

Mass Media

Mass media are means of communication that are used to reach the general public for the purpose of creating audiences for information, artistic expression, and other kinds of messages. Although the word *mass* suggests large numbers of people, the term is subjective, with standards of measurement relative to the normal capabilities of a given medium. For example, 1 million books sold nationally is more impressive than a national television audience of 1 million viewers. The word *media* is also commonly used as an aggregate noun to refer to the entire industry, often because of a perceived homogeneity or sameness of point of view.

Because the ability to reach large segments of the public is of great value in commerce, politics, and a society's culture, the mass media are usually controlled by corporations (as in the United States) or by national governments (as in China). The mass-media industry employs professionals to conceive, produce, promote, and deliver communication products that are specifically designed to meet the goal of attracting large audiences. These products may be sold as objects (such as books or digital videodiscs [DVDs]), exhibited for the price of a ticket or subscription (such as movies shown in cinemas or on premium or pay-for-view cable TV channels), or offered at no cash cost to consumers so as to create an audience for paid advertising (such as commercial television or radio broadcasts). Some of the mass media use combinations of these funding sources. For example, most newspapers and magazines are sold directly to the reader but depend on selling advertisements for their profitability.

No communication technology is inherently a mass medium but rather becomes one through usage. For instance, radio was invented at the end of the 19th century primarily for use as a two-way communication system to serve industrial shipping and naval operations. In the 1920s, however, corporate decisions were made by several major electronics manufacturers to mass-produce inexpensive radio receivers for retail sale and to operate radio stations as incentives for consumers to buy them. Thus radio broadcasting, a mass medium, was born; it quickly grew into the primary use of that medium. Television developed in the opposite way. It was first introduced to the general public as a mass medium in the late 1940s. Decades later, however, the development of supplementary appliances, such as the videocassette recorder (VCR) and the home video camera, allowed for its use as an interpersonal medium. The telephone is an example of a medium of interpersonal communication that remains, primarily, just that. It is only occasionally used as a mass medium, as when a telemarketer uses computers to automatically dial thousands of telephone numbers for the purpose of playing recorded messages. Similarly, letter writing has historically been an interpersonal medium, but the direct mailing of letters of solicitation, sometimes numbering in the millions, by post or by e-mail, constitutes the use of the letter as a mass medium.

History

Mass media are essentially an industrial-era phenomenon, although some historians argue that medieval European cathedral architecture functioned as a mass medium of religious communication by offering biblical stories and religious information to a largely illiterate population through the use of painting, sculpture, and other visual arts. The growth of the first commercial printing industry during the early 18th century, which sprang up around London's Grub Street, is more often cited as a beginning for mass media because of the recognizable economic system that was put into place. It was there that publishing found its early commercial applications, as hand-operated printing presses were used to produce and reproduce thousands of copies of inexpensive literary products, including novels ("penny-dreadfuls") and magazines, which were sold for profit to a growing audience of rudimentary readers. Previously, publishing had depended on the clergy or the aristocracy for funding, rather than

retail marketing.

A string of communication technologies were introduced during the 19th century, all of which accelerated the development of the mass media: the invention of the steam-powered printing press, coupled with increasing literacy rates, gave rise to mass circulation of newspapers and magazines, as well as to the mass production of books, including paperbacks. All three types of mass-produced print products were commonly available for sale in Europe and North America by the 1860s. Photography was invented in the 1820s, and methods for reproducing photographs in the print media were improved throughout the century, making such media ever more attractive to consumers. In addition, the development of still photography led to the invention of the motion picture, an entirely new means of communication that showed great potential for mass-media application.

The telegraph, invented in the 1830s and in practical use by the late 1840s, was perhaps the single most important invention in the history of mass communication. It revolutionized existing media by supplying newspapers and magazines with a continuous stream of news dispatches from the region, the nation, and, following the completion of the Atlantic cable in 1863, the world. Bolstered by the resources of the telegraphic wire services, newspapers and magazines achieved circulations numbering in the millions. Thus print became the first of the modern mass media. By the turn of the 20th century, other types of media were gaining public attention on this scale. Silent movies became increasingly popular during the early 20th century. Although entertainments, such as dramatic narratives, dominated the silent screen, informational genres of cinema, such as the newsreel and the documentary film, were also born at this stage of development. With the introduction of synchronous sound to feature films in 1927, attendance grew geometrically.

The phonograph emerged as a mass medium as well. Invented in 1877, it achieved wider use as electrification of homes allowed for replacement of hand-cranked mechanical models. Sales of recordings reached mass proportions during the 1920s as commercial radio was used to popularize musical genres, create hit songs, and make stars of artists. The first U.S. commercial radio station went on the air in 1920, and radio networks, linking stations in various parts of the country to carry a single program simultaneously, were first established in 1927. By the middle of the 20th century, newspapers, magazines, movies, phonograph records, and radio programs were conveniently available to most of the American population. Through sheer ubiquity, the mass media began to rival such traditional cultural determinants as family, education, and religion in providing information, art, and other aspects of cultural learning to many or most people. Some saw this as a natural and positive extension of democracy. Others criticized the mass media for failing to propagate existing culture and, instead, replacing it with a new mass culture based on consumerism at the expense of traditional or any other values.

