Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 8 - Mass Communication

Chapter 8

Mass Communication and the Media

> **Chapter Objectives:**
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> After reading this chapter you should be able to:
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> • Define mass communication.
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> • Identify key functions of mass communication.
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> • Understand prominent theories of mass communication.
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> • Understand the role that media plays in your life.
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> • Describe pop culture.
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> • Identify several key elements of media literacy.
>
> • Recognize your role in the global community.

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ou're sitting in a classroom reading the school paper and listening to your ipod when the clock hits the top of the hour. You take out your headphones and put the paper down when you hear the instructor begin talking. She is referring to a web page projected on the screen in front of class. She welcomes everyone to the start of the school year, but stops to wait for the guy next to you to put down the magazine he's reading. She explains that she will only provide an electronic version of the syllabus, pointing to the course web page. Everyone in the class is to go online and read the syllabus before the next class meeting. She explains that, besides lecture and discussion, you will need to watch CNN, read the Wall Street Journal, and watch several clips she's listed on YouTube to demonstrate and learn key concepts. Suddenly, from the back of the class a cell phone begins playing the latest Jay-Z song. The instructor stops mid-sentence and explains the class policy about turning off cell phones during class. Your classmate never answers the phone but reaches into his pocket and looks at the phone screen. Another student finishes text messaging and puts her phone away. The instructor explains that you will need to read chapter one of the textbook by next week. Included with your textbook is a pass-code that allows you to connect to an online database so you can access articles for your semester project. After she answers student questions, class is over.

As you head out the door you hear music coming from the building sound system playing the college FM radio station. You walk to the student union to grab lunch and watch Sports Center. On your drive home you turn on the satellite radio station to listen for scores, and check the weather and traffic. While driving, you notice the new billboard advertising Ford trucks. When you get home you sit down in front of your computer. You check a class web page to see if you have homework, check the day's current events and sporting scores, then check your email. You read several messages, delete the spam, and get irritated at the pop-up advertisements that keep jumping on your screen. Before shutting down your computer you update your Facebook page before sitting on the couch to watch a movie that you recorded on your DVR the night before. As you lean back on the couch, you clear away a stack of magazines to set down your drink.

The above example represents the amount of mass communication we are exposed to daily. In the U.S. we witness and understand a great deal of our world through mass communication. Remember from Chapter 2 that the early part of the 20th century communication scholars began to ask questions about the impact of media as more and more

mass communication outlets were developed. Questions then and now include: To what degree does mass communication affect us? How do we use or access mass communication? How does each medium influence how we interpret messages? Do we play an active or passive role when we interact with media? This chapter explores these questions by examining the concept of mass communication, its evolution, its functions, its theories, and its place in society.

Defining Mass Communication

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ittlejohn and Foss (2005) define **mass communication** as *"the process whereby media organizations produce and transmit messages to large publics and the process by which those messages are sought, used, and consumed by audiences"* (p. 273). McQuail (1994) states that mass communication is, *"only one of the processes of communication operating at the society-wide level, readily identified by its institutional characteristics"* (p. 7). Simply put, mass communication is the public transfer of messages through media or technology driven channels to a large number of recipients from an entity, usually involving some type of cost or fee (advertising) for the user. "The sender often is a person in some large media organization, the messages are public, and the audience tends to be large and varied" (Berger, 2002, p.121). However, with the advent of outlets like YouTube, MySpace, FaceBook, and text messaging, notice that these definitions do not account for the increased opportunities individuals now have to send messages to large audiences through mediated channels.

Nevertheless, most mass communication comes from large organizations that influence culture on a large scale. Schramm (1963) refers to this as a "working group organized around some device for circulating the same message, at about the same time, to large numbers of people" (p. 115). Today the working groups that control most mass communication are large conglomerates such as Viacom, King World, Disney, ComCast, and Ruppert Murdock's group. An example of the power of these large conglomerates occurred in 2000 when Time-Warner, one of the largest media producers, merged with America Online (AOL) for $181.6 billion, making it one of the largest corporate mergers in history. Just the year before that, Viacom purchased CBS to add it to its lineup of MTV, Nickelodeon, and many others.

Remember our definition of communication study: "who says what, through what channels (media) of communication, to whom, [and] what will be the results" (Smith, Lasswell & Casey, 1946, p. 121)? When examining mass communication, we are interested in who has control over what content, for what audience, using what medium, and what are the results? Media critic Robert McChesney (1997) said we should be worried about the increasingly concentrated control of mass communication. He states that as a result of very few organizations controlling mass communication, "The implications for political democracy, by any standard, are troubling" (p. 23). Ben Bagdikian (2004) points out that over the past two decades, major media outlets went from being owned by 50 corporations to just five. For both McChesney and Bagdikian, there are great implications for having so few organizations control so much communication. Perhaps this is why outlets like MySpace, YouTube, and FaceBook have grown in popularity, because they provide alternative voices to the few that control most mass communication outlets.

