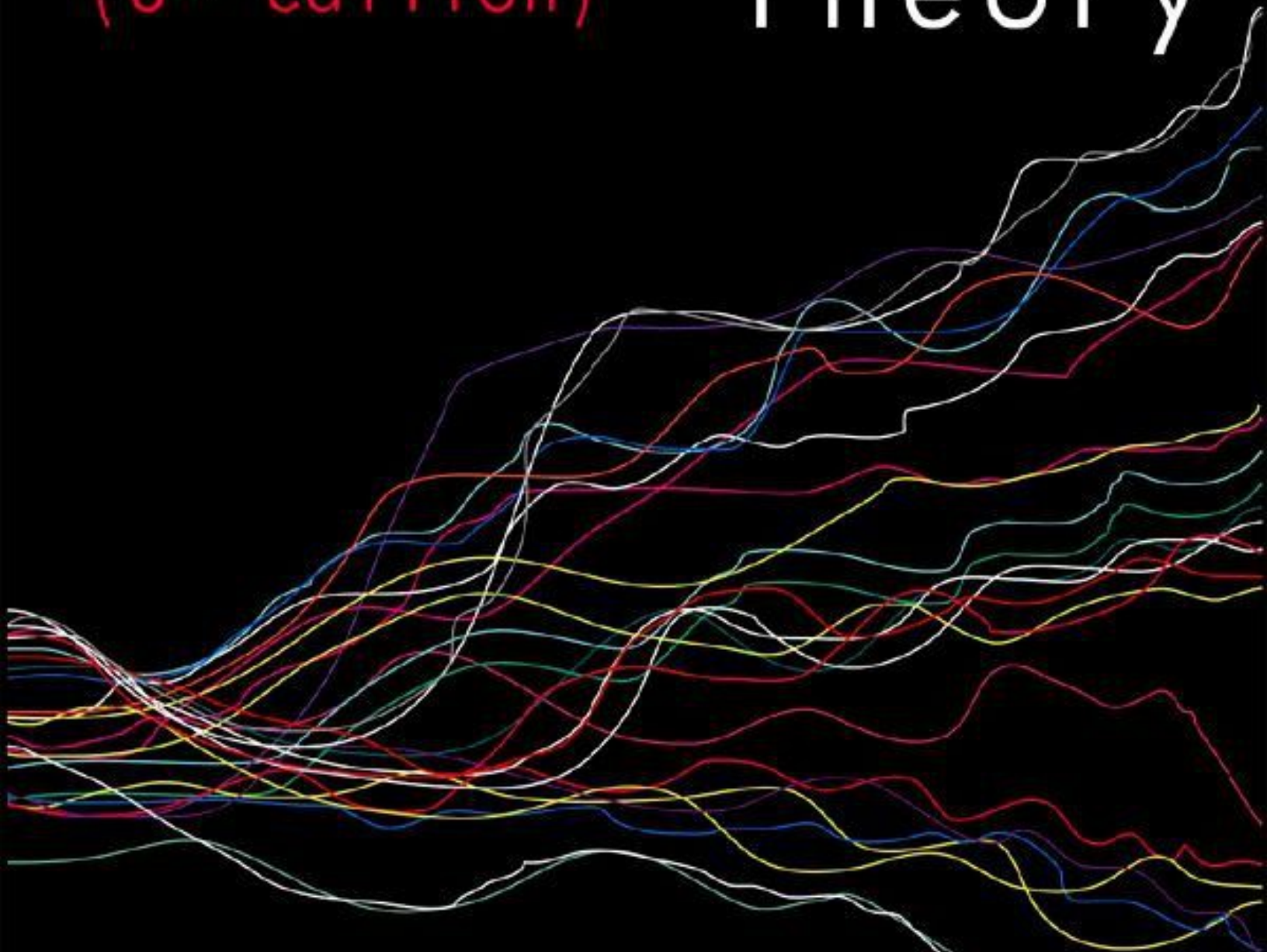


McQuail's Mass Communication (6th edition) Theory



Denis McQuail



McQuail's Mass Communication Theory

Dedicated to the future media audiences, especially:

Laurence, Alexander, William, Noah, Chaia, Alice, Miranda, Anarosa, and Ava, grand children all.

McQuail's Mass Communication Theory

6th edition

Denis McQuail



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Preface

This version is an updating and consolidation of the last edition, building with more confidence on the proposition that mass communication is evolving and becoming more complex rather than withering away. The earlier expectation of demise was based on the belief that the ‘new media’ of public communication that were appearing in the latter part of the 20th century would ultimately prove to be superior in all respects to the relatively crude forms of traditional ‘mass media’ (especially newspaper and television broadcasting). This supposition was itself out of step with the lessons of media history that has already demonstrated the power of different media forms to adapt and survive in new environments. It is now the turn of the traditional mass media to adapt to new technology under changing social, economic and cultural conditions. The persistence of mass communication as a process and the continued relevance of much of the accumulated theory and research stem, even so, from continuity in the kind and direction of dominant social forces, especially those that fall under the headings of globalization and modernization/development. In the same way that media of all kinds are converging, so also are theories of the new and old media converging.

Despite the expectation that mass communication will evolve and survive, the changes taking place to, and within, the spectrum of public communication media are fundamental, accelerating and open for all to see. They outpace the capacity of a book of this kind to keep pace with what is happening on the ground. But the purpose, as before, is not to chart media change, but to provide some relatively firm theoretical islands or platforms from which to observe and understand what is happening around us. The evidence for all this comes primarily from the continuing stream of findings of academic research in media and communication, which is itself always anchored in and directed by theory, but also rather slow to appear. The main changes made in this edition have been motivated by the aims of testing the continued relevance of old theory and of adding, where possible, to the stock of theory. Often it is reports about the effects and significance of new media that are most fruitful for the second purpose.

A process of revision of this kind depends not only on scanning and evaluating newly published theory and new empirical evidence. It also calls for continuing contact with others engaged in more active ways with the field of inquiry. I have been fortunate in having continued opportunities for exchange of ideas and for learning new things from colleagues, friends and students. I cannot repay all debts, but I would like to mention here some of the people, places and events that have been of particular help on the journey. I have been much helped, thanks to Karin Raeymackers, by ready access to the communication library of the University of Ghent, with its now rare collection of current and recent international journals. I have also appreciated regular contact with my co-editors and others associated with the European Journal of Communication, especially Els de Bens, Peter Golding and Liesbet van Zoonen. The periodic seminars organized by the EJC have been an important learning experience. A continuing link with the Euromedia Research Group, by participation in meetings and publication, has been another source of stimulation (too many names to name). Another recurring source of stimulation has been the chance to participate in the annual doctoral Summer School organized by the European Communication Research Association (ECREA) and held for the last five years at the University of Tartu, Estonia. I have benefited also from invitations to teach or give lectures at a number universities. Particular thanks are due in this respect to Prof. Takesato

Watanabe at Doshisha University, Kyoto. I have similar debts to Helena Sousa, at the University of Minho, Portugal; Josef Trappel at the University of Zurich, Elena Vartanova at Moscow University Faculty of Journalism; Miquel de Moragas Spá at the Autonomous University of Barcelona; Mirosljub Radoikovich, University of Belgrade; Konca Yumlu at Ege University, Izmir; Vita Zelče and Inta Brikše at the University of Latvia. Naming names is always a bit invidious and I have to omit many, but I will just mention my appreciation of renewed contact with my comrade-colleague of old, Jay Blumler, and last but not least my association with the self styled Soul Brothers, Cliff Christians, Ted Glasser, Bob White and Kaarle Nordenstreng, especially as our 'eternal' book on normative media theory has at last appeared. It is more than mere convention to say that the present book would not have appeared without the initiative, persistence and enthusiasm of Mila Steele, of Sage Publications. I hope it lives up to her high hopes. It is probably the last edition of this book, at my hand at least, but if mass communication endures so also will mass communication theory.


This Preface was written during a visit from young grandchildren who are already forming the future audience for mass media. For this reason I have dedicated the book to them all, borrowing an idea from Hanno Hardt. My last words of thanks are to my wife, Rosemary, for making so much possible.

Eastleigh, Hampshire, UK, November 2009


How to Use this Book

The text can best be used by readers as a resource for learning about a particular topic. There are several ways this can be approached. The table of contents provide an initial orientation, or map, to the book, and each chapter begins with a list of the main headings to help you orient yourself in the book. The subject index at the end of the book includes all key words and topics and can also be used for an initial search.


Each chapter contains boxes to help you explore the background, relevance and research on the themes and theories discussed in the book. Symbols beside the boxes help you navigate so you can quickly find summaries; review; name-check; and take it further with key quotes and additional information.




Theories: These boxes give a bullet-point outline to key theoretical propositions, helping consolidate your understanding of the essential themes and theories.




Information: These boxes supplement the discussion with essential addition information. Tables and lists give you extra information to help ground theory with empirical data.




Summaries: Use these as an easy reference to summarize many key themes and principles as you go along.



Quotations: Quotes from major thinkers and texts clarify and emphasize important principles and will help familiarize you with the some of the research literature on mass communication theory.




Questions: Key questions reflect in summary form the main divisions and points of debate in major issues of theory.




Research: Research examples will help you understand some of the ways in which theoretical questions can be answered empirically.

Further readings: An important aim of the book is to provide a guide to follow-up study. Each chapter ends with an annotated list of further readings to where the ground covered can be explored in more detail.



Online readings: all readings marked with a mouse can be accessed for free on the companion website (www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail6). These articles examine issues and theories in detail and provide valuable links to other relevant sources.



Glossary: At the end of the book you will find a detailed glossary of all the key concepts defined in the book. Glossary terms are indicated in **bold** and with a star in the margin to help quick cross-referencing.

Part 1

Preliminaries

Introduction to the book

The rise of mass media

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Introduction to the Book

	Our object of study
	The structure of the book
	Themes and issues in mass communication
	Manner of treatment
	How to use the book
	Limitations of coverage and perspective
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Communication science and the study of mass communication	Alternative traditions of analysis: structural, behavioural and cultural
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Our Object of Study

The term ‘mass communication’ was coined, along with that of ‘mass media’, early in the twentieth century to describe what was then a new social phenomenon and a key feature of the emerging modern world that was being built on the foundations of industrialism and popular democracy. It was an age of migration into cities and across frontiers and also of struggle between forces of change and repression and of conflict between empires and nation states. The mass media (a plural form) refer to the organized means of communicating openly, at a distance, and to many in a short space of time. They were born into the context and conflicts of this age of transition and have continued to be deeply implicated in the trends and changes of society and culture, as experienced at the personal level as well as that of society and the ‘world system’.

The early mass media (newspapers, magazines, phonogram, cinema and radio) developed rapidly to reach formats that are still largely recognizable today, with changes mainly of scale and diversification as well as the addition of television in the mid-twentieth century. Similarly, what were regarded as the key features of mass communication seventy or more years ago are still foremost in our minds today: their capacity to reach the entire population rapidly and with much the same information, opinions and entertainment; the universal fascination they hold; their stimulation of hopes and fears in equal measure; the presumed relation to sources of power in society; the assumption of great impact and influence. There are, of course, many and continuing changes in the spectrum of available media and in many aspects of their content and form, and one purpose of this book is to chart and assess these changes.

At the outset, we need to recognize that mass communication as described is no longer the only means of society-wide (and global) communication. New technologies have been developed and taken up that constitute an alternative potential network of communication. Mass communication, in the sense of a large-scale, one-way flow of public content, continues unabated, but it is no longer carried only by the ‘traditional’ mass media. These have been supplemented by new media (especially the Internet and mobile technology) and new types of content and flow are carried at the

same time. These differ mainly in being more extensive, less structured, often interactive as well as private and individualized.

