AMERICAN MASS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Edited By Qingwen Dong

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First published in the United States of America in 2010 by Cognella, a division of University Readers, Inc.

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14 13 12 11 10 1 2 3 4 5

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-935551-75-1
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This reader gives students an overview of the impact of American mass media on popular culture. Twenty-six essays on mass communication studies are divided into three sections. The first section provides a theoretical foundation for the study of American mass media and popular culture. The second section focuses on the impact of television in shaping American popular culture. Various culture topics are covered in this section: romance, love, sex, American mass media’s impact in shaping a global culture that embodies the American consumerist lifestyle. The third section presents new media and their impact on American popular culture. Topics encompass romantic communication over MySpace, mobile communication and teen emancipation.

How to Use This Book

In order to make the best use of this text, students should consider four suggestions.

First, the text provides students an understanding of key theoretical concepts and models in mass communication, with which they may explain, analyze and predict the impact of American mass media on popular culture. Students then use this foundation to implement the latter three suggestions.

Second, students may choose one popular culture phenomenon to examine over the course of the semester, to observe how the mass media frame the discussion of the phenomenon.

Third, since new media generate a fundamental shift in society and in the human mind, students may choose one new medium to investigate, in particular noting how it is affecting the lives of those who use it.

Fourth, students may keep a diary of new media use. This gives an immediacy to the concepts discussed in this text. Students then may become personally involved in the way in which new media are transforming our world.
Acknowledgements

My thanks first go to all those communication students who enrolled in my classes during the past 15 years at University of the Pacific. I have learned from these students as much as they have learned from me. Specifically, they have prompted me to refine my teaching techniques to address their interests and their lives. This book is the end result of their questions, their suggestions and their quests to understand.

I am indebted to the University Readers publisher who provided me with ideas for this anthology. I would like to express my gratitude to Jennifer Bowen and Monica Hui for their assistance and creativity. In particular, I want to thank Melissa Accornero for her patience, great suggestions and assistance. In addition, I am grateful to my wife, Xiaobing, and my daughter, Dale.

Stockton, California
PART ONE

Theoretical Foundations
Medieval Europeans knew, spoke, and thought about a universe within their immediate observation—a slice of land carved from the forests encompassing their villages. Few ever ventured beyond the timberland. They knew from occasional travelers that there were other villages beyond the woods. But, so little did they know of the other villages that the other villages might have well been distant planets.

The development of the printing press changed the medieval view of the world. The social consequences of the printing press were demonstrated in 1517 when Martin Luther published his 95 criticisms against the Church in Rome. He was not the first person to criticize the church. But, because his seditious writings were mass circulated, within months Europe was talking about Luther’s defiant act. The Church, in kind, responded with its own attacks. Luther’s criticisms ushered in the Protestant Reformation and “the first propaganda war” (Burke, 1985, p. 118).

The far-reaching and often unintended effects of Luther’s mass communicated messages demonstrate the multifarious nature of mass communication. Suddenly, people know and think about a world beyond their observation. Although tempting, comparing the contemporary Third World village with the medieval village before the age of printing is unwarranted. As a result of the mass media—of radio and group television viewing—today’s villagers “see” a pseudo-world beyond the forests. Some Third World leaders today view Western mass media in their countries as agents of media imperialism. Not only blatant propaganda, but even entertainment programs (e.g., “I Love Lucy”) are thought to have the potential for undermining traditional cultures (Salwen, 1991). Indonesian President Sukarno, a 1960s Third World spokesperson, declared: “You may not think of a refrigerator as a revolutionary weapon. But if a peasant woman sees one
on TV in her village square and realizes what it could do for her and her family, the germ of revolt is planted” (quoted in Manchester, 1993, p. 9).

This chapter reviews the development of theory and research in mass communication. The chapter concludes by proposing a scheme—a model of models—to help readers organize mass communication models. The chapter’s main premise is that theory and research are inseparable. Without theory to guide the interpretation of data, research activity is mere data collection in a helter-skelter fashion. When such atheoretical data are quantitatively summarized, they are open to criticism as mere “number crunching.” Likewise, empty theorizing and subjective interpretations without procedures to gather data open the researcher to what critics call “naval gazing,” “mere speculation,” or “armchair philosophy.”

