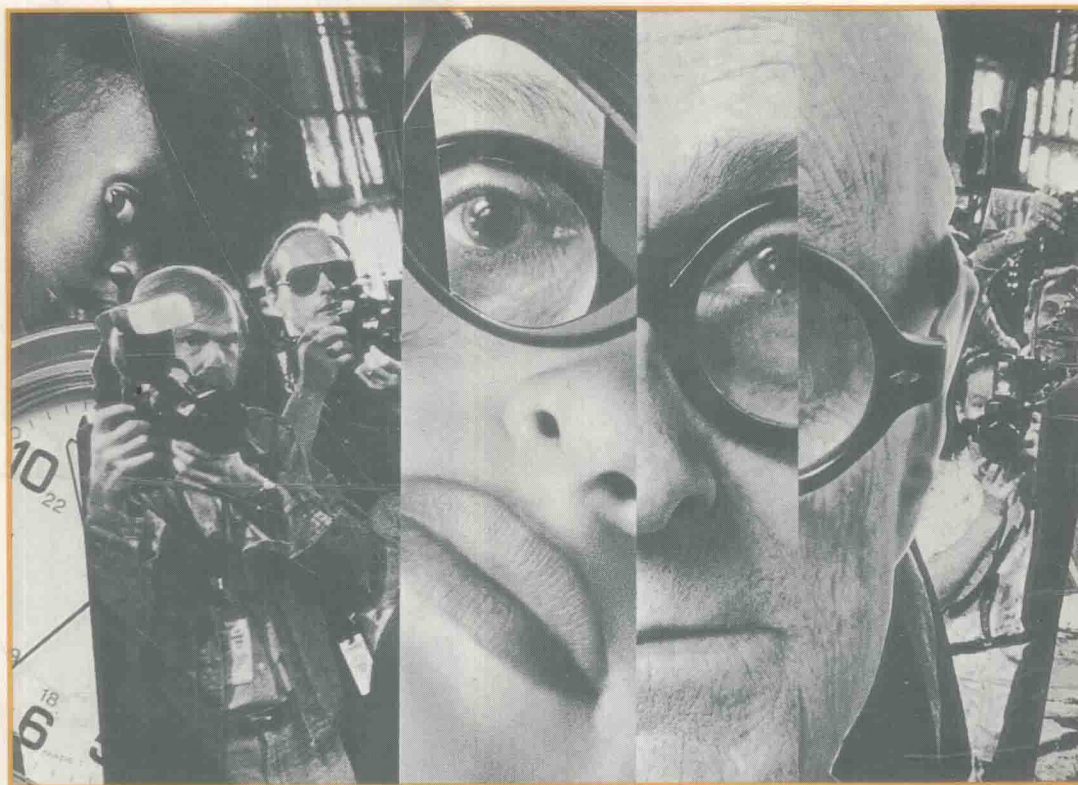


Leo W. Jeffres

MASS MEDIA



PROCESSES

Second edition

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Leo W. Jeffres

Cleveland State University



Prospect Heights, Illinois

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Dedication

To:
my parents,
Laurence and Edna Jeffres,
for their support all these years

Preface

Mass Media Processes, Second Edition began as the revision of *Mass Media Processes and Effects* published in 1986. The literature had grown so much since that time that we decided two volumes were necessary to cover the topics adequately. *Mass Media Effects* will be published later.

This text addresses the constantly evolving means by which film, print, and broadcast media attempt to entertain, inform, educate, or otherwise communicate with audiences—which also are changing continually. The interaction between the media and the audience is influenced by historical, political, economic and cultural factors. The channel chosen creates both constraints and possibilities. In short, mass media processes offer countless opportunities to explore how messages are formed and how audiences react to media presentations. How did the media develop as institutions for constructing messages? How are media messages and media systems similar or different around the world? How are media industries changing? What processes are used to construct newspaper articles, TV programs and films? Why do people adopt their unique patterns of media use? How do characteristics of films, TV formats and other messages affect the ways audiences understand them? Do media messages reflect the culture? This text will highlight numerous issues such as these in order to alert readers to the countless elements necessary for evaluating the mass media.

Comprehensive, up-to-date summaries of mass communication theory and research are difficult to write. The focus shifts constantly. What seems elementary at one level requires elaboration at another. The purpose of one reader may differ significantly from that of another. The “process” of writing this text mirrors the complexity of the field it attempts to profile. This revision includes a new chapter recognizing the important, growing literature on message processing. The first chapter has been expanded to accommodate a substantial discussion of the “currents” mentioned in the first edition but not treated at length. The literature on media industries is treated separately from the work on media organizations and message construction. Audience behaviors are the subject of two chapters: one focuses on exposure; the other looks at origins

and influences. One of the themes of this book is derived from the last topic. Media behaviors deserve examination in their own right, without having to justify their impact on other disciplines. Endnotes accompany each chapter in order to incorporate references to the current literature. Any readers interested in pursuing specific topics should find ample sources to consult.

