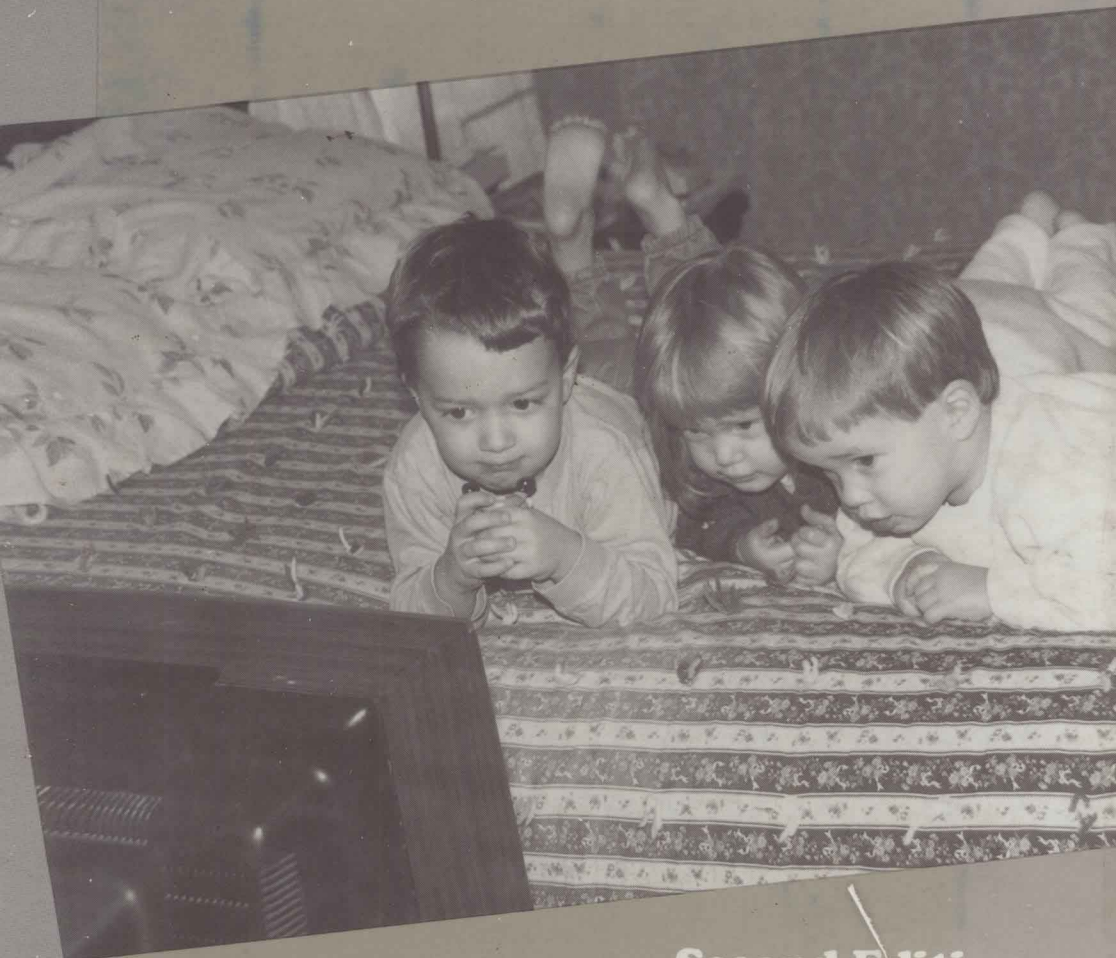


A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication



Second Edition

Richard Jackson Harris

A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Second Edition

Richard Jackson Harris
Kansas State University



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To four women of four generations

*My grandmother Anne Roberts Harris (1890–1974)
who modelled an unconditional love and an intellectual curiosity*

*My mother Helen Sellers Harris (1917–1970)
who modelled exceptional parenting and was always there for me*

*My wife Caprice Joan Becker (1955–)
whose love for me continues to amaze and sustain me in the present*

*My daughter Natalie Becker Harris (1991–)
who, with her brothers Clinton and Grady, have opened up new horizons
of being a father and balancing home and career*

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book evolved from developing and teaching a course “Psychology of Mass Communication” at Kansas State University yearly since 1981. I am grateful to the students in this class over the years for their enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge; their ideas and responses to my material have affected the book throughout. Some research on the cognition of deceptive advertising in the late 1970s originally challenged me to think seriously about mass media consumption as information processing. Thanks are due to Tony Dubitsky and Kristin Bruno for contributions to this research. The support of the Psychology Department at Kansas State University during the writing has been tremendous. I also greatly appreciate the Fulbright Visiting Lectureship I held in Belo Horizonte Brazil in 1982; this experience gave me an internationalist perspective that I have tried to bring to this book.

