

A Brief Critique of the Media System Dependency Theory

Lindsay Ems

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A Brief Analysis of the History and Use of Media System Dependency Theory

Kerlinger (1964) asserts that, “the basic aim of science is theory.” He says that science, in its most fundamental task, should find explanations for natural events. These explanations, then, are called theories. As both Haack (2003) and Kerlinger (1964) discuss, theories can be valuable in a variety of forms. Theories are often fallible, general and need revision. (Haack, 2003) In everyday language, if something is just a “theory,” we assume that one can choose whether or not to believe the claims being made because the required facts aren’t available to make an absolute judgment (Haack, 2003). Haack and Kerlinger warn against this type of thinking. As a simple search for any type of peer reviewed article will reveal, theories are consistently and successfully used to advance the scientific understanding of events that occur in our environment.

Though the job of a theory isn’t necessarily to show whether something is true or false, it does serve as a tool which brings us closer to an understanding of interrelated phenomena. Haack (2003) suggests that “falsifiability isn’t a viable way to distinguish science from non-science; but willingness to take account of negative evidence is an important aspect of intellectual integrity” (Haack, 2003, p. 277). She also says that, “...theoretical “statements” in science are *never* true or false. In fact, they aren’t really statements at all, but only instruments or tools or inference-tickets for making observational predictions” (Haack, 2003, p. 137). One could then assume that Haack would argue that theories, despite their flaws, are used to advance knowledge. She might say that knowledge is an ever-changing body which will be revised and remolded based on further advances and contributions to science.

Kerlinger's perspective is slightly different: "Scientific explanation boils down to specifying the exact relations between one class of empirical events and another, under certain conditions... The ultimately most usable and satisfying relations, however, are those that are the most generalized, those that are tied to other relations in a theory" (Kerlinger, 1964, p. 12). In understanding Kerlinger's philosophy, we might assume that he would argue that a theory's primary goal is to explain the relationships between phenomena. He would also argue that the more general the theory the better, and further reaching it is.

As I begin a scientific inquiry into the use of the Media System Dependency (MSD) theory's use, I will keep the thoughts of Kerlinger and Haack in mind. Specifically, I will measure the use of the use of MSD against Kerlinger's (1964) definition of theory:

"A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena" (p. 11)

Furthermore, I will be mindful of the following understanding of this definition which Kerlinger (1964) dissects into three main concepts:

- A theory is a set of propositions consisting of defined and interrelated constructs.
- A theory sets out the interrelations among a set of variables (constructs) and presents a systematic view of the phenomena described by the variables.
- A theory explains and predicts phenomena by understanding how variables are related to one another. (p. 11)

Along with Kerlinger's definition of theory, I will examine the MSD theory against the previously mentioned criteria set forth by Haack (2003). Specifically, I will look at MSD theory in terms of her notion that theories change over time and it is short-sighted on the part of a researcher to only consider theories which explain observable (and not unobservable) phenomena. (p. 137)

Before analyzing the usefulness of MSD theory according to Kerlinger and Haack, I will describe the basic propositions of theory and conduct a brief discussion about the development of the MSD theory over time. Finally, I will present findings about what kinds of criticism MSD theory suffers among researchers and how the conceivers of the theory respond to this criticism.

Media System Dependency: DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach's Original Concept

The theory of media dependency came about because the originators saw the need to integrate the findings of a large body of media effects research that had been done at that point. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975) suggest that a "*general* theory" of the effects of mass communication is lacking and that it is important to move toward "a higher level of abstraction in order to understand where our research and analyses appear to be leading us." (p. 256). This need came about because "the majority of scientific evidence" gathered through lab and survey research show that media have "*little* direct influence on people," yet many notable scholars and most lay people know that "the coming of new media to a society makes a tremendous difference in the lives of people. (p. 259)" So, how do the engineers of this theory suggest we bridge this gap? DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975) purport that the kinds of effects that occur and are measurable

are not those “that are easily detected in laboratory experiments, or in before-after studies of people who have been exposed to specific messages. (p. 260)” Instead these effects are the kind that enlarge people’s belief systems, change people’s attitudes, motivate subtle shifts in individual or collective sentiment as well as other kinds of society-wide changes. (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975, p. 260)

