An Analysis of Media Effects on Media: An Alternate Look at Medium Theory and Agenda

Setting

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Abstract

Medium theory states that society will be affected by the media, regardless of the specific content conveyed in any particular medium. Other theories look at specifics, such as agenda setting, which says that the media determine what people talk and think about from day to day. Similarly, media framing is a concept that looks at the organization of media, which ultimately tells society how to understand issues covered by the media. This paper looks to tie in medium theory and these other communication theories in such a way that shows that media not only affect society, but also each other, and in turn, society's expectations of media.

Keywords: medium theory, agenda setting, framing, priming, media, society

Much of communication theory practices focus on the relationship between the media and society. Often, this focus zeroes in on how one affects the other, or how one changes the other in a certain way. This is clear in theories such as agenda setting, which theorizes that "media depictions can affect how people think about the news, help organize the world of experience, and are 'stunningly helpful in telling us what to think about'" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Similarly, framing "refers to the process of putting a news story together, including the ways in which a story is organized and structured." Agenda setting tells people what to think about, while framing tells them how to think about those things.

Another theory that looks at the relationship between the media and society is medium theory. Medium theory is the product of Marshall McLuhan, who popularized the phrase, "The medium is the message." The idea behind classical medium theory is simple. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) define it succinctly, saying, "Structural features of various media, apart from media content, affect how we think about and respond to the world." Where the content of media has an effect on society in agenda setting and framing, medium theory posits that outside of content, media can still have an effect on society.

All of these theories offer ideas for how people and culture might be shaped by the media around us, but they don't account for how one medium can affect the other. The media is created and disseminated by people who are they themselves a part of society. This is important, because if the media determine how society thinks and what to think about, and the people who are responsible for that media are also a part of society, then the creators at one news outlet might affect the creators at another news outlet, and vice versa. Looking at it from the perspective of medium theory, agenda setting, and framing, this paper hopes to look at how or why this might happen, and what it might mean for society and the media as a whole.

Literature Review

While he didn't look at medium theory or agenda setting directly, Johnson (2013) examined Marvel Studios. Specifically, Johnson observed Marvel's early days of licensing characters out to other studios, and the financial specifics of what the company did when it first start independently producing its own films, starting with 2008's *Iron Man*. The topic of this article does not directly relate to medium theory, agenda setting, or this paper; however, the specifics regarding Marvel's foray into filmmaking serve as important evidence supporting the hypotheses of this paper.

Matthes (2009) provides a quantitative content analysis of different studies on media framing in communication journals from 1990 until 2005. The author looked at 131 different articles, all of which were published in 15 different international journals. He also pointed out current problems in framing research, including: a "lack of operational precision, the descriptive focus of many analyses, neglect of visuals, and insufficient reporting of reliability." For his own study, Matthes asked five research questions, involving the operationalization of media frames, the types of frames identified in content analytical literature, the visual elements of news items in framing, the extent of theory-driven media framing research, and the most prevalent methods of frame analysis.

In selecting journals to analyze, three principles were used as a guide. First, there must be a focus on communication in the article. Second, they should include different epistemological perspectives. Finally, the framing of research must include an international perspective. To code the data, there were two phases of studies: 36 samples from 1990-1999, and 95 samples from 2000-2005. Coding was used to determine if a definition of framing was "explicitly translated to frame extraction," or if it was used only to ground the reader. For

visuals, three levels were coded. They consisted of text- or word-based coding, coding of visual materials as frames, and "use of visual material to contextualize and interpret the frame." It was found that "19% of studies derived frames deductively from the literature, and from 2000-2005, this number jumped to 37%." There was also an increase in hypothesis testing, with 14% in the first time frame, and 39% in the second time frame. This shows that framing research has become more important to researchers over time.

McQuail's (1979) study was conducted much earlier than the other studies examined. As such, his research offers a look at the effects of the media during a different period of time. McQuail began his article pointing out the question of effects of the mass media is "the most insistently asked of social research on mass communication." The majority of his article looked at various concepts within the subject of media effects. The most important of the topics he covered is changes of culture and society. Ultimately, McQuail said, "it is not difficult to arrive at one or more versions of ways in which culture and social structure can be influenced by the path of development of media institutions." McQuail also pointed out that if our way of doing things is dependent on the media, then there is evidence of interdependence.

