

MASS COMMUNICATION **IN THE** **INFORMATION AGE**

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MASS COMMUNICATION

AND YOU:

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

On a spring day in 1844, inventor Samuel F. B. Morse sent a message over the first telegraph line. "What hath God wrought!" it exclaimed. That message, transmitted between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., captured the marvel with which Americans of the nineteenth century viewed great technological feats.

The telegraph would, indeed, change the face of communication—and in ways more dramatic than the generation of the 1840s could imagine. Whereas nearly all previous mass communication had relied on print, the telegraph ushered in a new means. As print communication previously had done—and as wireless communication would do in the future—telegraphy helped to alter the lives of human beings and to influence society in the process.

Without doubt, mass communication—not only telegraphy, but mass communication in all its forms—historically has been one of the most important factors in the record of human civilization. It has ranked with such forces as religion, families, education, political philosophies, and industrialization as an influence in the lives of individuals and of nations. It remains so today. Indeed, there are those who believe that today it plays an even larger role than it has at any time in the past.

Few topics are therefore of any greater importance to study than mass communication. If one is truly to understand society today and to comprehend the dynamics of the American nation and the global scene, then one must understand mass communication. *Mass Communication in the Information Age* has been written to help you in gaining that understanding. Naturally, you cannot learn everything that you should know from one textbook, but

the authors and editors hope that from this book you will gain an insightful and stimulating introduction. We begin by examining a variety of critical functions that mass communication plays, from conveying useful information to providing escapist entertainment.

The next section of the book will introduce you to the variety of communication industries that operate today. Our purpose is two-fold—one, to help you become an intelligent consumer of mass communication; and, two, to introduce you to the career possibilities offered by each industry.

The book's third and final section deals with media issues and other topics of concern. Some of the topics are those that interest professional communicators and general readers, while others are those that are of particular interest in mass communication education. In that section you will be introduced to such matters as diverse as media ethics and communication theory. The topics covered in the section are those that you probably will study in later courses. We hope the introductory study you will find here will make your later courses even more meaningful than they would be otherwise.

THE FIRST COMMUNICATION REVOLUTION

Today's fascination with mass communication is by no means new. Neither is the impact that today's communication technologies are having. From the time mass communication first appeared, it had the potential to reshape the activities of humankind. Mass communication in a pure sense existed as early as cavemen drew pictures on walls and others saw them. Modern mass communication began, however, with an extraordinary event.

In 1450 in Mainz, Germany, Johann Gutenberg created a system of printing from individual characters of type that could be assembled together to form a page, taken apart, and then reassembled into other pages. This process of printing with "movable" type revolutionized the printing trade. Its effect was to revolutionize much of life.

Prior to Gutenberg's invention, reproducing written material was a tedious and time-consuming process. Transcribers laboriously hand-lettered each copy, or printers would engrave all the letters of a manuscript on flat plates. When a new manuscript was to be printed, the process would have to be repeated.

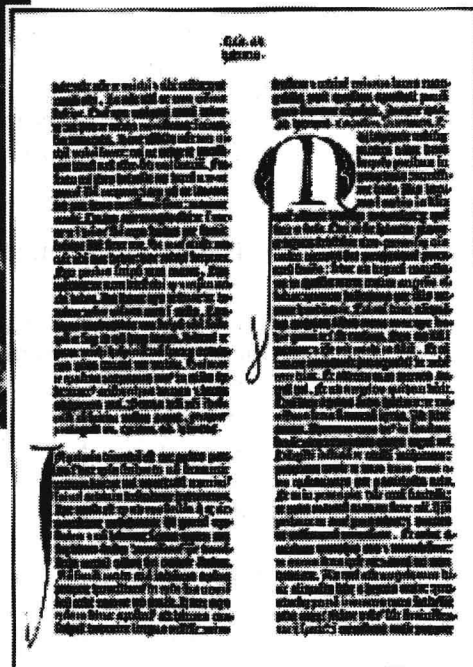
Because with Gutenberg's invention a page of movable type could be taken apart and the characters then used to compose a new page, the invention dramatically speeded the printing process. Previously, books were rare and expensive items. That changed dramatically with movable type. In the decade between 1450 and 1460, printers produced more than 4 million books. They were suddenly available to not just the wealthy, but to almost anyone who wanted one.