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1975) recommend, instead of looking solely at the individual to assess media effects, that it is worthwhile to consider the entire social framework within which the media function. The MSD theory, which culminates in chapter twelve of the book entitled, *Theories of Mass Communications*, focuses on the interplay between media systems and larger society. “Media do not exist in a vacuum” (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975, p. 257). DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach suggest that “...the ultimate basis of media influence lies in the nature of the three-way relationship between the larger social system, the media’s role in that system, and audience relationships to the media” (1975, p. 261).

A very important part of the philosophy behind this theory comes from sociological theory. The work of Durkheim, Tönnies and Marx, though constructed before the media themselves were developed, provide a framework across which MSD theory can be extended. This framework is built from the notion that the informal relationships between people, which were characteristic of non-industrial societies, decline as a result of economic growth and a movement toward an urban-industrial society. Because informal relationships among people weaken, an information void occurs. Consequently, the media rise up and fill this gap. Individuals, then, become

reliant on media for safety, social and entertainment information. Thus, a dependency on the media system arises.

This basic notion suggests that pre-existing informal ties dissipate in societies of complex structure and thus are no longer able to supply the many needs people have for information. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975) offer three needs which media fulfill in industrialized societies:

- The need to understand one's social world
 - The need to act meaningfully and effectively in that world
 - The need for fantasy-escape from daily problems and tensions
- (p. 262)

Certainly, as societies grow more complex and technology improves, the breadth of needs that media fill widens. It can be assumed that the larger the quantity and centrality of the specific information provided by a certain medium, the greater the audience dependency it warrants. Similarly, as the amount of change or conflict rises in a society, dependency on media also rises. Furthermore, the MSD theory concludes that, "The potential for mass media messages to achieve a broad range of cognitive, affective and behavioral effects will be increased when media systems serve many unique and central information-delivery functions. That potential will be further increased when there is a high degree of structural instability in the society due to conflict and change." Additionally, it is vital to include the fact that "...altering audience cognitive, affective and behavioral conditions can feed back in turn to alter both society and the media" (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975, p. 263). Because so many variables come into play as we discuss MSD theory, we can understand why the conceivers of the MSD theory titled the book chapter in which it takes form, "Toward and Integrated Theory."

MSD's Evolution as a Theory

Ball-Rokeach (1998) describes the evolution of MSD theory in *A Theory of Media Power and a Theory of Media Use: Different Stories, Questions, and Ways of thinking*. In this article, she compares MSD theory on a microlevel against the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) as developed by E. Katz. She says that MSD came about to provide a counterpoint to the U&G perspective. Specifically, she disproved of the U&G conception of the “active” audience member. She notes that E. Katz and others who were developing the U&G framework were also displeased with the previous notion that the audience was passive, however, she didn't observe the type of active individual that was described in the U&G literature.

She furthered her exploration of the passive and active audience member in her dissertation and other early scholarly work which centered around the concept of ambiguity. Shibutani's (1966) conception of rumor as “improvised news” may have been most influential to her early work. Rumors, according to Shibutani, were definitions of ambiguous events created by active, information-processing individuals. She drew two conclusions from this idea: “reality was constructed and reality had to be constructed in order for people to act with meaning” (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 10). When acting, people employ whatever information system they can to make sense of their environment. Because, in our industrial society, media are readily available, we use them to create our reality.

