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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 recognise 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

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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.

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- *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.
- Commercialisation 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

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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.

## How To Use the Book

The text can probably best be used by the individual reader as a resource for learning about a particular topic. There are several ways in which the task can be approached. The chapter headings provide some initial orientation, and at the beginning of each chapter the main subheadings are listed. The subject index at the end of the book includes all key words and topics and can also be used for an initial search. The name index can be used to locate a reference to a key author. The reader will notice that the same theme, issue or specific topic is often dealt with in more than one place and even in more than one chapter. An additional information resource is provided by the glossary at the end of the book, after the last chapter. This includes brief definitions and explanations of the main terms and concepts used in the book. Finally, an important aim of the book is to provide a guide to follow-up study. Each chapter ends with a set of suggested books where the ground covered can be explored in more detail. Key journal and chapter readings can be accessed from the companion website: [www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail6](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail6). The extensive list of references includes all citations made in the text and the reader can follow up a topic by looking up one of the sources cited. Often these are articles that examine issues and theories in detail and provide valuable links to other relevant sources.

## 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

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theory is, for instance, critical of the power exercised by media in the hands of the state of 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.

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

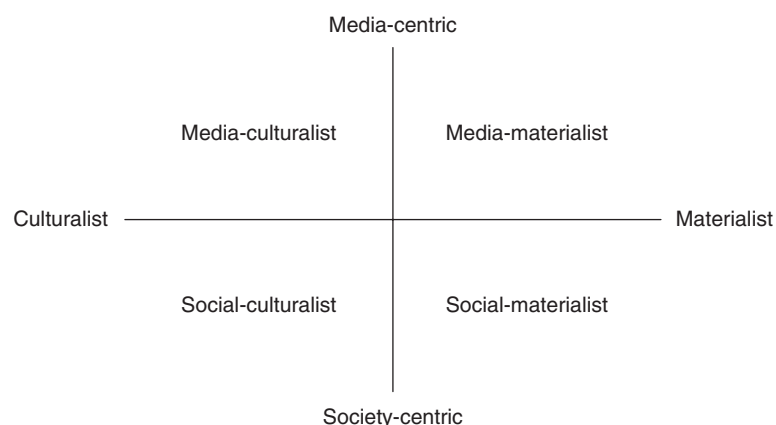


Figure 1.1 Dimensions and types of media theory. Four main approaches can be identified according to two dimensions: media-centric versus society-centric; and culturalist versus materialist

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 audience 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 enquiry 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 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 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 US in the 1970's 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 (for instance, 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 (for instance, 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.

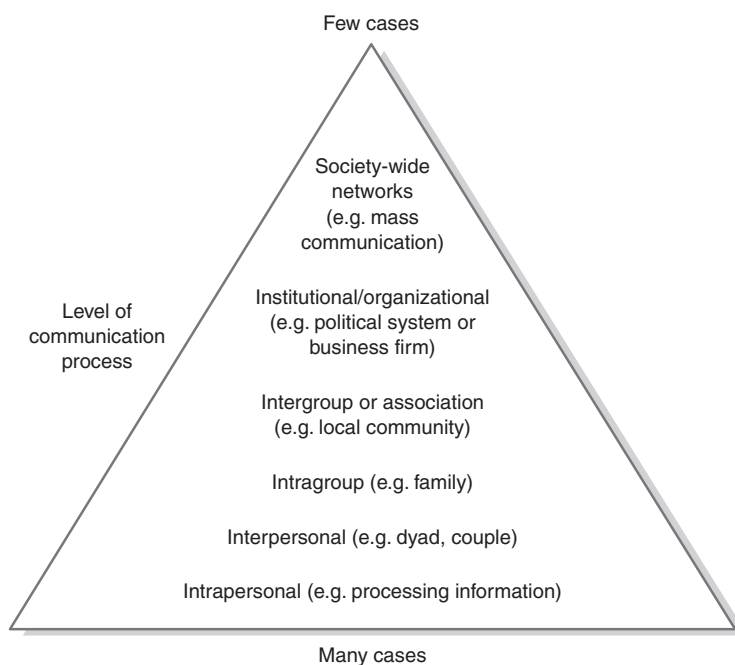


Figure 1.2 The pyramid of communication networks: mass communication is one amongst several processes of social communication



## 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.