



Sociology Central

The Mass Media

1. Defining the Mass Media

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Introduction

The focus of this opening section is an examination of different explanations of the relationship between ownership and control of the mass media and, in order to do this, we need to begin by thinking about how the mass media can be defined.

Defining Mass Media

A medium, is a 'channel of communication' a means through which people send and receive information. The printed word, for example, is a medium; when we read a newspaper or magazine, something is communicated to us in some way. Similarly, electronic forms of communication television, telephones, film and such like are media (the plural of medium).

Mass means 'many' and what we are interested in here is how and why different forms of media are used to transmit to and be received by large numbers of people (the audience).

Mass Media, therefore, refers to channels involving communication with large numbers of people. This is traditionally seen as 'one-to-many' communication 'one' person (the author of a book, for example), communicates to many people (their readers) at the same time. This deceptively simple definition does, of course, hide a number of complexities such as, how large does an audience have to be before it qualifies as 'mass'?

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Distance: Communication between those who send and receive messages (mediaspeak for information) is impersonal, lacks immediacy and is one way (from the producer/creator of the information to the consumer/audience). When I watch a film, for example, no matter how emotionally involved I become in the action, I can't directly affect what's unfolding on the screen.

Technology: Mass communication requires a vehicle, such as a television receiver, a method of printing and so forth, that allows messages to be sent and received.

Dutton et al (1998) suggest that, traditionally, the mass media has been differentiated from other types of communication (such as interpersonal communication that occurs on a one-to-one basis) in terms of four essential characteristics:

Commodification: An interesting feature of mass communication in our society at least is that it comes at a price. I can watch football on TV, for example, if I can afford a television, a license fee (to watch BBC or ITV) or a subscription to something like Sky Sports if it's on satellite or cable.

Scale: One feature of a mass medium, as we've noted, is it involves simultaneous communication with many people; for example, as I sit in my living room watching Chelsea play Manchester United on TV, the same behaviour is being reproduced in thousands of other living rooms across the country.

Whereas in the not-too-distant past it was relatively easy to identify a range of "mass media", nowadays it is a little more difficult to classify some forms of communication (such as mobile phones and email), mainly because they have the capacity to be both:

- **Interpersonal** ('one-to-one') communication and
- **Mass** ('one-to-many') communication.

Depending on how it is used, for example, email can involve exchanging interpersonal messages with friends and family ('Hi, how are you?') or sending one message to many thousands potentially millions of people; customers of on-line retailers, such as Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk), for example, can request email notification of special offers and so forth. Unrequested mass emails commonly known as 'Spam' also come into this category.

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In defining the mass media, therefore, we've hit upon something that, as recently as 25 years ago, wouldn't have been a problem; namely, the development of computer networks..

The ability to link computer technology (to create something like the Internet or mobile phone networks) has created a subtle but incredibly important change in the way we both define and conceptualise the mass media.

To further complicate matters, computer networks open up the potential for 'many-to-many' communication, where a mass audience can, simultaneously, interact and communicate with each other. In other words, a mass medium based on interpersonal communication. To clarify this idea, think about things like:

Internet chatrooms. These conform to three of the components of a 'mass medium' identified above (technology, scale and commodity). However, the 'distance' component is a problem. This is because, rather confusingly, a chatroom can, simultaneously, involve one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication.

Peer-to-peer networks use software to link individual computers, such that anyone connected to the network can exchange information directly with anyone else. In the workplace, for example, this can mean any number of people can contribute to the same piece of work at the same time. We can also note, however, this type of network also facilitates the illegal sharing of music and films.

In the light of these developments, therefore, we need to redefine the concept of mass media by creating a distinction between:

Old mass media, such as television, books and magazines, that involve 'one-to-many' communication, based on a one-way process of producers creating information that is transmitted to large numbers of consumers, and

New mass media, such as peer-to-peer networks, involving 'many-to-many' communication based on two-way communication with participants as both producers and consumers of information.

'**Old**' forms of mass media involve one-way communication between a producer and a mass audience.

'**New**' forms of mass media can involve two-way communication within a mass audience who are both producers and consumers.

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“Imagine visiting a newspaper website and seeing not just the bulletins and major stories you wouldn't have known about, but also the rest of that edition customized to your unique needs and interests. Rather than every reader seeing the same edition, each reader sees an edition simultaneously individualized to their interests and generalized to their needs”.

Crosbie (2002) argues that new (mass) media have characteristics that, when combined, make them very different to other forms of mass media.

Technology: They cannot exist without the appropriate (computer) technology.

Personalisation: Individualised messages (either tailored to the particular needs of those receiving them or having the appearance of being so constructed) can be simultaneously delivered to vast numbers of people.

Collective control: Each person in a network has, potentially, the ability to share, shape and change the content of the information being exchanged.

References

Dutton, Brian, O'Sullivan, Tim and Rayne, Phillip: “ Studying the Media:” (1988)

Crosbie, Vin: `What Is New Media?’ (2002)



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