Additional sociological underpinnings sustain Ball-Rokeach's development of the MSD theory. Adorno and Frenkel-Brunswik's (1950) work proved to be particularly

influential as she began thinking about why people find times of ambiguity so stressful and intolerable. With this work in mind, she predicted that instable situations in society result in people to becoming increasingly dependent on the media. People become more dependent on the media with the specific intention of resolving ambiguity. She then sought out to understand how people resolve ambiguity differently. This led her to identify two types of media dependency: the type of dependency which has to do with information (understanding and orientation) and that which has to do with stress reduction (play). (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 10)

Many media effect scholars in the 1960s and early 1970s were trying to understand the violence and racism of the time by conducting psychological research experiments. The results of these experiments produced few worthwhile findings. Ball-Rokeach pursued a different avenue. She reported in 1969-70 to the Violence Commission, that the questions psychological theories of media effects could address, were not the questions that needed answers. She contended that macrolevel processes (not microlevel processes) were responsible for people turning to violence to achieve social control and/or change. (Ball-Rokeach, 1971)

After taking some time away from media research, Ball-Rokeach came back to further the work she had begun on MSD theory. She was particularly inspired by Emerson's (1962, 1964) power-dependency theory which states that "the flipside of power is dependence, meaning power cannot be determined by observing only the relative distribution of resources...Resources accrue power only when, and to the extent that, one party to the relation must seek access to the other's resources" (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 12). This impacted MSD theory in that it motivated Ball-Rokeach to create a

theory which explained both the occurrence and nonoccurrence of media effects. The theory would also have both macro- and microlevel applicability and finally the MSD theory moved toward conceptualization as a theory of media power. At this point, Ball-Rokeach's theory of media system dependency had, for the most part, taken form. Other scholars have worked to examine aspects of this overarching theory but few, including the originators, have altered the theory's fundamental structure since.

An example of research using the MSD theory is a study by Les Switzer (1985) which outlines the role of the press in segregated (and instable) South Africa. This account places the relationship between the media system and the government in a situation, with which we, in the United States, are for the most part, unfamiliar. During the time this research was conducted, the government largely controlled the South African press. Switzer (1985) writes that, "Ideology, then, is the constructed reality of the hegemonic bloc in the social formation. Ideological control is maintained through the construction of a consensual bias that must win the approval of the ruled as well as the rulers" (p. 8). In this way, it seems that the audience was made to believe that they also had power. Perhaps in this example of power dynamics, the media have even more power (and thus demand higher audience dependency) than those in which the audience recognizes that they, in fact, do not have any power.

MSD has also been used to analyze various crisis situations such as 9/11 (Matsaganis & Payne 2005; Kim, Jung, Cohen & Ball-Rokeach, 2004), the SARS epidemic in China (Tai & Sun 2007) and a number of elections and governmental regime changes. (Schulz, Zeh, & Quiring, 2005) These opportunities provide fertile ground for prosperous MSD research considering the relative increase in ambiguity surrounding

these crises. Other research using MSD theory examines the media's role in particular communities in which a specific phenomenon occurs. (McDonald 1983; Morton & Duck 2000; Grant, Kendall & Ball-Rokeach, 1991) Some of these types of studies, in my opinion, don't go far enough toward employing Ball-Rokeach's whole concept of media dependency. They look at one aspect (usually one type of medium) to determine if that medium resulted in a specific occurrence. Even though MSD theory allows for microlevel experimentation, these microrelations should then be tied back to larger questions about culture, the audience, government, levels of potential ambiguity, etc. Grant et al do a nice job of this, but some of the other studies mentioned above seem to fall short in this respect.