Whatever changes are under way there is no doubting the continuing significance of mass media in contemporary society, in the spheres of politics, culture, everyday social life and economics. In respect of politics, the mass media provide an arena of debate and a set of channels for making policies, candidates, relevant facts and ideas more widely known as well as providing politicians, interest groups and agents of government with a means of publicity and influence. In the realm of culture, the mass media are for most people the main channel of cultural representation and expression, and the primary source of images of social reality and materials for forming and maintaining social identity. Everyday social life is strongly patterned by the routines of media use and infused by its contents through the way leisure time is spent, lifestyles are influenced, conversation is given its topics and models of behaviour are offered for all contingencies. Gradually, the media have grown in economic value, with ever larger and more international media corporations dominating the media market, with influence extending through sport, travel, leisure, food and clothing industries, and with interconnections with telecommunications and all information-based economic sectors.

For the reasons given, our focus on mass communication is not confined to the mass media, but relates to any aspect of that original process, irrespective of the technology or network involved, thus to all types and processes of communication that are extensive, public and technically mediated. Here the word 'public' means not only open to all receivers and to a recognized set of senders, but also relating to matters of information and culture that are of wide interest and concern in a society, without being addressed to any particular individual. There is no absolute line between what is private and public, but a broad distinction can usually be made. This book is designed to contribute to public scrutiny and understanding of mass communication in all its forms and to provide an overview of ideas and research, guided by the themes and issues summarized below.

The Structure of the Book

The contents are divided into twenty chapters, grouped according to eight headings. The first substantive part, 'Theories' (II), provides a grounding in the most basic and also the most general ideas about mass communication, with particular reference to the many relations that exist between media and social and cultural life. It starts with a brief historical review of the rise of mass media and follows with an explanation of alternative approaches to the study of mass media and society. The differences stem from varying perspectives on the media, the diversity of topics addressed, and the different ways of defining the issues and problems depending on the values of the observer. A subject of this kind cannot simply be studied 'objectively' by a single set of methods.

There are different kinds of theory, as explained later in this chapter, but most basically a theory is a general proposition, itself based on observation and logical argument, that states the relationship between observed phenomena and seeks either to explain or to predict the relation, in so far as this is possible. The main purpose of theory is to make sense of an observed reality and guide the collection and evaluation of evidence. A concept (see [Chapter 3](#)) is a core term in a theory that summarizes an important aspect of the problem under study and can be used in collecting and interpreting evidence. It requires careful definition. A model is a selective representation in verbal or diagrammatic form of some aspect of the dynamic process of mass communication. It can also describe the spatial and temporal relation between elements in a process.

The 'Theories' part deals separately with 'society' and 'culture', although the separation is artificial since one cannot exist without the other. But by convention, 'society' refers primarily to social relationships of all kinds, ranging from those of power and authority (government) to friendship and family relations as well as all material aspects of life. 'Culture' refers to ideas, beliefs, identity, symbolic expression of all kinds, including language, art, information and entertainment, plus customs and rituals. There are two other components. One relates to the norms and values that apply to the conduct of media organizations. Here theory deals with what media ought to be doing or not doing, rather than simply with why they do what they do. Not surprisingly, there are divergent views on this matter, especially given the strong claims that media make to freedom from regulation and control in the name of free speech and artistic expression and the strong public feelings that also exist about their responsibilities.

Secondly, this part deals with the consequences of media change for theory, especially because of the rise of new, interactive media, such as the Internet, that are 'mass media' in the sense of their availability, but are not really engaged in 'mass communication' as it has been earlier defined. Here the issue faced is whether 'new media' require new and different theory from that applying to 'mass communication' and whether mass communication is in decline.

The part entitled 'Structures' (III) deals with three main topics. First, it deals with the overall media system and the way it is typically organized at a national level. The central concept is that of a media 'institution' which applies to media both as a branch of industry subject to economic laws, and as a social institution meeting needs in society and subject to some requirements of law and regulation, guided in some degree by public policy. The media are unusual in being a business 'invested with a public interest' and yet free, for the most part, from any positive obligations. The second topic dealt with is a detailed inquiry into the normative expectations from media on the part of the public, government and audiences, with particular references to the principles and standards of their performance. What are the standards that should apply, how can media performance be assessed, and by what means can the media be made accountable? Thirdly, this part looks at the growing phenomenon of global media and the 'world system' of media that has its origins both in the new computer-based technologies of production and transmission and in larger globalizing trends of society.

The part headed 'Organizations' (IV) focuses on the locus of media production, whether a firm or a department within a larger firm, and deals with the numerous influences that shape production. These include pressures and demands from outside the boundaries of the organization, the requirements of routine 'mass production' of news and culture, and the personal and professional tendencies of the 'mass communicators'. There are several theories and models that seek to explain observed regularities in the process of selection and internal shaping of 'content' before it is transmitted.

The 'Content' part (V) is divided into two chapters, the first of which deals primarily with approaches to, and methods for, the analysis of content. Aside from simple description of media output according to internally given labels, it is not at all easy to describe content in a more illuminating manner, since there is no agreement on where the 'true meaning' is to be found, as between its producers, its recipients and the text of the 'message' itself. Secondly, theory and evidence are assembled to account for some of the observed regularities in content, with particular reference to the news genre.

In the next part, 'Audiences' (VI), the 'audience' refers to all the many sets of readers, listeners and viewers that receive media content or are the targets for media transmission. Without the

audience there would be no mass communication, and it plays a dynamic role in shaping the flow and effects of media. Again, audience analysis has numerous tasks and can be carried out for many different purposes. It is far more than audience 'measurement' on behalf of the media industry and it has evolved along several theoretically distinct paths. Audience theory deals not only with the 'why' of media use, but also with its determinants and correlates in social and cultural life. Media 'use' has become so intertwined with other activities that we can no longer treat it in isolation from other factors of our experience. A key question to be answered is whether the media have evolved so far beyond the stage of mass communication that a concept based on the image of a passive recipient is still adequate.

Questions of media 'Effects' (Part VII) stand at the start and at the conclusion of the book and are at the centre of social and cultural concern about mass media. They continue to give rise to different theories and much disagreement. Alternative paths towards the goal of assessing effects are outlined. Differences of type of effect are explained, especially the difference between intended and unintended effect and between short-term impact on individuals and longer-term influence on culture and society. The main areas of media effects theory and research still tend to focus, on the one hand, on the potentially harmful social and cultural effects of the most popular forms of content, especially those that involve representations of sex and violence, and on the other hand, on media influence on public knowledge and opinion. The chapters are organized accordingly.

Themes and Issues in Mass Communication

The contents of the book are cross-cut by a number of general themes that recur in discussions of the social origins, significance and effects of communication, whether at the personal level or that of a whole society. At this point we can identify the main themes as follows:

- **Time.** Communication takes place in time and it matters when it occurs and how long it takes. Communication technology has steadily increased the speed at which a given volume of information can be transmitted from point to point. It also stores information for recovery at a later point in historic time. Mass media content in particular serves as a store of memory for a society and for groups within it, and this can be selectively recovered or lost.
- **Place.** Communication is produced in a given location and reflects features of that context. It serves to define a place for its inhabitants and to establish an identity. It connects places, reducing the distance that separates individuals, countries and cultures. Major trends in mass communication are said to have a delocalizing effect, or to establish a new global 'place', which increasingly people recognize as familiar.
- **Power.** Social relationships are structured and driven by power, where the will of one party is imposed on another, whether legitimately or not, or by influence, where the wishes of another are sought out or followed. Communication as such has no power of compulsion but it is an invariable component and a frequent means of the exercise of power, whether effectively or not. Despite the voluntary character of attention to mass media, the question of their power over audiences is never far away.
- **Social reality.** The assumption behind much theory of mass communication is that we inhabit a 'real' world of material circumstances and events that can be known. The media provide us with reports or reflections of this reality, with varying degrees of accuracy, completeness or

dependability. The notion of ‘truth’ is often applied as a standard to the contents of news and fiction, however difficult to define and assess.

- **Meaning.** A related theme that continually arises concerns the interpretation of the ‘message’, or content, of mass media. Most theories of mass media depend on some assumption being made about the meaning of what they carry, whether viewed from the point of view of the sender, the receiver or the neutral observer. As noted above, there is no unique source of meaning and no way of saying for certain what is meant, providing an endless potential for dispute and uncertainty.
- **Causation and determinism.** It is in the nature of theory to try to solve questions of cause and effect, whether by proposing some overall explanation that links observations or by directing inquiry to determine whether one factor caused another. Questions of cause arise not only in relation to the consequences of media messages on individuals, but also in relation to historical questions of the rise of media institutions in the first place and the reasons why they have certain typical characteristics of content and appeal. Do the media cause effects in society, or are they themselves more the outcome and reflection of prior and deeper social forces?
- **Mediation.** As an alternative to the idea of cause and effect, we can consider the media to provide occasions, links, channels, arenas and platforms for information and ideas to circulate. By way of the media, meanings are formed and social and cultural forces operate freely according to various logics and with no predictable outcome. The process of mediation inevitably influences or changes the meaning received and there is an increasing tendency for ‘reality’ to be adapted to demands of media presentation rather than vice versa.
- **Identity.** This refers to a shared sense of belonging to a culture, society, place or social grouping and involves many factors, including nationality, language, work, ethnicity, religion, belief, lifestyle, etc. The mass media are associated with many different aspects of identity formation, maintenance and dissolution. They can drive as well as reflect social change and lead to either more or less integration.
- **Cultural difference.** At almost every turn, the study of media-related issues reminds us how much the working of mass communications and media institutions, despite their apparent similarities across the globe, are affected by differences of culture at the level of individual, subgroup, nation, etc. The production and use of mass media are cultural practices that resist the universalizing tendencies of the technology and the mass-produced content.
- **Governance.** This refers to all the means by which the various media are regulated and controlled by laws, rules, customs and codes as well as by market management. There is a continuing evolution in these matters in response to changes in technology and society.

When we speak of the issues that will be dealt with in the book, we are referring to more specific matters that are problematic or in dispute in the public arena. They relate to questions on which public opinion often forms, on which governments may be expected to have policies for prevention or improvement, or on which the media themselves might have some responsibility. Not all issues are problematic in the negative sense, but they involve questions of current and future trends that are significant for good or ill. No list of issues can be complete, but the following comprise the main headings that come to mind, most of them already familiar to the reader. They serve not only as a foretaste of the content of the book but as a reminder of the significance of the topic of media in society and the potential relevance of theory to handling such questions. The issues are divided

according to the terrain they occupy.

Relations with politics and the state

- Political campaigns and propaganda.
- Citizen participation and democracy.
- Media role in relation to war and terrorism.
- Influence on the making of foreign policy.
- Serving or resisting sources of power.

Cultural issues

- Globalization of content and flow.
- Promoting the quality of cultural life and cultural production.
- Effects on cultural and social identity.

Social concerns

- The definition of reality and mediation of social experience.
- Links to crime, violence, pornography and deviance.
- Relation to social order and disorder.
- Promotion of an information society.
- The use and quality of leisure time.
- Social and cultural inequality.

Normative questions

- Freedom of speech and expression.
- Social and cultural inequality: class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.
- Media norms, ethics and professionalism.
- Media accountability and social responsibility.

Economic concerns

- Degree of concentration.
- Commercialization of content. Global imperialism and dependency.

Manner of Treatment

The book has been written as a continuous narrative, following a certain logic. It begins with a brief history of the media, followed by a general overview of the main concepts and theories that deal with the relation between mass communication on the one hand and society and culture on the other. Subsequently, the sequence of content follows a line from the 'source', in the form of mass media organizations, to the content they produce and disseminate, to reception by audiences and to a range of possible effects. This does seem to imply in advance a view of how we should approach the subject, although that is not the intention.

