Mass Communication

AN OPTIONAL CHAPTER TO ACCOMPANY

Understanding Human Communication

THIRTEENTH EDITION

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Mass Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1

Explain the differences among mass communication, mediated interpersonal communication, and converging communication media.

2

Describe the differences among the various theories of media effects.

3

Identify the differences between cultural studies and uses and gratifications.

Why study media? Most of us are inherently interested in the glamour and power of mass communication, and we enjoy learning about it in more depth. In addition, some want to explore the possibility of a media career. Others just want to be informed users of media. This chapter is designed to help you start analyzing how much **mediated communication** affects your life—sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse. As informed users, we can also make better sense of the criticisms heard daily about the media. Those criticisms range from the nearsighted ("the media have no influence") to the exaggerated ("the media are in total control; people are manipulated to the point that they have no free will"). Obviously some middle ground is more likely the case, but where does that middle ground lie?

Types of Mediated Communication

When most people talk about "the media," they are referring to channels of mass communication, such as television and radio. As you have seen throughout this book, however, not all media are mass, so we need to clarify some key terms before going any further. This chapter will focus on mass communication, but it is essential to differentiate that context from mediated interpersonal communication, and communication through converged media that are both mass and interpersonal in nature.

Mass Communication

As Chapter 1 explained, **mass communication** consists of messages that are transmitted to large, usually widespread audiences via broadcast means (radio, television), print (newspapers, magazines, books), multimedia (CD-ROM, DVD, the Internet, etc.), and other forms such as recordings and movies.

Mass communication differs from face-to-face varieties like interpersonal, small group, and public communication in several ways. First, because mass messages are aimed at large audiences, there is *little or no interaction* between senders and receivers. For example, anyone who has attended a musical performance by a familiar artist recognizes how the contact between entertainer and audience creates an experience quite different from hearing the same material on a recording or watching it on television. That's one reason people are willing to pay up to $100 for tickets to certain performances, but complain about the cost of a $0.99 download of a work by the same artist.

Another important difference between mass communication and face-to-face communication concerns *feedback*. In most forms of mass communication, feedback is restricted. You might be able to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or the author of your favorite website, but it could take a long time to receive a response. And if they didn't want to respond, they wouldn't feel the pressure to do so that they would in a face-to-face encounter.

The producers of mass messages are often called **gatekeepers** because they determine what messages will be delivered to media consumers, how those messages will be constructed, and when they will be delivered. Sponsors, editors, producers, reporters, and executives all have the power to influence mass messages.

Because of these and other unique characteristics, the study of mass communication raises special issues and deserves special treatment.

Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Mediated communication is any type of communication in which messages are conveyed via some form of interposed device, or **medium**, rather than face-to-face. Because *media* is the plural form of *medium*, we refer to the "print media" of books, magazines, and newspapers, the "broadcast media" of television

mass communication Interaction composed of messages that are transmitted to large, usually widespread audiences.

gatekeepers Producers of mass messages who determine what, how, and when messages will be delivered to media consumers.

mediated communication Any type of communication in which messages are conveyed via some form of interposed device rather than face-to-face.

medium An interposed device through which messages are conveyed; the singular of *media*.

and radio, the "entertainment media" of movies and recordings, and so on. In everyday use, the term *media* has taken on a second meaning, referring to the gatekeepers and decision makers in the mass media who determine what information will be conveyed to mass audiences, and how it will be presented. For instance, in popular use we talk about how "the media" treat public figures such as politicians and celebrities and how "the media" address social issues like sex or violence.

As discussed throughout this book, however, much *interpersonal* communication is also mediated. **Mediated interpersonal communication** does not involve face-to-face contact (even if you're Skyping or FaceTiming, you're only talking to a facsimile of that other face), but it can possess all of the qualities of personal interaction described in Parts 1 and 2 of this book.

There are differences between mediated interpersonal communication and mass communication. In the interpersonal variety, a message doesn't go out to a large audience, it isn't produced by professionals, and it allows a considerable amount of interaction and feedback.

> **Mediated interpersonal communication** Person-to-person interaction via an interposed device.

Converging Communication Media

The distinction between mass and interpersonal communication is much fuzzier today than in the past. For example, in many respects online communication resembles other forms of mass media. Individuals and organizations both can create websites that have the potential to reach thousands, or even millions, of computer users. In addition, many websites are created by professionals and are quite elaborate in nature, such as the portals of major corporations such as Google and Facebook, which are part home page, part search engine, and part news service.

On the other hand, the Web also possesses characteristics of interpersonal communication. Unlike most forms of mass communication, the Internet is a truly democratic medium: Anyone can set up a website and "broadcast" his or her opinions. Also, websites often invite visitors to submit queries and offer feedback via email—just like a more interpersonal medium. These characteristics have become extremely important to the generation of young people born since the 1980s. Sociologists call this group *millennials* (see the "Understanding Diversity" box on the next page).

