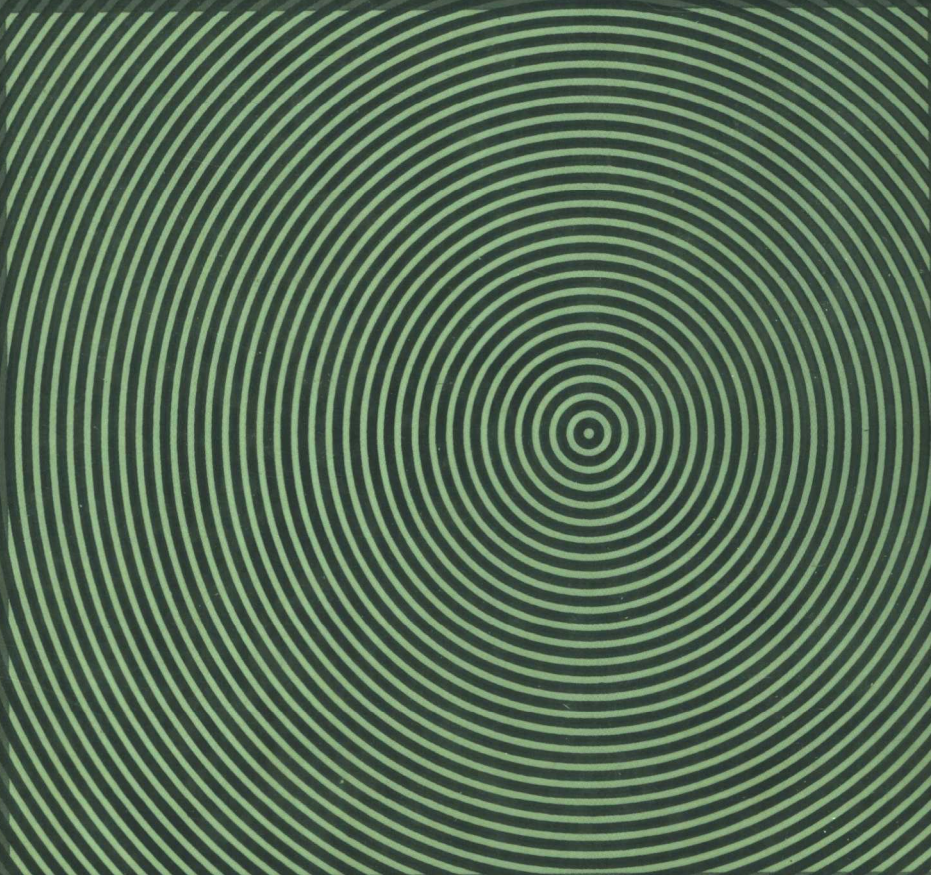


ALEXIS S. TAN



MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES AND RESEARCH

SECOND EDITION



Alexis S. Tan

Texas Tech University

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES AND RESEARCH

SECOND EDITION

Macmillan Publishing Company

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PREFACE

A lot has transpired in mass communication research since I wrote the first edition of this text about four years ago. The field has continued to mature as a scientific discipline. There has been a remarkable growth both in the quantity and quality of research. New terrain is being explored. Research continues at the intrapersonal level of analysis; however, many people are studying communication at the interpersonal and institutional levels. Learning theories continue to be influential, but there is increased attention to information-processing theories of communication. At the social level, structural functionalism continues to direct many mass communication researchers, but Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of social change are gaining a foothold.

The second edition of *Mass Communication Theories and Research* reflects these changes. In the first edition, I emphasized the interpersonal and intrapersonal analyses of communication. This was evident in the dominance (at least in terms of length) of the chapters on persuasion and socialization. In the second edition, I have added two lengthy chapters on communicators and their environment and on mass communication and social change. These new chapters reflect my own renewed interest in the social forces that constrain or limit communication behavior. I have also added sections and a chapter that explain the "new" (or revived) theories and research strategies that have recently been influential in our field—reciprocal determinism, structural functionalism, group dynamics, information processing, conflict theories, and analysis at the macro levels.

The second edition represents change as I see it occurring in our field. However, there is also an emphasis on continuity. The basic format of the book is unchanged. I continue to insist on discussing only the studies that are based on empirical and scientific methods of research. The research sections in all chapters have been updated; studies completed in the last four years, up to late 1983, are discussed. I refuse to get involved in the ongoing debate between the empirical and "critical" or "evaluative" research camps in mass communication, mainly because I think this debate is beside the point. Empiricism and critical research are not mutually exclusive. One can apply scientific methods to test hypotheses based on evaluative or critical analysis. I also do not accept the notion that to be scholarly is to write obtusely. I have tried to maintain a conversational tone in the book, using understandable language with a minimum of "scientific" jargon.