To understand mass communication it is important to be aware of some of the key factors that distinguish it from other forms of communication. First, is the dependence on a media channel to convey a message to a large audience. Second, the audience tends to be distant, diverse, and varying in size depending on the medium and message. Third, mass communication is most often profit driven, and feedback is limited. Fourth, because of the impersonal nature of mass communication, participants are not equally present during the process.

Mass communication continues to become more integrated into our lives at an increasingly rapid pace. This "metamorphosis" is representative by the convergence occurring (Fidler, 1997) between ourselves and technology,

where we are not as distanced from mass communication as in the past. Increasingly we have more opportunities to use mediated communication to fulfill interpersonal and social needs. O'Sullivan (2003) refers to this new use of mass communication to foster our personal lives as **"masspersonal communication"** where *(a) traditional mass communication channels are used for interpersonal communication, (b) traditionally interpersonal communication channels are used for mass communication, and (c) traditional mass communication and traditional interpersonal communication occur simultaneously.* Over time, more and more overlap occurs. "Innovations in communication technologies have begun to make the barriers between mass and interpersonal communication theory more permeable than ever" (O'Sullivan, 2003). Sites such as Myspace, Facebook, Xanga, Couchsurfing, YouTube, and Bebo are classic examples of masspersonal communication where we use mass communication to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Perhaps we are turning into a **"global village"** through our interdependence with mass communication. Suddenly, "across the ocean" has become "around the corner." McLuhan (1964) predicted this would happen because of mass communication's ability to unify people around the globe. Are you a player in what Hagerman calls the "public sphere" that mass communication creates by posting information about yourself on public sites? If so, be careful about what you post about yourself as many employers are "googling" potential employees to look into their personal lives before making decisions about hiring them. As we continue our discussion of mass communication we want to note that mass communication does not include every communication technology. As our definition states, mass communication is communication that potentially reaches large audiences. We will deal with other communication technologies in the last chapter

Evolution of Mass Communication

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ocieties have long had a desire to find effective ways to report environmental dangers and opportunities; circulate opinions, facts, and ideas; pass along knowledge, heritage, and lore; communicate expectations to new members; entertain in an expansive manner; and broaden commerce and trade (Schramm, 1963). The primary challenge has been to find ways to communicate messages to as many people as possible. Our need-to-know prompted innovative ways to get messages to the masses.

> **Mass Communication Study Then**
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> In 1949, Carl I. Hovland, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, and Fred D. Sheffield wrote the book Experiments on Mass Communication. They looked at two kinds of films the Army used to train soldiers. First, they examined orientation and training films such as the "Why We Fight" that were intended to teach facts to the soldiers, as well as generate a positive response from them for going to war. The studies determined that significant learning did take place by the soldiers from the films, but primarily with factual items. The Army was disappointed with the results that showed that the orientation films did not do an effective job in generating the kind of positive responses they desired from the soldiers. Imagine, people were not excited about going to war.

In this age of information overload, multiple news sources, high-speed connections, and high-tech gear, you probably can't imagine your life without mass communication. Can you relate to your grandparents' stories about laying in bed and listening to baseball games on AM radio, "watching" the radio with the family in the house, listening to the Jack Benny Show, talking on party telephone lines (multiple customers on one phone line), black and white televisions, computers as big as a classroom, offices without computers, or turn tables playing vinyl records? Obviously, mass communication has evolved quickly.

Before writing, humans relied on oral traditions to pass on information. "It was only in the 1920s-according to the Oxford English Dictionary-that people began to speak of 'the media', and a generation later, in the 1950s, of a 'communication revolution', but a concern with the means of communication is very much older than that" (Briggs & Burke, 2002, p. 1). Oral and written communication played a major role in ancient cultures. These oral cultures used

stories to document the past and impart cultural standards, traditions, and knowledge. With the development of alphabets around the world over 5000 years ago, written language with ideogrammatic (picture-based) alphabets like hieroglyphics started to change how cultures communicated.

Still, written communication remained ambiguous and did not reach the masses until the Greeks and Romans resolved this by establishing a syllable alphabet representing sounds. But, without something to write on, written language was inefficient. Eventually, paper making processes were perfected in China, which spread throughout Europe via trade routes (Baran, 2002). Mass communication was not quick, but it was far-reaching (Briggs & Burke, 2002). This forever altered how cultures saved and transmitted cultural knowledge and values. Any political or social movement throughout the ages can be traced to the development and impact of the printing press and movable metal type (Steinberg, 1959). With his technique, Guttenberg could print more than a single page of specific text. By making written communication more available to larger numbers of people, mass printing became responsible for giving voice to the masses and making information available to common folks (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). McLuhan (1962) argues that Gutenberg's evolution of the printing press as a form of mass communication had profound and lasting effects on culture.