Theories of Media Effects

Mass media are powerful forces in society. Interestingly enough, the average person will say that society is certainly affected by the media but that he or she, personally, is not. This is known as the *third-person effect*.[1] Still, most people remain extremely interested in media effects and equally confused about them. Do violent television and film cause violence in society? Does Internet use make us depressed? Do print media contribute to the moral decline in society? The best answer to these and most other media effects questions is, "It depends." Several researchers have pointed out that this answer is not as ambiguous as it might sound:

> The answer "it depends" should not be met with despair and a throwing up of the hands, however. The answer "it depends" does not mean that we do not know what is going on. In contrast to what we knew 40 or 50 years ago, we now have some more definite ideas of what "it" depends on.[2]

A quick look at some key theories will help explain the effects that media have on both societies and the individuals who compose those societies.

cultural idiom
    throwing up of the hands: admitting hopelessness

Convergence and Millennials

The millennials are the babies of the baby boomers, the huge generation born after World War II. Not all members of this or any other generation are the same, but one thing that distinguishes the millennials is the way most of them use media. They are the most technologically savvy generation in history. Thanks to the Internet, handheld computers, and cell phones, millennials have billions of facts literally at their fingertips. They like to watch television, but they barely recognize the concept of "prime time," instead downloading their favorite shows (without commercials) to DVRs, laptops, and smartphones.

They almost never buy newspapers or magazines, but get nearly all of their information from the Internet or their network of electronic contacts. They take broadband Internet access for granted.

This is a generation weaned on computer technology. They tinker comfortably with digital media—from creating websites and blogs to mixing their own music files—and they have constant access to their friends through text messaging and social networking.

Millennials find entertainment and information (and one another) through a wide variety of new media, including the latest versions of computers and smartphones. Many of these new media are products of convergence, the integration of previously separate forms of media.

Millennials are highly skilled at multitasking and teamwork. Shaped by the end of the Cold War, the explosion in technology, a new global economy, the events of September 11, and ongoing terrorism, they tend to be more sober-minded than those who came before them, and more willing to work within the system to effect change. Millennials are focused on achievement and have a respect for authority. They are less violent and less inclined to risky behavior than their parents were at the same age. Millennials drink less, use fewer recreational drugs, and smoke fewer cigarettes than earlier generations. They are more likely to go to college.[3]

It's no wonder that experts expect great things from this generation. As one set of authors predict, "The Millennial Generation will entirely recast the image of youth from downbeat and alienated to upbeat and engaged—with potentially seismic consequences for America."[4]

Not all of the traits of millennials are positive, however. Their English teachers feel that they've lost touch with the nuances of grammar and punctuation. They tend to possess notoriously short attention spans. One researcher coined the term *grasshopper mind* to describe the millennials' inclination to leap quickly from one topic to another.[5] Under intense pressure from their parents to succeed, and facing a new, more competitive world economy, they also feel more stress than earlier generations. Millennials are more prone to childhood obesity and depression.[6]

Perhaps more than anything, the millennials stand as proof that media have affected young people—and that those same young people are poised to change the world. If nothing else, this is a great argument for the idea that everyone needs to understand today's media effects.

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flow theories Theories that deal with the way effects travel from mass media to audiences.

bullet theory A theory that predicts that the media have direct, powerful effects.

cultural idioms

prime time: the 7:00–10:00 p.m. period when most people watch television

lost touch with: no longer know or be familiar with

Flow Theories

Some of the earliest theories of media effects, **flow theories**, dealt mainly with the way effects traveled, or "flowed," from the mass media to their audiences.[7]

Bullet Theory   Early mass media researchers, those who worked between World Wars I and II, developed an approach later termed **bullet theory**, which implied that the media had direct, powerful effects—like a bullet.[8] According to bullet theory, people who watched violent movies, for example, would become violent, and those who read "immoral" comic books would become immoral. The problem was that these powerful, direct effects were very difficult to prove, especially over the long term. Eventually, a different theoretical model evolved.

Two-Step Flow Theory   Research during and after World War II suggested that media's effects occurred in a **two-step flow**, meaning that media effects occurred mostly in interaction with interpersonal communication. Researchers

characterized two-step flow like this: A person would hear a message over the radio, perhaps a speech by a political candidate or a commercial message for a new type of laundry soap. Rather than immediately pledging support for the candidate or buying the soap, he or she would discuss it with **opinion leaders**—people viewed as credible sources of information on a particular topic. If the opinion leaders were positive about the candidate or product, the person who heard the original message might become a supporter.

Multi-Step Flow Theory   The researchers who devised the theory of two-step flow were moving in the correct direction—they just hadn't gone far enough. Today's researchers recognize a **multi-step flow**, which implies that media effects are part of a complex interaction.[9] In that interaction, opinion leaders have opinion leaders, who in turn have their own opinion leaders. You might be your friend's opinion leader about what sort of smartphone to buy, for example, but that friend probably formed his or her own opinions from other people.

Besides demonstrating how theories become more sophisticated as they are explored over time, flow theories demonstrate the importance of interpersonal communication in the effects of mass communication. They show that the mass media don't operate on us in a vacuum; rather, their effects are tempered by the way people communicate about those mediated messages to one another. Also, even though the bullet theory is largely discredited today, we still have daily examples of some types of mediated messages having the direct, powerful effects that early researchers predicted. Many products become overnight successes through television advertising, without enough time passing to give interpersonal communication much time to operate. A new blockbuster movie, for example, can earn tens of millions of dollars in box office receipts in its first weekend, based purely on advertising and reviews that appeared in the mass media. But for the great majority of mediated messages, effects depend largely on how they interact with interpersonal communication. After the first weekend that a movie is in the theaters, for example, its box office sales are determined largely by "word of mouth" communication. (Or through interpersonal online communication via social media.)