Qvortrup (2006) analyzed the new digital media by looking at two theories: medium theory and complexity theory. He suggested that medium theory is a potential candidate for the explanation of our transition from analogue media to digital media, but he also proposed the complexity theory as a possible explanation. With his article, Qvortrup sought to determine if this complexity theory can be applied to media studies where medium theory would traditionally be applied, offering a unique perspective on the subject matter. Qvortrup explains that communication is characterized by a double contingency, according to systems theory. He said, "One communication actor cannot observe the other without a loss of information…all elements

of one actor cannot be connected to all elements of the other." Qvortrup claims that this double

contingency increases social complexity. Finally, the author looked at the role of media

according to complexity theory. This role includes making communication possible, increasing

social complexity by allowing access to worldwide social acts, and managing "social complexity

by building systems of internal complexity in order to balance external complexity." The author

concluded the article by pointing out a paradox that must increase their own personal and

organizational complexity in order to "cope with an increasingly complex world."

  Scharrer (2008) sought to determine if violence in the media leads to desensitization

toward violence. Scharrer defines desensitization as "a short-term, immediate drop in concern or

sympathy about violence as well as a long-term, incremental effect due to repeated violent media

exposure." The author offers nine hypotheses, all of which are a combination of violence in

entertainment media, violence in news broadcasts, and violence in print news stories. Scharrer's

goal was to determine if excessive violence in one has a desensitization effect in the others, and

whether viewers are more or less likely to perceive violence in the media the more they are

exposed to it.

  The goal was to survey 75 men and 75 women in each zone, as well as to represent

equally three age groups: 18-35, 36-53, and 54 and older. A survey of 77 primetime television

programs across the five most popular networks of the time was given to respondents, and they

were to answer how often they watched each program. Respondents also answered how often

they read newspapers as well as how often they watch news broadcasts. Respondents were then

asked to read three separate news stories depicting violence, after which they were asked to

answer how the news stories made them feel, how shocking they found the news stories to be,

and what they think about news stories like them and their frequency in the world. It was found

that respondents with heavy exposure to violent entertainment television reported a weaker

emotional response to the news stories. Despite that, local newspaper reading was not associated

with the perceptions of how common the events of the story are perceived to occur, and the

amount of local TV viewing was not related to perceptions of the amount of violence contained

in stories.

Scheufele (1999) observed that research on framing is "characterized by theoretical and

empirical vagueness." Scheufele posited that this is because there is a lack of a shared model

underlying research on framing. The author's goal in writing this article was to offer a

comprehensive model for framing research. This is accomplished by looking at previous

approaches taken to research the subject along two different 'dimensions,' as Scheufele calls

them. These are the types of frame examined and the way frames are operationalized.

Scheufele's model for research on framing is divided into four processes.

The first of these is frame building. Research prior to this article failed to determine how

media frames are formed or the types of frames that result from the process. Scheufele posits

that future research should address these processes that influence frames created or changed by

the media.

The second process of Scheufele's model is frame setting. The purpose of this process is

to address the incompatibility of the perceived importance of frames and the salience of frames.

Previous research that focused on these two ideas contradict each other, according to Scheufele.

Salience refers to a frame's accessibility. "The frames that are most accessible are the ones that

are most easily available and retrievable from memory." By contrast, the perceived importance

of frames refers to the "outcome of a more conscious process of information gathering and

processing."

The third process of Scheufele's model of framing research is called individual-level effects of framing. Scheufele says that previous research describes links between media frames and individual-level outcomes of frames, but fails to offer an explanation for these links. The researcher expressed that this should change for future research.

The fourth and final process Scheufele offered for his model is what he calls a feedback loop from audiences to journalists. In other words, it should be taken into account that media creators such as journalists are also part of the media audience, and therefore, will also be affected by the framing made by the media.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) examined the evolution of three media effects models: framing, agenda setting, and priming. Specifically, if and how the three models are related and what the relationships between them could tell researchers about the effects of media. In doing so, the authors also hoped to sort out the differences between the three models of media effects. To explain the difference between agenda setting and framing, they offer a quote from a previous article by Tewksbury, which reads, "Agenda setting looks on story selection as a determinant of public perceptions of issue importance and, indirectly through priming, evaluations of political leaders. Framing focuses not on which topics or issues are selected for coverage by the news media, but instead on the particular ways those issues are presented." Agenda setting is based on news production, while framing is based on news processing. In closing their article, Scheufele and Tewksbury explain that they feel as though many questions are raised by the essay, because they see growing signs of "inefficiency…in the variety of ways framing, agenda setting, and priming theory are used by researchers."

In Vu, Guo, and McCombs (2014), the model of agenda setting known as network agenda setting is examined. The traditional model of agenda setting theorizes that the media

controls what the average person thinks about, based on the news stories that are disseminated to the public. In the network agenda setting model, it is posited that the news media can also transfer "objects and attributes…simultaneously in bundles between the agendas." The media has the ability to not only tell us what to think about, but it can also tell us what to associate with those thoughts and how to associate them. This is the third level of agenda-setting. This study in particular expands on the ideas laid out by the network agenda setting model, with the hope of increasing the model's scope. Five years' worth of aggregated data from national news media and polls was studied and tested, from 2007 until 2011.