With the transition to the industrial age in the 18th century, large populations headed to urban areas, creating mass audiences of all economic classes seeking information and entertainment. Printing technology was at the heart of modernization in this country that lead to magazines, newspapers, the telegraph, and the telephone. At the turn of the century (1900), pioneers like Thomas Edison, Theodore Puskas, and Nikola Tesla literally electrified the world and mass communication. With the addition of motion pictures and radio in the early 1900s, "for the first time in history, an entire population was able to participate in cultural communication" (Baran, 2002, p. 46). In the 1950s, television came of age, reaching 90% of homes by the 1960s. (Baran, p. 47). In the 1970s cable started challenging over-the-air broadcasting and traditional program distribution making the United States a wired nation. Today, over 70% of U.S. households are hooked up, having 500 channels at their finger tips with Pay-Per View (PPV) and Video on Demand (VOD).

The Information Age eventually began to replace the ideals of the industrial age. In 1983 Time magazine named the PC the first Machine of the Year. Just over a decade later PCs outsold televisions (Ebersole, 1995). Finally, in 2006, Time magazine named "you" as the person of the year for your use of technology to broaden communication.

Ebersole (1995) contends, "arguably the Web is just the latest in the parade of 'infotainment' technologies that promise a new age of opportunity. Immediate access to information, entertainment, consumer products, and participation in the democratic process are just a mouse-click away." Chances are that you, your friends, and family spend endless hours engaged in computer-mediated communication such as surfing the internet, emailing, texting, shopping, or participating in chat rooms. Romero (2003) points out that, "The Net has transformed the way we work, the way we get in contact with others, our access to information, our levels of privacy and indeed notions as basic and deeply rooted in our culture as those of time and space" (p. 88).

As more mass communication mediums develop, Marshall McLuhan (1964) states that we can understand media as either hot or cold depending on the amount of information available to the user, as well as the degree of participation. A **hot medium** *"extends one single sense in high definition"* (McCluhan, p. 22). Examples of hot media include photographs or radio because the message is mostly interpreted using one sense and requires little participation by participants. An audience is more passive with hot media because there is less to filter. Television is considered a **cold medium** because of the *large amount of multi-sensory information*. The more sensory data available to multiple senses, the colder the media. We would consider the Internet a cold medium (Ebersole, 1995). Berg Nellis (2004) takes it another step. "Virtual reality, the simulation of actual environment complete with tactile sensory input, might be the extreme in cold media….This and other cutting edge technologies seem to point to increasingly cold media as we move into the digital communication future" (p. 256). Think about the online video games that people play. They have become so involved and realistic that they represent cold mediums because of the vast amount of sensory input and participation they require.

Since the printing press, mass communication has literally changed the ways we think and interact as humans. We take so much for granted as "new technologies are assimilated so rapidly in U.S. culture that historic perspectives are often lost in the process" (Fidler, 1997, p. 1). With all of this talk and research about mass communication, what functions does it serve for us?

Functions of Mass Communication

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right (1960) characterizes seven functions of mass communication that offer insight into its role in our lives.

- **Surveillance**. The first function of mass communication is to serve as the eyes and ears for those of us seeking information about our world. When we want to find out the latest news about what's happening, we can turn on the television, surf the internet, or read a newspaper or magazine. We rely on mass communication for news and information about our daily lives such as the weather, stock reports, or the start time for a game. What was one of the first things you did after you heard about the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center? More than likely, you were glued to the Internet or your television waiting for details about the disaster. In fact, your authors' campus closed down to allow people to stay at home to collect information and be with loved ones, even though our campus is located on the other side of the country.

- **Correlation**. Correlation addresses how the media present facts that we use to move through the world. The information we get through mass communication is not objective and without bias. The grandmother of a friend of your authors stated that the information she heard on the radio, "had to be true" because it was on the radio. This statement begs the question, how credible are the media? Can we consume media without questioning motive and agenda? Someone selects, arranges, interprets, edits, and critiques the information we see. A friend of your authors' has a brother who edits for a major reality TV show. When asked if what we see if a fair representation of what really happens, the person who does the editing simply laughed and said "no."