Western Europe abruptly changed from an oral society to a printed one. People no longer had to rely on memory. The spread of knowledge was immense. Practices in medicine, botany, and other scientific fields sped forward. Old ideas were challenged. It was not merely coincidence that Christopher Columbus became the first European to discover the American continents only forty-two years after Gutenberg had revealed his invention to the world. The spread of knowledge helped people share their ideas with large audiences, increasing curiosity and the desire to know more. Nor was it a coincidence that the Protestant Reformation began in full force only twenty-five years after Columbus' voyage of discovery. Martin Luther posted his famous "Ninety-Five Theses" on the door of the Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. He may have believed his challenge to the church would remain a local dispute, but quickly he became the world's first true mass communicator, as his arguments appeared in broadsides (single sheets printed on one side only) and booklets. In 1520 his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* had a circulation of more than 4,000. Within only a short time from its invention, movable type had convincingly demonstrated its capacity to help change the world.



Johann Gutenberg

Johann Gutenberg is the man most often credited with the invention of movable type. Below is a page from the Gutenberg Bible.



As with books, other forms of mass communication proliferated. Movable type made possible the convenient printing of broadsides, pamphlets, and other timely material. Throughout Europe an insatiable appetite for political news developed after the advent of printing. The prototype of the modern newspaper was born in Holland in the early 1600s. The Dutch began publishing *Corantos* ("currents of news") about 1618. Shortly thereafter, in 1665, there appeared the first English newspaper, the *Gazette* of Oxford, the university town. Founded as a mouthpiece for the government, it was a single sheet printed on both sides and appeared on a semi-weekly basis. Other newspapers soon followed, and English settlers in the North American colonies brought with them the thirst for news and knowledge.

That required, in their minds, printed material; and the Puritans of Massachusetts set up the first printing press in the colonies in 1638, less than a decade after arriving. Their first productions—mainly of books, pamphlets, and broadsides—appeared at a time when only small towns intruded into a region that was essentially a wilderness. The first attempt at a newspaper in America occurred in 1690, and during the first half of the next century almost every American colony had at least one newspaper. By the early 1800s, circulation was so widespread that foreign visitors described the United States as a "nation of newspaper readers."

Even with the great interest in printed material, however, a period of almost 400 years passed without seeing any real changes in the technology that Gutenberg had devised. It was not until the 1820s that alterations were made in the design of presses. At that time, Robert Hoe invented a printing press that replaced the flat pages of type with cylindrical pages and that was thus able to increase press speeds. Only in the 1870s did Ottmar Mergenthaler devise a machine to arrange the individual characters of type, thus finally replacing the hand-composition method that printers had used since 1450.

WHEN TODAY'S OLD TECHNOLOGIES WERE NEW

In the nineteenth century, however, new technologies introduced new means of communication. Morse's telegraph was the first. It was followed by such devices as the transatlantic cable, successfully laid in 1866, and Alexander Graham Bell's telephone in the 1870s. These inventions increased the speed of communication over distance, but they relied on wires connecting two points and as such did not provide mass communication.

It was with the invention of means of wireless communication in the twentieth century that mass communication saw another revolution on the scale of the one ushered in by printing. First, several inventors—most notably the Italian Guglielmo Marconi—produced "wireless telegraphy," which lent itself to the direct

development of radio. Then, starting in the 1920s, there came several inventions that led to the development of television.

Both radio and television became standard items in most homes, and each affected the way people ordered their lives. Newspapers, books, and magazines had the capacity to bring culture, entertainment, and information into homes; but radio could do the same thing almost instantaneously in even the most remote areas. Within a short time after television became a commercial medium in 1948, it became the center of many people's lives. The average person today spends more time watching television than going to school or participating in all other forms of recreation combined. The period from 1948 to the 1980s has been called "the television age."

The recent development of computer technology already has demonstrated its potential to bring about another communication revolution. One does not have to be a serious student of the subject to recognize the variety of ways that such technology is affecting the ways we live.

At the same time that the electronic media were appearing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other forms of mass communication were developing. Magazines and advertising both proliferated in the 1800s, bringing new kinds of reading material to the American public, informing them of new items they could buy, stimulating interest in new ideas, and encouraging the growth of an industrial economy. Motion film and sound-recording technology were both invented in the late 1800s, and they brought to mass communication and the public a huge emphasis on entertainment that neither had seen before. All four forms—magazines, advertising, film, and recording—grew in size throughout the twentieth century and today occupy major places in the communication and social landscapes.

While the forms of communication were increasing, it is not surprising that they played a number of significant roles in the affairs of humankind. Limited space here prevents us from examining them fully, but suffice it to say that mass communication became an integral part of human existence. We may take, as an example, the media's role in popular democratic government.