MSD's Weaknesses as a Theory

Perhaps because the theory is so large and all encompassing (and thus so daunting to refute), I could only find a few criticisms of the MSD theory. Although one could certainly submit the critique that the very vastness of the theory is a potential fault, I wasn't successful in locating researchers that held this opinion. Surprisingly, one of its harshest critics is also its creator, Sandra Ball-Rokeach. In her 1998 article, she discusses the limits of the theory, which include emphasis on other systems of information besides the media. She contends, however, that these other networks, which are made up of interpersonal relationships, are often times intimately linked to the media system. She also mentions that people have the option to 'drop out.' This means that people can constrain the power of the media simply by decreasing the importance of personal understanding as a goal. Her final limitation occurs on the individual processing level,

and contends that media dependency can be decreased through the processing of media information in a “debunking, literate, or creative manner” (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 25). This can be done for purposes of play, by decoding media stories in terms of their understandings of the distortions of the media production process, or recreating media stories by imposing their version of reality. Ball-Rokeach (1998) suggests, though, that this type of media processing requires time and effort, which are scarce resources in the lives of most people. On the social level, she notes that media dependency can also be decreased through the possibility of “coalition formation” which can result in subculture media sources” (Ball-Rokeach, 1998, p. 25).

In Mass Communication Theory, Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis offer the critique of MSD that doesn't provide any specific use as a scientific theory. They say that, “[Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's] thesis never varied much beyond their initial assertion that media can and do have powerful effects...It has not yet been conclusively demonstrated that the experience of media dependency by average people is strongly related to a broad range of effects” (Baran & Davis, 2000, p. 309). In fact, they suggest that we could be dependent on media without ever experiencing dependency. If this is the case, Baran and Davis suggest that dependency should be studied through examining behavioral rather than attitudinal variables. They purport that MSD might be better at explaining short-term (reaction to a crisis situation, for example) rather than long-term social phenomena. Finally, Baran and Davis condemn MSD theory because it doesn't identify an ideal level of media dependency. “Are Americans currently too dependent on media or too independent? Is the trend toward increased or decreased dependency” (Baran & Davis, 2000, p. 309)? In my research, I wasn't able to find a response from

DeFleur or Ball-Rokeach regarding these criticisms. I would guess, though, that they would say that Baran and Davis understand the theory differently than the way that they did as they were creating it. Suggesting that a judgment about whether a society is too dependent seems well outside of DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach's intentions. I believe they developed the concept of a system made up of interdependent relationships simply to show that relationships exist. The notion of power is very important to the discussion of dependency. However, according to the Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, the amount of the power the media have depends on the dynamics of these relationships. I'm not sure who Baran and Davis would suggest make the decision about what qualifies as "too dependent." Baran and Davis' questions suggest that Americans either have a distinct and inexplicable personality flaw, or are subjected involuntarily to the might of all-powerful media institutions. To me, both of these notions seem ill informed. They look at a single power dynamic without regard to the other systems which DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach describe also play a role.

Summary

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach have developed a theory that many scholars use to examine social phenomena in relation to the media. Though, the theory certainly isn't perfect, it fits into Haack's understanding of what qualifies as a theory. She claims that theory's aren't made to prove true or false. A good theory evolves and changes over time based on the input of those who use the theory. Although in the case of MSD, changes have not really been made to the fundamental structure of the theory, its application has been multifarious. MSD theory also stands up to Kerlinger's definition: MSD theory is a

set of interrelated constructs that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena.

The evolution of the MSD theory has roots in sociology but extends out to connect individual cognitive effects of media to happenings within the larger societal structure. Ultimately, the consequence of media dependency is that of information access and the power relations between those who provide access to information and those who seek it. This power dynamic is significant for many reasons, one of which is outlined in Todd Gitlin's book, Media Unlimited, where he suggests that globalization is a result of media dependency. Social identity formation through material goods and ideas, specifically through American things like Coke, Bart Simpson, Mickey Mouse and James Dean, to name a few, also offer motivation for dependence on media (Gatlin, 2001). While Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur focus mainly on instable governments as proof that ambiguity yields dependency on media, it can also be found in other places like, identity definition, play and interpersonal connection. Certainly research using the MSD theory has its challenges because the theory is so wide-reaching. However, the results of this research which employs an integrated theory of media effects also stand to offer unique and significant explanations for complicated long-term social phenomena in a way that is difficult for lab and survey research to do.

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