**ESTABLISHING A BASE: METHODS AND THEORIES**

Only in the 20th century did researchers formalize broad “theories” about mass communication. The rise of daily newspapers with more than one million circulation and the introduction of electronic media fostered an interest in the effects of mass communication messages. Certain attributes appeared to distinguish mass communication from other modes of human communication: the diffusion of messages from a seemingly powerful, single source to a large, heterogeneous audience; the public nature of the messages; and the lack of (or delayed) feedback from receivers to the mass communication source.

**Theoretical Development**

After World War I, it appeared to some observers that clever politicians and governments had manipulated communication symbols in mass communication messages to bring the world to war. A crude “theory” of “propaganda” emerged in which mass media were seen as having a “hypodermic-needle” (or “bullet theory” or “theory of uniform effects”) effect of direct, universal, and massive influences on malleable and impressionable audiences.

This notion of all-encompassing effects would have two primary limitations. First, wartime propaganda—whether during World War I or our more contemporary Gulf Wars—represents a relatively unique situation with few, if any, competing messages. Antiwar propaganda is not common in the mass media of dictatorial nations or democracies; even in democracies those who oppose patriotic efforts are largely ignored by the mainstream media (Kellner, 1993). So the development of a model based on the lack of competitive messages cannot be generalized to more common situations.
A second assumption is that the receiving target (readers, listeners) is homogenous in composition and response. Yet there is no compelling evidence that audiences can be herded into a single media corral; indeed, contrary evidence suggests audiences are resistant to media messages.

Some media scholars argue that the hypodermic-needle “theory” never received serious scholarly attention; it was formulated years later for political and pedagogical reasons (Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985; Sproule, 1989, 1990). Even if there were no hypodermic-needle theory, the mass media would be—and still are—viewed by many as powerful instruments for communicators to convey persuasive messages to audiences. The assumption of massive and unmitigated media effects certainly influenced empirical mass communication research in the “effects” tradition. Lasswell (1927), for example, described how symbols could be manipulated through the mass media:

A new and subtler instrument … weld[s] thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope. … The name of this new hammer and anvil of social solidarity is propaganda. … All the apparatus of diffused erudition popularizes the symbols and forms of pseudo-rational appeal; the wolf of propaganda does not hesitate to masquerade in the sheepskin. All the voluble men of the day—writers, reporters, editors, preachers, lecturers, teachers, politicians— are drawn into the service of propaganda to simplify a master voice. (p. 220)

Methodological Development

Starting in the 1920s, several modes of inquiry for studying mass communication were refined. One involved content analysis of media, defined by Berelson (1952) as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communication” (p. 18). A popular form, “propaganda analysis,” was pioneered by Lasswell (Rogers, 1994, pp. 203–243). The Chicago School of sociology, caught up in the progressive spirit of the era, did not shy away from advocating social causes and “do-goodism.” Early Chicago School research displayed a methodological eclecticism that was “empirical but not very quantitative” (Rogers, 1994, p. 152). Chicago School researchers took advantage of their inner-city environs to conduct ethnographic studies of urban problems (Vidich & Lyman, 1993), while in Europe the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research applied neo-Marxist theory to critically analyze communication and culture (Bottomore, 1984).

Despite promising qualitative research developments, by the mid-1930s mass communication research in the United States was distinguished by “an aggressively empirical spirit” (Czitrom, 1982, p. 122). A confluence of factors accounted for quantitative
empirical research's popularity. Among the factors was the development of measurement tools, such as the Likert scale and the formulation of systematic methods for gathering data.

In addition, statistical techniques for analyzing large sets of data were introduced into the behavioral sciences. British mathematician Karl Pearson, for example, introduced the product-moment coefficient. Pearson, who was aware of the import of his discovery, declared that the product-moment coefficient “had the potential of introducing a major paradigm shift and revolutionizing the biological and social sciences” (cited in Tankard, 1984, p. 66). Another statistical pioneer fascinated by quantitative analysis, Francis Galton, devised statistical measures of beauty, prayer, and boredom. Galton, however, serves to warn against the misuse of statistics; he applied statistical techniques to support the Eurocentric racial theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Gould, 1981). Paralleling statistical advancements were technological improvements in computers that allowed researchers to analyze massive data sets (Lowery & DeFleur, 1988, p. 20; Nash, 1990). Meanwhile, within the media professions, the use of quantitative data became increasingly important for mass media “market research” (Hurwitz, 1988).