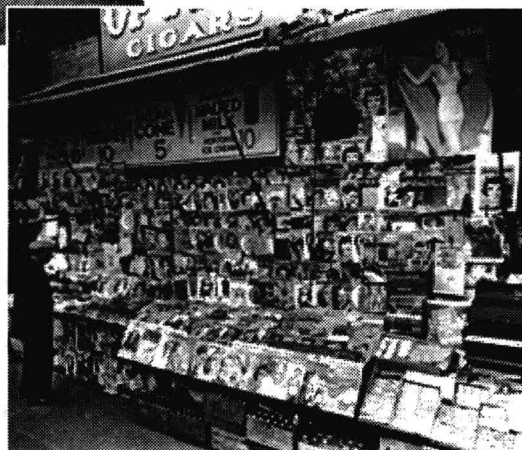
The thinking underlying a political democracy is that we, the ordinary people, are capable of governing ourselves. This concept is pointed out admirably in Chapter 4 of this book and in Prof. Steven Knowlton's accompanying essay on the media and popular sovereignty. In a democracy, it is a given that public opinion is indispensable.

The only effective means of appealing to public opinion in a large and complex society and involving it in the political system is the mass media. This has been true from the founding of popular government in England and, subsequently, in the English North American colonies, resulting in the world's first true democratic government, that of the United States.

One can make just as convincing a case for the importance of mass communication's importance in such areas as diverse as



Media publications have always been available to most Americans in abundance, as these photos of newsstands in New York City above (1903) and to the right (1935) attest. In the information age, with television, on-line information services, and the Internet, this abundance of mediated information has grown even more.



community cohesiveness at both the local and national levels, the growth of the national economy, the dissemination of ideas, the nature of a national character, community development, and many others. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of this book will introduce some of the most important such functions of mass communication.

It is not difficult to produce convincing evidence of the important roles that mass communication has played in the past. It is just as evident that it is an integral part of life today.

A VARIED COMMUNICATION LANDSCAPE

In *Mass Communication in the Information Age*, you will become acquainted with the variety of communication industries as they operate today. Written by experts on the various communication fields, chapters on such topics as advertising, television, public relations, and newspapers will provide you the information

and analysis that you need to understand mass communication today. You will find that virtually every field combines traditional approaches with new and continually changing ones. Let's consider some of the most important characteristics of mass communication today.

While we often refer to the major media in this country as "mass media," the term is actually becoming a rather inaccurate depiction. As a rule of thumb, the media are becoming less and less "mass media." Instead, they are becoming more and more "niche media" that direct their products to tightly defined audience segments.

Also, the number of media products available in the United States and throughout the world has increased dramatically. As an example, people in their 40s grew up with three or four television channels that they could access. Today, most basic cable systems offer nearly forty channels. This expansion in the availability of media choices has made the communication marketplace a highly competitive environment. As an example, the traditional television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) ruled the airwaves and captured nearly all of the TV viewers until the early 1980s. Then, with the widespread introduction of cable TV, that dominance dwindled as the likes of ESPN, MTV, and cable alternatives attracted viewers away from the networks.

THE MEDIA AS BUSINESSES

These changes can be consolidated into a simple definition to help understand the media of the United States today: *The media are businesses that produce formatted products for audience segments.* Let's examine the elements of this definition a little more to better understand the communication industries.

The media in the United States today, and increasingly in many parts of the world, are private businesses that must secure more income than expenses. If they don't, they will go out of business just like a hamburger stand that doesn't sell enough hamburgers to cover the restaurant's expenses.

As noted in Chapter 11 on advertising, media secure their revenues from two possible sources: advertisers and users. Radio and television (broadcast) secure 100% of their revenues from selling advertising to companies that want to reach radio listeners and TV viewers, while the recording and book industries secure 100% of their revenues from the sale of the actual products, such as CDs and tapes. Newspapers, magazines, cable television, and even films secure their revenues from a combination of advertising sales and "fees" from their users. Newspapers receive 78% of their revenues from advertisers and 22% from user subscription fees; magazines receive 60% of their revenues from advertisers and 40% from user subscription fees; cable television receives 12% of its revenue from advertisers and 88% from user subscrip-

tion fees; and films receive 5% of their revenues from advertisers and 95% from moviegoers.

As one can see, people in the media are under substantial business pressure to secure an audience that advertisers want to reach, or an audience base that is willing to use and pay for the media product, or, in some cases, a combination of both.

To secure this audience and/or user base, the media usually develop their products in today's marketplace based on research that attempts to identify interest levels and media behaviors of the potential users, the demographic composition of the audience (i.e., are they male or female, how old are they, etc.), and the lifestyles and personal characteristics of the given audience, which are typically called psychographic variables.

