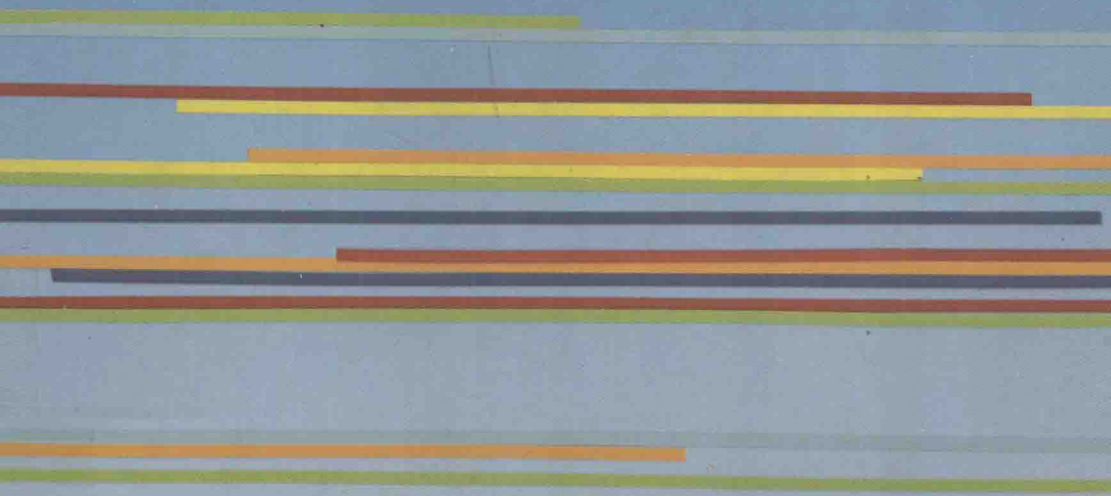
THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

FIFTH EDITION

MELVIN L. DEFLEUR and SANDRA BALL-ROKEACH



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FIFTH EDITION

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Preface

The present fifth edition of *Theories of Mass Communication* is a much revised version. Although the chapters dealing with the historical development of the several media have been retained relatively unchanged from earlier editions, the remaining chapters have been either significantly modified or are completely new to this edition.

Several completely new theoretical perspectives are offered as frameworks for interpreting the influence of communications on individuals, society, and culture. For example, the first chapter contains a theory of transitions in human communication. It is intended to narrow the gap between the study of human communication as a general process and the specific study of mass communication. It focuses very broadly on what happens to people and society when completely new forms of communication are introduced. Other new perspectives are included in chapters that follow.

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 numerical data on the adoption, spread, and use of the various traditional media have been brought up to date. Additional information has been added to describe the origins and development of newer media, such as cable television and the video cassette recorder, now important components of our media systems.

Chapter 5 continues to focus on the mass media as social systems. It ties their structure and functions to the theoretical perspectives offered in Chapter 1 and shows that mass communication and the several media currently operating in the United States constitute a deeply institutionalized system that is tightly integrated with the Amer-

ican society as a whole. In particular, the analysis shows why it is unlikely that the media will discontinue their production of popular culture and their emphasis on content of a relatively unsophisticated level in the near future.

Chapter 6 has been somewhat revised from earlier editions. It provides an important background for understanding the type of society in which the media emerged and why the earliest interpretations of their influences and effects took the particular direction that they did. The idea of a "mass" society continues to play a part in much thinking about the media, but the earliest theoretical perspectives derived from such considerations have become less relevant to modern analyses. Nevertheless, this chapter provides an important starting point in understanding the unfolding development of mass communication theory as this took place in the basic social sciences and in the discipline of communication itself.

Chapter 7 provides a newly prepared perspective on three important concepts: (1) The study of individual differences developed as a result of an early emphasis on learning in psychology; (2) differences in social characteristics among various categories of people grew out of sociological studies of the heterogeneous composition of contemporary urban industrial societies; and (3) the influence of social relationships became evident in the early days of research into the mass communication process itself. Each of these—individual differences, social differentiation, and social relationships—continues to play an important part in understanding the short-term selective influence of mass communications.