I hope the changes I have introduced in the second edition will make this a stronger, more complete, and more useful text. I believe that it continues to

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be appropriate for upper-level undergraduate and beginning graduate courses in communication theory. Since the material has been greatly expanded, instructors may wish to emphasize some chapters more than others, depending on their particular interests.

We have been gratified by the kind and sometimes critical reception that the first edition received. The text was successful beyond my most optimistic expectations. I thank the students, instructors, and scholars in mass communication who gave me the opportunity to publish a second edition and for their many suggestions regarding the book. I also thank the editors at Wiley and the many communication scholars whose work constitutes the foundation of this book.

My thanks again to Gerdean, Marco, and my parents. Writing this second edition was even more fun than writing the first one.

Alexis S. Tan

*Lubbock, Texas
April 1984*

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

As communication technology continues to develop at an accelerated rate, new questions are being asked—and answers to old ones are being reexamined—about the role of the mass media in society. There is renewed interest in the power of the mass media over its audiences. Is this power mainly mythical, as was suggested by communication researchers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or is it pervasive and unavoidable, as some current scholars proclaim? In any case, the renewed focus on mass media effects has helped establish the study of mass communication as a scientific discipline. The coming age of mass communication as a behavioral science is evident in many ways:

1. The increase in the amount and quality of research output from communication scholars. Ten years ago, there were only three or four scholarly journals devoted primarily to mass communication research. Today, there are at least a dozen.
2. The increase in the number and amounts of grants awarded to communication scholars by industry and government for basic and applied research. Over \$1 million was awarded by the Surgeon General to researchers to study the relationship of televised violence to aggressive behavior among viewers. The National Science Foundation has recently sponsored substantial research programs to evaluate the feasibility of interactive cable television and to determine effective methods of communicating science information to the public.
3. The infusion of courses on mass communication theory and research methodology into the curricula of many of the top journalism and mass communication schools in the country. Most accredited mass communication programs have at least one course in theory of mass communication and society at the intermediate level. Almost all of the graduate programs require a course in communication theory. The theory courses, unlike the more common Introduction to Mass Communications taught at the freshman or sophomore level, take a behavioral and research approach to the analysis of communication problems. The introductory survey courses generally have a historical and descriptive emphasis.

The increase in research productivity of communication scholars has led to a proliferation of scholarly journals in the field. Unfortunately for the undergraduate and beginning graduate student of mass communication, and for practitioners as well, most of these journals report research findings in highly technical and scientific language—which is, to be sure, brief, concise, and parsimonious—but mostly unintelligible to readers without a background in communication theory, methodology, and statistics. This is unfortunate, since many of the models, theories, and principles derived from such research can be useful to the practitioner and can help students of communication better understand the role of the mass media in today's societies.

This, then, is the main objective of the present volume: to present and integrate results of significant communication research within theoretical frameworks that can be useful to readers with little or no background in communication theory, methodology, or statistics. It is written for the college student interested in communications as a profession or field of study and for the practitioner of communications in business, government, or education.

The book begins with a discussion of scientific method and theory, explaining concepts that will be needed to evaluate and understand mass communication research. Current methods used by communication researchers are also discussed in basic, simple terms. From here, significant research findings in the field of mass communication are discussed in historical order, that is, beginning with early research on persuasion in the 1950s to the current interests in media socialization. When appropriate, general principles are offered and theoretical explanations explored. The tone of the book, although academic, is not technical.

The book can be used as a text for upper-level undergraduate and beginning graduate courses in mass communication theory or mass media and society. I have been teaching these courses for over seven years and have been dismayed at the lack of a comprehensive text on mass communication theory that discusses not only early theories, but recent developments in the field as well. Most available texts are anthologies, and even though some of these are competently edited, there is a need for an integrated, up-to-date discussion of mass communication theory in one volume. Through the years, I have tried to compensate for the lack of an adequate text by assigning readings from several reference books and from research journals. And each year, I hear the same complaints from students early in the semester—lack of integration of the material in the readings and incomprehensible articles in the journals. I have tried to integrate and interpret the articles in my lectures, but it occurred to me that the task could be greatly simplified by a text that would accomplish these objectives. I hope this one will do the job.