Newspapers relied on studies to learn about their readers. Developments in radio led to audience studies based on telephone coincidental calls (e.g., “What are you listening to right now?”). This technique was later adapted into the first generation of television ratings. The financial resources of media industries to fund studies, and thereby have some say over the academic research agenda, encouraged investigation in the empirical tradition. Industry influence on the academic study of mass communication was evident in advertising (Hess, 1931; Link, 1938). As Scott (1921) noted: “[I]t can be stated, without fear of contradiction, that no advertisement that defies the established laws of psychology can hope to be successful” (italics added, p. 2).

Despite research advances, empirical research faced a nagging problem. Conducting empirical research was expensive. Some researchers demonstrated an ability to obtain industry and government funding. But, many critics asked, at what price? Even Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who obtained substantial industry funding and was sometimes accused by critics for selling out to industry (Gitlin, 1978), was not oblivious to such dangers (Pasanella, 1994), and he warned: “[W]e academic people always have a certain sense of tightrope walking: at what point will the commercial partners find some necessary conclusion too hard to take and at what point will they shut us off from the indispensable sources of funding and data?” (Lazarsfeld, 1948, p. 116).
Many mass communication (and interpersonal communication as well) “founders” of the 1930s and 1940s were housed in sociology and psychology programs and did not call themselves communication scholars (Rogers, 1994). Lazarsfeld (1948), for example, was a sociologist who considered himself “a student of the mass media” (p. 115).

What mass communication needed was someone to champion its cause. This advocate was Wilbur Schramm (Dennis & Wartella, 1996; Rogers, 1994; Wartella, 1994), who sought to establish communication as a legitimate academic field with a firm grounding in the behavioral sciences. In a series of edited volumes from 1948 to 1972, Schramm brought together researchers from journalism, the behavioral sciences, and the mass communications industries. These volumes (especially Schramm, 1948, 1954) trained future mass communication scholars, providing a firm research grounding for the emerging field. Although Schramm planted the seeds for a legitimate and independent field of study, it was many years before researchers viewed themselves as mass communication scholars setting an agenda for mass communication research.

Schramm did not originally distinguish mass communication from human communication. He hoped for a unified field of communication. But this contemporary separation was an inevitable result of parochial academic barriers (Reardon & Rogers, 1988). Rogers (1994, pp. 449–450) traces the human and mass communication dichotomy to 1950, when Schramm became dean of the Division of Communication, University of Illinois, in charge “of every activity at the University of Illinois that was to be even remotely connected with communication” (p. 449). However, the rhetorically oriented Department of Speech decided not to join the division.

**Academic Emergence**

University journalism programs would have been the most logical place in academia for the emergence of the study of mass communication. But most journalism programs emphasized vocational training. Many were dominated by former journalists who held an antipathy for behavioral research. Even in the late 1950s, now prominent researchers (e.g., Westley, 1958a, 1958b) were able to publish articles in the flagship scholarly journal in journalism that portrayed the behavioral sciences as a novel approach. Most journalism faculty saw the social scientific study of mass communication “to have no practical value whatever, in part because few effects researchers bothered to expound on the implications of their studies for journalists, and also because many such researchers wrote the results of their studies in barely comprehensible language” (Weaver & Gray, 1980, p. 142).

This is not to say that applied journalism researchers, or those in advertising and public relations, did not contribute to mass communication theory during this
formative era. Journalism professionals complained (and sometimes still complain) that journalism research is not geared to industry. Meanwhile, scholars from other academic disciplines claimed (and sometimes still complain) that journalism research is atheoretical and inappropriate for the academy. To deal with these two-pronged attacks, Sloan (1990) argued that journalism programs have become a mish-mash curriculum of skills training and scholarship:

The result has been one of the most evident, peculiar features of journalism education. One might say it is schizophrenic. It is not known which way to go: Should it become primarily professional, or should it be a traditional academic discipline? Possessing a sense of inferiority to both professional journalism and academia, it has tried to prove itself to both. One inferiority complex is difficult enough to overcome, but two create a severe problem. (p. 4)

Perhaps as a result of journalism education’s confused identity and unwillingness to be at the vanguard of mass communication theory and research during the 1940s, 1950s, and much of the 1960s, when the systematic study of mass communication blossomed, sociologists and other behavioral science researchers set the agenda for mass communication theory and research (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Hovland, Lumsdaime, & Sheffield, 1949; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Their “grand studies,” guided by broad research questions, yielded unanticipated findings for the development of later models (e.g., the sleeper effect, two-step flow, opinion leaders, selective perception, reinforcement). Much of this early research might appear unsophisticated today; the studies were based largely on breakdowns of media use and preferences by various demographic (i.e., socioeconomic status) groups. But their impact was enormous (Katz, 1987).