- **Sensationalization**. There is an old saying in the news industry-"if it bleeds, it leads" that highlights the idea of sensationalization. Sensationalization is when the media puts forward the most sensational messages to titillate consumers. Elliot poses some interesting food for thought: "Media managers think in terms of consumers rather than citizens. Good journalism sells, but unfortunately, bad journalism sells as well. And, bad journalism-stories that simply repeat government claims or that reinforce what the public wants to hear instead of offering independent reporting -is cheaper and easier to produce" (2004, p.35).

- **Entertainment**. Mass media provide us with an escape from daily routines and problems by entertaining us (Zillmann & Bryant, 1986, p. 303). Media like People Magazine and E-TV keep us up to date on the doings of our favorite celebrities. We watch sports on television, go to the movies, play video games, and listen to our ipods and radios. Most mass communication simultaneously entertains and informs. We often turn to media in our leisure time to provide an escape from our boredom and relief from the predictability of our everyday lives. We rely on media to take us places we could not afford to go or imagine, acquaint us with bits of culture, and make us laugh or cry. Entertainment can have the secondary effect of providing companionship and/or catharsis through the media we consume.

- **Transmission**. Mass media is a vehicle to transmit cultural norms, values, rules, and habits. Consider how you learned about what is fashionable to wear or what music to listen to. Mass media plays a significant role in the socialization process. We look for role models to display appropriate cultural norms, but all too often, we do not recognize inappropriate or stereotypical behavior. We start shopping, dressing, smelling, walking, and talking like the person in the music video, commercial, or movies. Why would soft drink companies pay Christina Aguilera or Mariah Carey millions of dollars to sell their products? Have you ever bought a pair of shoes or changed your hairstyle because of something you encountered in the media? Obviously, culture, age, type of media, and other

cultural variables factor into how mass communication influences how we learn and perceive our culture.

- **Mobilization**. Mass communication functions to mobilize people during times of crisis (McQuail, 1994). Think back to 9/11. Regardless of your political preferences, we mourned as a nation and rallied around national pride and patriotism during this time of crisis. Using our earlier example, your authors' campus decided to suspend classes to allow the campus community time to mourn the loss of fellow citizens. With instant access to media and information, we can collectively witness the same events taking place in real time somewhere else, thus mobilizing a large population of people around a particular event. The rising popularity of political websites such as moveon.org is another key example of the use of mass communication to mobilize people for political action.

- **Validation**. Mass communication functions to validate the status and norms of particular individuals, movements, organizations, or products. The validation of particular people or groups serves to enforce social norms (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1971). If you think about most television dramas and sitcoms, who are the primary characters? What gender and ethnicity are the majority of the stars? What gender and ethnicity are those that play criminals or those considered abnormal? The media validates particular cultural norms while diminishing differences and variations from those norms. A great deal of criticism focuses on how certain groups are promoted, and others marginalized by how they are portrayed in mass media.

Given the power of the various functions of mass communication, we need to be reflective about its presence in our lives (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). We will now turn our attention to the study of mass communication by looking at what mass communication scholars study, and how they study it.

The Study of Mass Communication

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ontinuing with the theme of this book, studying the role of mass communication heightens our awareness, helping us become media literate and strengthen our "ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages" (Baran, 2004, p. 374). Look around you. Mass communication's influence in contemporary society is pervasive, as we are all interlaced with it in our daily lives.

Mass Communication and Popular Culture

Culture is comprised of *shared behaviors, values, beliefs, and attitudes that are learned through socialization*. As Brummett explains, "**popular culture** are those *systems or artifacts that most people share or know about*" (2006, p. 27). Using Brummett's ideas, in order for mass communication to be popular all forms do not have to be consumed or used by everyone. Instead, its place in culture is so pervasive that we at least have some familiarity with it. You may not watch the shows like Survivor, Scrubs, or Lost but chances are you know something about them.

> **Case In Point**
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> In 2002, a general manager at CNN Headline News instructed writers to insert slang words like "fly" (a sexually attractive person) into their televised graphics to resonate with younger viewers (Gordon, 2003; Sanders, 2003). Irvine (2002) points out that advertisers have been doing this for years. Abbreviations to speed up writing such as "lol" (laugh out loud) from chat rooms and e-mail are now becoming popular in daily conversation, and are even included in cell phone commercials advertising text messaging plans. Also, as new television genres replaced older ones, shows like "Survivor," "Dancing with the Stars" and "American Idol" demonstrated that viewers like watching people in "real" situations. Does media shape our culture or does our culture shape media? Which one reflects the other, or is it possible to tell which one came first? These questions point to the importance of, and need for, media theories to provide the answers.