IMAGINE YOURSELF A RADIO STATION OWNER

As an example, let's imagine that you have an idea for a new reggae radio station in your town. First, you would use some type of research, typically a survey, to determine if people in your market are interested in that type of music. Let's assume the best ... 48% of your randomly selected survey respondents say they would love a reggae station in your town and would listen to it each day. Next, you analyze the data a little more, and you discover that the 48% who are interested are generally between the ages of 24 to 35, that they all make more than \$50,000 a year, and that they have a strong interest in action lifestyles, such as mountain climbing, wind surfing, fast cars, etc.

You develop a plan for your station, and you go to the local banker to secure funds to purchase a radio license and to set up your business. The banker likes the high interest levels in reggae music and agrees to lend you the money. Sounds easy so far, doesn't it?

Next, you would probably like to develop some type of daily schedule or format for your radio station. Again, you check your research data, and you discover that audience members will most likely listen to the station most during the morning as they get ready for work, when they drive to and from work, and when they have lunch during the day. Also, they tell you that they are often listening to the radio as a secondary activity, such as while they are driving or while they are getting dressed for work. Your research suggests that, in general, they want very short "bits" of information or music, such as a two-minute song followed by a weather update, followed by more songs, a little news, and other items.

Based on what they want, you set up your business, hire the needed personnel, and develop a format or daily "playwheel" that will not change much from day to day. As an example of this programming philosophy, think about David Letterman's television show. The basic format of the show is the same from night to night.

... Letterman does his monologue; then he introduces Paul; then the camera cuts to him at his desk; then he does something like the "Top 10 List"; then he goes to the first interview; and on and on. Each night the format of the show is basically the same, but naturally the jokes, the stunts, and the guests are not ... unless of course it's a rerun that's been on for the fifth time!

You, too, in designing your radio station's programming must develop a format that meets your potential listeners' needs and wants. Also, the format will save you a lot of time each day trying to decide what you'll put on your station. In a sense, you will not have to reinvent the wheel everyday; but you will have to decide what songs and information to put into the format segments each day.

So far, you've accomplished quite a bit. You've developed a viable product that 48% of the people in your town say they want and will listen to; you've sold the idea to a bank to get the start-up money; and you've used your research to develop the format of your product. Only one problem remains ... making money!

In radio, 100% of your revenue will come from advertisers who want to sell their products to your audience. So, you check your research and begin to make a list of all of the companies in town that have products geared to people 24-35 years of age who have fairly good incomes and who have "active" lifestyles. A few companies that come to mind are your local boating, mountain climbing, and sports car dealers. You set up meetings with the dealers, and, with your research in hand, you sell them on how your station is the best way to reach the people who buy their products. They are so impressed with your information and station that they give you all of their advertising business for the entire year!

Time to kick back and plan an early retirement in some tropical island!

If only it were so simple. The reality is that the media businesses of today are typically large corporations with lots of money that is required to play in today's media market. Second, the formats of today's media require significant amounts of research, testing, and funds to develop adequately. And, third, holding onto the interests and money of those audience segments is an extremely difficult and challenging task.

While our little success scenario sounds simple—and sometimes is—the more common scenario is much more complex. Let's take a brief look at this reality.

A CHANGING MEDIA WORLD

In the newspaper industry, large newspaper chains now dominate, producing many of the 1,556 dailies and 7,437 weeklies in this country. While industry profits average about 30%, the number of total adult readers has been dropping and the price of paper used in the industry has skyrocketed. What would you do to gain more adult readers and deal with the rising cost of paper?

Each year many new magazines attempt to capture the interests of a specialized niche market with a publication designed for that niche. Within three years 20% of those businesses fail. What would you do in terms of developing an idea, format, and marketing strategy to hold the interests of your readers and secure advertisers to keep one of these magazines afloat—not to mention what you would do about the ever rising cost of the paper to produce your product?

Regarding radio, suppose once you developed your reggae station, some big radio company came in and developed its own reggae station in your town. Unlike you, though, it had enough money to hire the best DJs and format specialists to develop a station that eats yours alive. Any ideas on how you could whip your competitor in the marketplace?

The penetration of cable television is now slightly over 66% in the United States, and the television industry (both broadcast and cable) is dominated by large corporations. Suppose you worked for a network programming department. What type of shows would you develop and market that could stop the new cable stations from “stealing” your viewers? Think, your job’s on the line!

In the movie industry, it now takes, on average, \$44 million to produce and market a film, and you need to make \$110 million just to break even. Suppose you were a big movie executive. Would you take a chance on an untried story idea or would you go with Rambo XV? The fourteen previous ones have made big bucks. The stakes are unbelievably high, and you have no time to delay your decision—which one are you going with? Your investors will only run you out of the business if you make the wrong choice!

