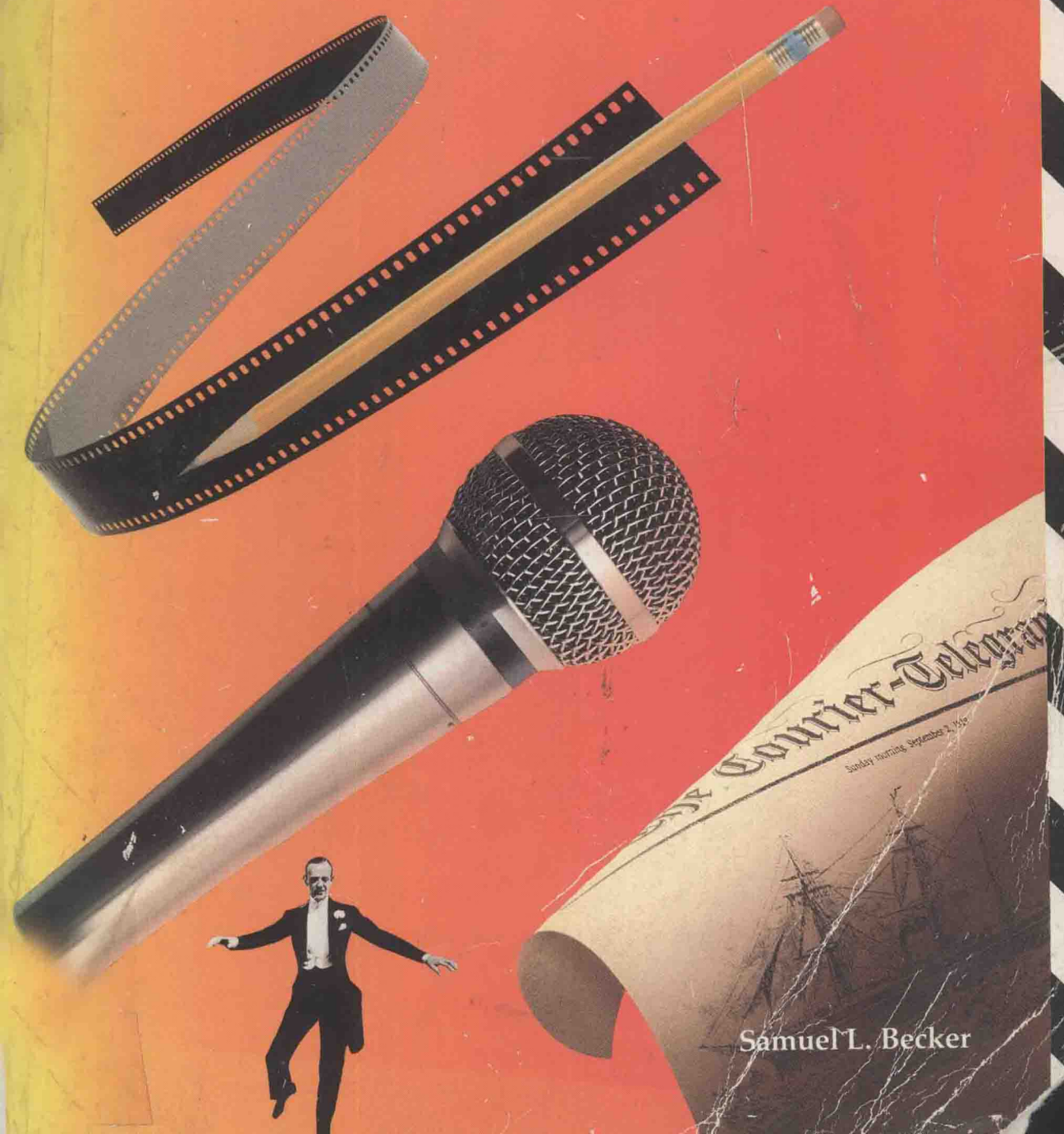


DISCOVERING MASS COMMUNICATION

Second Edition



DISCOVERING MASS COMMUNICATION

SECOND EDITION

Samuel L. Becker
The University of Iowa

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PREFACE



We live in an exciting age. The mass media of communication have made available a wealth of information, entertainment, ideas, and stimulation—more than any other people in history have enjoyed. These resources should enable us to better control and enrich our lives: to accumulate the knowledge we want, to develop useful understandings of ourselves and our world, and to make wise decisions. Also, with increased understanding of the mass media, the ways they operate and the roles they play in our lives, each of us should be able to use them more intelligently and to avoid *being* used by them. *Discovering Mass Communication* provides a framework within which that understanding can take place. It is designed for a course which serves both as an introduction to mass communication for students majoring in the field and as a general education for students from other disciplines who seek to understand this important part of their culture.

Discovering Mass Communication is a receiver-oriented approach to the media—a consumer's guide, if you will, to the media galaxy. It is based on two assumptions. First, to understand or control the role of mass media in our lives, we must consider them as an integrated system rather than as independently operating forces. We need to understand, for example, how our uses of newspapers and their effect on us are shaped in part by the way we use television and the effect that medium has on us; we need to understand too how all the various media affect each other. Second, we must recognize that the impact of the media depends at least as much on us as it does on them. We cannot consider the media alone, or our knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors alone; we must consider and control the interaction between them.

Discovering Mass Communication is divided into four major parts. Part One, "Mass Communication Processes," provides the theoretical framework for the receiver-oriented approach that informs the remainder of the book. It explains the ways in which you and I and others who read news-

papers, go to the movies, watch television, and so on, are “active” in the process of mass communication. It argues that we are at least as much *creators* of the messages we take in as the writers, editors, directors, actors, and producers are. It suggests that all of the media of communication available to us at any given moment, along with the various people with whom we might communicate, compose a sort of mosaic of communication, or type of communication environment. From this environment or mosaic, all of us grasp different combinations of information and use that information, along with all of the other information we have gathered over the years, to construct images of the world in our heads.