> **two-step flow**   A theory that predicts that media effects will occur mostly in interaction with interpersonal communication.
>
> **opinion leaders**   People viewed as credible sources of information on a particular topic.
>
> **multi-step flow**   A theory that views media effects as part of a complex interaction.
>
> **social learning theory**   A theory that predicts that people will learn how to behave by observing others, including others portrayed in the mass media.

cultural idiom

> **operate in a vacuum:** function as if there were no other individuals or influences

Social Learning Theory

Flow theories aren't the only approach to studying media effects. **Social learning theory** is based on the assumption that people learn how to behave by observing others—often others portrayed in the mass media. The theory gained prominence from the experiments of Albert Bandura in the 1960s.[10] In Bandura's most famous studies, nursery school children watched films in which an adult encountered Bobo, a 3-foot-tall pop-up clown. One group of preschoolers saw a version in which the adult beat up Bobo and was then rewarded for being a "strong champion." Others saw versions in which the adult assailant was scolded for being a bully and was spanked with a rolled up magazine. After watching the film, the children themselves then had a chance to "play" with Bobo. Bandura discovered that the children who saw the adult model's aggression being rewarded treated the Bobo doll more violently than those who saw the model punished.

The implications of social modeling are obvious. It's easy to imagine how a 13-year-old who has just seen the latest superhero movie might be inspired to lash out at one of his friends the first time a disagreement arises. However, the theory also suggests that viewing prosocial models can teach constructive behavior. The same 13-year-old, if he identified with one of the more nonviolent characters in a movie, might be inspired to use one of that character's nonviolent, communicative approaches to problem solving rather than his fists.

Social learning theory makes sense, and the original laboratory studies produced impressive results. But in everyday life the theory doesn't hold up quite so well.[11] After all, behavior that is modeled from the media might not be successful in the real world. For example, a 13-year-old who tries out his martial arts skills on the playground might be punched in the nose by a tougher adversary. The pain of that punch might do more to determine that child's attitude toward violence than all the television shows or movies he will ever watch.

Besides the power of real-life rewards and punishments, all individuals are different, and that plays a role in determining how people are influenced by media. For example, boys seem to be more influenced by violent media than girls are, whereas girls seem to be more influenced by the "body image" of their media models—they often try to be as slim as fashion models, an influence that boys generally escape. Observations such as these led to the development of individual differences theories.

Individual Differences Theories

As its name suggests, **individual differences theories** look at how media users with different characteristics are affected in different ways by the mass media.[12] Some types of users will be more susceptible to some types of media messages than are others. For example, a viewer with a high level of education might be more susceptible to a message that includes logical appeals. Besides one's level of education, individual differences that help determine how media affect individuals include age, sex, geographic region, intellectual level, socioeconomic class, level of violence in the home, and a wealth of other characteristics that were referred to as *demographics* in Chapter 11.

There are also more subtle psychological characteristics that distinguish media users. **Diffusion of innovations theory**, for example, explains that there are five types of people who have different levels of willingness to accept new ideas from the media.[13] These types also predict who will be the first to use and become competent in new media.[14]

1. *Innovators:* These are venturesome people who are eager to try new ideas. They tend to be extroverts and politically liberal. They are the first to try out and become competent in new media technology and social networking sites.

2. *Early adopters:* Less venturesome than innovators, these people still make a relatively quick but informed choice. This tendency makes them important opinion leaders within their social groups.

3. *Early majority:* These people make careful, deliberate choices after frequent interaction with their peers and opinion leaders. They seldom act as opinion leaders themselves, however.

4. *Late majority:* These people tend to be skeptical and accept innovations less often. When they do adopt an innovation, they often do so out of economic necessity or increasing peer pressure.

5. *Laggards:* These people tend to be conservative, traditional, and most resistant to any type of change. Their point of reference tends to be the past, and they tend to be socially isolated. Today, these are the people who are mystified by smartphones and might not even own a computer.

individual differences theory   A theory that predicts that media users with different characteristics will be affected in different ways by the mass media.

diffusion of innovations theory   A theory that predicts that different types of people will have different levels of willingness to accept new ideas from the media.

cultural idiom

to lash out at: to attack with words

Cultivation Theory

According to **cultivation theory**, media shape how we view the world. Cultivation theory therefore works hand in hand with the facets of perception discussed in Chapter 3. This theory helps explain how media sometimes distort a person's perceptions of the world.

Cultivation theory was advanced by George Gerbner and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania. This theory predicts that media will teach a common worldview, common roles, and common values. Over time, media "cultivate" a particular view of the world within users. For example, Gerbner's research found that heavy television viewers had a markedly different view of reality than light viewers. Heavy viewers overestimated their chances of being involved in some type of violence, overestimated the percentage of Americans who have jobs in law enforcement, and found people in general to be less trustworthy than did light viewers.[15]

Cultivation theory suggests that the primary effect of television, therefore, is to give heavy viewers a perception that the world is less safe and trustworthy, and more violent, than it really is. Gerbner's findings help explain why society seems to be becoming more tolerant of violence, a process known as **desensitization**. Researchers suspect that desensitization has a profound effect on interpersonal communication by making people care less about others' feelings and reactions.