Not until the 1970s, when mass communication was an established area of study, did journalism researchers Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) offer the agenda-setting model. McCombs and Shaw’s model hypothesized that the news media prioritized, or set the agenda for public issue concerns. Agenda-setting was widely embraced by journalism scholars, and even entered common parlance among media professionals. Although the agenda-setting model was thoughtfully conceived, explicated, and provided valuable insights about the mass communication process, there were other reasons why the model was well-received. Agenda-setting was important because it was the first popular “home-grown” mass communication model from self-declared journalism researchers (Tankard, 1990).

The quantitative tradition in mass communication has become dominant in the United States today, although there has been a renewed interest in qualitative research and the macro-level social effects (Potter, 1996). In 1983, a special issue of the Journal
of Communication devoted to the “Ferment in the Field” brought together internationally prominent scholars to comment on the alleged upheaval in communication study. A number of critical scholars, who trace their roots to the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, contributed to the “Ferment” issue. Many neo-Marxist, critical scholars attacked behavioral researchers, sometimes savagely, for failing to criticize mass communication industries.

Critical scholarship also has had an impact on mass communication thinking. It has stimulated interest in expanding inquiry beyond media effects on audiences—traditionally the main focus of mass communication—and looking at media production processes as well. Most behavioral researchers have not, however, responded to the critical scholars’ harshest criticisms. Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) was one of the few behavioral researchers in the “Ferment” issue to directly confront the charges from his critical colleagues. His criticisms were directed at a lack of coherent methods in critical research and, from his perspective, a reliance on speculation and academic clichés:

So where is the ferment? There is, of course, a large and dull literature that claims to have overthrown empirical behavioral research. It condemns quantification and controlled observation as arid, naive, banal, and even reactionary and immoral. I chose not to digress into a debate about the morality of acquiring knowledge. The important point here is that, if knowledge of the world is a good thing to have, there is no other way of acquiring it except by carefully and with well-designed controls. … But the scores of methodological and ideological essays about new approaches to the study of communications can hardly be honored by the term “ferment.” There is a simple recipe for these essays: avoid measurement, add moral commitment, and throw in some of the following words: social system, capitalism, dependency, positivism, idealism, ideology, autonomy, paradigm, commercialism, consciousness, emancipation, cooption, critical, instrumental, technocratic, legitimation, praxiology, repressive, dialogue, hegemony, contradiction, problematic. (p. 260)

The Age of Models

A good deal of mass communication research has been guided by so-called models, such as agenda-setting, spiral of silence, cultivation analysis, knowledge gap, and others discussed in part II of this book. A good deal of mass communication research also consists of bodies of research such as violence, media ethics and so forth, as the other chapters attest. Westley (1958b) noted the trend toward “conceptual models” in mass communication as an effort to “stake out significant concepts in the field, to codify
scattered findings of the past and weave them into a single conceptual framework which will help give direction and focus future work” (p. 313).

Models are shorthand attempts to capture the essence of a conceptual issue or question of interest. A model “seeks to show the main elements of any structure or process and the relationships between [and among] these elements” (McQuail & Windahl, 1993, p. 2). For example, Lasswell’s (1948) cryptic model: “Who Says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect?” This simple model directs research attention to the source, the message, the channel, the receiver, and the outcome or consequences.

Although Lasswell’s model draws attention to several key elements in the mass communication process, it does no more than describe general areas of study. It does not link elements together with any specificity, and there is no notion of an active “process.” Still, it generated great interest. A dozen years after Lasswell, Berlo (1960) elaborated his own source–message–channel–receiver paradigm that became a standard for the analysis of human communication processes for a decade.

