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Applying the Reinforcing Spirals Model to Dynamic Communication Phenomena: Conceptual and Statistical Pitfalls

Abstract

The reinforcing spirals model (2007) is considered an important conceptual model in research on both media use and media effects. Researchers relied on this conceptual model to explain reciprocal effects of media use and media effects in various domains of research. Although Slater (2015) refined the model by considering boundary conditions, moderators, and alternative processes, empirical research has lagged behind this theoretical advancement. We discuss how the use of inappropriate statistical modeling techniques can produce misleading findings about the presumed occurrence of reinforcing spirals processes and what can be done about that. Conceptually, extant research has focused most on escalating spiral dynamics while such process may occur very rarely. At the same time, research may have ignored more common dynamic processes, e.g., homeostasis, wear-out, depolarization. Therefore, we urge researchers to think about communication dynamics from different angles and to model such processes accordingly.

Keywords: Reinforcing Spirals Model, Media Effects, Media Use, Dynamics

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