Agenda Setting

In the 1970s, researchers Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs posted another important approach to media effects. Studying the way the media covered political campaigns, Shaw and McCombs found the main effect of media to be **agenda setting**: The media tell people not what to think but what to think *about*. In other words, the amount of attention given to an issue in the press affects the level of importance that media users assign to it. Shaw and McCombs explained their findings as follows:

> Perhaps more than any other aspect of our environment, the political arena—all those issues and persons about whom we hold opinions and knowledge—is second-hand reality. Especially in national politics, we have little personal or direct contact. Our knowledge comes primarily from the mass media. For the most part, we know only those aspects of national politics considered newsworthy enough for transmission through the mass media.[16]

The main thrust of agenda setting is that the media might not change your point of view about a particular issue, but they will change your perception of what's important.[17] Although Shaw and McCombs concentrated on political issues and the news media, the idea of agenda setting can easily be expanded to all issues and to all the media. In the minds of many people, if a social problem is not on television, in the newspapers, or on a website, it essentially does not exist. For today's researchers, the important point to make about agenda setting is that, once issues get attention with the public, they have a tendency to influence government policy.[18] Other observers are more concerned that profit-oriented media companies push sensationalized gossip more than substantive news at their audiences. Thus, the agenda is set for the importance of, say, the dance routines of Miley Cyrus, leaving little time for news of national policies that affect world peace.

One of the effects of a 500-channel cable television industry is that viewers of different political stripes set different agendas depending on the media they prefer. Thus, viewers of Fox News tend to have a radically different political agenda from viewers of CNN or MSNBC.

cultivation theory   A theory that predicts that media shape our view of the world more than our behavior.

desensitization   The process of becoming more tolerant of violence within society.

agenda setting   A theory that states that the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance consumers assign that issue.

cultural idiom
hand in hand: in close association

Cumulative Effects Theory

Not everyone agrees with the agenda setting theory. Some point out that the media do, indeed, tell us *what* to think, but they do it slowly, over time. This has come to be called **cumulative effects theory**, which states that media messages are driven home through redundancy and have profound effects over time.

According to this theory, the media latch on to certain themes and messages and build them up over time. There is a bandwagon effect as various newspapers, magazines, television and radio networks, and other media take up the theme. Because the media are omnipresent and such a common part of most people's lives, the media view becomes the widely accepted one within society.

According to this theory, a "spiral of silence" occurs when individuals with divergent views become reluctant to challenge the consensus offered by the media. People form unconscious perceptions of the distribution of public opinion. If they feel they are in the minority, they are less likely to express their opinions. People who hold majority viewpoints tend to speak out confidently. For example, in times of war some people might become concerned about civilian casualties inflicted on the other side, but they won't speak out about this issue if they feel most people disagree.

cumulative effects theory   A theory that predicts that media will have a profound effect over time.

cultural studies   Research that examines the long-term effects of media on society in general.

Manifestation of Effects

Many researchers have pointed out that some media effects are not readily observable. They claim that media exposure is always affecting us, whether or not we realize it. This is referred to as a *baseline effect*. The baseline effect is subtle but relatively constant. Media exposure also causes some short-term fluctuations, such as when a movie makes us feel sad or an ad catches our attention. Most of these fluctuations will not be noticeable to others, and perhaps not even to us. They are below what researchers call the *manifestation level*. Occasionally, however, a fluctuation will go beyond the manifestation level and be observable, such as when a movie makes us cry or an ad convinces us to buy a product. One expert in media literacy uses the diagram in Figure 1 to demonstrate this characteristic of media effects.

FIGURE 1 Observable and Unobservable Media Effects. The baseline reflects media's constant impact, which is not observable. Fluctuations become observable when they reach the manifestation level.

Cultural Studies

All the theories we have discussed so far stress the media's effect on individuals, but these same media appear to have significant long-term effects on entire cultures. The role that the media play in changing us as a society is difficult to measure. Rather than relying on statistical analyses and controlled experiments, **cultural studies** rely on "close reading" of messages from the mass media. Media critics examine the meanings—both surface and hidden—of these messages and then use logic and insight to come to certain conclusions about the effect those messages might have on their audiences. Cultural studies examine the role that media play in reflecting and shaping society's most widely and deeply held values in areas such as class, race, and gender.

Cultural theorists explore the *invisible ideology*, or belief system, that is embodied in media programming and use. They ask questions about the nature of masculinity, femininity, individualism, capitalist economics, and education, among

cultural idioms

drive home: emphasize forcefully
bandwagon effect: support for a cause that quickly grows

other topics. Does a television program affirm a particular lifestyle as natural? Does a movie advance a preferred way of viewing the world? Does an ad campaign make a statement about social roles? If a particular worldview is being advanced, who is being served by this view? In short, what *meanings* does this mediated message present? Some cultural theorists abandon the goal of impartiality that characterizes the social sciences, criticizing some social practices and suggesting what they believe are better alternatives.

There are a wide range of cultural approaches, including (but not limited to) gender analysis and political economic analysis.

Gender Analysis

Gender analysis examines how the media construct and perpetuate gender roles. Our culture's assumptions about how men, women, and children should think, act, and speak are continually presented in our mediated messages. The potential influence of these genre portrayals on our sense of who we are and who we should be is the realm of consideration of gender critics. They study the ways that gender stereotypes are confirmed and contradicted, and how media legitimize the language we use to describe gender and sex roles.

> **gender analysis** Research that examines how the media construct and perpetuate gender roles.

For example, Caren Deming and Mercilee Jenkins examined the gender roles advanced in the classic television sitcom *Cheers*.[19] Their method was a close reading of just one episode of the series, which happened to be the premiere. These researchers found that the show contradicted certain gender stereotypes through dialogue and visual imagery. The study showed how the character Diane Chambers (played by Shelley Long) used humor as a tool of resistance and succeeded in asserting her individuality in the face of attempted domination. Deming and Jenkins demonstrated how a sitcom like *Cheers* can refute the rules that subjugate people and can therefore have a liberating effect on its audience.

