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Comments from the Editor

Theory? Bah Humbug!

A “theoretical framework” may not always be necessary or desirable in magazine research.

By David E. Sumner, Ball State University

One of the criteria that reviewers use for rejecting articles is a “lack of a theoretical framework.” However, I don’t think a “theoretical framework” is necessary for magazine research and may not even be desirable in some cases. I realize that I’ve just become a heretic in the eyes of some media researchers. But I believe the “theoretical framework” concept has been carried over from the physical sciences and applied to areas of the social sciences, including communications, where it often does not work.

Theory is based on constructing a model for predicting behavior. The physical universe does follow concrete laws and patterns of behavior. Therefore, we have theories that predict the physical universe with uncanny accuracy. If you observe that A, B, and C occur under certain conditions, then A, B, and C should occur again when those conditions are replicated. As you move into the human universe, however, you can’t always predict behavior because human beings act with free will. The behaviorists will dispute that statement, but free will is a basic tenet of my philosophical belief system. Media theories seek to construct theoretical models about how the producers or the consumers of mass media have and will behave in the future. Therefore, it’s difficult to construct theoretical models that apply to the mass media because of the unpredictability of the behavior of those who either produce or consume media content.

Please follow my reasoning here. I don’t dispute the usefulness or the validity of existing media theories, but I simply argue that it’s difficult, if not impossible, to apply them to magazines. Maybe that’s why not much magazine research gets accepted in *Journalism & Mass Communications Quarterly*. Newspaper content is aimed at a general audience with many different demographic characteristics who live in one location. Magazine content, however, is aimed at an audience with very similar demographic characteristics who live in thousands of towns and cities around the world.

The magazine business isn’t a business. It’s 19,532 different businesses with content produced for 19,532 different audiences, according to the 2008-09 *MPA Magazine Handbook*. Can you apply the agenda-setting credo “The media doesn’t tell people what to think, but what to think about” to magazines? I am sure that every magazine may “set the agenda” for what its particular audience thinks about, but what do those 19,532 audiences share in common? I just read an article about New Orleans food in a Southern lifestyle magazine. How many of you who read these words were thinking about New Orleans food?

In this *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research*, one article—“Body Image of Older Adults in Magazine Advertisements: A Content Analysis of Their Body Shape and Portrayal”—has a theoretical framework. This article uses social comparison and cultivation theories to suggest the potential for some older people to make comparisons to idealized images of older adults in magazine advertisements, which may lead to eating disorders, feelings of inadequacy, or dissatisfaction. The other article—“The Growth of International Women’s Magazines in China and the Role of Transnational Advertising”—does not have a theoretical framework. But it provides a fascinating glimpse of the expansion of magazine publishing into China. Using content analysis, the authors conclude that magazine titles

franchised in China by U.S. and Japanese-owned publishers have a more commercialized content and carry a heavier predominance of advertising than those produced by locally owned publishers. Maybe 50 years from now, we will have some useful theories that apply to magazine publishing. For now, however, I believe the magazine industry is so huge, so fragmented, and so changing that requiring a theoretical framework for any research may impede our efforts in producing new knowledge, especially useful knowledge.

In our section on “Essays & Reports,” Scott Fosdick has provided us with a useful summary of “The State of Magazine Research 2008” based on a well-attended panel discussion at the August AEJMC Convention in Chicago. He includes summaries of the research issues discussed by panelists David Abrahamson, Carolyn Kitch, Joe Bernt, Marcia Prior-Miller, and David Sumner.

Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin from Columbia College in Chicago has given us “A Professor’s Diary of the 2008 American Magazine Conference.” Because of its cost, most of us have only dreamed of attending this annual event sponsored by the American Society of Magazine Editors. She summarizes remarks by Nancy Pelosi, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Richard Stengel, and others who highlighted this gathering of the country’s best-known editors.

The AEJMC Magazine Division has published this *Journal* since 1999. I wish to thank my friend and colleague Steve Thomsen for his excellent leadership in editing the journal for the past four years. We hope to continue publishing the journal, but frankly, the number of submissions has been discouragingly low. Therefore, I welcome and encourage submissions from new authors for both refereed articles and our new “Essays & Reports” section.