According to Berlo, models are useful to the extent they:

1. specify relationships among concepts/variables. A useful model will generate conceptual hypotheses, indicating the nature and direction of linkages among the components;
2. are relatively simple to express verbally or visually;
3. characterize an active process;
4. stimulate research; and
5. are responsive to change and revision from research outcomes.

The hypodermic-needle model dominated until the 1940s. As discussed earlier, there is some question whether such a model influenced scholarly research, but anyone reading pre-World War II popular literature will see that it underlay much popular thinking about the mass media and their consequences. One medical writer noted: “The story of mass media in America reads much like the case history of a public health menace” (Starker, 1989, p. 5).

In the war and postwar period, the introduction of quantitative, empirically based research findings challenged the earlier exaggerated claims of unmitigated media effects. Only after Klapper (1960) summarized the newly accumulated research into an alternative model, resulting in the so-called limited-effects (or minimal-effects) model, was the hypodermic-needle model rejected.

Klapper shifted attention from media messages to the role of audiences in the mass communication process. This was an important development, but one diminished by researchers who became overly enthused about the power of an “active” and even “obstinate” audience able to overcome media messages (Bauer, 1964). A failing of limited-effects
research is found in a reliance on short-term experiments and surveys; it largely neglected how difficult it is to measure the effects of cumulative messages. Another limitation was a concern with affective and behavioral effects, rather than cognitive effects.

From the beginning, researchers were uncomfortable with the limited-effects notion that the mass media were relatively minor contributors to media effects. The limited-effects model contends that a variety of sociological and psychological factors mediate and reduce the effects of any mass communication message. Klapper argued that the major impact of the mass media was to reinforce existing opinions, rather than modify old ones—a position as extreme as the hypodermic-needle’s had been in the opposite direction. Its influence was evident in research during this period. For example, a survey on *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) noted:

> [I]t is seldom wise to rely on even the most rigorous study of mass media for indications of the public’s familiarity with any specific issue. In general, public officials and people involved in public relations tend to overestimate the impact that contemporary issues have on the public. They find it difficult to believe that the reams of newspaper copy and hours of television and radio time could be ignored by any normal person within the reach of these media. The fact seems to be, however, that human perceptions are highly selective, and unless it happens to be tuned to a particular wavelength, the message transmitted will be received only as noise. (p. 99)

The limited media effects model, like the bullet theory, is no longer popular. Today, the dominant general view is moderate media effects. Still, aspects of the limited-effects model endure. McGuire (1986) chided popular commentators and empirical scholars for adhering to the “myth of massive media impact,” despite what he contended was substantial empirical evidence to the contrary:

First, we are not arguing that no media effects have been found, but only that the demonstrated effects are not large. A formidable proportion of the published studies (and presumably an even higher proportion of the unpublished studies) have failed to show overall effects sizable enough to reach the conventionally accepted .05 level of statistical significance. Some respectable studies in several of the dozen impact areas reviewed below do have impacts significant at the .05 level, but even these tend to have very small effect sizes, accounting for no more than 2 or 3% of the variance in the dependent variables such as consumer purchases, voting behavior, and viewer aggression. (p. 177)
Such overarching, grand models as the hypodermic-needle theory and limited-effects are of little value to empirical researchers interested in designing specific studies. The 1960 to 1980 period produced a variety of small-scale models which specified subprocesses of social effects within mass communication (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). The small-scale models examined small slices of mass communication processes that led researchers to appreciate both the power and limitations of the mass media. If there is any dominant grand model today, however, it is a model of moderate media effects.

Popular models of moderate effects—such as agenda setting, knowledge gap, or gatekeeping—pointed to regularities in mass communication effects and processes. These and other models are discussed at length in this section of the book. Advocates of moderate effects models accept the general processes of empirically supported mass communication models, but also understand that they are by no means universal. They call for researchers to delineate the contingent conditions, locate the intervening variables, and specify the social contexts.

A MODEL OF MODELS

Several popular contemporary mass communication models receive in-depth treatments in succeeding chapters. Here we propose a scheme—a model of models—to help organize existing models and research. The scheme is useful for suggesting modified research paths. Our model is a broad classification-type model in the Lasswellian tradition for summarizing the plethora of mass communication models. It does not refer to any dynamic process.

Selection
Creation
Dissemination
Reception

Figure 5.1 Model processes.