In conducting the research, two methods of data collection were used. One was weekly content analysis reports from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, or PEJ. PEJ analyzes media content in the United States on a weekly basis. The study looked at approximately 50 weekly analysis reports for the years 2007-2011. The other method of data collection was Gallup's monthly polls. The author's explain that Gallup has surveyed the public each month for many years by asking, "What do you think are the most important problems facing the country today?" The study looked at the results of those monthly surveys from the years 2007-2011, with twelve total for each year. It was concluded that there is a positive association between the public and media network agendas. Vu, et al. also confirmed a strong correlation of the media agenda across multiple media channels.

Weaver (2007) is similar to Scheufele and Tewksbury in that it also looks at the similarities and differences between agenda setting and framing, as well as agenda setting and priming. The primary difference between Weaver's article and Scheufele and Tewksbury's is that Weaver also examines data on the number of studies on agenda setting, framing, and priming ranging from 1971 until 2005.

Weaver found that there are much more definitions for framing in communication scholarship than there are for agenda setting or priming. According to Weaver, it is clear that framing is a much more common research topic than agenda setting or priming. Articles on framing have risen steadily over the years, starting with only two indexed articles in the period between 1976 and 1980, having 76 between 1996 and 2000, and 165 between 2000 and 2005. By contrast, articles on agenda setting have risen and fallen over the years, never reaching the numbers of articles on framing. Indexed articles on priming have remained small.

Weaver offers a more detailed look at the differences between agenda setting and priming than Scheufele and Tewksbury do. Put succinctly, priming is "the focus on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion." Priming generally focuses on public opinion of politics and government policy, and the media's role in that opinion.

Framework

This paper seeks to take the concepts of various theories that in some way claim that media affects society, and turn said concepts back on the media. In doing so, it is posited that the media not only have an effect on society and how it operates and thinks, but also on each other, creating a back-and-forth that ultimately becomes the cause of a particular structure or trend in a particular medium. Whether it's the mentality a producer has in building a newscast, trends in the film industry, or cable television taking new risks, the framework theorized by this paper states that it all starts somewhere in the media, the beginning of which is quickly followed suit by another in the media.

To offer some examples of what this might look like, medium theory can be applied to the film industry. As a new thing is attempted in the film industry, and it is viewed as successful,

the presence of that new thing eventually becomes standard. These ideas are often based on

structure as opposed to content, much like in medium theory. The only difference is that it is an

example of the film industry affecting the film industry, rather than the film industry affecting

society.

The various television media also give hints to each other as to how they can operate. A

similar effect to the one previously mentioned occurs in cable television when they follow

certain narrative trends. Looking at news shows, however, when there is a trend in what is

covered or what type of news is covered across them, it is an example of agenda setting and

framing having an effect on the medium, rather than medium theory.

These ideas come together to form the basis of the concepts explored in this paper.

Research Questions

In observing medium theory, agenda setting, and framing in this way, several questions

and hypotheses are considered to flesh out the ideas. They follow.

RQ1: Looking specifically at medium theory, and medium structure, can films have an

effect on each other outside of specific content?

When there is an observable trend in the film industry, it is hypothesized that it is because

of a content creator trying something new, and then other content creators following their lead,

thereby serving as an example of the media influencing itself.

RQ2: Looking specifically at medium theory, and medium structure, can narrative

television programs have an effect on each other outside of specific content?

Much like as is posited regarding the film industry, it is hypothesized that narrative-focused television programming can also be influenced by other programs of the like in such a way that a new trend is born in the medium.

RQ3: Looking specifically at agenda setting and framing, can the content of one news program have an effect on the content of another news program?

It is hypothesized that the content of one news program can influence the content of another news program, which might also be a direct cause for the format and violence-focused news shows that are so common.

Research

When looking at film trends, the most relevant example of what is happening in the industry today comes from the advent of superhero films. These blockbusters reach huge audiences, with 2012's *The Avengers* totaling $1.5 billion at the global box office (Box Office Mojo, 2016). While they have been around for years, and have always maintained some level of popularity, superhero films have seen a boom over the last eight years, and the genre is now the most popular and sought after amongst movie studios. This is due in no small part to Marvel Studios, the film production arm of Marvel Entertainment. As Johnson (2012) pointed out, "Few companies proved to be as central to the production of big-budget cinema over the past decade as Marvel Studios." While Marvel at one time licensed out its characters to film production companies for film adaptations, Marvel eventually realized the full potential capable of its various properties, and started work on its own, independently produced films. The first product to arise from this endeavor was *Iron Man*, which released in 2008. Proving successful, Marvel continued to release its own films. "So valuable to industries outside of comic books did

Marvel's imprint and content strategies become that in December 2009, Disney bought the

company for $4 billion" (Johnson, 2012).