Because of the wide-ranging character of the issues outlined above and the complexity of many of them, it is only possible to give quite brief accounts. Each chapter begins with an introduction giving an overview of the main topics to be covered. Within chapters, the substance of the book is dealt with in headed sections. The topics are not defined according to the themes and issues just outlined, but they reflect the varying focus of theory and the research that has been carried out to test theories. In general, the reader will find a definition of relevant concepts, an explanation of the topic, a short review of relevant evidence from research and an overall assessment of matters of dispute. Each chapter ends with a brief overview of what has been concluded. Key points are summarized in the text in 'boxes' to provide a focus and to aid recall.

Limitations of Coverage and Perspective

Although the book is wide-ranging in its coverage and is intended to have an application to the mass communication phenomenon in general, rather than to any particular country, the viability of this aim is limited in various ways. First, the author has a location, a nationality and a cultural background that shape his experience, knowledge and outlook. There is much scope for subjective judgement and it is impossible to avoid it, even when trying to be objective. Secondly, the 'mass communication phenomenon' is itself not independent of the cultural context in which it is observed, despite similarities of technology and tendencies to uniformity of media organizational form and conduct as well as content. Although some histories of the mass media institution portray it as a 'western invention' that has been diffused as part of a process of 'modernization' from America and Europe to the rest of the world, there are alternative histories and the diffusion is far from a one-way or deterministic process. In short, this account of theory has an inevitable 'western' bias. Its body of theory derives to a large extent from western sources, especially in Europe and North America and written in English, and the research reported to test the ideas is mainly from the same locations. This does not mean it is invalid for other settings, but it means that conclusions are provisional and that alternative ideas may need to be formulated and tested.

The nature of the relation between media and society depends on circumstances of time and place. As noted above, this book largely deals with mass media and mass communication in modern, 'developed' nation states, mainly elective democracies with free-market (or mixed) economies which are integrated into a wider international set of economic and political relations of exchange, competition and also domination or conflict. It is most probable that mass media are experienced differently in societies with 'non-western' characteristics, especially those that are less individualistic and more communal in character, less secular and more religious. There are other traditions of media theory and media practice, even if western media theory has become part of the

hegemonic global media project. The differences are not just a matter of more or less economic development, since profound differences of culture and long historical experience are involved. The problem goes deeper than an inevitable element of authorial ethnocentrism, since it also lies in the mainstream social scientific tradition that has its roots in western thought. The alternatives to social science offered by cultural studies are in other ways no less western in character.

Although the aim is to provide as 'objective' an account as possible of theory and evidence, the study of mass communication cannot avoid dealing with questions of values and of political and social conflict. All societies have latent or open tensions and contradictions that often extend to the international arena. The media are inevitably involved in these disputed areas as producers and disseminators of meaning about the events and contexts of social life, private as well as public. It follows from these remarks that we cannot expect the study of mass communication to provide theoretically neutral, scientifically verified information about the 'effects' or the significance of something that is an immensely complex as well as intersubjective set of processes. For the same reasons, it is often difficult to formulate theories about mass communication in ways that are open to empirical testing.

Not surprisingly, the field of media theory is also characterized by widely divergent perspectives. A difference of approach between left (progressive or liberal) and right (conservative) tendencies can sometimes be discerned. Leftist theory is, for instance, critical of the power exercised by media in the hands of the state or large global corporations, while conservative theorists point to the 'liberal bias' of the news or the damage done by media to traditional values. There has also been a difference between a critical and a more applied approach to theory that does not necessarily correspond to the political axis. Lazarsfeld (1941) referred to this as a critical versus administrative orientation. Critical theory seeks to expose underlying problems and faults of media practice and to relate them in a comprehensive way to social issues, guided by certain values. Applied theory aims to harness an understanding of communication processes to solving practical problems of using mass communication more effectively (Windahl and Signitzer, 2007). However, we can also distinguish two other axes of theoretical variation.

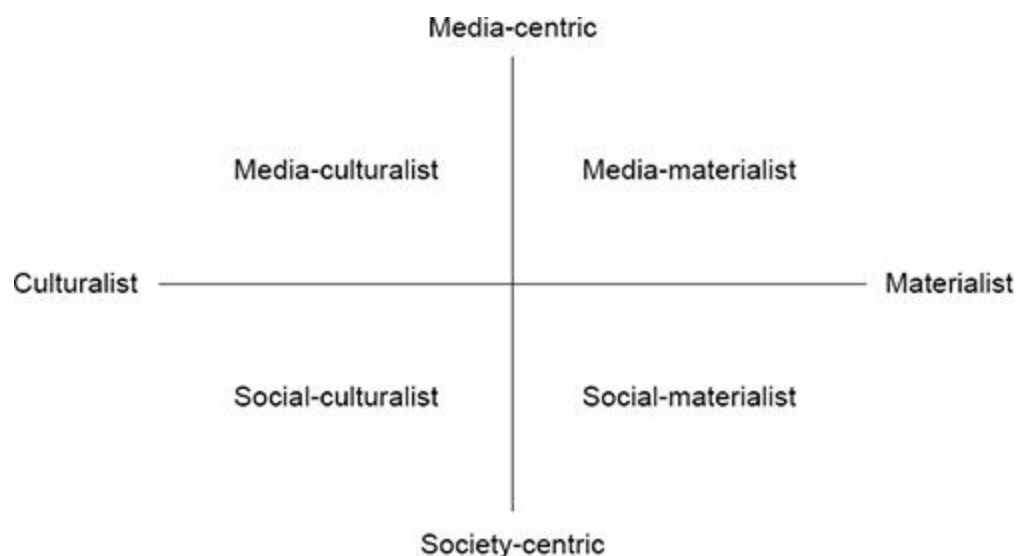


Figure 1.1 Dimensions and types of media theory. Four main approaches can be identified according to two dimensions: media-centric versus society-centric; and culturalist versus materialist

One of these separates 'media-centric' from 'society-centric' (or 'socio-centric') approaches.

The former approach attributes much more autonomy and influence to communication and concentrates on the media's own sphere of activity. Media-centric theory sees mass media as a primary mover in social change, driven forward by irresistible developments in communication technology. It also pays much more attention to the specific content of media and the potential consequences of the different kinds of media (print, audiovisual, interactive, etc.). Socio-centric theory mainly views the media as a reflection of political and economic forces. Theory for the media is a special application of broader social theory (Golding and Murdock, 1978). Whether or not society is driven by the media, it is certainly true that mass communication theory itself is so driven, tending to respond to each major shift of media technology and structure.

The second, horizontal, dividing line is between those theorists whose interest (and conviction) lies in the realm of culture and ideas and those who emphasize material forces and factors. This divide corresponds approximately with certain other dimensions: humanistic versus scientific; qualitative versus quantitative; and subjective versus objective. While these differences partly reflect the necessity for some division of labour in a wide territory and the multidisciplinary character of media study, they also often involve competing and contradictory ideas about how to pose questions, conduct research and provide explanations. These two alternatives are independent of each other, and between them they identify four different perspectives on media and society (Figure 1.1).

The four types of perspective can be summarized as follows:

1. A media-culturalist perspective. This approach takes the perspective of the audience member in relation to some specific genre or example of media culture (e.g. reality TV or social networking) and explores the subjective meaning of the experience in a given context.
2. A media-materialist approach. Research in this tradition emphasizes the shaping of media content and therefore of potential effects, by the nature of the medium in respect of the technology and the social relations of reception and production that are implicated by this. It also attributes influence to the specific organizational contexts and dynamics of production.
3. A social-culturalist perspective. Essentially this view subordinates media and media experience to deeper and more powerful forces affecting society and individuals. Social and cultural issues also predominate over political and economic ones.
4. A social-materialist perspective. This approach has usually been linked to a critical view of media ownership and control, that ultimately are held to shape the dominant ideology transmitted or endorsed by the media.

While these differences of approach can still be discerned in the structure of the field of inquiry, there has been a trend to convergence between the different schools. Even so, the various topics and approaches outlined involve important differences of philosophy and methodology and cannot simply be ignored.

Different Kinds of Theory

If theory is understood not only as a system of law-like propositions, but as any systematic set of ideas that can help make sense of a phenomenon, guide action or predict a consequence, then one can distinguish at least five kinds of theory which are relevant to mass communication. These can be

described as: social scientific, cultural, normative, operational and everyday theory.

Social scientific theory offers general statements about the nature, working and effects of mass communication, based on systematic and objective observation of media and other relevant sources, which can in turn be put to the test and validated or rejected by similar methods. There is now a large body of such theory and it provides much of the content of this book. However, it is loosely organized and not very clearly formulated or even very consistent. It also covers a very wide spectrum, from broad questions of society to detailed aspects of individual information sending and receiving. It also derives from different disciplines, especially sociology, psychology and politics. Some 'scientific' theory is concerned with understanding what is going on, some with developing a critique and some with practical applications in processes of public information or persuasion.

Cultural theory is much more diverse in character. In some forms it is evaluative, seeking to differentiate cultural artefacts according to some criteria of quality. Sometimes its goal is almost the opposite, seeking to challenge hierarchical classification as irrelevant to the true significance of culture. Different spheres of cultural production have generated their corpus of cultural theory, sometimes along aesthetic or ethical lines, sometimes with a social-critical purpose. This applies to film, literature, television, graphic art and many other media forms. While cultural theory demands clear argument and articulation, coherence and consistency, its core component is often itself imaginative and ideational. It resists the demand for testing or validation by observation. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for combined cultural and scientific approaches and the many problematics of the media call for both.

A third kind of theory can be described as normative since it is concerned with examining or prescribing how media ought to operate if certain social values are to be observed or attained. Such theory usually stems from the broader social philosophy or ideology of a given society. This kind of theory is important because it plays a part in shaping and legitimating media institutions and has considerable influence on the expectations concerning the media that are held by other social agencies and by the media's own audiences. A good deal of research into mass media has been stimulated by the wish to apply norms of social and cultural performance. A society's normative theories concerning its own media are usually to be found in laws, regulations, media policies, codes of ethics and the substance of public debate. While normative media theory is not in itself 'objective', it can be studied by the 'objective' methods of the social sciences (McQuail, 1992).

A fourth kind of knowledge about the media can best be described as operational theory since it refers to the practical ideas assembled and applied by media practitioners in the conduct of their own media work. Similar bodies of accumulated practical wisdom are to be found in most organizational and professional settings. In the case of the media, operational theory serves to guide solutions to fundamental tasks, including how to select news, please audiences, design effective advertising, keep within the limits of what society permits, and relate effectively to sources and society. At some points it may overlap with normative theory, for instance in matters of journalistic ethics and codes of practice.

Such knowledge merits the name of theory because it is usually patterned and persistent, even if rarely codified, and it is influential in respect of behaviour. It comes to light in the study of communicators and their organizations (e.g. Elliott, 1972; Tuchman, 1978; Tunstall, 1993). Katz (1977) compared the role of the researcher in relation to media production to that of the theorist of music or philosopher of science who can see regularities which a musician or scientist does not even need to be aware of.

Finally, there is everyday or common-sense theory of media use, referring to the knowledge we

all have from our own personal experience with media. This enables us to make sense of what is going on, allows us to fit a medium into our daily lives, to understand how its content is intended to be 'read' as well as how we like to read it, to know what the differences are between different media and media genres, and much more. On the basis of such 'theory' is grounded the ability to make consistent choices, develop patterns of taste, construct lifestyles and identities as media consumers. It also supports the ability to make critical judgements. All this, in turn, shapes what the media actually offer to their audiences and sets both directions and limits to media influence. For instance, it enables us to distinguish between 'reality' and 'fiction', to 'read between the lines' or to see through the persuasive aims and techniques of advertising and other kinds of propaganda, to resist many of the potentially harmful impulses that the media are said to provoke. The working of common-sense theory can be seen in the norms for use of media which many people recognize and follow (see [Chapter 16](#)). The social definitions that mass media acquire are not established by media theorists or legislators, or even the media producers themselves, but emerge from the experience and practices of audiences over time. The history of media and their future prospects depends more on this very uncertain branch of theory than on anything else.