The text is designed to provide students with a comprehensive summary of the social science literature on mass communication processes. It explains how the media operate—as industries, organizations, and centers of message construction by professionals; the relationship between media and the social context in which they operate; the audiences exposed to media symbols; decoding processes used by audiences in making sense of media messages; and the pattern of media content that permeates our lives. *Mass Media Effects* will focus exclusively on the various political, social, economic and cultural effects attributed to mass media.

Although I began the revision with a basic framework of chapters, the new edition emerged from an inductive search of the literature, allowing the available research to determine the final structure and content. More than a decade and a half of social science journals have been sifted for research on mass communication and mass media. These were combined with the findings and perspectives elaborated in papers and manuscripts.

The summaries that follow, tentative or otherwise, are my own conclusions based on the literature. Certainly, other scholars may arrive at different conclusions. I hope the outline of my logic and evidence is sufficiently clear for students and scholars to make their own judgments. Since critical assessments are open-ended processes that produce only tentative results, the book is not a “final statement” but necessarily represents a slice of time ending with the publication of this text.

Finally, there are many people to thank for their direct and indirect contributions along the way. First, my work began with a co-author, Marilyn Jackson-Beeck, who started the project in 1979 and asked me to join her. “Pun’s” contribution survives in the opening pages of the introductory chapter and the basic structure of the book. Several others helped along the way, including Dennis Davis and Jack Suvak, whose efforts made the preliminary edition possible. My co-author, Rick Perloff, provided an excellent chapter on social effects in the first edition and provided useful comments in the more recent writing. *Mass Media Processes, Second Edition* has benefitted greatly from various critiques. I thank Philip Allen, David Atkin, Benjamin Bates, Sharon Dunwoody, W. James Potter and others for generously providing their comments. None of these people are responsible, however, for any mistakes or final conclusions. The editors at Waveland Press were most helpful and cooperative, and the final manuscript benefitted greatly from the careful editing of Carol S. Rowe. Finally, I want to thank three graduate assistants, Annie Sifford, Richard Griffin and Sylvia Fields, for checking the list of final references.

My current work is certainly not an achievement isolated in time. Rather, it is a product of my own interactions with others along the way, including my colleagues and students at Cleveland State University. Furthermore, I am constantly amazed to find how useful past associations as a graduate student—at the University of Minnesota and the University of Washington—are. My interest in mass media began with Bert Cross at the University of Idaho many years ago. That interest was given practical form at the *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, which was a classroom filled with a host of talented journalists who had a high set of standards and a broad perspective about their work. To all these people, named and unnamed, I extend my thanks.

Leo W. Jeffres
Cleveland, Ohio

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1

Studying the Mass Media of Communication Philosophies, Models and Theories



2 Chapter One

- I. Introduction to mass communication
- II. Media characteristics
 - A. Qualities of each medium—visual, sight and sound, permanence, indexability, scope, method of distribution
 - B. Changing characteristics
- III. Defining communication
 - A. Communication discipline—focus, scope, coherence
 - B. Perspectives on communication
 1. Mechanistic model
 2. Psychological perspective
 3. Symbolic interaction
 4. Pragmatic perspective
- IV. Analyzing the mass media of communication
 - A. Perspectives on communication
 1. Idealism vs. realism
 2. Postmodernism
 3. Social/sciences vs. humanities and methods of investigation
 4. Foundations and starting points
 5. Paradigms, models and discipline goals
 - B. Aspects of mass communication subject to research
 1. Encoding processes—processes of message construction
 2. Channels and behavior—natural sensory envelope
 3. Content of encoding/decoding activities
 4. Decoding processes
 - a. Uses and gratifications
 - b. Message processing
 5. Mass Media Effects
- V. Summary

Imagine what life would be like without mass media—without TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, and movies. Without mass media you would have to rely on face-to-face contact. You would be bound in space, geographically. And your communication would be bound in time—you could talk with people only while they lived, while they were physically present.

The telephone, bulletin boards, and other devices that carry messages between people may be viewed as media, but what makes a medium a mass medium is its ability to carry messages not just from one person to another but from one person to thousands or millions of others. For example, the president of the United States now can address the entire nation when he delivers a speech carried by TV. Whether he is in St. Louis or New York, people everywhere can watch and listen to him simultaneously. The fascination of the mass media is that they have liberated people from the normal constraints of time and space.

Recently, the definitions of media themselves have become blurred as new technologies integrate computers with television and telephones, and data bases or information services blur the relationship between “mass” and “point-to-point” communication. In general, mass media refer to electronic media—TV, cable, videocassettes, radio, films, and related technologies—and three types of print media—newspapers, magazines, and books—each of which is attended to by millions of people. Our focus is on mass communication, not just media as industries or institutions.

