

The Mass  
Media

# Defining the Mass Media



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**Breaking down the concept of a 'mass media' into its constituent parts...**

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**, as you probably realise, 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, refer to channels of communication that involve transmitting information in some way, shape or form to large numbers of people (although the question of exactly how many a "large number" has to be to qualify as a "mass" is something that's generally left undefined - it's one of those things that we know when we see it...).

A mass medium (such as television) is generally classified as '**one-to-many**' communication - 'one' person (such as the author of a book, the creators of a television programme or a film director), communicates to many people (the audience) "at the same time" in a way that is largely impersonal; that is, the communication is one-way, in the sense that those communicating a message to an audience don't receive simultaneous feedback from that audience (you can shout at a politician on the television but they can't hear you...).

**Dutton et al** (1998) suggest that, *traditionally* (an important qualification that will be developed further in a moment), 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:

**1. Distance:** Communication between those who send and receive messages (media-speak 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.

**2. 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.

**3. 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

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.

## Observations

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same behaviour is being reproduced in thousands of other living rooms, not just across the country but also, in this instance, across the globe.

**4. Commodity:** An interesting feature of mass communication 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.



We no-longer live in a society where it's possible to make a clear and obvious distinction between those (mass) media that simply involve one-to-many communication and those (non-mass) media that merely involve one-to-one communication.

## Explanations

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In defining the mass media, therefore, we've encountered a problem 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 make matters even more complicated, computer networks open up the potential for '**many-to-many**' communication, where a mass audience can, simultaneously, interact and communicate with each other. Something that, in other words, represents 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' we've identified (scale, technology and commodity). However, 'distance' is a problem because a chatroom, for example, 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. As is the way of such things, this type of network can also be used illegally to breach copyright laws through the sharing of music, films and books.

Although the definition we've just put forward serves the not unhelpful purpose of introducing the basic idea of a mass medium, its usefulness as a definition for our current purpose is somewhat limited - mainly because, as you may have noticed, while it's reasonably easy to use this definition to identify a range of mass media (books, television, film and so forth) the world, as it were, has moved on.

We no-longer live in a society where it's possible to make a clear and obvious distinction between those (mass) media that simply involve one-to-many communication and those (non-mass) media that merely involve one-to-one communication. In recent times, for example, we've seen the development of forms of communication (such as mobile phones and email) that don't fit easily (if at all) into traditional definitions, mainly because they have the capacity to be both:

- **interpersonal** ('one-to-one') communication *and*
- **mass** ('one-to-many') communication.

Depending on how it's used, for example, email can involve exchanging interpersonal messages with friends and family ('Hi, how are you?') or sending one message to many thousands, if not millions, of people; customers of on-line retailers, such as Amazon for example, can request email notification of special offers and so forth. Unrequested mass emailing (or "spam") also comes into this category.

Although peer-to-peer networks involve communication between large numbers of people, a not insignificant feature of these networks is that they reverse the accepted wisdom about a mass medium in the sense that they represent "many-to-one" communication; large numbers of people effectively cooperate to deliver a message (such as a song) to an individual (who, in turn, may choose to cooperate as part of the network to transmit that message to everyone else in the network who wants it).

**Social network media**, such as Bebo, MySpace or probably the most important and influential social network currently (2011) in existence - Facebook. These types of social media allow various forms of communication (one-to-one, many-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many...) depending on how the individual decides or chooses to communicate.



In the light of these (and many other - video-sharing, blogging and the like) developments, therefore, we need to rethink and redefine the concept of the mass media by creating a distinction between:

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

A further dimension to these forms of communication that mark them apart from traditional forms of mass media, therefore, is that some new media clearly blur the traditional distinction between producer and consumer - an important idea we will need to develop at some point.

However, for the moment it's enough to note that whereas in the past traditional forms of mass media were based squarely on a hard-and-fast distinction between those who produced the media and those who consumed it (something that still, of course, exists when you read a book, watch television or go to the cinema), new forms of mass media don't necessarily confirm to this easy distinction.

When you take part in a conversation in a chatroom or forum, for example, you are both the produced and the consumer of information - and while this may not seem like a particularly important or stunning revelation it has hugely important ramifications for our understanding of other aspects of the mass media such as the relationship between media producers and their audience (a discussion we'll leave to a later point).

For the moment we can note that **Crosbie** (2002) argues that new (mass) media have characteristics that, when combined, make them very different to other forms of mass media. These include:

**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.

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.

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**Crosbie** uses the following example to illustrate this idea:

"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".



# References

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