Communication Science and the Study of Mass Communication

Mass communication is one topic among many for the social sciences and only one part of a wider field of enquiry into human communication. Under the name 'communication science', the field has been defined by Berger and Chaffee (1987:17) as a science which 'seeks to understand the production, processing and effects of symbol and signal systems by developing testable theories, containing lawful generalizations, that explain phenomena associated with production, processing and effects'. While this was presented as a 'mainstream' definition to apply to most communication research, in fact it is very much biased towards one model of enquiry – the quantitative study of communicative behaviour and its causes and effects. It is especially inadequate to deal with the nature of 'symbol systems' and signification, the process by which meaning is given and taken in varied social and cultural contexts. The main alternative approaches to the study of mass communication are outlined in the conclusion to this chapter.

Difficulties in defining the field have also arisen because of developments of technology that have blurred the line between public and private communication and between mass and interpersonal communication. It is now impossible to find any single agreed definition of a 'science of communication', for a number of circumstantial reasons, but most fundamentally because there has never been an agreed definition of the central concept of 'communication'. The term can refer to very diverse things, especially: the act or process of information transmission; the giving or taking of meaning; the sharing of information, ideas, impressions or emotions; the process of reception, perception and response; the exertion of influence; any form of interaction. To complicate matters further, communication can be either intentional or involuntary and the variety of potential channels and content is unlimited.

In addition, no 'science of communication' can be independent and self-sufficient, given the origins of the study of communication in many disciplines and the wide-ranging nature of the issues that arise, including matters of economics, law, politics and ethics as well as culture. The study of communication has to be interdisciplinary and must adopt varied approaches and methods (see McQuail, 2003b).

A less problematic way of locating the topic of mass communication in a wider field of communication inquiry is according to the different levels of social organization at which communication takes place. According to this criterion, mass communication can then be seen as one of several society-wide communication processes, at the apex of a pyramidal distribution of other communication networks according to this criterion (Figure 1.2). A communication network refers to any set of interconnected points (persons or places) that enable the transmission and exchange of information between them. For the most part, mass communication is a network that connects very many receivers to one source, while new media technologies usually provide interactive connections of several different kinds.

At each descending level of the pyramid indicated there is an increasing number of cases to be found, and each level presents its own particular set of problems for research and theorizing. In an integrated modern society there will often be one large public communication network, usually depending on the mass media, which can reach and involve all citizens to varying degrees, although the media system is also itself often fragmented according to regional and other social or demographic factors.

Mass media are not the only possible basis for an effective communication network that extends throughout a society. Alternative (non-mass-media) technologies for supporting society-wide networks do now exist (especially the network of physical transportation, the telecommunications infrastructure and the postal system), but these usually lack the society-wide social elements and public roles which mass communication has. In the past (and in some places still today) society-wide public networks were provided by the church or state or by political organizations, based on shared beliefs and usually a hierarchical chain of contact. This extended from the 'top' to the 'base' and employed diverse means of communication, ranging from formal publications to personal contacts.

Alternative communication networks can be activated under unusual circumstances to replace mass media, for instance in the case of a natural disaster, major accident or outbreak of war, or other emergency. In the past, direct word of mouth was the only possibility, while today mobile telephones and the Internet can be effectively employed for interconnecting a large population. In fact the original motive for designing the Internet in the USA in the 1970s was precisely to provide an alternative communication system in the event of a nuclear attack.

At a level below that of the whole society, there are several different kinds of communication network. One type duplicates the social relations of larger society at the level of region, city or town and may have a corresponding media system of its own (local press, radio, etc.). Another is represented by the firm, work organization or profession, which may not have a single location but is usually very integrated within its own organizational boundaries, within which much communication flow takes place. A third type is that represented by the 'institution' – for instance, that of government, or education, or justice, or religion, or social security. The activities of a social institution are always diverse and also require correlation and much communication, following patterned routes and forms. The networks involved in this case are limited to achieving certain limited ends (e.g. education, maintaining order, circulating economic information, etc.) and they are not open to participation by all.

Below this level, there are even more and more varied types of communication network, based on some shared feature of daily life: an environment (such as a neighbourhood), an interest (such as music), a need (such as the care of small children) or an activity (such as sport). At this level, the key questions concern attachment and identity, co-operation and norm formation. At the intragroup (e.g. family) and interpersonal levels, attention has usually been given to forms of conversation and

patterns of interaction, influence, affiliation (degrees of attachment) and normative control. At the intrapersonal level, communication research concentrates on the processing of information (e.g. attention, perception, attitude formation, comprehension, recall and learning), the giving of meaning and possible effects (e.g. on knowledge, opinion, self-identity and attitude).

This seemingly neat pattern has been complicated by the growing ‘globalization’ of social life, in which mass communication has played some part. There is a yet higher ‘level’ of communication and exchange to consider – that crossing and even ignoring national frontiers, in relation to an increasing range of activities (economic, political, scientific, publicity, sport, entertainment, etc). Organizations and institutions are less confined within national frontiers, and individuals can also satisfy communication needs outside their own society and their immediate social environments. The once strong correspondence between patterns of personal social interaction in shared space and time on the one hand, and systems of communication on the other, has been much weakened, and our cultural and informational choices have become much wider.

This is one reason why the idea of an emerging ‘network society’ has been advanced (see Castells, 1996; van Dijk, 1999; also [Chapter 6](#) in this book). Such developments also mean that networks are to an increasing degree not confined to any one ‘level’ of society, as implied by [Figure 1.2](#). New hybrid (both public and private) means of communication allow communication networks to form more easily without the usual ‘cement’ of shared space or personal acquaintance. In the past, it was possible to match a particular communication technology approximately with a given ‘level’ of social organization as described, with television at the highest level, the press and radio at the regional or city level, internal systems, telephone and mail at the institutional level, and so forth. Advances in communication technology and their widespread adoption mean that this is no longer possible. The Internet, for instance, now supports communication at virtually all levels. It also sustains chains or networks that connect the social ‘top’ with the ‘base’ and are vertical (in both directions) or diagonal, not just horizontal. For instance, a political website can provide access to political leaders and elites as well as to citizens at grass-roots level, allowing a wide range of patterns of flow. For the time being, however, the society-wide communicative function of the ‘traditional’ core mass media of newspapers, television and radio has not greatly changed in itself, although their near monopoly of public communication is increasingly being challenged.

Despite the growing complexity of the network society, each level indicates a range of similar questions for communication theory and research. These are posed in [Box 1.1](#).

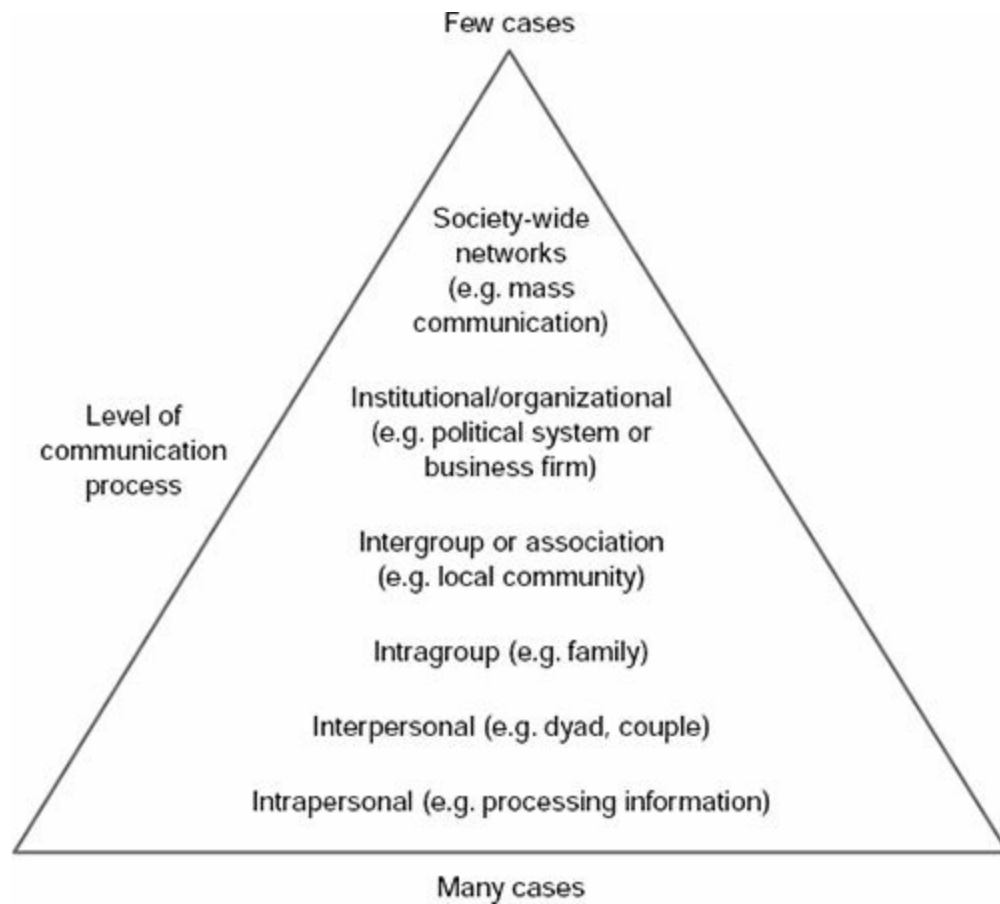


Figure 1.2 The pyramid of communication networks: mass communication is one amongst several processes of social communication



1.1

Questions for theory and research about communication networks and processes

- Who is connected to whom in a given network and for what purpose?
- What is the pattern and direction of flow?
- How does communication take place? (channels, languages, codes)
- What types of content are observed?
- What are the outcomes of communication, intended or unintended?

Alternative Traditions of Analysis: Structural, Behavioural and Cultural

While the questions raised at different levels are similar in very general terms, in practice very different concepts are involved, and the reality of communication differs greatly from level to level. (For instance, a conversation between two family members takes place according to different 'rules' from those governing a news broadcast to a large audience, a television quiz show or a chain of command in a work organization.) For this reason, among others, any 'communication science' has, necessarily, to be constructed from several different bodies of theory and evidence, drawn from several of the traditional 'disciplines' (especially sociology and psychology in the earlier days, but now also economics, history and literary and film studies and more besides). In this respect, the deepest and most enduring divisions separate interpersonal from mass communication, cultural from behavioural concerns, and institutional and historical perspectives from those that are cultural or behavioural. Putting the matter simply, there are essentially three main alternative approaches: the structural, the behavioural and the cultural.

The structural approach derives mainly from sociology but includes perspectives from history, politics, law and economics. Its starting point is 'socio-centric' rather than 'media-centric' (as shown in [Figure 1.1](#)), and its primary object of attention is likely to be media systems and organizations and their relationship to the wider society. In so far as questions of media content arise, the focus is likely to be on the effect of social structure and media systems on patterns of news and entertainment. For instance, commercial media systems tend to concentrate more on entertainment, while public service media provide relatively more information and traditional culture. In so far as questions of media use and effect are concerned, the approach emphasizes the consequences of mass communication for other social institutions. This includes, for instance, the influence of political marketing on the conduct of elections or the role of news management and PR in government policy. The fundamental dynamics of media phenomena are located in the exercise of power, in the economy and the socially organized application of technology. The structural approach to media analysis is more linked to the needs of management and also of media policy formation.