Particular thanks are due to John Bechtold, Sherry Wright, Jean Peters, and Ty Callahan for their helpful reactions and conversations about this material. Jennings Bryant and the reviewers for Lawrence Erlbaum Associates have made exceptionally helpful comments that have improved the book immeasurably. Working with them on developing the manuscript could not have been more helpful and pleasant.

Finally, I thank my parents E.R. and Helen Harris for modelling such effective media use in the home I grew up in. I am sure that many conversations over the television or the evening newspaper provided some intellectual seeds that bear some fruit in this book.

Richard Jackson Harris
August 1988

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Seldom does the content of a textbook become obsolete so fast as when it deals with the media. Of course there are the predictable changes in what television shows are popular and what changes the latest telecommunications technology has brought. Far beyond these, however, the changes in the world in the time between the completion of the final draft of the first edition of this book (summer 1988) and the completion of the final revisions of the second edition (winter 1993) have been nothing short of astounding. Never in recent history, with the possible exception of 1941–1945, has the world changed so much in 4 years. In all of these changes the media have played a central role.

In many ways, 1989 was a watershed year, when the “springtime of democracy” in Beijing would culminate in the brutal repression of the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 4 and following. Later in the year, one by one the communist nations of eastern Europe threw off their authoritarian governments, using very different methods, ranging from the “velvet revolution” of Czechoslovakia to the grisly televised execution of Romania’s Ceausescu on Christmas Day 1989. The new year of 1990 brought the unexpectedly quick reunification of Germany, the independence movement in the Baltic states, and Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. The 6-week Persian Gulf War of early 1991 brought together the most unlikely allies of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Israel, the United States, and much of Western Europe to fight a war marketed through media as a struggle against a Hitler-like figure. By the end of that incredible year of 1991, the reforming Soviet Union had survived an attempted August coup by hard-liners and, most incredibly, voted itself out of existence. The end of the Soviet Empire and the Cold War initiated a massive realignment of nations and a revolution in the way we will all need to learn to think of the world.

As if these events were not cataclysmic enough, South African Whites voted to end apartheid, Israel and the Palestinians sat down together to talk peace, Yugoslavia disintegrated in a civil war no one seemed able to stop, and troops were sent to Somalia to distribute famine relief in a country with no government but lots of televised pictures of starving children whom the world could no longer ignore. Within the United States, opinion moved from massive support of a take-charge president during the Gulf War to massive disillusionment in the face of the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. Late 1992 saw the election of the first U.S. president (Bill Clinton) born after World War II; perhaps even more significantly, he was the first U.S. president to grow up with television from his childhood.

In all of these events the media were central. More than telling us the events, although that in itself was a landmark undertaking, the media participated in the changes. Two dominating visual images of 1989 served as a sort of extreme anchors for that unforgettable year. The lone protester in front of a line of tanks in Beijing represented both the hope and despair of Tiananmen Square. Considerably more uplifting were the images 5 months later of dancing on the Berlin Wall as it was literally dismantled piece by piece. For many who shared that image worldwide the triumphant strains of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony will forever evoke that historic moment.

Even as events reshaped the world, they also reshaped the media. The Persian Gulf War was the best thing that ever happened to Cable News Network (CNN). Ted Turner's upstart all-news cable channel became the industry standard, providing its footage to the big three networks and establishing itself as the source even world leaders watch to help them plan their policy.

In 1993 the nations of the Soviet Union, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia are no more, while new nations of Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan sent people worldwide running to their continually outdated atlases. Other events of immense import receive relatively little coverage in competition with these cataclysmic changes; for example, the moves toward economic unity through the European Community (EC) and the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Surely the book is not closed on these events, especially the rapidly changing situation in central and eastern Europe. My hope is that reading and studying this book will sensitize you to the psychology of the mass media, how they connect us as persons. Although it is almost a cliché to talk of our becoming a smaller and more interdependent world, it nevertheless is profoundly true. The media make us all neighbors, and faraway events affect us personally. For example, I personally have friends in my small town who were eyewitnesses present at the Tiananmen Square massacre, the abortive Moscow coup, and the Desert Storm campaign in Kuwait and Iraq. My personal stake in the continuation

of a good livable world has increased since the publication of the first edition, with the birth of my three children in March 1989 and January 1991. Expecting the birth of twins about at the UN deadline for Saddam Hussein to pull out of Kuwait on January 15, 1991 caused a strange juxtaposition of the hopes and fears of both personal and world events. As we spent the evening after bringing two new babies home watching CNN show us the beginning of a massive air war, we were left with all sorts of mixed emotions and second thoughts about things ending and things beginning. The media were the messages as well as the messengers.