More recently, a group of researchers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, examined the gender roles that were advanced in television commercials. They found that when men were depicted doing housework, their actions were "often humorously inept as measured by negative responses from others, lack of success, and unsatisfactory outcomes."[20] These researchers assert that males, including young men, learn their gender roles at least partially from television commercials, and that these depictions teach them that housework is inappropriate as part of a male gender role.

Several other gender theorists have looked at the effects of media. Cheris Kramarae proposes a "muted group" theory, which she explains as follows:

> The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men.[21]

Kramarae examines the media to see how language is "man-made," and how it "aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women."[22] Another feminist scholar, Carol Gilligan, presents a theory that men and women speak in a different ethical voice.[23] Her "different voice" theory posits that men define moral maturity in terms of justice, whereas women define it in terms of caring. Researchers who follow Gilligan's thinking look at mediated messages to see how those messages encourage this different voice.[24]

Political Economic Analysis

Much of today's political economic analysis is based on the work of the philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883). To Marxist media critics, Marx was a humanist whose argument was essentially a moral one. Marx believed that the economic system of a nation (in the case of the United States, capitalism) influenced the values of the entire culture (in our case, encouraging materialism, which is the craving for money and what it can buy). **Political economic analysis** is a critical technique that focuses on media's role in this influence. It looks at how media become the means by which the haves of society gain the willing support of the have-nots to maintain the status quo.

Marxist critics believe that media help create a "false consciousness" within the working/consuming class that enables the wealthy, who benefit most from the social arrangements in a capitalist country, to manipulate and exploit the working/consuming class. One expert on this type of analysis summed it up in this way:

> The most frequent theme in Marxist cultural criticism is the way the prevalent mode of production and ideology of the ruling class in any society dominate every phase of culture, and at present, the way capitalist production and ideology dominate American culture, along with that of the rest of the world that American business and culture have colonized.[25]

According to Marxist theory, workers in a capitalist society are kept in a constant state of dissatisfaction. To escape from this dissatisfaction (which they do not recognize as a condition, but the symptoms of which they feel), they engage in various forms of consumption, all of which cost money, so that they are forced to work increasingly hard to escape from the effects of their work. The dissatisfaction generated by a capitalist system is therefore functional, for it encourages the impulsive consumption that enables capitalism to thrive.

In a Marxist analysis, the mass media perform the function of distracting people from the realities of their society (poverty, racism, sexism, and so on). The argument is that powerful commercial forces cloud the minds of the public with ideas such as "I feel better when I buy something." By doing so, they perform the function of maintaining the dominance of those already in positions of power.

political economic analysis A critical technique that focuses on media's role in the process by which an economic system influences the values of a culture.

cultural idiom

haves of society: wealthy people

have-nots: poor people

cloud . . . minds: prevent people from thinking clearly

Marxist theory has led to many interesting insights about mass media. For example, two researchers looking at Muzak, the type of instrumental music we hear in elevators and department stores, pointed out that this type of "functional music," which was originally used in factories to control and regulate work, is now used in stores and malls to control and regulate consumption.[26]

Other researchers have shown that the Harry Potter films have encouraged materialism and consumerism, even though those messages were not primary in the books on which the movies were based. The researchers attribute this tendency to Time Warner's corporate ownership of the film rights.[27]

One of the best-known political economic critics is Stuart Hall. Hall's work attacks "the unknowing acquiescence to the dominant ideology of the culture"[28] and urges resistance to that acquiescence. He seeks to raise consciousness about media's role. Hall does not claim a widespread establishment conspiracy to oppress the poor and the powerless; he accepts this oppression as a seldom-recognized part of the economic system of both the country and the media. In recent years, his work has sought to bring together various forms of cultural criticism, saying that gender, semiotics, and political economy are all part of the "representations" of the media, and that those representations are what produce media's overall effect.[29]

How We Use the Media

All the theories we have explored so far have characterized media consumers as passive, being acted upon by various types of media, their content, and their creators. But instead of analyzing media effects, another group of scholars has developed **uses and gratifications theory**: the study of ways in which media consumers actively choose and use media to meet their own needs.[30] Uses and gratifications research doesn't regard consumers as passive creatures whose behaviors are controlled by the media industry. Instead, it views them as decision makers who choose—sometimes deliberately and sometimes less consciously—which media to use and how to use them.

uses and gratifications theory   The study of ways in which media consumers actively choose and use media to meet their own needs.

Media Consumers as Active Agents

The difference between a uses and gratifications perspective and the other approaches we have explored so far becomes clearer when we look at how each might explore a media phenomenon such as professional wrestling. Millions of people are devoted followers of this combination sport and theatrical performance. Media effects researchers concerned with violent behavior might study the relationship between watching wrestling and aggression. For example, they might study whether wrestling fans get in more fistfights, or whether they are more likely to act violently with their spouses or children. If they did discover a link between watching wrestling and perpetrating physical violence, media effects researchers would try to sort out the causal relationship between the two phenomena: whether, for example, wrestling causes people to behave more violently, or whether people with violent personalities are attracted to wrestling. Cultural studies scholars might analyze how wrestling perpetuates violence in culture, how corporate interests exploit the wrestlers and their fans, or how the sport contributes to a male-dominated society.

By contrast, a uses and gratifications approach to wrestling would not concern itself with the effects of viewing the sport. Instead it would explore what motivates fans to watch wrestling in the first place and what needs wrestling fans are satisfying by watching matches. A uses and gratifications approach underscores the active role of media consumers. It regards them as decision makers rather than puppets who are driven by unconscious forces or manipulated by media producers.