Most people grow up using several mass media daily. A good chunk of what we accept as “reality” today is a “mediated reality.” The major distinction between the two is the relationship between the source (who constructs messages) and the receiver (who translates messages from the source). In face-to-face (interpersonal) situations, both parties immediately influence each other. People interact. Specifically-chosen words are delivered to you while you are prepared to interact at a pace that is more or less comfortable. You constantly provide feedback to the source, including nonverbal cues such as nods and questioning looks. Typically, you alternate roles. Contrast this with what happens when you watch TV. The relationship between you and the news anchor is impersonal. When you turn the set on, the messages are not designed for you alone. If you don’t like or can’t understand messages from TV, you can talk back to the set all you want, but there is no exchange and the program goes on. This makes you the receiver and only the receiver in most situations. On the other hand, you have a lot of freedom when you use mass media like TV. There is no obligation to pay attention, you can “tune out” whenever you

4 Chapter One

wish, and you can choose various stories and programs. It is much more difficult to be so **selective** in your face-to-face discussions with friends, family, and associates.

Sources in mass communication are numerous and diverse. Consider, for example, the many sources involved in an edition of the *Reader's Digest*. Most of its articles are condensed by editors who work with material selected from other magazines and books. The original source, meanwhile, incorporated additional sources and material. The edited articles are processed further by artists who illustrate and make the text fit small pages. Later, technicians and craftspeople run the presses, pour the ink, and bind the magazine. Multiple participants constitute the "source" in this example. Later chapters will explain in detail how sources encode media messages.

If source behavior is more complex than the simple reflections of the work of a single individual, receiver behaviors also are a complex bundle of personal interests, media uses and gratifications, and information processing. Later chapters will describe the audiences of mass media in greater detail. Briefly, people use the media for a variety of reasons. Books generally are chosen with considerable reflection, while much TV viewing begins with the intention of "passing time." People who live alone often find the radio or TV set a "noisy companion" that drowns out the silence, while others avoid TV except for an occasional planned viewing of a documentary. Some people read the daily newspaper only for the sports content. Others use opinion magazines and newspaper editorials as voter guidance at election time.

The feedback which occurs in mass communication—letters to the editor or Nielsen ratings, for example—**generally is delayed and of lesser "magnitude" than in interpersonal communication**. Many mass communication messages have "lives" of their own once they are created, while the fleeting comments of interpersonal conversations have no such permanence. By definition, the audience in mass communication is more diverse because size ensures that people of varying interests and backgrounds are included.

Media Characteristics

Each mass medium has particular attributes. **Print media are strictly visual**. Magazines and newspapers are designed to catch the eye through color, pictures, headlines, drawings, and typefaces. Messages transmitted by radio involve sound alone, while **TV and movies are based on both sight and sound**. Radio uses a barrage of music and sound effects to hold our aural attention, while television and the cinema employ action-packed, visual film images accompanied by music and speech. Sometimes the media have an effect we might not consciously notice. The next time you are watching a movie

in a theater, notice how the audience is bathed in light. Noted media guru Marshall McLuhan goes so far as to say that TV and movies are tactile media producing a pleasant sense of all-over body stimulation.

A major difference between print and electronic media until quite recently was **permanence**. Messages in print media can be saved whereas those transmitted by the electronic media must be consumed during their **fleeting lifespan**. This characteristic relates directly to another feature of print media which is **indexability** by titles, headlines, and captions so you can decide if and when to read specific material. Typically, electronic media are nonindexable. Unless you have an audio or video recorder, messages transmitted by electronic media are impossible to review. Until you've seen or heard something, you don't know what it is about and then it's too late to make a choice. In addition to indexability, permanence allows the consumer to control the speed of message reception by altering reading rate. With electronic media, one receives messages at the transmission speed.

Scope is another distinguishing feature. Does a medium send messages to a national, regional, or local audience? This factor also affects the types of messages sent and is affected by the means used to distribute mass media. Each of the media can have either wide or narrow scope, but they tend to specialize. National media generally include television, movies, books, and magazines. TV reaches the largest audience. Most of its prime time programs are intended to appeal to everyone—all age groups, geographic areas, and socioeconomic groups. Books, movies, and magazines exclude many potential consumers—for example, the illiterate and indigent—although they also tend to concentrate on the national audience. In contrast, most newspaper and radio content is directed at the local audience.

Another way to classify mass media is by **method of distribution**. Basically, there are two ways to reach large, diverse audiences. Messages can be mass produced in multiple copies, or those messages can be presented once or a few times to large numbers of people simultaneously. Print media (books, magazines, newspapers) typically produce multiples of the same product; movies are shown in theaters to many people cumulatively. In contrast, radio and TV are broadcast media, which means that they seldom duplicate their messages but reach many when they transmit. Distribution and the element of permanence are obviously tied together. Videotapes and discs now parallel print media in producing multiple copies of the same product, previously available only in limited broadcasts.

When you decide to watch TV, read a book, or listen to the radio, much of the time your decision will center around content. Although the themes or topics in a medium may change somewhat, depending on audience receptivity, there are basic content structures that tend to reappear through time. For example, there are fiction, non-fiction, biography, science fiction, and reference books. Film offers various genre—horror movies, comedies, westerns,