The behavioural approach has its principal roots in psychology and social psychology but it also has a sociological variant. In general, the primary object of interest is individual human behaviour, especially in matters to do with choosing, processing and responding to communication messages. Mass media use is generally treated as a form of rational, motivated action that has a certain function or use for the individual and also some objective consequences. Psychological approaches are more likely to use experimental methods of research based on individual subjects. The sociological variant focuses on the behaviour of members of socially defined populations and favours the multivariate analysis of representative survey data collected in natural conditions. Individuals are classified according to relevant variables of social position, disposition and behaviour, and the variables can be statistically manipulated. In the study of organizations, participant observation is commonly adopted. This approach is mainly found in relation to the study of persuasion, propaganda and advertising. Communication is primarily understood in the sense of transmission.

The cultural approach has its roots in the humanities, in anthropology and in linguistics. While very broad in potential, it has been mainly applied to questions of meaning and language, to the minutiae of particular social contexts and cultural experiences. The study of media is part of a wider field of cultural studies. It is more likely to be 'media-centric' (although not exclusively), sensitive to differences between media and settings of media transmission and reception, more interested in the in-depth understanding of particular contents and situations than in generalization. Its methods favour the qualitative and in-depth analysis of social and human signifying practices and the analysis and interpretation of 'texts'. The cultural approach draws on a much wider range of theory, including

feminist, philosophical, semiotic, psychoanalytic, film and literary theories. Typically, there is no direct application for the cultural approach, although it can yield many important insights for media producers and planners. It helps in a fuller understanding of the audience and in accounting for success and failure in qualitative ways.

Conclusion

This chapter has been intended to provide a brief sketch of the overall field of inquiry within which the humanistic and social scientific study of mass communication is located. It should be clear that the boundaries around the various topics are not clearly fixed, but change according to shifts of technology and society. Nevertheless there is a community of scholarship that shares a set of concerns, concepts and tools of analysis that will be explored in the chapters that follow.

Further Reading

Devereux, E. (2007) *Media Studies: Key Issues and Debates*. London: Sage.

A wide-ranging set of original chapters on important topics in the field, with supplementary teaching materials and references.

Grossberg, L., Wartella, E. and Whitney, D.C. (1998) *Media Making*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A comprehensive presentation of the field of study of mass media from different perspectives – sociological, cultural and media industrial.

McQuail, D. (ed.) (2002) *Reader in Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.

A set of key readings, classic and modern, organized in sections that correspond to the main divisions of the present book and chosen to support the same range of content as this edition.

Silverstone, R. (1999) *Why Study the Media?* London: Sage.

A concise and clearly argued personal statement of the significance of the media in society. Still valid, despite changes in the last decade.

Online Readings



Castells, M. (2007) 'Communicative power and counter power in the network society', *International Journal of Communication*, 1:238–66.

Sreberny, A. (2004) 'Society, culture and media: thinking comparatively', in J.D.H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger and E. Wartella (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies*, pp. 83–103. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The Rise of Mass Media

From the beginning to mass media

Print media: the book

Print media: the newspaper

Other print media

Film as a mass medium

Broadcasting

Recorded music

The communications revolution: new media versus old

Differences between media

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to set out the approximate sequence of development of the present-day set of mass media. It is also to indicate major turning points and to tell briefly something of the circumstances of time and place in which different media acquired their public definitions in the sense of their perceived utility for audiences and their role in society. These definitions have tended to form early in the history of any given medium and to have been subsequently adapted in the light of newer media and changed conditions. This is a continuing process. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the two main dimensions of variation between media: one relates to the degree of freedom and the other to the conditions of use.

From the Beginning to Mass Media

We have distinguished already between a process of mass communication and the actual media that make it possible. The occurrence of human communication over time and at a distance is much older than are the mass media now in use. This process was integral to the organization of early societies, which persisted for long periods and extended over large areas. Even the element of large-scale (mass) dissemination of ideas was present at an early point in time, in the propagation of political and religious awareness and obligations. By the early Middle Ages, the church in Europe had elaborate and effective means in place to ensure transmission to everyone without exception. This could be called mass communication, although it was largely independent of any ‘media’ in the contemporary sense, aside from the sacred texts. When independent media arrived in the form of printing, authorities of church and state reacted with alarm at the potential loss of control that this represented and at the opportunities opened up for disseminating new and deviant ideas. The bitter propaganda struggles of the religious wars during the sixteenth century are evidence enough. It was the historical moment when a technology for mass communication – the printing press – irrevocably acquired a particular social and cultural definition.

In telling the history of mass media, we deal with four main elements that are of significance in the wider life of society. These are:

- certain communicative purposes, needs, or uses;
- technologies for communicating publicly to many at a distance;
- forms of social organization that provide the skills and frameworks for organizing production and distribution;
- forms of regulation and control.

These elements do not have a fixed relationship to each other and depend very much on the circumstances of time and place. Sometimes a technology of communication is applied to a pre-existing need or use, as when printing replaced copying by hand or the telegraph replaced the physical transport of key messages. But sometimes a technology, such as film or broadcast radio, precedes any clear evidence of need. The combinations of the above elements that actually occur are usually dependent both on material factors and on features of the social and cultural climate that are not easy to pin down. Even so, it seems probable that a certain degree of freedom of thought, expression and action has been the single most necessary condition for the development of print and other media, although not for the initial invention. The techniques of printing and even the use of movable type were known and applied in China and Korea long before Gutenberg, who is credited as the (European) inventor in the mid-fifteenth century (Gunaratne, 2001).

In general, the more open the society, the more inclination there has been to develop communication technology to its fullest potential, especially in the sense of being universally available and widely used. More closed or repressive regimes either limit development or set strict boundaries to the ways in which technology can be used. Printing was not introduced into Russia until the early seventeenth century and not in the Ottoman Empire until 1726. In the following summary of the history and characteristics of different media, a 'western' perspective and set of values are being applied, since the institutional frameworks of mass media were initially mainly western (European or North American) and most other parts of the world have taken up and applied the same technologies in a similar way. Even so, there is no reason why mass media need follow only one path in the future, always converging on the western model. There are diverse possibilities, and it is quite possible that cultural differences will trump technological imperatives. The history of media already shows up certain important differences between societies, for instance the large variation in the readership of books and newspapers or in the rates and pace of Internet diffusion.

In the following pages, each of the main mass media is identified in respect of its technology and material form, typical formats and genres, perceived uses and institutional setting.

Print Media: the Book

The history of modern media begins with the printed book – certainly a kind of revolution, yet initially only a technical device for reproducing a range of texts the same as, or similar to, what was already being extensively copied by hand. Only gradually does printing lead to a change in content – more secular, practical and popular works (especially in the vernacular languages) as well as political and religious pamphlets and tracts – which played a part in the transformation of the

medieval world. At an early date, laws and proclamations were also printed by royal and other authorities. Thus, there occurred a revolution of society in which printing played an inseparable part (Eisenstein, 1978).

The antecedents of the book lie in classical times when there were numerous established authors and when works of many kinds, both fictional and non-fictional, were copied and circulated for reading or verbal transmission. In the west, at least, the culture of the book largely disappeared after the end of the Roman Empire until revived by monastic activities, although some key texts were preserved for reasons of learning or religion.

In the early medieval period, the book was not regarded primarily as a means of communication. Rather, it was a store or repository of wisdom, and especially of sacred writings and religious texts that had to be kept in uncorrupted form. Around the central core of religious and philosophical texts there accumulated also works of science and practical information. The main material form of the book at this time was of bound volumes of separate pages within strong covers (known as the codex), reflecting the requirements for safe storage and reading aloud from a lectern plus the demands of travel and transportation. Books were meant both to last and to be disseminated within limited circles. The modern book is a direct descendant of this model, and similar uses are embedded within it. The alternative form of rolls of paper or parchment was discontinued, especially when the printing press replaced writing by hand and required the pressing of flat sheets. This ensured the triumph of the medieval manuscript book format, even when miniaturized.

Another important element of continuity between writing and printing is the library, a store or collection of books. This remained similar in concept and physical arrangement, at least until the advent of digital libraries. It also reflected and confirmed the idea of a book as a record or permanent work of reference. The character of the library did not change much with printing, although printing stimulated the acquisition of private libraries. The later development of the library has given it some claim to be considered not only as a medium but even as a mass medium. It is certainly often organized as a means of public information and was envisaged from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as an important tool of mass enlightenment.

The successful application of print technology to the reproduction of texts in place of handwriting, about the mid-fifteenth century, was only the first step in the emergence of what we now call a 'media institution' (see p. 59) – an organized set of interrelated activities and roles, directed towards certain goals and governed by a set of rules and procedures. Printing gradually became a new craft and a significant branch of commerce (Febvre and Martin, 1984). Printers were later transformed from tradespeople into publishers, and the two functions gradually became distinct. Equally important was the emergence of the idea and role of the 'author' since earlier manuscript texts were not typically authored by living individuals.

A natural further development was the role of professional author, as early as the late sixteenth century, typically supported by wealthy patrons. Each of these developments reflects the emergence of a market and the transformation of the book into a commodity. Although print runs were small by modern standards, cumulative sales over time could be large. Febvre and Martin (1984) estimate that by 1,500 up to 15,000 titles had been published, and during the sixteenth century more than a million copies of Luther's translation of the Bible had been printed. There was a thriving book trade, with much export and import between those countries with printing industries, especially France, England, the German states and Italy. In fact many of the basic features of modern media are already embodied in book publishing by the end of the sixteenth century, including the earliest form of reading public. There was the beginning of copyright in the form of privileges granted to printers in respect of certain

texts. Various forms of monopoly practice were appearing, for instance the Stationers' Company in London, which was convenient for purposes of censorship, but also offered some protection to authors and maintained standards (Johns, 1998).

The later history of the book is one of steady expansion in volume and range of content and also of struggle for freedom of the press and the rights of authors. Nearly everywhere from the early sixteenth century onwards, government and church authorities applied advance censorship to printed matter, even if not with the effectiveness of a modern totalitarian state. The most famous early and eloquent claim for freedom from government licensing was made by the English poet John Milton in a tract published in 1644 (*Areopagitica*). Freedom of the press went hand in hand with democratic political freedoms and the former was only achieved where democracy had triumphed. This close association remains.

The key features of the book both as a medium and as an institution are summarized in [Box 2.1](#). These typical features are interrelated in the idea of the book as it has been known since the sixteenth century. The 'medium' features relate to technology, form and manner of use and the wider institution of production and distribution.

The book as a medium and institution: key features

2.1

Medium aspects

- Technology of movable type
- Bound pages, codex form
- Multiple copies
- For personal reading
- Individual authorship

Institutional aspects

- Commodity form
- Market distribution
- Diversity of content and form
- Claim to freedom of publication
- Subject to some legal limits

Print Media: the Newspaper

It was almost two hundred years after the invention of printing before what we now recognize as a

prototypical newspaper could be distinguished from the handbills, pamphlets and newsletters of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its chief precursor seems, in fact, to have been the letter rather than the book – newsletters circulating via the rudimentary postal service, concerned especially with transmitting news of events relevant to international trade and commerce (Raymond, 1999). It was thus an extension into the public domain of an activity that had long taken place for governmental, diplomatic or commercial as well as for private purposes. The early newspaper was marked by its regular appearance, commercial basis (openly for sale) and public character. Thus, it was used for information, record, advertising, diversion and gossip.

The seventeenth-century commercial newspaper was not identified with any single source but was a compilation made by a printer-publisher. The official variety (as published by Crown or government) showed some of the same characteristics but was also a voice of authority and an instrument of state. The commercial newspaper was the form which has given most shape to the newspaper institution, and its development can be seen in retrospect as a major turning point in communication history – offering first of all a service to its anonymous readers rather than an instrument to propagandists or authorities.