In contrast to popular culture, **high culture** consists of those *media that are generally not produced for the masses, require a certain knowledge base, and typically require an investment of time and money to experience them*. Examples of high culture include opera, poetry, theater, classical music, and the arts. While we generally do not use

the term low culture, "Pop culture refers to mass-mediated kinds of 'low' art such as television commercials, television programs, most films, genre works of literature, and popular music" (Berger, 2002, p. 118).

Keep in mind that popular culture does not necessarily mean poor quality. Popular is not always bad and is often relative to the times. For example, think about baby boomers. Their parents said rock-n-roll music was going to ruin their generation. However, today that very same music is considered classic. In the 1950's it was said that comic books would corrupt children, and jazz was sinful. Regardless of how mass communication is perceived, it implants words, behaviors, trends, icons, and patterns of behaviors that show up in our culture. Or, as some ask, is it the other way around?

For example, in the 1980's, Wendy's aired the popular television commercial "where's the beef?" In the 1990s, Jerry Seinfeld's television show got us saying, "yada, yada, yada." And Saturday Night Live popularized the phrase, "I need more cow bell." Mass communication influences all aspects of society, including the language we use (Spitulnik, 2001). It is common for us to personalize words or phrases, especially if they're funny, and integrate them into our lives relative to our social contexts. The Seattle Times News Service (2003) reported that the 2003 version of the Oxford Dictionary of English now contains the catch phrase made famous by the HBO show The Sopranos-"bada bing" meaning an exclamation to emphasize that something will effortlessly and predictably happen. This dictionary now contains words implanted by popular culture such as "counterterrorism" and "bootylicious." Do you ever watch VH1? Maybe you've seen their version of a Pop Culture Dictionary. Certain words become a part of our shared understanding through media exposure. Think about other acronyms and language that are now commonplace that were not just a few years ago: MP3s, DVDs, DVRs, ipods, etc.

Grounding Theories of Mass Communication

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hirty years ago Osmo Wiio (1978) argued that mass communication does not accurately portray reality. Interesting that 30 years later we now have a large number of "reality tv" shows that continue to blur the lines of reality and fiction. Are you always able to tell the difference between fiction and reality in mass communication? Most people tend to rationalize that others are more affected by mass communication than they are (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000). However, we are all susceptible to the influence of mass communication.

As we discussed in Chapter 5, theories are our best representations of the world around us. "Mass communication theories are explanations and predictions of social phenomena that attempt to relate mass communication to various aspects of our personal and cultural lives or social systems" (Baran, 2002, p. 374). We need to be discerning as we examine mass communication (Baran, 2002). "The beginning of the television age in the 1950s brought in visual communication as well as stimulated the rise of an interdisciplinary theory of the media. Contributions were made from economics, history, literature, art, political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology, and led to the emergence of academic departments of communication and cultural studies" (Briggs & Burke, 2002, p. 2). Mass communication theories explore explanations for how we interact with mass communication, its role in our lives, and the effect it has on us.

Let's look at five fundamental theories of mass communication: the magic bullet theory, two-step flow theory, multi-step flow theory, uses and gratification theory, and cultivation theory.

- **Magic Bullet Theory**. The magic bullet theory (also called the hypodermic needle theory) *suggests that mass communication is like a gun firing bullets of information at a passive audience*. "Communication was seen as a magic bullet that transferred ideas or feelings or knowledge or motivations almost automatically from one mind to another" (Schramm, 1963, p. 8). This theory has been largely discredited by academics because of its suggestion that all members of an audience interpret messages in the same way, and are largely passive receptors of messages. This theory does not take into account intervening cultural and demographic variables such as age,

ethnicity, gender, personality, or education that cause us to react differently to the media messages we encounter. However, many people hold this assumption that media like television simply shoot out information. Those who believe reality television shows actually portray reality hold some assumptions of the magic bullet theory.

Mass Communication Study Now

One of the things that has occurred in mass communication during the Iraq war is the absence of images and coverage of American soldiers killed in action. The American government has asked that the media refrain from using these images in their publications. As we have talked about how individuals now have the ability to engage in mass communication, Paul Mcleary (2008) wrote an article for the Columbia Journalism Review entitled "Blogging the Long War." In it, he examines the rise of independent reporters using blogs to report events occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan that people may not be able to see in mainstream media. As a result of access to outlets like blogs, individuals, such as soldiers can do their own reporting, and others are able to access alternative sources of information. How do you think these new outlets impact our world view?