As a strategy in writing the book, I have adopted the Aristotelean didactic philosophy of *logos*. Most chapters begin with a discussion of a few general principles, which lead to specific studies providing empirical evidence for the principles. The evidence is then summarized, and the original principles are evaluated on the basis of research findings.

I have emphasized research to a greater extent than authors of other communication theory texts. Recent studies are discussed in detail, particularly those published within the last five years. I believe that students should be taught not only the *what's*, but also the *why's* and *how's* of communication theory. By discussing relevant studies in detail, I hope to help the reader understand how a certain communication principle (or "law") was established, so that he or she can evaluate its validity. I have also tried to explain research findings using a few general principles or theories, so that the reader can gain a total instead of a fragmented view of human communication.

The material in the text can be covered in a one-semester or one-quarter course for juniors and seniors. For graduate classes, the instructor may wish to supplement text material with journal articles. Graduate students may benefit from a more thorough discussion of the original studies. The review questions at the end of each chapter are intended to motivate the student to pursue the material further or to apply theoretical principles to practical problems.

As with any major undertaking, this project would not have been possible without the help of many others. Although I must bear sole responsibility for any failings this book might have, I must share its merits with my colleagues in communication research whose work I have liberally cited. Five people deserve special mention, since my intellectual debt to them is considerable: Albert Bandura, Steve Chaffee, Jack McLeod, Leonard Berkowitz, and William McGuire. Directly and indirectly, they have influenced my own approach to communication theory.

I thank Janice Juneau, Carol Bogle, and Sandy Mitchell for patiently typing the manuscript. My students—past, present, and future—also deserve mention. They provided the stimulus for this undertaking.

Finally, my thanks to Gerdean and Marco. Because of them, writing this book was fun.

Alexis S. Tan

Lubbock, Texas
October 1980

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PART I

THE SCIENCE OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Our basic assumption in this textbook is that the study of mass communication is a science. Part I establishes the foundations for this assumption.

In Chapter 1, we define the field of mass communication to include the study of the mass media, the messages they generate, the audiences they attempt to reach, and their effects on these audiences. Chapter 1 also discusses the evolution of mass communication research, including early “powerful effects” models of the 1940s, the “limited effects” research of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the current interest in socialization effects of the mass media.

In Chapter 2, we discuss four ways of “knowing”: tenacity, authority, intuition, and scientific method. We examine scientific method in detail—its unique characteristics, its procedural steps, its basis in empiricism and formal logic, and its value to the study of mass communication.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of research methods commonly used by mass communication researchers. It begins with an examination of the criteria often used to evaluate all scientific research—internal and external validity. We then discuss hypothesis testing, experiments, field surveys, and content analysis. An understanding of these basic research principles and methods will help the reader appreciate the research presented in later chapters.

In Chapter 4, we present three communication models that have gained acceptance among communication researchers through the years: Shannon and Weaver’s mathematical model, Newcomb’s social psychological model, and Westley and MacLean’s general model. We then integrate these models into a transactional model, which considers communication to be purposive interaction between two or more individuals. The transactional model identifies variables that can be studied in communication, criteria for evaluating the communicative act, and common causes of failure in communication.

DEFINING THE FIELD

Mass communication involves the scientific study of the mass media, the messages they generate, the audiences they attempt to reach, and their effects on these audiences. Traditionally, the field has included the academic disciplines of journalism, telecommunications, advertising, public relations, and some subdivisions of speech communication. These areas are commonly concerned with mediated messages that reach their audiences indirectly through a medium, most often a mass medium such as television, radio, newspapers, or magazines. However, as we will see in Chapter 4, an understanding of mediated communication will require analysis of the encoding and decoding of messages (intrapersonal communication) and of person-to-person and small group communication (interpersonal communication). Although we will be primarily concerned with the mass media and their effects on large groups of people, we will also discuss research dealing with how individuals communicate directly with each other. The main emphasis of the book will be on the functions of the mass media in modern society and their effects on audience values, cognitions, and behaviors.

A major objective of the book is to integrate research findings into general explanations of mass communication functions, processes, and effects. These explanations, to be considered here, should be based on empirical evidence derived from scientific method, an objective and verifiable way of establishing "truths" about the nature of reality. This qualification eliminates from the scope of the book significant work in historical and legal research. Even though historical and legal analysis can add significantly to our understanding of the functions of the mass media in modern society, our concern with theory limits the discussion to principles that can be objectively verified. A more thorough discussion of scientific method and theory in mass communication is presented in Chapter 2.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mass communication is a relatively young discipline compared to other social and behavioral sciences such as psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. Even now, many teachers and researchers in the field will argue

with the assertion that mass communication is a scientific discipline. We believe it has achieved this status, as indicated by the extensive use in the field today of scientific research methods (laboratory and field experiments, time series and longitudinal designs, systematic and systems-wide content analyses), advanced statistical tools, and mathematical models. We will discuss some of these research methods in Chapter 3. More important, researchers in the field are beginning to integrate research findings into systematic and general explanations (theories) of mass communication processes, many of which are discussed in this book.