In a sense the newspaper was more of an innovation than the printed book – the invention of a new literary, social and cultural form – even if it might not have been so perceived at the time. Its distinctiveness, compared with other forms of cultural communication, lies in its orientation to the individual reader and to reality, its utility and disposability, and its secularity and suitability for the needs of a new class: town-based business and professional people. Its novelty consisted not in its technology or manner of distribution, but in its functions for a distinct class in a changing and more liberal social-political climate.

The later history of the newspaper can be told either as a series of struggles, advances and reverses in the cause of liberty or as a more continuous history of economic and technological progress. The most important phases in press history that enter into the modern definition of the newspaper are described in the following paragraphs. While separate national histories differ too much to tell a single story, the elements mentioned, often intermingling and interacting, have all played a part in the development of the press institution. The principal features of the newspaper are summarized in [Box 2.2](#).

2.2

The newspaper as medium and institution: key features

Medium aspects

- Regular and frequent appearance
- Print technology
- Topicality of contents and reference
- Individual or group reading

Institutional aspects

- Urban, secular audience
- Relative freedom, but self-censored
- In public domain
- Commodity form
- Commercial basis

From its early days, the newspaper was an actual or potential adversary of established power, especially in its own self-perception. Potent images in press history refer to violence done to printers, editors and journalists. The struggle for freedom to publish, often within a broader movement for freedom, democracy and citizen rights, is emphasized in journalism's own mythology. The part played by underground presses under foreign occupation or dictatorial rule has also been celebrated. Established authority has often confirmed this self-perception of the press by finding it irritating and inconvenient (although also often malleable and, in the last resort, very vulnerable to power). However, early newspapers did not generally seek to offend authorities and were sometimes produced on their behalf (Schroeder, 2001). Then, as now, the newspaper was likely to identify most with its intended readers.

There has been a steady progression towards more press freedom, despite major setbacks from time to time. This progress has sometimes taken the form of greater sophistication in the means of control applied to the press. Legal restraint replaced violence, then fiscal burdens were imposed (and later reversed). Now institutionalization of the press within a market system serves as a form of control, and the modern newspaper, as a large business enterprise, is vulnerable to more kinds of pressure or intervention than its simpler forerunners were. The newspaper did not really become a true 'mass' medium until the twentieth century, in the sense of directly reaching a majority of the population on a regular basis, and there are still quite large inter-country differences in the extent of newspaper reading (see [Box 2.3](#)). There has been a gradual worldwide decline in newspaper reading over the last decade, despite the increase in literacy, with the rise of the Internet probably playing some part (Küng et al., 2008). It has been customary and it is still useful to distinguish between certain types or genres of newspaper (and of journalism), although there is no single typology to suit all epochs and countries. The following passages describe the main variants.

Percentage of non-readers in the adult population of some European countries (2004/5) (Elvestad and Blekesaune, 2008:432)

Norway	4
Switzerland	9
Estonia	17
Germany	19
United Kingdom	26
Poland	30
France	39
Spain	49
Greece	66

The party-political press

One common early form of the newspaper was the party-political paper dedicated to the task of activation, information and organization. The party newspaper (published by or for the party) has lost ground to commercial press forms, both as an idea and as a viable business enterprise. The idea of a party press, even so, still has its place as a component in democratic politics. Where it does survive in Europe (and there are examples elsewhere), it is typically independent from the state (though possibly subsidized), professionally produced, serious and opinion-forming in purpose. Its uniqueness lies in the attachment of its readers by way of shared party allegiance, its sectionalism and its mobilizing function for party objectives. Examples include the ‘vanguard press’ of the Russian revolutionary movement, the party-political newspapers (especially social democratic) of several Scandinavian countries and the official party press of former communist regimes.

The prestige press

The late-nineteenth-century bourgeois newspaper was a high point in press history and contributed much to our modern understanding of what a newspaper is or should be. The ‘high-bourgeois’ phase of press history, from about 1850 to the turn of the century, was the product of several events and circumstances. These included: the triumph of liberalism and the absence or ending of direct censorship or fiscal constraint; the forging of a business-professional establishment; plus many social and technological changes favouring the rise of a national or regional press of high information quality.

The new prestige or ‘elite’ press was independent from the state and from vested interests and was often recognized as a major institution of political and social life (especially as a self-appointed former of opinion and voice of the ‘national interest’). It tended to show a highly developed sense of social and ethical responsibility (in practice fundamentally conformist) and it fostered the rise of a journalistic profession dedicated to the objective reporting of events. Many countries still have one or more newspapers that try to maintain this tradition. By wide consensus, the newspapers still recognized as having an ‘elite’ status are likely to include the New York Times, The Times (London), Le Monde, El Pais, NRC Handelsblad (The Netherlands). Current expectations about what is a

‘quality’ newspaper still reflect the professional ideals of the prestige press and provide the basis for criticisms of newspapers which deviate from the ideal by being either too partisan or too ‘sensational’, or just too ‘commercial’. The prestige press currently seems better placed than most to survive the current pressure on newspapers, by virtue of their importance to a political and economic elite, although to do so it may need to accelerate its transition to online forms.

The popular press

The last main type of newspaper has been with us for a century or so without much change of essential character. This is the truly ‘mass’ newspaper that was created for sale to the urban industrial masses and designed to be read by almost everyone. It was a fundamentally commercial enterprise (rather than a political or professional project) and was made possible by advances in technologies of scale, concentrations of population, the spread of literacy, low cost to the reader and large amounts of advertising revenue. In general, the popular press has always specialized in ‘human interest’ stories (Hughes, 1940), in dramatic and sensational styles of reporting and presentation, in the coverage of crime, disasters, crises, scandals, war and celebrities. Although not primarily interested in politics, it has often played a political role at key moments in national societies. Because of its typical smaller page format, the term ‘tabloid’ has been widely applied to this type of newspaper and its contents, as in the term ‘tabloidization’ (Connell, 1998). This means a process of becoming more sensational, trivial and irresponsible.

The local and regional press

In many countries, the most important newspaper sectors have been and remain the local and regional press. The forms are too varied to be described as a single type. They can be serious or popular, daily or weekly, urban or rural, with large as well as small circulations. The main features they have in common are: a set of news values relevant to a local readership; a typically consensual and bipartisan approach (although there are exceptions); and a dependence on support from local advertisers. Some local papers are free, others are paid for and they have generally been most threatened by online news and advertising. The status as newspapers or free sheets, often largely devoted to advertising, and now a rapidly rising category, is questionable, although they are regarded as such by readers and some may define themselves as such.

Other Print Media

The printing press gave rise to other forms of publication than book and newspaper. These include plays, songs, tracts, serial stories, poems, pamphlets, comics, reports, prospectuses, maps, posters, music, handbills, wall newspapers and much more. The single most significant is probably the periodical (weekly or monthly) magazine that appeared in great diversity and with wide circulations from the early eighteenth century onwards. Initially aimed at the domestic and cultural interests of the gentry, it eventually developed into a mass market of high commercial value and enormous breadth of coverage. The periodical magazine still belongs largely to the domestic and personal sphere and supports a wide range of interests, activities and markets. In the early twentieth century it was more

like a mass medium than it is today, and its diffuseness and uncertain impact have led to a general neglect by communication research.

These comments apply to the commercial periodical. In many countries there has been and remains a significant opinion-forming or political periodical press, often with an influence beyond its circulation size. At key moments in some societies particular magazines have played important social, cultural or political roles. In conditions of political oppression or commercial domination, the 'alternative' periodical has often been an essential instrument of resistance and expression for minority movements (see Downing, 2000; Huesca, 2003; Gumucio-Dagron, 2004).

Film as a Mass Medium

Film began at the end of the nineteenth century as a technological novelty, but what it offered was scarcely new in content or function. It transferred to a new means of presentation and distribution of an older tradition of entertainment, offering stories, spectacles, music, drama, humour and technical tricks for popular consumption. It was also almost instantly a true mass medium in the sense that it quite quickly reached a very large proportion of populations, even in rural areas. As a mass medium, film was partly a response to the 'invention' of leisure – time out of work – and an answer to the demand for affordable and (usually) respectable ways of enjoying free time for the whole family. Thus it provided for the working class some of the cultural benefits already enjoyed by their social 'betters'. To judge from its phenomenal growth, the latent demand met by film was enormous. Of the main formative elements named above, it would not be the technology or the social climate but the needs met by the film for individuals that mattered most. The most apparent are those for escape from humdrum reality into a more glamorous world, the wish for strong narratives to be caught up in, the search for role models and heroes, the need to fill leisure time in safe, affordable and sociable ways. In these respects, not much has changed.

The characterization of the film as 'show business' in a new form for an expanded market is not the whole story. There have been three other significant strands in film history. First, the use of film for propaganda is noteworthy, especially when applied to national or societal purposes, based on its great reach, supposed realism, emotional impact and popularity. The two other strands in film history were the emergence of several schools of film art (Huaco, 1963) and the rise of the social documentary film movement. These were different from the mainstream in having either a minority appeal or a strong element of realism (or both). Both have a link, partly fortuitous, with film as propaganda in that both tended to develop at times of social crisis.

There continue to be thinly concealed ideological and implicitly propagandist elements in many popular entertainment films, even in politically 'free' societies. This reflects a mixture of forces: deliberate attempts at social control; unthinking adoption of populist or conservative values; various marketing and PR infiltrations into entertainment; and the pursuit of mass appeal. Despite the dominance of the entertainment function in film history, films have often displayed didactic, propagandistic tendencies. Film is certainly more vulnerable than other media to outside interference and may be more subject to conformist pressures because so much capital is at risk. It is a reflection of this situation that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers, US government leaders sought a meeting with leaders of the film industry to discuss ways in which film could make a contribution to the newly announced 'war on terror'.

The main turning points in film history have been: the 'Americanization' of the film industry and

film culture in the years after the First World War (Tunstall, 1977); the coming of television and the separation of film from the cinema. The relative decline of nascent, but flourishing, European film industries at that time (hastened by the Second World War) probably contributed to a homogenization of film culture and a convergence of ideas about the definition of film as a medium, with Hollywood as a dominant model. Television took away a large part of the film-viewing public, especially the general family audience, leaving a much smaller and younger film audience. It also took away or diverted the social documentary stream of film development and gave it a more congenial home in television, where it appeared in journalistic magazines, special reports and ‘public affairs’ programming. However, it did not have similar effects on the art film or for film aesthetics, although the art film may have benefited from the ‘demassification’ and greater specialization of the film/cinema medium. For the first two generations of filmgoers, the film experience was inseparable from having an evening out, usually with friends and usually in venues that were far grander than the home. In addition, the darkened cinema offered a mixture of privacy and sociability that gave another dimension to the experience. Just as with television later, ‘going to the pictures’ was as important as seeing any particular film.

The ‘separation of film and cinema’ refers to the many ways in which films can be seen, after initial showing in a film theatre. These include television broadcasting, cable transmission, videotape and DVD sale or hire, satellite TV and now digital broadband Internet and mobile phone reception. These developments have several potential consequences. They make film less typically a shared public experience and more a private one. They reduce the initial ‘impact’ of mass exposure to a given film. They shift control of selection in the direction of the audience and allow new patterns of repeat viewing and collection. They make it possible to serve many specialist markets and easier to cater for the demand for violent, horrific or pornographic content. They also prolong the life of films. Despite the liberation entailed in becoming a less ‘mass’ medium, the film has not been able to claim full rights to political and artistic self-expression, and most countries retain an apparatus of licensing, censorship and powers of control.

Although the film/cinema medium has been subordinated to television in many respects, it has also become more integrated with other media, especially book publishing, popular music and television itself. It has acquired a greater centrality (Jowett and Linton, 1980), despite the reduction of its immediate audience, as a showcase for other media and as a cultural source, out of which come books, strip cartoons, songs, and television ‘stars’ and series. Thus, film is as much as ever a mass culture creator. Even the decline of the cinema audience has been more than compensated by a new domestic film audience reached by television, digital recordings, cable and satellite channels. Key features are summarized in [Box 2.4](#).