- **Two-Step Flow Theory**. After World War II, researchers began noticing that not all audiences react in the same ways to mass communication. It became apparent that the media appear to have less power and relatively less affect than previously assumed (Klapper, 1958). The two-step flow theory suggests that mass communication messages do not move directly from a sender to the receiver (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Instead, *a small group of people, gatekeepers, screen media messages, reshape these messages, and control their transmission to the masses*. Opinion leaders initially consume "media content on topics of particular interest to them" and make sense of it based upon their own values and beliefs (Baran, 2002). In the second step, the opinion leaders filter and interpret the messages before they pass them along to individuals with shared ideologies who have less contact with the media, opinion followers. An example of this theory occurs during political campaigns. Research has shown that during an election, media influence your voting preferences (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) through the information they choose to show about a candidate. So, conservatives often argue that they are marginalized by the "liberal media," while liberals argue that they are marginalized because wealthy conservatives own and control the media. Either way, research reveals that media dependency becomes increasingly important for the public especially during political campaigns (Jeffries, 1997).

- **Multi-step Flow Theory**. This suggests that *there is a reciprocal nature of sharing information and influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors* (Troldahl, 1965; Troldahl & Van Dam, 1965). The idea is that opinion leaders might create media messages, but opinion followers might be able to sway opinion leaders. Thus, the relationship to media becomes much more complex. Some believe that the role of the opinion leader in our changing culture is diminishing (Baran, 2000; Kang, 2004). This word of mouth diffusion de-bunks the notion of an all powerful media but still recognizes that media have some effect on the audience.

Mass Communication Study and You

Do you do most of your research using search engines like google or yahoo? There had been an assumption that today's younger generation is the most web-literate. However, a new study carried out by the CIBER research team at the University College London states today's youth "rely heavily on search engines, view rather than read and do not possess the critical and analytical skills to assess the information that they find on the web." The same study showed that people of all ages who use the internet have a low tolerance for any delay in obtaining information. These researchers called on libraries and educational institutions to keep up with the digital age in order to provide people with quick access to information. They also stress the importance of having good research skills, rather than doing quick and simple google searches, without thinking critically about the information and its sources. Does your campus require an sort of "information literacy" training for you to graduate?

-The British Library

- **Uses and Gratification Theory**. The uses and gratification theory suggests that *audience members actively pursue particular media to satisfy their own needs*. "Researchers focus their attention, then, on how audiences use the media rather than how the media affect audiences" (Berger, 2002, p. 127). The reciprocal nature of the mass communication process no longer sees the media user as an inactive, unknowing participant but as an active, sense-making participant that chooses content and makes informed media choices. We tend to avoid media that do not agree with our values, attitudes, beliefs, or pocketbooks. Schramm (1963) argued that we make media

choices by determining how gratified we will be from consuming a particular media. Is it easier for you to read a newspaper or would you rather watch television or listen to the radio? Even with all the information on the internet, there are still some people who consider it too time consuming and complex. Yet, many of our students do not have television sets, but instead watch all television, movies, and videos online.

- **Cultivation Theory**. Cultivation theory *questions how active we actually are when we consume mass communication*. For example, children view between three and five hours of television a day for an average of 21 hours per week (McDowell & Futris, 2001). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, by age 18, the average American child will have watched 200,000 acts of violence on television. When violence is shown on television, rarely are the negative consequences of it acknowledged-47% of victims show no evidence of harm and 73% of perpetrators were not held accountable for their violent actions (Huston et al., 1998).

What kind of impact does all of this have? Is it possible to tell when the average viewer becomes desensitized to violent content, or does it serve as an outlet for normal aggression? Why doesn't all violent content affect every viewer in the same manner? Does too much consumption of violent media cause violent behavior from viewers? People who consume a lot of media see the world as a more violent and scary place because of the high levels of violence they see (Gerbner, 2003).

The theory has been extended to address the more general influences of media on human social life and personal beliefs (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Media present cultural realities such as fear of victimization (Sparks & Ogles, 1990), body image, promiscuity, religion, families, attitudes toward racism (Allen & Hatchett, 1986), sex roles, and drug use. Kilbourne (1999), states, "Advertising doesn't cause eating problems, of course, any more than it causes alcoholism. [However,] Advertising does promote abusive and abnormal attitudes about eating, drinking, and thinness" (p. 261). Gerbner (1990) developed the three B's which state that media blurs people's traditional distinctions of reality, blends people's realities into one common cultural mainstream, and bends the mainstream to fit its institutional interests and the interests of its sponsors.

Understanding some of the theories of mass communication, let's look at some skills that will help you become a better and more critical consumer of mass communication.

Media Literacy

S tudying how we use and consume mass communication allows us to scrutinize the conflicts, contradictions, problems, or even positive outcomes in our use of mass communication. With so much to learn about mass communication, how informed are you? Our consciousness of our media consumption is vital to understanding its effects on us as members of society. Media Literacy is our awareness regarding our mediated environment or consumption of mass communication. It is our ability to responsibly comprehend, access, and use mass communication in our personal and professional lives. Potter (1998) states that we should maintain cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral awareness as we interact with media. Stanley J. Baran (2002) suggests a number of skills we can develop in order to be media literate.

