

F I F T H E D I T I O N

Communication Theories

Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media

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JAMES W. TANKARD, JR.



Communication Theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media

Fifth Edition

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PREFACE

This edition of *Communication Theories* attempts to address the ongoing changes in the mass communication field and the new developments in mass communication theory that are occurring at an increasingly rapid pace. The major change in this edition is the addition of a new chapter on theories of cyber communication. While theory in this area is somewhat sparse, it is clearly an area where new developments in communication research and theory building are occurring and are needed.

Another change is the dropping of the chapter on readability research that was present in the first four editions. We believe research on readability is important, but it is difficult at this point to defend it as a major area of communication theory. Students or faculty members interested in the area of readability should consult George Klare's *The Measurement of Readability*.

Other changes include the following: more attention in the persuasion chapter to the dual processing models of attitude change (including the Elaboration Likelihood Model), an addition to the agenda-setting chapter dealing with the second level of agenda setting, and a reorganization of the chapter on the effects of mass communication that provides an overview of major trends in effects research and then goes on to discuss important areas of effects research.

We have added to Chapter 1 a brief section describing two other approaches to the study of mass communication—critical theory and cultural studies—that have become popular with scholars. Nevertheless, we remain committed to the scientific approach, with its emphasis on observation, evidence, logic, and hypothesis testing.

We have included new examples from the mass media throughout the text and have discussed recent cases of the effects of media ownership on media content. We have added boxes at many points to introduce relevant examples or to highlight particular concepts.

As was the case with the first four editions, the book is aimed primarily at undergraduate students who intend to pursue careers in the mass media—journalism, advertising, public relations, radio, television, film, and electronic publishing—and who need an introduction to the theories, foundations, and research methodology of mass communication. The book is also appropriate for courses introducing graduate students to mass communication theory.

Our thanks go to colleagues, reviewers, and users of the textbook who have made helpful suggestions for improvement, including George Albert Gladney, University of Wyoming; Janet McMullen, University of North Alabama; Philip Napoli, Rutgers University; Kim Smith, Iowa State University; Glenn Sparks, Purdue University. We would also like to thank Amy Brocato, our research assistant, for her helpful contributions.

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PART I

The Changing Media Landscape

As we move into what is being called the “information age,” the challenges facing the field of mass communication seem greater than ever before. Does the content of mass communication have an effect on society’s values? If so, what kind of effect? How does it take place? How do people learn from the mass media? How do people develop their basic attitudes toward the world around them? Does mass communication play a role in this process? How is mass communication changing in the face of new developments in the media—the Internet, digital television, and the general convergence of formerly distinct media?

It is undoubtedly possible to use several different methods to attempt to answer these questions and others. In this book, we recommend approaching questions about mass communication through the scientific method. Science, based as it is on empiricism and logic, offers powerful tools for understanding, predicting, and controlling the world around us, especially as that world becomes increasingly made up of information.

Basic to scientific method is the building and testing of theory, and Chapter 1 discusses the nature of theory as it is used in the field of mass communication. It describes some of the problems communication researchers are attempting to study in the 1990s; it also gives an overview of the changing media landscape we are facing as the result of the rapid development of new communication technology. Those changes, in turn, affect mass communication theory itself.

CHAPTER I

Introduction to Mass Communication Theory

We live in a rapidly changing media environment. Only a few years ago, most people had never heard of multimedia or the Internet. Now, you can hardly pick up a newspaper without seeing a reference to one or the other or both.

The changes taking place in the media environment are numerous and, in some cases, breathtaking. Newspapers have been declining in circulation and readership for some time. Television is changing from a five-network (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and public broadcasting) structure to cable systems with 50 channels, and talk of 500 or more. Videocassette recorders make movies available for viewing in the home and allow viewers to time-shift recorded television programs. Some magazines are publishing through pages on the World Wide Web or through CD-ROMs. Older approaches to news are being replaced with what is being called the New News. Advertising is grasping for its role in the new communication landscape. People spend hours visiting with other people in computer chat rooms, and virtual reality games give new dimensions of experience to participants.

The term **cyberspace**, coined by science fiction writer William Gibson, has become a popular way to refer to the metaphoric space where electronic communication takes place.

The United States recently reached the point where more computers were sold than television sets (Powell, 1995). In addition, research shows that the use of personal computers is starting to take time away from television viewing (Lieberman, 1995). We seem to be moving rapidly into a new, user-active, multimedia, communication environment. One characteristic of the new media environment is the recognition that all information is the same—it is digital (Powell).

Of course, it remains to be seen just where all these changes are leading us. Will people really be willing to give up a newspaper with their morning coffee or the chance to browse through a stack of their favorite magazines on their living room couch at the end of the day? One possibility is that the new media, whatever they are, will take their place beside the old media, which may not go away. A common pattern in the past has been that new communication technologies have not nudged out old technologies completely but have caused the old technologies to take on new roles. For instance, television did not eliminate radio but led to new types of radio programming, including talk shows and specialized music formats.