Mass communication research has not always been characterized by scientific method and a concern with formulating theory. Many of the important contributions in the 1920s and 1930s were historical analyses of newspapers and magazines or descriptions of media messages.¹ Early issues of *Journalism Quarterly*, the oldest scholarly journal in the field of journalism and mass communication, emphasized historical, legal, and content analysis studies.

During the 1930s and 1940s, researchers from other disciplines—particularly political science and social psychology—formulated a model of the powerful influences of the mass media. According to this model, the mass media could be used to bring about almost any kind of effect on their passive audiences. Much of the basis for the powerful effects model came from analyses of successful propaganda techniques in World Wars I and II.² Additional support for the model was provided by Lazarsfeld's and Stanton's analysis of the effects of radio,³ Merton's study of the successful Kate Smith war bond broadcasts,⁴ and Cantril's analysis of panic effects resulting from Orson Welles' broadcast of "War of the Worlds."⁵

Experimental evidence for the powerful effects model of mass communication was provided by Hovland and his colleagues in the late 1940s and through the early 1950s at the Army's Information and Education Division and later at Yale's Attitude Change Center.⁶ These studies were originally designed to provide solutions to problems encountered by the U.S. Army in World War II, such as evaluating the effects of persuasive films on soldiers, getting housewives to change the food habits of their families, assessing the attitudes of bomber crews, and improving the morale of new recruits. Through experiments, Hovland and his colleagues identified characteristics of the communicator, messages, and audiences that could lead to attitude change. Hovland's influence on mass communication research has been considerable. Even today, this line of research is being pursued by many in the field.

In 1944, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet published *The People's Choice*, an analysis of the effect of mass media on voting decisions.⁷ This work provided the basis for what has proven to be an enduring model of mass communication—the "limited" or "reinforcement" model of mass media effects. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found that the mass media had very little direct effect on voters during political campaigns. The main effect was reinforcement of existing attitudes, and the small percentage who did change were more likely to be affected by personal communication sources (opinion leaders) than by the

mass media. According to the limited effects model, the mass media merely reinforce existing attitudes and behaviors, because audiences are "stubborn" and because they can use a variety of defensive strategies such as selective attention, selective perception, and selective recall to insulate themselves against attacking or contradictory messages. The limited effects model gradually replaced the "powerful effects" model of mass communication and was adopted by many researchers and writers in the field.⁸ Even today, the limited effects model has many proponents among mass communication researchers.⁹

The late 1960s saw a revival of the powerful effects model of mass communication. There has been renewed interest in the impact of the mass media on their audiences, except now the interest is no longer confined to attitude or behavioral change. Researchers today are interested in the many other important ways in which audiences are affected by the mass media, such as their knowledge of public and political issues, their structuring of social realities, role expectations of self and others, the acquisition of political attitudes and behaviors, use of leisure time, antisocial behaviors (aggression, violence, prejudice), prosocial behaviors (altruism, cooperativeness), learning of motor and cognitive skills, perceptions of the importance of public issues (agenda setting), satisfaction of individual needs (diversion, entertainment), and others. Thus, the powerful effects model has been expanded to include not only attitude and behavioral change, but other facets of the human experience as well.

At this point you may ask: How can one model be appropriate yesterday and invalid today?

We can answer this question in at least two ways. A historical explanation suggests that the effects of mass communication on society can best be understood by analyzing the prevailing social and political climate of the time.¹⁰ The early powerful effects model found its greatest acceptance during war and economic depression, when there were ample opportunities and the conditions were conducive for the media to be powerful. During these times, there is some degree of insecurity in audiences (or "imbalance," using the terminology of cognitive consistency psychologists), which can make them more receptive to persuasive communications. This is particularly true if the audience perceives that following the messages' recommendations will help restore security or balance. Thus, the purchase of bonds for a war that is generally supported may remove guilt feelings or may convince the individual that this action will help achieve a desired goal—victory and an end to the war. During the relative calm and economic prosperity of the 1950s and early 1960s, media audiences were relatively satisfied with their lives. There was less reason to be discontented; thus there was a preference for the status quo. The cognitive consistency psychologists predict that when consistency is present in people, they will be resistant to suggestions for change. So we find that during this time, the limited effects model was the prevailing model of mass media effects.