Part of what made Marvel's approach so valuable – as audiences would later see – was

that the company had plans to create what is now commonly known as a cinematic universe, or a

single franchise of films composed of multiple different franchises that are all intended to cross

over with one another.

As was previously mentioned, *The Avengers*, the first major crossover in Marvel's

cinematic universe (commonly referred to as the 'MCU') earned a global sum of $1.4 billion at

the box office. Marvel's strategy was proving to be profitable. Following such success, other

production companies followed the strategy, and worked to build their own cinematic universes.

Warner Bros. and DC have started their own using DC properties, called the DC Extended

Universe, or DCEU. Other franchises that started long before Marvel initiated their cinematic

universe have adopted the term cinematic universe in marketing. This includes the *X-Men*

franchise, produced by Fox, and the *Transformers* franchise, produced by Hasbro Studios. In

2017, Universal hopes to start its own cinematic universe utilizing the monster characters the

company popularized in the early days of film, starting with a new adaptation of *The Mummy*, to

be released on June 9, 2017 (IMDb, 2016).

The concept of the cinematic universe started with Marvel, and was thought impossible

by many before it was proven as a capable approach to filmmaking. Now that it is known to be

profitable, Marvel has influenced other studios into similar territory, changing the landscape of

the film industry, and audiences' expectation of what to expect from a movie theater and

blockbuster experience. Production companies have followed Marvel's business practices, and

outside of content, the industry is now changed.

This phenomenon of a media form affecting other media forms is not restricted to the film industry. Television has followed a similar path in recent years, albeit it in a slightly different direction. In recent years, narrative television has taken a turn, shifting from the procedural stories that were so prominent in yesteryear, and moving into what Martin calls the Third Golden Age of television (2013). This 'Third Golden Age' has of TV has its focus on complicated characters and story arcs that play out over multiple episodes, or even multiple seasons, of a program. As the title of his book, *Difficult Men*, suggests, this new age started with the likes of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, before being embraced by other networks, leading to the creation of shows like *Breaking Bad*. This stronger focus on narrative that television has taken to allows the medium to tell stories that are not possible in film, due to the time constraints of that medium, and have led many to calling television a true art form. This would not have been possible without the start that *The Sopranos* gave to this new age.

Finally, when one looks at agenda setting, and how it can have an effect on what audiences think about – and in the case of framing, how they think about those topics – one can also see that news programs might also have an effect on each other. Ultimately, what this does is it creates an agenda setting loop. One news program might heavily feature some piece of news – or some type of news, such as violent news – and a news program on another network will follow suit. For instance, Scharrer (2008) observed violence in news reports. While her article is about the evidence of desensitization that violence in the news points to, it's worth looking at her article to get a sense of just how much violence is covered in the news. A popular adage amongst journalists is, "If it bleeds, it leads." Because television is a ratings game, when one news program has a violent story, a news program at a rival network must match it. In doing so, the media has a direct effect on itself and what is shown to audiences.

Conclusion

Medium theory, agenda setting, and framing are communication theories that all state, in one way or another, that the media has an effect on the mindset and thinking of society. In medium theory, apart from media content, the structure of the media can affect how people think about things. In agenda setting, the media tells people precisely what to think about. Framing, a similar concept to agenda setting, yet still different, tells people how to think about those things. Despite these theories that the media affect society, it seems that there is room to expand these theories, and apply them directly to the media. In doing so, evidence starts to become clear that the media not only affects society and how society thinks, but also each other. One visual medium can influence another creator in the same medium, until eventually, media trends are created. This process can be applied to medium theory or agenda setting, depending on the media form that is being examined.

There is room to expand on the ideas laid out in this paper. Further research could uncover greater evidence. If researched to a large enough extent, the ideas in this paper may need to be separated from medium theory and agenda setting altogether.

In expanding the research, one might also look at not just how the media can affect each other, but the reverse of medium theory and agenda setting. This would apply the notion that not only does the media affect society, but society also affects the media just the same. Were this true, it could hint that medium theory and agenda setting could be applied in such a way that it makes a circle. The media affects society, society accepts, the media takes note of that and follows that path, ad infinitum. While there is not sufficient evidence studied in this paper to prove that, it could be worth looking into.

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