Chapter 8 focuses the role of mass communications in the long-term process of socialization. In its discussion of modeling theory from psychology it reviews the way in which mass communications serve as a source for acquiring patterns of behavior that have been demonstrated by media presentations. Individuals can adopt these as means of coping with their personal environment. The chapter also develops a new theoretical perspective, the social expectations theory, that emphasizes the importance of mass communications as a source of information about social norms, roles, ranking, and social control. It is these psychological and sociological aspects of media content that are at the heart of the indirect socialization functions of mass communications.

A completely new perspective on the construction of meaning is offered in Chapter 9. It shows that although a focus on the social construction of meaning is relatively new to many media scholars, it is one of the oldest intellectual concerns in western society. From Plato to the present, philosophers, theorists, and researchers in various fields have probed the questions of the nature of reality, how we know that reality, and how our subjective conceptions of the objective world have

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influenced our behavior. Theories devoted to understanding the role of the media in the social construction of individual and shared meanings are now moving to the forefront of mass communication research.

Chapter 10 ties together the theoretical perspectives advanced in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 with a review of the role of basic theories in developing applied strategies for modifying the behavior of audiences. This is one of the least understood issues in communication studies and may be by far the most difficult problem to understand in the context of the mass media. Enormous expenditures are made daily in the world of advertising, political campaigning, and public persuasion efforts. However, little in the way of reliable guidelines have emerged from academic research and mass communication theory for predicting when a particular persuasion strategy will succeed or fail. This remains a relatively uncharted research frontier.

Chapter 11 is a new chapter that presents what has come to be called media system dependency theory. It articulates the basic concepts, assumptions, and hypotheses of this ecological theory and its roots in the basic theoretical paradigms set forth in Chapter 1. Discussion of the special nature of the media system as an information system in control of resources that individuals, groups, organizations, and societies require to attain their respective goals, lays the groundwork for an examination of macro and micro processes of media effects. Above all, it shows why the resources controlled by the media create dependency relations at all levels of modern society, relations that account for the media system's central roles in the organization of personal, group, and social life. This statement takes media system dependency theory beyond its application as a theory of media effects to make it a theory of mass communication. It affords us an understanding of why mass communication has become so necessary to our and our society's struggles to understand, act, and, even, play in our complex and ever-changing modern world. In a sense this theory seeks to provide the same kind of insight that might be gained were we to wake one morning to find that the media, for some mysterious reason, had vanished leaving us and our society with the problem of organizing daily life, not to speak of surviving, without mass communication.

Chapter 12 is necessarily a new chapter because it concerns some of the more important developments in communications technologies that have already altered the nature of mass communication and are likely to continue to do so in the future. Present and future implications of computer, cable, and interactive communication technologies are discussed. Various successful and some unsuccessful efforts to adapt these technologies for use in media systems are examined, including direct broadcast satellite systems, telephone- or television-based interactive systems, and videotex. Also discussed is the importance of exam-

ining emerging media systems in the context of our rapidly changing information service economy, and how all such developments may force the dominant mass communication systems of today to adapt to these changing environments to insure their survival. This discussion thus brings us full-circle back to the history of the development of mass communication and how systems of old, like systems of today, have to change not only how they do things technologically, but also change what they do by way of their mass communication roles in the organization of personal and social life.

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PART I

The Origins of Mass Communication

CHAPTER 1

Stages in the Development of Human Communication

Our impressive ability today to send messages instantaneously across vast distances, and to arouse similar meanings in millions of people simultaneously, is so familiar to us all that it is easy to regard it with nonchalance. In the perspective of human life as it existed in earlier times, however, what we do today when we open our newspaper, tune in our radio, go to a movie, or view our television set represents a change in human communication behavior of truly extraordinary magnitude.

In spite of the painstaking research and the best analytic efforts of communication scholars over the last half century, we are not sure what this change means, how it influences us individually or collectively, or how it will shape our future. In other words, the implications, influences and consequences of the soaring growth of our mass media are as yet incompletely understood. However, it does seem clear at this point that our mass media *do* influence their audiences, and indeed the society as a whole. What we do not fully understand is *how* and to what *extent*. The central task of this book is to present in overview the major formulations that have emerged thus far to try to provide answers to those two problems. In other words we seek to understand (1) how mass communication takes place and (2) what consequences it has for both individuals and the social order.

One way to begin such a task is to provide at the outset a broad perspective across time within which the rapid appearance of our current mass media can be understood as one among several radical

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