During the 1950s, broadcast television emerged as the nexus of the mass media. Containing news, drama, cinema, music, and at least some content from all other mass media in a single, convenient home appliance, television's overwhelming functionality was soon dictating supplementary roles to other components of the mass media. Radio began to produce specialized programming, mostly music, for smaller target audiences as television absorbed general-interest entertainment, such as drama, comedy, and variety, which had been among radio's most popular attractions. Newspaper circulation had started to decline in the 1930s as radio journalism proved itself both faster and more popular. With the spread of television, the number of daily U.S. newspapers began to drop precipitously, leaving most cities with only a single newspaper publisher. Many general-interest magazines disappeared as well, as publishers sought smaller, specialized audiences that television did not serve. Motion-picture attendance declined in the face of television's at-home convenience.

The Mass Media Today

Evolving technologies continue to drive the development of the mass media. Instantaneous communication, a process that originated with the telegraph, reached a milestone with the successful

launchings of communications satellites into low Earth orbit. The first of these, *Telstar 1* (1962) orbited the Earth at a speed faster than the Earth revolves, allowing for "windows" of time when video and audio transmissions could be made within a shifting orbital footprint. Today, with dozens of high-capacity communications satellites in synchronous orbit, a reporter may attach a camera or microphone to a laptop computer and report live, via satellite, from virtually anyplace in the world to the studio of a mass-media company, which in turn can offer that live transmission to much of the world.

The nationwide dissemination of cable TV was a process that took decades because of the necessity of seeking legal franchises in virtually every municipality in the United States, one at a time. As cable subscription reached a saturation point in the late 1980s, the new mass medium began to remake television in much the same way that the introduction of television had remade radio and magazines. Cable channels seek smaller audiences with special target interests for advertisers specifically intent on reaching them.

The 1990s were marked by an explosive growth in online services for people who use computers, as well public access to the Internet. At first it was hoped by critics that the Internet might offer an alternative or even a counterforce to mass-media influence over public taste and public opinion with such interpersonal applications as e-mail, newsgroups, bulletin boards, and chat rooms. By the turn of the 21st century, however, the familiar model of mass-media development had reasserted itself over the new domain. Mass-media companies had become the dominant servers, extending their familiar brand names to this newest source of information and entertainment. The 2001 merger of Time Warner, an integrated mass-media company with holdings in publishing, cinema, television, radio, recording, and just about every other form of mass communication, with America Online (AOL), the largest Internet service provider, epitomized this trend. Meanwhile, marketers of all kinds monitored and eventually drove the development of interest groups as a way of creating retail audiences for products. For many Internet users, "interactivity" has become limited to shopping on commercial Web sites with credit cards.

Mass Media and Democracy

Mass-media ownership has been characterized by concentration of ownership through mergers and acquisitions. In the United States a consistent trend of deregulation since the 1980s has left most of the television industry, as well as other mass media, in the hands of fewer than a dozen companies and, at the same time, has relieved these companies of what used to be legal obligations to provide public-service programming. As a procession of new media continue to emerge from the laboratory, fewer communicators or, more important, fewer types of communicators are available to supply users with content. Besides the worldwide mass-media empire of AOL Time Warner, other companies with extensive holdings in dozens of communication media—such as General Electric, Westinghouse, News Corporation, and Bertelsmann Group—tend to compete with each other in like genres containing like messages and styles. Because the mass media, especially television, are the only sources of news for many individuals, political or social biases in the media sometimes force viewers to identify themselves in political terms—liberal, conservative, radical, reactionary—that have become largely metaphoric. The challenge to active participation in democracy is further compounded when the mass media seem to be in concert about which issues to cover. Some critics are hopeful that the inclusion of foreign-based news organizations will broaden the variety of American news coverage. There was some evidence of this during the 2003 Iraq War in radio and television coverage by the British Broadcasting Corporation. Foreign news services, however, are not likely to have a significant effect on domestic issues.

The Effects of Mass Media

Because of their central position as a source of cultural and social learning, the mass media are easily

—and often—blamed for many of society's ills. Some researchers believe that the mass media shape the way people view the world, especially when people have little direct experience; others point to the media as providing role models—positive and negative—imitated by members of the audience. The portrayal of violence in the media is perhaps the most prominent issue, but other behavioral areas are of concern. These arguments tend to be based on the supposition that the experience of the content presented by contemporary mass media differs in some qualitative way from other material that people have been exposed to since the beginning of social communication. Attempts to hold mass-media corporations legally responsible for the criminal acts of the consumers of their products have failed, and a general consensus has been reached that people will have to continue to be responsible for their own behaviors in the age of mass media.

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