Finally, thanks are expressed to editor Hollis Heimbouch and the other people at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates for having the confidence in doing a second edition of this book. Thanks also to Jennings Bryant, Alan Rubin, and some anonymous reviewers who taught from the first edition and offered very helpful comments for revisions. Many of their suggestions are followed in this edition, especially an inclusion of a greater amount of theoretical materials and research from the field of communication.

Richard Jackson Harris
February 1993

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CHAPTER

1

MASS COMMUNICATION IN OUR LIVES

Q: Why did the U.S. Coast Guard receive many telegrams from viewers of "Gilligan's Island" in 1964?

A: Because people were asking them to go pick up those stranded castaways (Fore, 1987).

Q: What leisure activity do people spend the most time on?

A: Watching television. Residents of the United States spend almost half of their total leisure time watching television, making it by far the most popular leisure activity. Every day people worldwide spend over 3.5 billion hours watching TV. Only work and sleeping take more of our time (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

A young BBC news reporter was sent to cover the Vietnam War in 1969. Not being very experienced or knowledgeable about what he was observing, he led off his first televised report of an American attack of a Vietcong stronghold with "My God! It's just like watching television" (Bogart, 1980).

People very frequently take portable radios, or even televisions, to the stadium with them when they attend a sports event. When asked why they listen to the play-by-play when the game is going on right in front of them, a common response is, "so I can know what's really happening."

In 1984, a 13-year-old boy died instantly after shooting himself in the head with a handgun while he and a friend were re-enacting a scene from *The Deer Hunter*, an Oscar-winning film depicting American POWs in Vietnam being forced by their captors to play Russian roulette. The boy and two friends had recently seen the film. He had later taken the handgun from under his father's bed. The

county coroner ruled the death accidental. He was the 31st person known to have died reenacting that climactic scene from *The Deer Hunter*.

These three examples concisely suggest the major theme of this book, that our experience with the media is the basis for building our knowledge about the world. We may call this a *cognitive* approach to mass communication because the emphasis is on the way that our minds create knowledge, indeed, create a reality about the world based on our experience with the media. This mental reality then becomes the basis for all sorts of behaviors and has numerous effects on our lives. Instead of television being a more or less accurate reflection of some external reality, it has *become* the reality against which the real world is compared. The media view of the world has become more real than the real world itself.

Mass communication in the form of print media has been with us almost since Gutenberg's invention of movable type and the printing press in 1456. However, the nature of mass communication, indeed, of life in general, has been radically changed in the 20th century by the advent of electronic media, especially television. Television has transformed the day-to-day life of more people in the last 50 years than has perhaps any invention in human history. Radio and the print media have been greatly changed by TV as well. In one U.S. poll (Handler, 1987) 68% of the participants reported that watching television was their main source of pleasure, followed by spending time with friends, helping others, and taking vacations. Besides changing the way that we spend our time, television has also revolutionized the way that we think and the way that we view the world. These effects on our perception and our cognition are particular emphases of this book. The media are not only the "magic window" through which we view the world, but also the way in which we learn about the world.

Media are far more important than merely serving as conduits of knowledge, although that is no trivial role. The act of transmitting that knowledge may itself become the event of note. When the U.S. and Saudi Arabian governments and military blocked press access to the war front during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the nature of the war coverage became one of the major news stories of the war. The media were not merely communicating the news, they had become the news. In the case of the Vietnam War, scholars, heads of state, and the general public are still debating a generation later the role of the media in the declining public acceptance of that war over the years 1965 to 1973.

We have come a long way from Gutenberg to the 1,657 daily newspapers, 1,611 television stations, and 10,128 radio stations in the United States in 1987 (Friedrich, 1987, see Box 1.1 for some further background on print and broadcast media). In this chapter we introduce mass communication and our use of the media from a psychological perspective. We conclude with an overview of the rest of the book.