Process-based research on mass communication phenomena can begin with a fairly linear collection of processes. After the processes are established, we can then speak of recursive or nonlinear features. The concepts are arrayed in a linear fashion in which they are likely to occur but, even here, we can graphically capture their potential for nonlinear or overlapping evolution as well. In trying to keep models relatively parsimonious, we limit our set of processes to four; each process, however, may constitute a separate model (see Figure 5.1).
Processes of Selection

Of all the stimuli available to be reported, of all that is in gatekeepers’ heads to be created, of all the entertainment story ideas that exist, how are a relatively small number of stimuli chosen for development? Typical gatekeeping studies begin in editorial offices, comparing material selected from the larger quantity that goes unused. Gatekeeping research in the selection process would encompass editorial and entertainment norms and decisions about what should be covered before any actual selection or rejection decision is made.

Determining the predilections, predispositions, interests, and biases of media decision makers is crucial in understanding decision making at the initial stage, before possible alternatives exist, and how ideas or events are developed into mass communication messages. This approach raises numerous questions: Do the decision makers have personal agendas? If so, do their personal agendas influence the selection process? Are they aware of the selection processes of other relevant media decision makers? If so, how does this awareness influence their selection process? How do they decode their environment? What are their reference points? Criteria? Standards?

One can also pose questions here regarding access. It has been said that reporters are only as good as their sources. Access to sources of information, events themselves, and ideas all become variables in the selection process. This approach provokes researchers to ask important questions: Whom do you know? Whom do you trust?

The 1990 Gulf War provided another generation of war correspondents with limited access to military sites, targets, and information sources (Greenberg & Gantz, 1993). The result was a media picture of the war that was carefully constructed by the military. Media decision makers can make their selections only from those issues, events, and ideas which are accessible.

Inherent in the selection process is the entity of the media system or institution. The institution consists of individuals in various work roles with professional and social norms. It is foolhardy to think that a single omnipotent gatekeeper makes these decisions. In some cases, there are layers of people who filter the offerings; story ideas go to editors who share them with senior editors, or producers, and so on. In other contexts, selection is a group process (e.g., the designated creative advertising team for a new car will pool its impressions of the car’s best features during the initial step in the advertising campaign proposal). And of course there are the mixes of individuals (the client) and groups (the ad team) and so forth.

In summary, then, the selection process links media institutions and systems with the world from which events, ideas, information, and other issues will be extracted for possible inclusion in that system’s message pool.
Processes of Creation

Now the linkage shifts to encompass those media system components responsible for translating the events and ideas obtained from the selection process into sets of signs and symbols to be disseminated to receiving groups. That which has been decoded must now be encoded. The composition of the creating unit is of interest. Is it an individual or a team? What are their respective abilities? How do they merge their talents and their disparate ideas about the event or story? To what extent are they compatible with each other? In other words, we have the same set of concerns about characteristics and predispositions of the communicators as we did when specifying their operating rules in the selection process. Here the questions apply to their encoding capabilities.

The creation process needs to identify the intentions of the communicating sources as well. If sources intend to inform rather than persuade, alternative message strategies will likely be chosen. Paralleling this should be an understanding of the motives which drive such individuals in their creative enterprises. One set of motivations relates to their understanding of the reward system accessible to them. For example, if two reporters assigned to the same story use different reference points, wherein one anticipates how her peers will respond to the story, and the second anchors her material in how the audience will respond, a basis emerges for anticipating content differences in each message.

Content differences, examined through content analysis research, have long been the subject of mass communication research. These studies lie within the creation process as its end product, although many tend to be static investigations of available content. These studies sometimes infer motives and intentions rather than directly assess them. To avoid static, descriptive outcomes, researchers can consider trend analysis (if the content has been analyzed previously) and comparative analysis (looking across different media for the same kinds of content). Both approaches permit hypothesis testing.

Content analysis is perhaps the most common research method in mass communication. The substance of these analyses normally examines content for topics, themes, and styles.

Topical analyses provide the subsequent basis for agenda-setting research. Here, content analysis is a means to understanding one component of media influence on the public. The purpose is to study how emphasized topics in the mass media encroach on the public’s agenda. Media coverage of issues or individuals confers status (fame and infamy alike). Topics which are absent or less emphasized in the media are considered of less important to the public, although this conclusion is more often assumed than demonstrated.

