Media Studies and Psychology

"Wouldn't you be happier in a psychology department?" is a question often asked of media scholars in communication programs. After all, some colleagues observe, aren't you people more interested in mental processing than in what is processed? Aren't half your references to psychology journals and books? And don't your psychological theories depart radically from important concerns about media and society?

Although fewer in number, psychologists interested in media often receive an analogous set of questions. Isn't television viewing too complex a situation, and television as a stimulus itself too complex, to allow meaningful answers to basic research questions? Don't you of necessity get overinvolved with issues of media and society? Aren't half your references to communication journals and books? Wouldn't you be happier in a communication department?

These questions come not only from those who fall outside the intersection of media and psychology. The same questions summarize criticism that people within the intersection have about each other. Psychologists worry about whether communicologists use processing concepts correctly and whether enough attention is paid to experimental controls. Communicologists worry about whether psychologists are sensitive to media as symbolic forms that are important for reasons other than their psychological significance. And aren't psychological experiments often, well, intellectually arid?

The frequency of these questions signals an uncertainty about what it means to have a psychological perspective on mediated communication. Is the interaction a valid branch of applied psychology? Is it a sensible direction for communication theory and research? Having committed the bulk of our research careers to the intersection of psychology and media, we answer both questions with a resounding affirmation.

How Psychological Theory Informs Media Studies

When someone in media studies attempts to comment on even the simplest segment of video or film, he or she is confronted with a presentation that is
How Media Studies Inform Cognitive Psychology

Traditionally, research psychologists have tried to identify and study cognitive processes and structure through the classic laboratory experiment. The goal has been to isolate and manipulate a cognitive function, holding all other factors constant, with the hope of formulating general theories. In an influential critique, Neisser (1976) characterized such research as using stimulus material that is abstract, discontinuous, and only marginally real. It is almost as if ecological invalidity were a deliberate feature of the experimental design. Subjects are shown isolated letters, words, occasionally line drawings or pictures, but almost never objects. . . . [Stimuli] last for only a fragment of a second, and lack all temporal coherence with what preceded or what will follow them. . . . The subject is isolated, cut off from ordinary environmental support, able to do
nothing but initiate and terminate trials that run their magical course
whatever he may do. (pp. 34-36)

In a call for greater ecological validity and new approaches to cognition,
Neisser (1976) argued: "A psychology that cannot interpret ordinary experience is ignoring almost the whole range of its natural subject matter" (p. 4). In cognitive and developmental psychology, this call is being met, and it is producing important new approaches and new knowledge in a number of domains. Significantly, answering the call has led psychologists to multiple interdisciplinary inquiries; it is now commonplace to see psychologists publishing with practitioners of, and in journals of, economics, engineering, linguistics, computer science, medicine, and not least, communication.

Regardless of whether psychology enriches the study of media, the study of media is enriching psychology. In particular, the interaction of people with media allows the study of cognition, attention, and perception in the framework of complex, dynamic, multimodal, and real-life but replicable contexts. Already, advances in understanding the psychology of reading have influenced general theories of cognition (e.g., Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). We hope much the same will result from studying the psychology of audiovisual media. Anderson’s recent research, for example, has the clear goal of providing generalizations from the study of television viewing to other behavioral domains (e.g., Choi & Anderson, in press).

The Current Issue

This special issue represents a progress report on the status of research at the intersection of psychology and communication. In answer to the call for papers, we received six papers that survived the review process. Interestingly, three papers come from psychology, and three from communication. All of the papers have in common the notion that mediated audiovisual communication must be understood in terms of the psychological interaction of the viewer with the structure and content of media. And all contribute to our belief that progress is arising from the interaction of two fields.

References