BOX 1.1: A PRIMER ON ELECTRONIC AND PRINT MEDIA

Mass media are of two basic types: print and electronic (or broadcast). Print media (newspapers and magazines) provide information through the production and distribution of copies. In contrast to electronic media, print media tend to be more permanent (at least before the advent of widespread video and audio taping) and depend on the literacy of the audience. There are also no channel limits in print media—although there have traditionally been a finite number of possible television channels (today rapidly increasing in number), there is no inherent limit to the number of newspapers that may be published. Print media also lend themselves better to detailed treatment of subjects than do electronic media.

In contrast to print media, electronic media are technologically more recent, less permanent, and less dependent on formal literacy or accessibility to urban infrastructure. This last point becomes especially crucial in the isolated regions of the world. One can have a portable radio without any access to electricity, schooling, or urban life. From its beginnings in a Pittsburgh garage in 1920, radio grew phenomenally in its first 10 years in a manner parallel to the rise of television in the 1950s and VCRs in the 1980s. With the advent of television after World War II, however, the character of radio changed drastically, away from prime-time programming to music/news formats and later to more specialized (especially FM) stations like country and western, classical, gospel, or all news.

Because of its use of the public airwaves, which are sharply limited in capacity, radio and television typically are regulated by governments much more tightly than are print media (e.g., assignment of television channels by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission [FCC]). The more authoritarian the society, the easier it is for the government to control radio and (especially) television in times it deems to be unduly threatening. Although television networks, both private and government owned, tend to be national in scope, they often have influence far beyond their country's borders. Because broadcast signals do not respect political boundaries, most Canadians are able to receive U.S. television. One of the major influences in the 1989 democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe was exposure to Western television.

WHAT IS MASS COMMUNICATION?

What makes mass communication *mass*? First of all, the audience is large and anonymous, often very heterogeneous (Wright, 1986). Individual viewers, listeners, readers, or even groups of individuals can be targeted, but only with limited precision. Second, the sources of the communication are institutional and organizational (Wright, 1986). Some, such as television networks, newspaper chains, or wire services, are among the largest and richest private corporations. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the basic economic function of most media

in most nations is to attract and hold as large an audience as possible for the advertisers. In one way or another, advertising pays a high percentage of the costs of commercial television networks like CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox; even public television and government-subsidized networks like the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) or the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are far from immune from commercial pressures.

In spite of all the high-sounding rhetoric about serving the public, the bottom line of commercial mass media is money, which comes from advertisers at rates directly determined by the audience or readership size and composition, which in turn determines the content. Thus there are tremendous pressures to be as entertaining as possible to as many people as possible; this principle also holds for nonentertainment content like news. All of this is not to say that editors and programmers have no concern about responsibly meeting the needs of the public. They do, but such needs must necessarily be considered within the constraints of the economic realities of the media industry.

Print media also have the pressure of numbers. Newspapers and most magazines receive a majority, though not all, of their income from advertising. There are economic pressures, and sometimes political and ideological ones as well, to control the content of media. For example, magazines that accept tobacco advertisements print fewer stories about the health risks of smoking than those that have no cigarette ads (Lee & Solomon, 1991). See Box 1.2 for a further discussion of blatant and subtle censorship.

In spite of its mass nature, there is more than *mass* to mass communication. There is also *communication*. In true communication there is a reciprocity, some kind of response from the audience. Although the TV viewer is often characterized as being extremely passive, mindlessly absorbing the program content, such a picture is far from accurate. The meaning of a particular program certainly depends heavily on the content of that program, but it also depends on what is in the mind and experience of the viewer. A TV movie dealing with rape will have a very different effect on, indeed a different meaning for, a viewer

BOX 1.2: THE ISSUE OF CENSORSHIP

A major philosophical and legal issue with regard to media is censorship, which varies greatly across different societies. Prior censorship (i.e., requiring approval of all content before broadcast or publication) occurs in some totalitarian societies, but more subtle forms of censorship exist in all nations. Even in democracies, press freedom has never been absolute, but rather operates within certain constraints. One may not print or broadcast material that is libelous, classified, obscene, incites people to violence, or infringes on copyright laws.

(Continued)

BOX 1.2: *Continued*

In the United States, the FCC assigns channels and issues licenses. Although it has the power to deny renewal of licenses, less than 150 radio and TV renewal licenses (out of 70,000) have been rejected in over 50 years of operation. The FCC also insures application of the Equal Time rule (and, until its demise in 1987, the Fairness doctrine as well) to insure that opposing points of view on controversial issues and political campaigns are aired.