Part Two, “Individual Media,” devotes a chapter to each of the major media we frequently find in our mosaic environments. The historical development of each medium is discussed, as well as the ways we receive and process messages from it and its functions in and effects on our lives. In addition, special features of each medium are pointed out. This section of the book concludes with a chapter on new technologies and other recent developments with implications for the future of mass communication.

In order to control the impact of the media on our lives, it is important for us to understand the factors that influence those media and their content. This understanding can even help us become one of those influences on the media and not just a target of the media’s influence. Part Three, “Controlling the Media,” discusses the various sorts of economic controls on American media, especially advertising; the external controls, such as government regulation and pressure groups; and the internal controls, such as the norms and working practices of people working in the media.

Finally, we come full circle in Part Four, “Impact,” and discuss the way you and others use the media, the functions those uses may have for you, the functions the media serve for our society, and the impact they have on you and the society.

This book does not provide answers to all the important questions about mass communication and could not if it tried. For many of these questions we have no answers. For others, the best answers are and should be different for different individuals. Therefore, for only some questions will you find answers in this book; for other questions, you will be stimulated to find your own answers and, in the process, to think about mass communication and to become more self-conscious in your use of the media. The various “Bylines” scattered throughout the book are one of the means used to stimulate such thinking.

Each of the media chapters in Part Two presents a “time line”—a visual perspective on how the medium covered in that chapter developed historically. The time line that precedes the title page of the book provides a historical overview of all the mass media. It should help you integrate the media into a single chronological stream. Each media chapter also includes an organization chart to orient you to the normal operation of the individual media. The Suggested Readings at the end of each chapter provide you

with means to follow up on information and ideas that particularly interest you. They should be especially helpful as background material for discussions and papers in this and other courses.