Unless you are a wrestling fan yourself, you might wonder why anyone would watch more than a few minutes of this obviously phony "sport." A uses and gratifications perspective offers some answers to this question. Depending on his or her interests and attitudes, a viewer might tune in to a match for a number of reasons. One might be *excitement*: Gullible viewers might find excitement, wondering which valiant combatant will win the contest. More sophisticated fans might watch matches for *amusement*: The over-the-top costumes, names, and mock aggression provide plenty of laughs for viewers who view the matches as a joke instead of a genuine athletic event. A third reason for tuning in to matches might be *catharsis*: Watching muscular brutes slam one another to the canvas might be a better way of letting off steam than yelling at the family or kicking the cat. Another reason to watch wrestling might be *escape*: For some fans, a wrestling match might be just the way to forget about the problems and challenges of the real world.

If you smugly dismissed the thought of watching wrestling for *any* reason, consider the fact that you probably consume other types of media for the same sorts of reasons. Do you read novels? Maintain a Facebook profile? Listen to sporting events on the radio or watch them on TV? Tune in to dramas or comedies? Watch films? If so, a little reflection will probably reveal that your reasons for consuming each type of media probably resemble some of the ones in the list above.

Our brief look at professional wrestling should help you see the difference between the questions asked by media effects researchers and those posed by scholars who study uses and gratifications. The first group asks, "What effects do media have *on* people?" whereas the second asks, "What do people do *with* media?"

Types of Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications approach suggests several ways in which people use media:

Surveillance Scholars use the word *surveillance* to describe our need to keep informed about the world. In earlier, simpler times, surveillance needs could be met mostly through person-to-person contacts. But in the first decades of the 21st century, our fates are linked to people and forces that we cannot understand through direct personal experience. In this postindustrial world, mass media are an important tool in helping us understand what is going on around the world, as well as closer to home.

Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet provide a variety of ways to meet surveillance needs: What are the latest developments in the Mideast? What will the weather be like tomorrow? How is the stock market doing? Does daylight saving time begin this weekend or next? What's the cost of an airline ticket to Mexico City? Media provide quick and easy ways to answer questions like these.

Diversion Sometimes we use the media to *escape* from the pressures of the real world. Escape sometimes comes via *relaxation*. You might, for example, tune in to your favorite FM radio station, seeking music that helps you calm down after a stressful day. At other times, we seek diversion by *excitement*, such as watching a suspenseful movie.

Passing Time On some occasions, we use media to fill idle time. Consider the way you browse through magazines while waiting in the doctor or dentist's reception room: You probably aren't looking for news or diversion as much as a way to fill the minutes until your appointment. Likewise, think about the times you use the radio in your car or at home to fill in time while you are commuting or doing chores.

Social Integration In an age of social networking and online romances, it shouldn't be a surprise that computer-mediated communication has the potential to bring people closer together. On the other hand, it might seem paradoxical or even

cultural idioms
over the top: bizarre
letting off steam: releasing tension

downright wrong to suggest that watching TV, listening to an iPod, or reading a book promotes involvement with others. Uses and gratifications scholars suggest that the media can help us connect with others in several ways.

At the most obvious level, shared knowledge in media programming and publications provides what researchers have called an immediate "agenda for talk." Swapping news and opinions about current events can provide a useful way to develop relationships with strangers, and to maintain them with acquaintances.

The ability of the media to provide conversational currency helps explain why going to the movies is such a common first date. It provides an activity in which two people who barely know each other can spend several hours together while minimizing the risk of running out of things to say. The first part of the date is spent in close proximity without the need to speak at all, whereas the second part of the date can be spent discussing the film.

Some research even indicates that television can be a tool for promoting family unity. For example, research suggests that TV viewing can bring family members together when they otherwise would have been apart.[31] Furthermore, television has the potential to reduce family conflict by providing a shared enjoyable experience ("Hey, we're all laughing together!"), by diverting attention from contentious issues, and by providing a neutral topic to discuss.

Identity Management   Along with all their other functions, media also provide a tool for creating and managing our identities.[32] From an early age, children get a sense of who they are from media. Am I rich or poor, attractive or ugly, intelligent

or not, similar to or different from others? Questions like these are answered in part by consuming media that give a child—and adults, too—a sense of how they fit into the world.

What we do with media also helps us define how we want to be seen by others. People often choose media to support a public identity. Imagine, for instance, how the choice of the music you play when hosting company at home makes a statement about who you are. Perhaps you can recall how, as an adolescent, you deliberately chose music, films, or television programming that would set you apart from your family and make the statement, "I'm my own person."

Different Theories, Different Observations

Different theories of media effects would explain changes in society in different ways. The way language is used, for example, has certainly changed in recent years. Terms that were once considered obscene have become commonplace. Most experts believe that media have played a role in this transformation. Years ago, the media encouraged the use of only "proper" language. For many years, the word *pregnant* was not uttered on television, even by Lucille Ball, whose character on *I Love Lucy* was obviously in that condition. Today, words that used to be considered bad enough to get a kid kicked out of school—words such as *sucks*, *bites*, and *blows*, used as verbs of criticism—can be heard routinely on Saturday morning cartoons.

How would the various theories explain media's role in the way language has changed?