2.4

The film medium and institution: key features

Medium aspects

- Audiovisual channels of reception

- Private experience of public content
- Extensive (universal) appeal
- Predominantly narrative fiction
- International in genre and format

Institutional aspects

- Subjection to social control
- Complex organization of and distribution
- High cost of production
- Multiple platforms of distribution

Broadcasting

Radio and television have, respectively, a ninety and a sixty-plus-year history as mass media, and both grew out of pre-existing technologies – telephone, telegraph, moving and still photography, and sound recording. Despite their obvious differences in content and use, radio and television can be treated together in terms of their history. Radio seems to have been a technology looking for a use, rather than a response to a demand for a new kind of service or content, and much the same is true of television. According to Williams (1975:25), ‘Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily designed for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content.’ Both came to borrow from existing media, and most of the popular content forms of both are derivative from film, music, stories, theatre, news and sport.

A distinctive feature of radio and television has been their high degree of regulation, control or licensing by public authority – initially out of technical necessity, later from a mixture of democratic choice, state self-interest, economic convenience and sheer institutional custom. A second and related feature of radio and television media has been their centralized pattern of distribution, with supply radiating out from metropolitan centres, with little or no return flow. Perhaps because of their closeness to power, radio and television have hardly anywhere acquired, as of right, the same freedom that the press enjoys, to express views and act with political independence. Broadcasting was thought too powerful as an influence to fall into the hands of any single interest without clear limitations to protect the public from potential harm or manipulation.

Television has been continuously evolving, and it would be risky to try to summarize its features in terms of communicative purposes and effects. Initially, the main genre innovation of television stemmed from its capacity to transmit many pictures and sound live, and thus act as a ‘window on the world’ in real time. Even studio productions were live broadcasts before the days of efficient video recording. This capacity of simultaneity has been retained for some kinds of content, including sporting events, some newscasting, and certain kinds of entertainment show. What Dayan and Katz (1992) characterize as ‘media events’ (such as state visits, the Olympic Games, coronations, large political demonstrations) are often likely to have significant live coverage. Most TV content is not

live, although it often aims to create an illusion of ongoing reality. A second important feature of television is the sense of intimacy and personal involvement that it seems able to cultivate between the spectator and presenter or the actors and participants on screen.

The status of television as the most ‘massive’ of the media in terms of reach, time spent and popularity has barely changed over thirty years and it adds all the time to its global audience. Even so, there is now some evidence of gradual decline in total audiences, although significant inter-country differences in its dominance of free time remain, as indicated in a summary way in [Box 2.5](#).

Differences in time spent with television, 2000 and 2007

2.5

Country	Viewing minutes per day	
	2000	2007
United States	299	297
United Kingdom	234	233
Italy	238	239
France	219	214
Netherlands	166	194
Norway	163	154
Czech Republic	19	194
Germany	233	203
Ireland	185	185

(Source: International Television Expert Group, www.ip-network.com)

Despite the fact that television has been largely denied an autonomous political role and is primarily considered a medium of entertainment, it plays a vital role in modern politics. It is considered to be the main source of news and information for most people and the main channel of communication between politicians and citizens, especially at election times. In this informally allocated role of public informer, television has generally remained credible and trusted. Another role is that of educator – for children at school and adults at home. It is also the largest single channel of advertising in nearly all countries, and this has helped to confirm its mass entertainment functions. In terms of its distribution, broadcast television has fragmented in most countries into many separate channels. Even so, the typical pattern that remains is one in which a few (national) channels are very dominant in audience and financial terms. An enduring feature of the appeal of television seems to lie in the very fact that it is a medium that brings people together to share the same experiences in an otherwise fragmented and individuated society and not only in the circle of the family.

The main features of broadcast television and radio are summarized in [Box 2.6](#).

2.6

Television as medium and institution: key features

Medium aspects

- Very diverse types of content
- Audiovisual channels
- Close, personal and domestic association
- Low intensity and involvement experience

Institutional aspects

- Complex technology and organization
- Subject to legal and social control
- National and international character
- High public visibility

Radio notably refused to die in the face of the rise of television and it has prospered on the basis of several distinctive features. Competition with television led to a degree of deliberate differentiation. The close supervision of national radio systems relaxed after the rise of television and there was a 'pirate' phase, in which amateurs and independent entrepreneurs set up competing illegal stations. Radio ceased to be a highly regulated national 'voice' and became more free to experiment and to express new, minority and even deviant sounds in voice and music. As a medium, it has much more channel capacity and therefore much greater and more diverse access. It is much cheaper and more flexible in production than television and also cheap and flexible in use for its audience. There are no longer limitations on the place where radio can be listened to or the time of reception, since listening can be combined with other routine activities. It has possibilities for interaction with its audience by way of the telephone and can accommodate many different genres. In fact, radio has flourished since the coming of television, even if it can no longer claim the mass audience of its glory days in the 1940s. The main features discussed are outlined in [Box 2.7](#).

Radio as medium and institution: key features

2.7

Medium aspects

- Sound appeal only
- Portable and flexible in use
- Multiple types of content, but more music
- Participative (two-way) potential
- Individual and intimate in use

Institutional aspects

- Relative freedom
- Local and decentralized
- Economical to produce

Recorded Music

Relatively little attention has been given to music as a mass medium in theory and research, perhaps because the implications for society have never been clear, and neither have there been sharp discontinuities in the possibilities offered by successive technologies of recording and reproduction/transmission. Recorded and replayed music has not even enjoyed a convenient label to describe its numerous media manifestations, although the generic term ‘phonogram’ has been suggested (Burnett, 1990, 1996) to cover music accessed via record players, tape players, compact disc players, VCRs (video cassette recorders), broadcasting and cable, etc.

The recording and replaying of music began around 1880 and records were quite rapidly diffused, on the basis of the wide appeal of popular songs and melodies. Their popularity and diffusion were closely related to the already established place of the piano (and other instruments) in the home. Much radio content since the early days has consisted of music, even more so since the rise of television. While there may have been a gradual tendency for the ‘phonogram’ to replace private music-making, there has never been a large gap between mass-mediated music and personal and direct audience enjoyment of musical performance (concerts, choirs, bands, dances, etc). The phonogram makes music of all kinds more accessible at all times in more places to more people, but it is hard to discern a fundamental discontinuity in the general character of popular musical experience, despite changes of genre and fashion.

Even so, there have been big changes in the broad character of the phonogram since its beginnings. The first change was the addition of radio broadcast music to phonogram records, which greatly increased the range and amount of music available and extended it to many more people than had access to gramophones or jukeboxes. The transition of radio from a family to an individual medium in the post-war ‘transistor’ revolution was a second major change, which opened up a relatively new market of young people for what became a burgeoning record industry. Each development since then – portable tape players, the Sony Walkman, the compact disc, music video and ipod – has given the spiral another twist, still based on a predominantly young audience. The

result has been a mass media industry which is very interrelated, concentrated in ownership and internationalized (Negus, 1992). Despite this, music media have significant radical and creative strands which have developed despite increased commercialization (Frith, 1981). The growth of music downloading and sharing via the Internet has added to the distribution traffic and seriously challenged the power of music rights holders.

While the cultural significance of music has received sporadic attention, its relationship to social and political events has been recognized and occasionally celebrated or feared. Since the rise of the youth-based industry in the 1960s, mass-mediated popular music has been linked to youthful idealism and political concern, to supposed degeneration and hedonism, to drug-taking, violence and antisocial attitudes. Music has also played a part in various nationalist independence movements. For instance, songs of protest and nationalism were a potent element in the pursuit of independence of Ireland from Britain. More recently, the end of Soviet control of Estonia was described as the ‘singing revolution’ because music enabled people to come together and express their aspirations for restoration of autonomy and the suppressed national culture. While the content of music has never been easy to regulate, its distribution has predominantly been in the hands of established institutions, and its perceived deviant tendencies have been subject to some sanctions. In any case, most popular music expresses and responds to rather enduring conventional values and personal needs, with no subversive aim or potential. These points about music are summarized in [Box 2.8](#).

2.8

Recorded music (phonogram) as medium and institution: key features

Medium aspects

- Sound experience only
- Personal and emotional satisfactions
- Main appeal to youth
- Mobile, flexible individual in use

Institutional aspects

- Low degree of regulation
- High degree of internationalization
- Multiple technologies and platforms
- Links to major media industry
- Organizational fragmentation
- Central to youth culture

The Communications Revolution: New Media versus Old

The expression 'new media' has been in use since the 1960s and has had to encompass an expanding and diversifying set of applied communication technologies. The editors of the Handbook of New Media (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006) point to the difficulties of saying just what the 'new media' comprise. They choose to define them in a composite way, linking information communication technologies (ICT) with their associated social contexts, bringing together three elements: technological artefacts and devices; activities, practices and uses; and social arrangements and organizations that form around the devices and practices. As noted above, much the same definition applies to 'old media', although the artefacts, uses and arrangements are different. As far as the essential features of 'new media' are concerned, the main ones seem to be their interconnectedness, their accessibility to individual users as senders and/or receivers, their interactivity, their multiplicity of use and open-ended character, and their ubiquity and 'delocatedness' (see also [Chapter 6](#)).

Our primary concern in this book is with mass communication, which is closely related to the old media and seems thus to be rendered obsolete by new media. However, as noted already, mass communication is not a process that is limited to mass media nor has it necessarily declined. The new media technologies also carry mass communication activities. Lüders (2008) argues that distinctions between mass media and personal media have not been abolished but have become unstable. Even so, the rise of new media is seen by some as a revolt against mass communication, an idea that has a long history in critical theory (see Enzensberger, 1970). The two main driving forces of change were initially satellite communication and the harnessing of the computer. The key to the immense power of the computer as a communication machine lies in the process of digitalization that allows information of all kinds in all formats to be carried with the same efficiency and also intermingled. In principle, there is no longer any need for the various different media that have been described, since all could be subsumed in the same computerized communication network and reception centre (in the home, for instance). So far this has not happened, and it is bound to be a gradual process if and when it does. But we already see many signs of newspaper moving to a life online. Alongside computer-based technologies there are other innovations that have in some degree changed some aspects of mass communication (Carey, 2003). New means of transmission by cable, satellite and radio have immensely increased the capacity to transmit. New means of storage and retrieval, including the personal video recorder, CD-ROM, compact disc, DVD, ipod, etc., have also expanded the range of possibilities, and even the remote control device has played a part. While not directly supporting mass communication, the many new possibilities for private 'media-making' (camcorders, PCs, printers, cameras, mobile phones, etc.) have expanded the world of media and forged bridges between public and private communication and between the spheres of professional and amateur. Finally, we should note the new kinds of 'quasi-media', including computer games and virtual reality devices, that overlap with the media in their culture and in the satisfactions of use.

The implications of all this for mass media are still far from clear, although it is certain that the 'traditional' media have also benefited greatly from new media innovations as well as acquiring new competitors. Secondly, we can already conclude that the communications revolution has generally shifted the 'balance of power' from the media to the audience in so far as there are more options to choose from and more active uses of media available. Traditional mass communication was essentially one-directional, while the new forms of communication are essentially interactive. Mass communication has in several respects become less massive and less centralized.