Thematic analyses seek objective markers of how women and minorities are portrayed, how often violence is used to resolve conflict, or whether Middle Eastern
combatants are given equal photo display. While topical analyses emphasize the presence and frequency of media content, thematic analyses focus on the directionality of that content.

Stylistic analyses, not as common as topical and thematic analyses, evolve from the grammar and structure of mass media messages. In the 1940s, readability research was plentiful (Flesch, 1943, 1948). Readability studies determine the comprehensibility of written passages based on measures of verbal complexity, assessed with simple tools (e.g., sentence length and syllable counts). It is unfortunate that counterpart measures of “listenability” and “viewability” have not been developed. Today, formal features in television (e.g., zooming, panning) are examined for their potential and actual impact on viewers’ enjoyment and understanding (Watt & Welch, 1983) and comprise a language referred to as media literacy. More structural assessments (e.g., order of presentation of information or arguments, the emphasis and placement of counter-information) also fit within this creative process segment.

Topics, themes, and styles are the result of creative decisions made by individuals and small groups. They are dependent, in part, on the medium for which the messages are created. To this point, we have ignored media differences because the creative processes described are generic across all media. Their outputs, however, are media specific. So, creative process models are likely to require elements that account for media differences.

The context in which message creation processes occur also yields research considerations. For example, media creators often do their work in stressful contexts (e.g., the stress of deadlines and competitive pressure). How does stress impact on their product? Are there more errors? Does it take longer to encode? Is some amount of stress a positive motivator, while too much impedes the message creation process?

Processes of Dissemination

In practice, the concept of a dissemination process is not wholly separable from the process associated with receiving a message. It is also erroneous to assume that receivers will necessarily decode the messages as the senders intended. This separation of message dissemination and reception is an artificial and temporary separation that highlights approaches to the systematic and scientific study of mass communication. If not already apparent, all such separations are artificial, perhaps arbitrary; they are a convenient way to convey conceptions of a particular idea being studied at that time.

Dissemination processes link message producers and creators to their receivers via their messages. Gatekeepers then select from the flood of messages available to them; this is the traditional gatekeeping approach for determining how decisions are made.
and on what bases. As noted, this traditional gatekeeping model occurs after messages have already been created.

In part, dissemination is dependent on the media play given to any event or idea. The two most popular dissemination models have dealt with the diffusion of news, almost entirely a media system configuration, and with the diffusion of innovations, in which the media have a central, but not exclusive, role. The former is interested in how rapidly breaking news disseminates among segments of the public, whereas the latter focuses on how rapidly new products, ideas, or services disseminate.

Diffusion of news research could begin in the newsroom with the decision-making process that determines how a story will be reported, when it will be released, and what sort of play it will be given. Diffusion of innovations’ interest in the mass media focuses on the media’s role in providing information about the innovation, in contrast with or in juxtaposition with the role of a source. Again, decisions about which media to use for disseminating, for how long, and with what anticipated effects are difficult to assess and have not received research attention.

Content analysis in the dissemination process focuses on what media play is given to a story, event, or idea. In a specific time frame, how frequently does it appear? How prominently is it featured? The diffusion of news research tradition often has chosen to examine crisis or catastrophic news events, in which almost all the major news media interrupt their normal routine and focus most of their resources on examining the happening, such as the unexpected death of a major figure. Given the unstable nature of crisis news events, it is also fair to examine the misinformation the media provide as the raw breaking news takes form and errors subsequently are corrected.

**Processes of Reception**

Linking the message to the receiver begins with selectivity processes. Of all the messages available to media audiences, with which ones are they familiar or even aware? Awareness certainly precedes a certain amount of exposure. One may begin by acknowledging that there is a large business in making receivers familiar with messages. That business consists of making receivers aware that a media event will be available to attend. Whether the promotions are advertisements on ABC announcing new fall programs, or the stories and matrices in TV Guide, or the newspaper index at the bottom of the front page, they are designed to increase audience awareness as the first step toward increasing exposure. Their purpose is to cut into the selection process and cry out, “Try Me!”