There are pressures toward censorship, although it often is not called that, especially in the United States, where *censorship* is a very dirty word. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), a professional organization of radio and television stations, has a fairly rigorous ethical code that it expects its members to adhere to, although court challenges and appeals, an atmosphere of deregulation, and changing social standards weakened adherence to the NAB code in the 1980s. Some content, which may not be illegal per se, may nevertheless not appear on television because it is not in accord with NAB guidelines or because broadcasters fear public outrage (e.g., graphic and explicit sex, violence, or surgery). Also, certain words (e.g., "shit," "fuck," many racial epithets, and religious expletives stronger than "Oh, my God!") seldom occur on U.S. prime-time television. Incidentally, these standards change: 30 years ago we did not hear the words "damn," "hell," or "pregnant," although we may have heard "nigger" in the early days of radio.

Real or feared reaction from advertisers is another subtle source of self-censorship. Television networks and stations are very loath to risk offending those who pay the bills for their livelihood. Advertisers occasionally threaten to withdraw their ads in protest. In 1979 General Electric was unhappy with ABC's Barbara Walters' plans to interview Jane Fonda about her antinuclear activism and pulled their ads in protest. However, ABC still aired the interview. Not so noble have been magazines' frequent failure to run articles on the health hazards of smoking for fear of alienating their lucrative tobacco advertisers (Lee & Solomon, 1991).

A democratic government may exert influence even in cases where it has no formal censoring authority. For example, the British government requested the BBC not to run a scheduled documentary on Northern Ireland in August 1985. This documentary included extensive interviews with two extremists, one Catholic IRA member and one Protestant extremist. The government argued that this gave those whom it called "terrorists" an undeserved platform and hearing. After extensive discussion, BBC management decided to honor the government's request, although this decision evoked a 1-day strike by BBC employees in protest.

Concern over the public's reaction may be another source of self-censorship. In 1985 two of the three U.S. commercial networks refused to run an antismoking PSA that showed a fetus smoking a cigarette in the womb. Similarly, we seldom see ads for contraceptives on U.S. television, although they have appeared in magazines for years. In fact, commercials are the most conservative component of television. Advertisers are extremely loath to offend viewers; from an economic perspective, the worst sin a broadcaster can commit is to air something that causes viewers to turn the set off.

who has herself been a rape victim than on someone with no such personal experience. A violent pornographic video may incite one man to sexual violence because of the way his mind interprets and interacts with the content of the video, whereas another man who sees the same video may be repulsed by it and show no antisocial behavioral response.

The nature of the media consumption experience must also be considered. Watching television or listening to the radio may be done alone or in small groups. Reading newspapers or magazines is typically, though not always, a solo activity. Although this is not always a concern of the communication source, it can greatly affect the psychological experience of using the medium. For example, consider the difference between watching an exciting ball game by yourself or with a group of friends. Consider the difference between watching a horror film with someone who either shrieked in fun, cried in severe distress, laughed, or made no obvious reaction at all (Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). Within the family, each medium may either promote family harmony and interaction or be a divisive force, depending on how it is used (Bryant, 1990; Lull, 1988).

Now let us turn to how we use the various media of mass communication.

MEDIA USE

Television

Although experimental sets existed in the 1930s, television was practically unknown among the general public at the end of World War II in 1945. Although only .02% of U.S. homes had TV in 1946, that figure rose to 9% by 1950, 23.5% by 1951, and 90% by 1962. By 1980, televisions were found in about 98% of U.S. homes, and that figure has remained there since that time (Andreasen, 1990). Although most of the programming over the years has been by networks or local stations, the rapid growth of cable and satellite technology in the 1980s greatly expanded the offerings. How networks and their affiliates deal with this competitive challenge may dramatically alter the face of television in the 1990s.

The television phenomenon is almost as pervasive in the developing world. For example, in 1984, 86% of Costa Rican homes had TV (95% in the more urbanized Central Valley; Lobo, 1991). Over three fourths of Brazilian homes had TV, although only 20% of all homes had refrigerators (Marquez de Melo, 1991). Even the worst urban slums of the Third World sprout television antennas. No nation on earth is beyond the reach of television. Over 1 billion people have seen recent Olympics and World Cup soccer finals on TV. See Box 1.3 for a look at an anthropologist's views of the stages of a society's acceptance of TV.

The bulk of mass communications research has been on television; the main reason for this is that we spend so much time watching television. On average,