The list of problems and challenges in this ever changing business goes on and on. We hope this book points to some of the things you need to understand and master today to make it in this very big and competitive business that produces very costly formatted products for an audience segment that is always looking for something new and better. The challenge is a formidable one. Study hard if you want to survive in this high-stakes game!

Oh, by the way, did we mention that all of the media equipment and the way media products are produced will change dramatically in the next few years? ... Better read on to learn about the future trends and how to survive them.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . .

What will the mass media be like in the future?

That question intrigues and occupies us all to some extent. We see the massive changes that have occurred during the last few years and wonder where things are going and even where things could go. Those changes include the development of the Internet as a means of sending and receiving information, the replacement of wax records with CD disks, the introduction of cable television

channels that are aimed at specific segments of the population, and the spate of "instant publishing" that occurs in the book industry when a major news event captures our attention. All of these changes and many others referred to in this book have made it easy to predict that change is in the future of the mass media. Things will be different in five, or ten, or twenty years than they are now. Many of those changes will be profound and far-reaching and will affect the way we live our lives and conduct our business.

What are some of these changes. Here are a few predictions that you can glean directly or indirectly from the chapters of this book:

The mass media are likely to become more accessible and interactive. That is, people will have more forms of media available to them, and they will be able to participate more directly in determining the content of those media. In some cases, consumers will be able to tailor the content of the mass media for their own needs and interests. The Internet and on-line information services have greatly speeded the delivery and accessibility of information to people, and technological developments will undoubtedly continue these trends.

Mass media organizations will have to adapt to a continually changing environment. This environment will include rapidly developing technological changes, some of which may be only temporary and others of which will be long-lasting. Technology is only part of the environment, however. Audience expectations and advertiser needs may also change, and media organizations will have to be flexible enough to respond.

People who work in the mass media will have to learn new skills to adapt to this changing environment. In many cases they will need to develop the specialized skills to meet a particular need while at the same time becoming more generally aware of the media environment, the audiences, and the other forces that influence the mass media.

Finally, the future is likely to see an increased significance of the mass media in the lives of individual citizens. More and more we will depend on them to help us to perform the daily tasks of life and to understand the world around us.

THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME . . .

Few of the changes that we will encounter in the near future are apt to be as profound as the invention of the printing press or the telegraph. Those technologies altered the way people behaved, as well as the way people looked at and thought about the world.

More likely, the changes that we will see will be incremental in nature—and rather than shifting our entire outlook and behavior, they will alter only some portion of our lives.

Consequently, after looking at some of the changes that are in the offing for the mass media, as we did in the previous section, we might examine what is likely to remain constant in the years ahead. Much of what we know about the mass media will not change. Here are a few of the constants about the media:

Most of the forms of the mass media that are in existence today will continue to be in existence for the foreseeable future. Much is made of the idea that electronic forms of the mass media will replace more tangible forms. For instance, when radio was introduced in the 1920s, many people predicted that we would stop reading books, newspapers, and magazines. When television began to appear in homes throughout the country in the 1940s and 1950s, many people predicted that we would stop listening to radio. None of that happened. Some studies indicate that we are reading more today than ever before. Despite what many people say today, newspapers are not about to go out of existence. They are still the only medium that delivers substantial local news and advertising to an audience that wants and needs them. Like every other medium, newspapers will have to adapt to new factors in the environment, but they show no evidence of being on the brink of demise.

The media, whether they be the Internet or books, will continue to be a source of information for people. Citizens of all nations will look to the media for information about their government, political system, and social and economic culture. Leaders in all segments of society will continue to use the media to disseminate their ideas. The cohesion of a community beyond the immediate surroundings of an individual will depend in great part on the availability and operation of the mass media.

The media will continue to be a source of entertainment for most citizens. The business of entertaining audiences is practiced efficiently by the mass media, and this practice will, if anything, grow more efficient in the days ahead. New ways of delivering entertainment will undoubtedly be found, but the basic entertainment function of the mass media will remain the same.

Parts of the mass media will continue to serve as condensers and presenters of information and ideas as they do now. At present, it is not enough to present raw information. That information must be processed and put into some comprehensible form. This is particularly true in the area of news, but it is also true with many of types of information. Media practitioners must analyze and interpret information. They will also have to put that information into forms of presentation that will be usable and satisfying to the audience.

All forms of the mass media will continue to need intelligent and creative people. Despite the increased dependence on computers to handle many of the tasks associated with the mass media, human beings will still make the important decisions