- The findings from social learning research might suggest that these changes in language usage occurred as people imitated the language they heard in movies and on TV.
- Individual differences theory might suggest that the same language will affect different people in different ways, and that perhaps only segments of the population who were predisposed to it would adopt the new language use.
- Cultivation theory might suggest that media language use slowly changes individuals' worldviews, perhaps convincing them that society in general has become more coarse and that such language use is therefore acceptable.
- Agenda setting theory might suggest that news coverage of sexual scandals made sexual affairs part of the national agenda, and therefore grist for everyday conversation.
- Cumulative effects theory might suggest that language changed when those who believed in using only socially acceptable terms became silent in the face of the continual mediated use of obscenity.
- Gender analysts might see these changes in language use as a way for women to seek equality with men, or perhaps as a form of oppression against women.
- Political economic analysts might regard the new language use as a successful assault on the repressive status quo.
- Uses and gratifications theory might suggest that people have attended to media messages with this type of language because it performs some function for them, perhaps freeing them from societal restraints that they found repressive.

All of these theories provide insights into media effects. They might be different insights, but taken as a whole and mixed with logic, they begin to help make sense out of the question of how media affect behavior.

This variety of theories also demonstrates that it is usually ill advised to make blanket criticisms and blanket statements about media uses and effects. It is an oversimplification to say, "Violent television causes violence in society" or "Skinny models encourage girls to be anorexic" without qualifying that statement with some form of "It depends." Each of the theories discussed in these pages (as well as many others) has revealed that the uses and the effects of media are many and complex.

MAKING THE GRADE

For more resources to help you understand and apply the information in this chapter, visit the *Understanding Human Communication* website at www.oup.com/us/adleruhc.

OBJECTIVE 1   Explain the differences among mass communication, mediated interpersonal communication, and converging communication media.

- Mediated communication—the sharing of messages that are conveyed through any type of interposed device, or medium—includes mass communication, mediated interpersonal communication, and converging media.

- Forms of mass communication (such as television programming) are aimed at large audiences. There is little or no interaction between senders and receivers, feedback is restricted, and gatekeepers control the messages.

- In mediated interpersonal communication (such as talking or texting via cell phone), a message doesn't go out to a large audience, and it isn't produced by professionals. This form of communication allows a considerable amount of interaction and feedback.

- Converging media (such as the various ways we use social media) are both mass and interpersonal in nature.
  - > Why are the distinctions among types of mediated communication important in the study of interpersonal communication?
  - > Which forms of media are most important in your own life? Why?

OBJECTIVE 2   Describe the differences among the various theories of media effects.

- An early theory now known as *bullet theory* predicted that the media would have direct effects. Although this is true in some cases, the media's powerful effects more often result from a combination of mediated and interpersonal

messages, especially from those we consider opinion leaders. This explanation of media effects has come to be known as the *multi-step flow theory.*

- *Social learning theory* is based on the assumption that people learn how to behave by observing others, particularly role models in the media.

- *Individual differences theory* states that media users with different characteristics are affected in different ways by the mass media. This view helps inform predictions derived from social learning theory.

- A similar theory, *diffusion of innovations*, explains that different types of people have different levels of willingness to accept new ideas from the media.

- One of the more sophisticated theories of media effects, *cultivation theory*, predicts that media shape and sometimes distort our view of the world. Heavy viewers of television, for example, tend to see the world as less trustworthy than do light viewers.

- *Agenda setting* suggests that media tell us what to think *about*. The amount of attention given to an issue in the press affects the importance that mass media consumers assign to it.

- *Cumulative effects theory* suggests that media have profound effects over time.
  - > Which theory best explains the impact media have in your own life? Why?
  - > Which theory best explains the impact media have on society in general?

OBJECTIVE 3   Identify the differences between cultural studies and uses and gratifications.

- Cultural studies look at the long-term effects of media on society in general. They rely on a close analysis of mediated messages rather than statistical studies.
  - > One type of cultural study, gender analysis, examines how the media construct and perpetuate gender roles.

> Another type of cultural study, political economic analysis, examines how media affect the relationship between a nation's economic system and national values. It looks at how media become the means by which the haves of society gain the willing support of the have-nots to maintain the status quo.

- By contrast, uses and gratifications theory looks at the ways media consumers actively choose and use media to meet their own needs. These needs include surveillance (keeping informed about the world), diversion (escaping from the pressures of the real world), passing time (filling idle moments), social integration (bringing people closer together), and identity management (creating and managing our sense of who we are).

- All of these theories, when taken together, provide a broad understanding of the many different effects of media in the lives of individuals and in society overall.

  > How would gender studies explain some of the media effects you observe in society?

  > How would political economic analysis explain different media effects?

  > In what ways do media satisfy your own needs?

KEY TERMS

agenda setting p. 9

bullet theory p. 6

cultivation theory p. 9

cultural studies p. 10

cumulative effects theory p. 18

desensitization p. 9

diffusion of innovations theory p. 8

flow theories p. 6

gatekeepers p. 4

gender analysis p. 11

individual differences theory p. 8

mass communication p. 4

media p. 4

mediated communication p. 4

mediated interpersonal communication p. 5

medium p. 4

multi-step flow p. 7

opinion leaders p. 7

political economic analysis p. 12

social learning theory p. 6

two-step flow p. 6

uses and gratifications theory p. 13

ACTIVITIES

1. **Media in Your Life** What is the effect of media in your own life? Estimate the amount of time you spend on an average day with all media types—including social media, news, phone calls, texts, online games, articles, books, magazines, movies, music recordings, radio, and TV. When you have finished your estimate, answer these two questions:

   a. Do you consider yourself a heavy, light, or moderate media user?

   b. Are media very important, moderately important, or not very important to you? Why?