- **Understand and respect the power of mass communication messages**. An important skill for media literacy is to acknowledge just how dominant mass communication is in our lives and around the globe. Through mass communication, media shape, entertain, inform, represent, reflect, create, move, educate, and affect our behaviors, attitudes, values, and habits in direct and indirect ways. Virtually everyone in the world has been touched in some way by mass communication, and has made personal and professional decisions largely based on representations of reality portrayed though mass communication. We must understand and respect the power media have in our lives and understand how we make sense of certain meanings.

- **Understand content by paying attention and filtering out noise**. As we learned in Chapter 1, anything that hinders communication is noise. Much of the noise in mass communication originates with our consumption behaviors. How often do you do something other than pay complete attention to the media that you're accessing? Do you listen to the radio while you drive, watch television while you eat, or text message a friend while you're in class? When it comes to mass communication we tend to multitask, an act that acts as noise and impacts the quality of the messages and our understanding of their meanings. We often turn ourselves into passive consumers, not really paying attention to the messages we receive as we perform other tasks while consuming media.

- **Understand emotional versus reasoned reactions to mass communication content in order to act accordingly**. A great deal of mass communication content is intended to touch us on an emotional level. Therefore, it's important to understand our emotional reactions to mass communication. Advertising often appeals to our emotions in order to sell products (Jhally, 1990). "Sex sells" is an old advertising adage, but one that highlights how often we make decisions based on emotional reactions, versus reasoned actions. Glance through magazines like Maxim or Glamour and you'll quickly realize how the emotions associated with sex are used to sell products of all kinds. Reasoned actions require us to think critically about the mass communication we consume before we come to conclusions simply based on our emotional responses.

- **Develop heightened expectations of mass communication content**. Would you consider yourself an informed consumer of mass communication? Do you expect a lot from mass communication? You may like a mystery novel because it's "fun," or a movie might take your mind off of reality for a few hours. However, Baran (2002) challenges us to require more from the media we consume. "When we expect little from the content before us, we tend to give meaning making little effort and attention" (p. 57). It depends upon you what you're willing to accept as quality. Your authors have noticed that we watch fewer and fewer mainstream movies because, as we like to put it, "they're stupid." More and more we look for foreign films, independent films, and documentaries as they seem like they are better quality than many of the popular movies released by Hollywood.

- **Understand genre conventions and recognize when they are being mixed**. All media have their own unique characteristics or "certain distinctive, standardized style elements" that mark them as a category or genre (Baran, 2002, p. 57). We expect certain things from different forms of mass communication. For example, most of us believe we are able to tell the difference between news and entertainment. But, are we? Television news shows often recreate parts of a story to fill in missing video of an event. Do you always catch the "re-enactment" disclaimer? Movies such as United 93 or Rendition effectively blur the lines between fact and fiction, and can have the effect of making us think we are watching "reality." Even eighty years ago, Walter Lippmann (1922) recognized that media are so invasive in our lives that we might have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is manipulated by the media. The "reality TV" genre is now blurring these lines even more. Another example is the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California. He, and others, often refer to him as the "governator", a blurring of his fictional role as the Terminator and his real role as California's governor.

Case In Point

The Tao of Media Literacy

How do media affect us? Are we media literate? Werner Heisenberg (1958) in The Physicist's Conception of Nature relates a timeless, allegorical story about the role of technology in our lives and questions if our interactions are mindful or thoughtless in regards to change. In Heisenberg's analogy, the wise old, Chinese sage warns us about the delicate balance between humans, nature, and technology.

In this connection it has often been said that the far-reaching changes in our environment and in our way of life wrought by this technical age have also changed dangerously our ways of thinking, and that here lie the roots of the crises, which have shaken our times and which, for instance, are also expressed in modern art. True, this objection's much older than modern technology and science, the use of implements going back to our earliest beginnings. Thus, two and a half thousand years ago, the Chinese sage Chuang-Tzu spoke of the danger of the machine when he said: As Tzu-Gung was [traveling] through the regions north of the river Han, he saw an old man working in his vegetable garden. He had dug an irrigation ditch. The man would descend into the well, fetch up a vessel of water in his arms and pour it out into the ditch. While his efforts were tremendous the results appeared to be very [meager]. Tzu-Gung said, "There is a way whereby you can irrigate a hundred ditches in one day, and whereby you can do much with little effort. Would you not like to hear of it?" Then the gardener stood up, looked at him and said, "And what would that be?" Tzu-Gung replied, "You take a wooden lever, weighted at the back and light in front. In this way you can bring up water so quickly that it just gushes out. This is called a draw-well." Then anger rose up on the old man's face, and he said, "I have heard my teacher say that whoever uses machines does all his work like a machine. He who does his work like a machine grows a heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. He who has lost his simplicity becomes unsure in the strivings of his soul. Uncertainty in the strivings of the soul is something which does not agree with honest sense. It is not that I do not know of such things: I am ashamed to use them."