The expanded powerful effects model became a significant influence on researchers as political and social turmoil enveloped the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The unpopular Vietnam war and issues raised by the

civil rights movement were sources of insecurity (cognitive inconsistency) for many people, making them more receptive to media influence. The mass media became a source of reassurance to some, of escape to many. And, as the media become more pervasive, this model continues to exert considerable influence on mass communication researchers up to this time.

A second explanation for the shift from a powerful to limited and again to powerful view of mass media effects is methodological. We are often able to observe communication effects in the laboratory (an artificial research setting where the researcher has almost complete control over the procedures), but not in a real-life setting. Thus, it is easier to change attitudes in the laboratory, where effects are often short term, as Hovland and his colleagues did, than in the community. However, with advanced techniques of measurement, research design, and analysis and with the help of computers, we are now able to track down these effects in the real world, effects that often build up over time and that early researchers found difficult to isolate, given the limited procedures available to them.

The contents of this book reflect a preference for the expanded powerful effects model. Although communication and persuasion following the social psychological tradition of Hovland is treated in the early chapters, the greater part of the book is devoted to a discussion of how the mass media are affecting societies today.

CURRENT CONCERNS

Communication scholars today are interested in how the mass media are affecting societies and also in how social institutions are affecting the mass media. Communicators do not perform their work in a vacuum. They encode and decode messages as members of small social groups, mass media organizations, communities, and nation states. Communication behaviors of individuals are influenced by the groups and institutions to which they belong. These groups and institutions often impose rules or constraints on their members. We are taking a closer look at these constraints on individual communication behaviors. Parts V and VI of this text, for example, discuss how mass communication organizations and social institutions affect the individual communicator.

Another concern of today's communication scholars has been the level of analysis at which communication is studied. Traditional communication research analyzes the individual communication behaviors at the intrapersonal level. Most studies of persuasion, for example, look at attitude and behavior change in the individual as *the* measure of communication effectiveness. More researchers today are looking at communication from the larger perspectives of social groups and institutions. We are still interested in the individual's communication behavior. However, we are now also looking at how groups and social institutions are affected by communication and at how communication is affected by groups and social institutions. The different levels of analysis in

mass communication are discussed in Chapter 5. Beginning with Part II, we have organized this book according to level of analysis, from the intrapersonal analysis of communication (Part II, "Communication and Persuasion," and Chapter 14, "Mass Media Uses and Audience Needs"), analysis at the interpersonal level (Chapter 13, "Coorientation," and most chapters in Part IV, "Mass Communication and Socialization"), and through analysis at the organizational and institutional levels (Part V, "Communicators and Their Environment," and Part VI, "Mass Communication and Society"). Our journey through the mass communications field will take us from the smallest level of analysis (the individual) to the largest levels (organizations and social institutions.)

SUMMARY

Mass communication involves the scientific study of the mass media, the messages they generate, the audiences they attempt to reach, and their effects on these audiences. A major objective of this book is to integrate research findings into general explanations or theories of mass communication functions, processes, and effects.

Mass communication is a relatively young discipline. Early research in the 1920s and 1930s consisted mostly of historical, legal, and content analysis studies of the mass media. Researchers formulated a "powerful effects" model of mass communication during the 1930s and 1940s. According to this model, the main effect of the mass media is persuasion. Laboratory studies of attitude and behavioral change by Hovland at Yale provided much of the evidence for this model, which continued to be popular through the 1950s.

Lazarsfeld and his colleagues completed a series of field surveys in the 1940s and 1950s to determine how voters were affected by the mass media. Their studies led to still another view of mass communication effects—the "limited effects" model. According to this model, the main effect of mass communication is reinforcement. Audiences protect themselves from information they do not like by selective attention, selective perception, and selective reception. The limited effects model gradually replaced the powerful effects model and was adopted by many researchers in the field.

The late 1960s saw a revival of the powerful effects model. There is renewed interest in the impact of the mass media on audiences, except now the interest is not confined to attitude or behavioral change. Most researchers today are interested in how audiences are socialized by the media: how we develop values, patterns of behavior, and perceptions of social reality from the information and images presented by the media.

We are interested in how the mass media are affecting societies and in how social institutions are affecting the mass media. We are giving more attention to individual communicators and their groups, organizations, and communities. Communication is being analyzed more today at the social and organizational levels.