2. **Media Fast** Could you survive 24 hours with no media? Make an attempt to give up all forms of media, including your cell phone, for one day. Write a brief essay explaining why you were or were not successful, and how you felt about the experiment. In what ways did your life change?

3. **Mass Media Theories and You** Review the theories of mass media effects discussed in this chapter. In your opinion, which theory or theories best explain the impact of mass media in your own life? Why?

4. **Exploring Research** Search online for sites related to current media research, such as www.cios.org (the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship). Write a brief summary of one of the reports posted, and explain the potential impacts of the findings.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Banning, S. A. (2006, Winter). Third-person effects on political participation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 83*(4), 785–800.
2. Severin, W. J., & Tankard, J. W., Jr. (1997). *Communication theories: Origins, methods, and uses in the mass media* (4th ed.). New York: Longman, p. 322.
3. Kissing, M. (2005, June 5). The millennials. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Retrieved from http://www.jsonline.com.
4. Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage, p. 4.
5. S. Papert of MIT's Media Lab, cited in Olsen, S. (2005, November 18). The "Millennials" usher in a new era. *CNET News*. Retrieved from news.cnet.com.
6. Reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cited in Kissing (2005).
7. O'Sullivan, P. B. (1999, June). Bridging the mass-interpersonal divide: Synthesis scholarship. *Human Communication Research, 25*(4), 569–589.
8. The name *bullet theory,* as well as the alternate names *hypodermic needle theory* or *transmission belt theory,* was used not by the early researchers who performed these studies but by later theorists. See DeFleur, M. L., & Ball-Rokeach, S. (1989). *Theories of mass communication* (5th ed.). New York: Longman, pp. 145–166. See also Severin & Tankard (1997), pp. 297–298.

9. See, for example, Sandman, P. M., Rubin, D. M., & Sachsman, D. B. (1982). *Media: An introductory analysis of American mass communications* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 4–5.

10. These and other social learning experiments are reported in Bandura's seminal book, Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. See DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach (1989), pp. 112–116, for more on this study and social learning and modeling theory.

11. See, for example, Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. K. (1995). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, p. 206.

12. See DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach (1989), pp. 172–186.

13. Diffusion of innovations theory is attributed primarily to E. Rogers; see Rogers, E. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press. See also Severin & Tankard (1997), pp. 238–239. This research perspective continues to be the foundation for important research. See, for example, Valente, T. W. (1993, Winter). Diffusion of innovations and policy decision-making. *Journal of Communication, 43*(1), 30–45; or Meyer, M., Johnson, J. D., & Ethington, C. (1997, Spring). Contrasting attributes of preventive health innovations. *Journal of Communication, 47*(2), 112–131.

14. See, for example, Jeffres, L., & Atkin, D. (1996, Summer). Predicting use of technologies for communication and consumer needs. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 40*(3), 318–330. See also Adams, T. L. (1997, Winter). Follow the yellow brick road: Using diffusion of innovations theory to enrich virtual organizations in cyberspace. *Southern Communication Journal, 62*(2), 133–148.

15. Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., & Signorielli, N. (1994). Living with television: The cultivation perspective. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 17–41). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. See also Severin & Tankard (1997), pp. 299–303.

16. Shaw, D., & McCombs, M. (1977). *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press.* St. Paul, MN: West Publishing, p. 7.

17. The way these theories converge can be seen in studies such as Brosius, H., & Weimann, G. (1996, October). Who sets the agenda? Agenda-setting as a two-step flow. *Communication Research, 23*(5), 561–580. This research examined news items on German television and found that issues tend to flow from the public to the media and within the public.

18. See, for example, Dearing, J. W., & Rogers, E. M. (1996). *Agenda-setting.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, especially Chapter 5.

19. Deming, C., & Jenkins, M. (1991). Bar talk: Gender discourse in *Cheers.* In L. R. Vande Berg & L. A. Wenner (Eds.), *Television criticism: Approaches and applications* (pp. 47–57). New York: Longman. A similar type of study can be found in Steinke, J. (1998, Winter). Connecting theory and practice: Using women scientist role models in television programming. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 42*(1), 142–151.

20. Scharrer, E., Kim, D. D., Lin, K., & Liu, Z. (2006). Working hard or hardly working? Gender, humor, and performance of domestic chores in television commercials. *Mass Communication & Society, 9*(2), 215–238.

21. Kramarae, C. (1981). *Women and men speaking.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, p. 1.

22. See Kramarae (1981).

23. Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

24. See, for example, Cohen, J. (1997, Fall). Parasocial relations and romantic attraction: Gender and dating status difference. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 41*(4), 516–529.

25. Lazere, D. (1977, April). Mass culture, political consciousness and English studies. *College English, 38*, 755–766.

26. Jones, S., & Shumacher, T. (1992, June). Muzak: On functional music and power. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 9*, 156–169.

27. Waetjen, J., & Gibson, T. A. (2007, March). Harry Potter and the commodity fetish: Activating corporate readings in the journey from text to commercial intertext. *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies, 4*(1), 3–26.

28. See Kramarae (1981).

29. See, for example, Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

30. Baran and Davis provide a concise, readable overview of uses and gratifications theory. See Baran & Davis (1995), Chapter 10, "Using Media: Theories of the Active Audience," pp. 210–275.

31. Lull, J. (1990). *Inside family viewing.* London: Routledge, pp. 35–46.

32. Grodin, D., & Lindlof, T. (Eds.). (1996). *Constructing the self in a mediated world.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.