Many people have helped in the development of this revised version of *Discovering Mass Communication*. I am especially indebted to Robert Avery of the University of Utah, Barbara Cloud of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, Jeanne Meadowcroft of Indiana University, Robert Ramsey of Stephen F. Austin State University, and Regina Sherard of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for their helpful suggestions.

As usual, the people at Scott, Foresman have been wonderful to work with. Their expertise in the communication field, their encouragement, sensitivity, and down-to-earth good sense are much appreciated. I must acknowledge especially those with whom I worked most closely, Barbara Muller, Louise Howe, and Carrie Dierks.

My colleagues and students, past and present, also deserve thanks. The students in my Mass Media and Mass Society course were the experimental subjects for test runs of all of these materials. Many of my graduate students have made helpful suggestions. And my colleagues have consistently provided a thoughtful sounding board for ideas, as well as a warm and supportive community in which to work.

And, finally, to Ruth Becker for her patience and support in this and many other things, this book is dedicated with love and thanks.

If *Discovering Mass Communication* encourages you to think about yourself and the role of the media in your life, and especially what you might do to make the media serve you and your society better than they do now, my goal in writing this book will have been fulfilled.

Samuel L. Becker

MASS COMMUNICATION PROCESSES



For most of modern civilization three institutions—government, the church, and business—have been the dominant forces in our lives. Today, in the United States and most other developed countries of the world, there is a fourth major force: the mass media—primarily television, radio, motion pictures, newspapers, books, magazines, and recordings. Many consider these media collectively as more powerful and influential than the government or the church, especially when allied with all of the other businesses with which they are closely associated.

Because the media affect our lives to such an extent, it is vital that we learn to understand them. With such understanding, you can control to a large degree their power over you. Also, with such understanding, you will be able to work effectively in the media or to provide leadership in the search for ways to cope with and control the media. The purpose of this book is to help you acquire such understanding.

The mass media can be thought about or studied in various ways. In this book we will focus on the way in which you—the individual consumer—interact with the media, the reasons you interact with them as you do, and the reasons the media affect you as they do.

In this first section, we will consider the most important element in the mass communication system—you. We will discuss the ways and the degree to which you, not the media moguls in New York and Hollywood, control the information you get from the

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media and the meanings you construct from that information. We will consider the factors that affect your exposure to the media, as well as the factors that affect the ways you process the information you get from that exposure.

Although the media may operate relatively independent of each other, for you, as a receiver, they are closely interrelated. As you will learn in this first section, not only your *perception* of news and entertainment from one medium, but your *exposure* to a particular medium, is influenced by other media. In a very real sense, all of those individual media in your environment form a tightly integrated system. Virtually no one's picture of the world is gathered from one medium alone. Rather, each of us gets bits and pieces from a great variety of media and from talking with other people. We learn of the antinuclear movement, for example, a terrorist attack, or the World Series from one medium and then seek details from other media. Sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, we check the same bit of information in various media. At other times, we learn different kinds of things about an event, idea, or person from different media.

Consideration of mass communication in this systemic and receiver-oriented fashion, before we turn to discussion of individual media, should help you understand those individual media in more useful ways. Even more important, you will better understand yourself and your relationship to the media.

OUR COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT



There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was, therefore, with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony assembled at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting . . . those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies.

Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 3.

Walter Lippmann's story of the way in which these islanders, for a brief period at the beginning of World War I, lived in a world that did not truly exist—a world in their heads that did not correspond to the “real” world—illustrates the theme of this book. Although it is rarely brought to our attention so dramatically, all of us, in a sense, live in worlds that do not exist. We have no choice. The real world, as Lippmann makes clear, is “altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” We must learn about much of it indirectly, from the mass media and other people, and from what we learn we must construct a model of that world that is simple enough for us to manage.

Think about your picture of Russia today, that part of the world in your head that is Russia. Where did that picture come from? You would have to trace your life back for many years to find the answer to that question. It came from innumerable exposures to information about Russia: seeing stories about the Soviet premier and the Red Army on television, reading in newspapers and newsmagazines about their treatment of political pris-