The Internet

Beyond that, it is useful to distinguish between the implications of enhanced transmission and the emergence of any new medium as such. The former means more speed, capacity and efficiency, while the latter opens up new possibilities for content, use and effects. The foremost claim to status as a new medium and maybe also a mass medium is the Internet. Even so, mass features are not its primary characteristic. The Internet began primarily as a non-commercial means of intercommunication and data exchange between professionals, but its more recent rapid advance has been fuelled by its potential as a purveyor of goods and many profitable services and as an alternative to other means of personal and interpersonal communication (Castells, 2001). The medium is not yet mature or clearly defined, in line with Lievrouw's (2004:12) still valid assessment that there is 'no overarching killer application of online interaction'. Nevertheless, there is a case for seeing both search engines and social networking sites as dominant and unique applications. Initially, diffusion proceeded most rapidly in North America and Northern Europe. In the USA, it appeared to reach a ceiling of diffusion in 2001, at around 60% to 70% of the population (Rainie and Bell, 2004), but with much continuing flux. More recent figures indicate even higher household penetration in other countries (Küng et al., 2008). Actual use varies considerably in amount and type and overlap with the use of other media (e.g. music, film, radio). Some applications of the Internet, such as online news, are clearly extensions of newspaper journalism, although online news itself is also evolving in new directions, with new capabilities of content and new forms (as where a member of the public adopts the role of journalist).

The Internet's claim to full medium status is based in part on its having a distinctive technology, manner of use, range of content and services, and a distinct image of its own. However, the Internet has no clear institutional status and is not owned, controlled or organized by any single body, but is simply a network of internationally interconnected computers operating according to agreed protocols. Numerous organizations, but especially service providers and telecommunication bodies, contribute to its operation (Braman and Roberts, 2003). The Internet as such does not exist anywhere as a legal entity and is not subject to any single set of national laws or regulations (Lessig, 1999). Klotz (2004) said that no new legal paradigm for cyberspace has been realized, although it is at too early a stage of development to conclude that there never will be legal framework. At the time of writing, in 2009, this is still the position. However, those who use the Internet can be accountable to the laws and regulations of the country in which they reside as well as to international law (Gringras, 1997). We return to the question of the Internet in [Chapter 6](#) and elsewhere, but for the moment we can record its chief characteristics as a (mass) medium. Essential features of the Internet are summarized in [Box 2.9](#), without distinguishing between 'medium' and 'institutional' aspects, since the former are so multiple and the latter so undeveloped.

- Computer-based technologies
- Hybrid, non-dedicated, flexible character
- Interactive potential
- Private and public functions
- Low degree of regulation
- Interconnectedness
- Ubiquity and de-locatedness
- Accessible to individuals as communicators
- A medium of both mass and personal communication

Differences between Media

It is much less easy to distinguish these various media from each other than it used to be. This is partly because some media forms are now distributed across different types of transmission channel, reducing the original uniqueness of form and experience in use. Secondly, the increasing convergence of technology, based on digitalization, can only reinforce this tendency. Newspapers are already widely accessible as text on the Internet, and the telephone system is also delivering media content, especially by way of the Internet. The clear lines of regulatory regime between the media are already blurred, both recognizing and encouraging greater similarity between different media. Thirdly, globalizing tendencies are reducing the distinctiveness of any particular national variant of media content and institution. Fourthly, the continuing trends towards integration of national and global media corporations have led to the housing of different media under the same roof, encouraging convergence by another route.

Nevertheless, on certain dimensions, clear differences do remain. There are some obvious differences in terms of typical content. There is also evidence that media are perceived differently in terms of physical and psychosocial characteristics (see [Box 6.4, Chapter 6](#)). Media vary a good deal in terms of perceived trust and credibility, although findings vary from country to country. Here we look only at two enduring questions. First, how free is a medium in relation to the wider society? Secondly, what is a medium good for and what are its perceived uses, from the point of view of an individual audience member?

Dimension of freedom versus control

Relations between media and society have a material, a political and a normative or social-cultural dimension. Central to the political dimension is the question of freedom and control. The main normative issue concerns how media ought to use the freedom they have. As noted above, near-total freedom was claimed and eventually gained for the book, for a mixture of reasons, in which the claims of politics, religion, science and art all played some part. This situation remains unchallenged in free societies, although the book has lost some of its once subversive potential as a result of its relative marginalization (book reading is a minority or minor form of media use). The influence of books remains considerable, but has to a large extent to be mediated through other more popular media or other institutions (education, politics, etc.).

The newspaper press bases its historical claim to freedom of operation much more directly on its political functions of expressing opinion and circulating political and economic information. But the newspaper is also a significant business enterprise for which freedom to produce and supply its primary product (information) is a necessary condition of successful operation in the marketplace. Broadcast television and radio are still generally licensed and have limited political freedom in practice, partly because of their privileged access to scarce spectrum space (despite the proclaimed 'end of scarcity') and partly because of their believed impact and power to persuade. But they are also often expected to use their informative capacity to support the democratic process and serve the public good in other ways. Even so, the current trend is for market forces to have a greater influence on the conduct of broadcasting than either political control or voluntary social responsibility.

The various new media, using cable, satellite or telecommunications networks for distribution, still await clear definitions of their appropriate degree of political freedom. The key new medium in this respect is the Internet. Freedom from control may be claimed on the grounds of privacy or the fact that these are not media of indiscriminate mass distribution but are directed to specific users. They are so-called 'common carriers' that generally escape control over their content because they are open to all on equal terms and primarily for personal or business rather than public matters. They also increasingly share the same communicative tasks as media with established editorial autonomy. The unclear status of most new media in respect of freedom is still a matter of dispute, since they are de facto very free, but also give rise to widespread fears of misuse.

The intermedia differences relating to political control (freedom means few regulations and little supervisory apparatus) follow a general pattern. In practice this means that the nearer any medium gets to operating as a mass medium, the more it can expect the attentions of governments and politicians, since it affects the exercise of power. In general, activities in the sphere of fiction, fantasy or entertainment are more likely to escape attention than are activities that touch directly on the ongoing reality of events and circumstances.

Virtually all media of public communication have a radical potential, in the sense of being potentially subversive of reigning systems of social control. They can provide access for new voices and perspectives on the existing order; new forms of organization and protest are made available for the subordinate or disenfranchised. Even so, the institutional development of successful media has usually resulted in the elimination of the early radical potential, partly as a side-effect of commercialization, partly because authorities fear disturbance to society (Winston, 1986). According to Beniger (1986), the driving logic of new communication technology has always been towards increased control. This generalization is now being tested with reference to the Internet and looks like being validated.

The normative dimension of control operates according to the same general principles, although sometimes with different consequences for particular media. For instance, film, which has generally escaped direct political control, has often been subject to self-censorship and to monitoring of its content, on grounds of its potential moral impact on the young and impressionable (especially in matters of violence, crime or sex). The widespread restrictions applied to television in matters of culture and morals stem from the same tacit assumptions. These are that media that are very popular and have a potentially strong emotional impact on many people need to be supervised in 'the public interest'.

However, the more communication activities can be defined as either educational or 'serious' in purpose or, alternatively, as artistic and creative, the more freedom from normative restrictions can usually be claimed. There are complex reasons for this, but it is also a fact that 'art' and content of

higher moral seriousness do not usually reach large numbers and are seen as marginal to power relations.

The degree of control of media by state or society depends partly on the feasibility of applying it. The most regulated media have typically been those whose distribution is most easily supervised, such as centralized national radio or television broadcasting or local cinema distribution. Books and print media generally are much less easy to monitor or to suppress. The same applies to local radio, while desktop publishing and photocopying and all manner of ways of reproducing sound and images have made direct censorship a very blunt and ineffective instrument.

The difficulty of policing national frontiers to keep out unwanted foreign communication is another consequence of new technology that promotes more freedom. While new technology in general seems to increase the promise of freedom of communication, the continued strength of institutional controls, including those of the market, over actual flow and reception should not be underestimated. It is also becoming clearer that the Internet is not impossible to control, as once believed, since all traffic can be monitored and traced and some countries have effectively blocked websites and content they dislike and can punish users. There is also extensive self-censorship by service providers in the face of threats or legal uncertainty.

The main issues raised in this section are summarized in [Box 2.10](#) dealing with social control, with particular reference to two aspects: means or types of control and motives.

2.10

Social control of media

Types of control

- Censorship of content
- Legal restrictions
- Control of infrastructures
- Economic means
- Self-regulation or self-censorship

Motives for control

- Fear of political subversion
- For moral or cultural reasons
- Combat cyber-crime
- National security

Dimensions of use and reception

The increasing difficulty of typifying or distinguishing media channels in terms of content and function has undermined once stable social definitions of media. The newspaper, for instance, may now be as much an entertainment medium, or a consumers' guide, as it is a source of information about political and social events. Cable and satellite television systems are no longer confined to offering general programming for all. Even so, a few dominant images and definitions of what media 'are best for' do appear to survive, the outcome of tradition, social forces and the 'bias' of certain technologies.

For instance, television, despite the many changes and extensions relating to production, transmission and reception, remains primarily a medium of family entertainment, even if the family is less likely to be viewing together (see [Chapter 16](#)). It is still a focus of public interest and a shared experience in most societies. It has both a domestic and a collective character that seem to endure. The traditional conditions of family living (shared space, time and conditions) may account for this, despite the technological trend to individuation of use and specialization of content. The expected diffusion of digital radio and television might tend to reinforce the latter trend, along with demographic trends to more one-person households, more divorce and fewer children.



2.11

Dimensions of media use: questions arising

- Inside or outside the home?
- Individual or shared experience?
- Public or private in use?
- Interactive or not?

The questions about media use in [Box 2.11](#) indicate three dimensions of media reception that mainly apply to traditional media: whether within or outside the home; whether an individual or a shared experience; and whether more public or more private. Television is typically shared, domestic and public. The newspaper, despite its changing content, conforms to a different type. It is certainly public in character, but is less purely domestic and is individual in use. Radio is now many things but often rather private, not exclusively domestic and more individual in use than television. Both the book and the music phonogram also largely follow this pattern. In general, the distinctions indicated have become less sharp as a result of changes of technology in the direction of proliferation and convergence of reception possibilities.

The newer digital media have added to the uncertainty about which medium is good for what purpose, but they have also added a fourth dimension by which media can be distinguished: that of degree of interactivity. The more interactive media are those that allow continual motivated choice and response by users. While the video game, CD-ROM, Internet and telephone chatline are clear

examples where interaction is the norm, it is also the case that multi-channel cable or satellite television has an increased interactive potential, as do the recording and replay facilities of the domestic VCR. Interactivity has developed from a simple reaction possibility to the creation and supply of content, as with some social networking sites.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a commentary on the evolution of mass media from the early days of printing in the late Middle Ages to the present age of information communication technology and the information society. It has told the story not as a narrative with dates and descriptions of events, but in terms of brief sketches of the mass media and their main forms, in chronological order. It has highlighted their main characteristics in terms of capacity to communicate, uses for an audience and regard by the larger society. Although the primary distinction is according to a type of technology, equal importance attaches to social, cultural and political factors. Certain technologies survived the evolutionary struggle, so to speak, and some others (not described here) did not make it. The same applies to the various uses to which the media have been put. There is no determining logic at work. Notable is the fact that all the media described are still with us and, in their own way, flourishing, despite recurrent predictions that one master medium would drive out weaker competitors. They have all found a means of adapting to changed conditions and new competitors.

Further Reading

Briggs, A. and Burke, P. (2005) *A Social History of the Media: from Gutenberg to the Internet*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Polity Press.

A comprehensive overview of the key developments in society and media during the modern era, written by two historians.

McLuhan, M. (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

A seminal book about the revolutionary part played by the printing press in changing European culture and society. With high literary quality and many imaginative insights and examples.

Williams, R. (1975) *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana.

An original analysis by a leading British critical scholar of the cultural consequences of technology, with particular reference to television. It still merits its seminal status.

Online Readings



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- Stober, S. (2004) 'What media evolution is: a theoretical approach to the history of new media', *European Journal of Communication*, 19 (4): 483–505.