Media use, or the time and energy spent on the mass media, is often measured by exposure. The issue of comparative time allocated to different media remains an enduring research concern. Is it fair to compare an hour of book reading with equal time spent watching television or reading a newspaper? Underlying the measure of media
exposure is a concern with reception; it is assumed that media exposure and reception are positively correlated. While sheer time spent with media might be an operationally reliable measure, it is not a sufficient indicator of reception.

The process of selective exposure is receiving new scrutiny. Thanks to new media technologies, the public has more choices available than ever before. Rather than a half dozen off-air television stations, there are 60 to 100 cable television channels, plus another dozen offering payper-view, and a likely two dozen radio stations from which to select, if an Ipod isn't plugged into one's ears. A computer with a modem provides access to several information data banks (is this mass communication?) and offers hundreds of information sources. What is the process of media choice-making, within available disposable time, which leads an individual to watch this, read that, or listen to something different? The range of strategies being used by receivers to cope with an overwhelming array of media options is a fertile, but largely uncultivated, area for research.

Exposure itself has often been mapped against what are called media gratifications—those needs and uses which prod individuals to choose a particular media activity, usually over others that are available at the same time. These motivating tendencies have been mapped for a wide variety of content—entertainment, news, talk shows—to identify both underlying and content specific gratifications. Seeking gratifications from media experiences then can be linked to obtaining them; if what is sought is not fulfilled, what is the likelihood that one will return to that medium or that specific content for a second effort? Do some gratifications emanate from specific content and others from specific media, regardless of content offering? How much of our media exposure is gratifying in some way, or merely habitual?

Given selectivity in awareness and exposure, this phase can also include assessments of selectivity in interpretation and recall. These follow logically from exposure. They also reinforce the need to acknowledge that audiences may interpret the media systems’

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output in terms of their own predispositions. Furthermore, audiences are likely to recall only that which is particularly outstanding and of special utility for them. This suggests that the relationship between what was initially identified in the selection process as a candidate for subsequent media creation and dissemination may bear little resemblance to the resultant message. This assertion cuts across the modular processes described.

At some point, model-making must cease and researchers commence to test the model and its components. One criterion for halting is when the model becomes overly complex. For that reason we end this effort by summarizing the elements to examine in the selection–creation–dissemination–reception criteria in the model of models in Table 5.1.

Researchers should examine much more in analyzing and critiquing mass communication models. Were we to continue our model of models, we might extend the reception process by discussing alternative potential effects one might highlight from mass media; alternatives to reinforcement effects might be one such effort. Because specification of such effects is likely to be contained within the hypotheses that link elements or concepts in each of these phases, we urge readers to continue with such speculation.

SUMMARY

In summary, contemporary study of mass communication is guided by popular models, often, but not exclusively, in the effects tradition. Given the time it takes for a model to produce a coherent body of research, it is difficult to predict whether major new widely-accepted models are on the horizon. This is not entirely a bad thing; a field that willy-nilly introduces and tosses out models the way that Detroit used to introduce new car models is a field unsure of its place.

Other models are on the horizon: The third-person effect, people’s attributional beliefs that mass media messages affect other people but not themselves (Davison, 1983), is gaining credence as a popular model generating a paradigmatic body of empirical research (Gunther & Mundy, 1993; Perloff, 1993). Another, the drench hypothesis, focuses on whether television effects on viewers is the result of a relatively short-term intensive impact (drench) or incremental effects attributable to the repetition of messages and images over time (Greenberg, 1988; Reep & Dambrot, 1989).

In addition to an age of models, the field is to some extent in an age of normal, fundamental research. Researchers are specifying the contingencies associated with popular models. In short, the field of mass communication has wound down from an era of rapid growth and excitement during the 1940s to 1970s and established itself as a legitimate field of study forging new paths in understanding and delineating the mass communication processes.
NOTES

1. See Tankard (1984) for an account of the contributions of leading statisticians.
2. The sleeper effect posits (Hovland et al., 1949; Hovland & Weiss, 1951) that over time receivers remember parts of the messages after forgetting the source. Two-step flow and the related concept of opinion leaders come from studies (Berelson et al., 1954; Katz & Lazarfeld, 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) in which leaders in their areas of expertise gained mass media information that they filtered to others. Selective perception and reinforcement were implicit in this research. Selective perception maintains that people actively attend to and select messages that fit preconceptions. Reinforcement is conceived as an explanation for why people seek out messages that fit preconceptions.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED READINGS