- **Think critically about mass communication messages, no matter how credible their source**. It is essential that we critically consider the source of all mass communication messages. No matter how credible a media source, we can't always believe everything we see or hear because all mass communication is motivated by political, profit, or personal factors. Publicists, editors, and publishers present the information from their perspective--informed by their experiences and agendas. Even if the motive is pure or the spin is minimal, we tend to selectively interpret meanings based on our own lived experiences. Audiences do not always hold similar perceptions regarding mediated messages.

- **Understand the internal language of mass communication to understand its effects, no matter how complex**. This skill requires us to develop sensitivity to what is going on in the media. This doesn't just refer to whether you can program a DVR or surf the internet. This means being familiar with the intent or motivation behind the action or message. "Each medium has its own specific internal language. This language is expressed in production values--the choice of lighting, editing, special effects, music, camera angle, location on the page, and size and placement of headline. To be able to read a media text, you must understand its language" (Baran, 2002, p. 58). What effect do these have on your interpretive or sense making abilities? For example, most news coverage of the Iraq war includes background symbols of American flags, eagles, as well as words like "Freedom," and "Liberation." What is the impact of using these symbols in "objective" coverage of something like war? Shows like CSI make editorial choices to glamorize and make forensic science "sexy." On the surface, we might not think that being a forensic scientist would be all that exciting, but shows like CSI make it appear so. Reality shows such as Extreme Makeover Home Edition have a distinct formula that we've come to anticipate and recognize each week.

Summary

S ocieties have always needed effective and efficient means to transmit information. Mass communication is the outgrowth of this need. If you remember our definition of mass communication as the public transfer of messages through media or technology driven channels to a large number of recipients, you can easily identify the multiple forms of mass communication you rely on in your personal, academic, and professional lives. These encompass print, auditory, visual, and interactive media forms. A relatively recent mass communication phenomenon known as

masspersonal communication combines mass communication channels with interpersonal communication and relationships, where individuals are now gaining access to technology that allows them to reach large audiences. While mass communication is vital to the success of social movements and political participation it has seven basic functions. The first of which is surveillance, or the "watch dog" role. Correlation occurs when an audience receives facts and usable information from mass media sources. When the most outrageous or fantastic stories are presented we are witnessing the sensationalization function of media. Needing an escape from routines or stress we turn to media for its entertainment value. As a cultural institution, mass communication transmits cultural values, norms and behaviors, mobilizes audiences, and validates dominant cultural values. As media technology has evolved, so have the scholarly theories for understanding them. The five theories we discussed are different primarily in the degree of passivity versus activity they grant the audience. The magic-bullet theory assumes a passive audience while the two-step-flow and multi-step-flow theories suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between the audience and the message. The theory of uses and gratification suggests that audiences pick and choose media to satisfy their individual needs. Gerbner's cultivation theory takes a long-term perspective by suggesting that media is one of many cultural institutions responsible for shaping or cultivating attitudes. Because of mass communication's unquestionable role in our lives, media literacy skills are vital for any responsible consumer and citizen. Specifically, we can become media literate by understanding and respecting the power of mass communication messages, understanding media content by paying attention, understanding emotional versus reasoned responses to mass communication, developing heightened expectations of mass communication content, understanding genre conventions and recognizing when they're mixed, understanding the internal language of mass communication, and above all—thinking critically!

Discussion Questions

1. What is the role of the oral tradition in today's society?
2. Does media directly influence individuals?
3. What determines what media an individual will use?
4. Is it the form of the media or its content that most deeply influences us?
5. Which mass communication theory do you feel most accurately portrays your media experiences? Why?
6. With constantly changing technology, what do you see as the future of mass communication?
7. How involved should the government be in protecting us from media effects? Where do you draw the line between free speech and indecency? Is censorship ever warranted?

Key Terms

- cold media
- correlation
- cultivation theory
- entertainment
- gatekeepers
- global village
- hot media
- magic bullet theory
- mass communication
- masspersonal communication
- media literacy
- mobilization
- multi-step flow theory
- opinion followers

- opinion leaders
- popular culture
- sensationalization
- surveillance
- transmission
- two-step flow theory
- uses and gratification theory
- validation

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