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## Process

### OVERVIEW: ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

In order to become media literate, you must first develop an understanding of the communication process.

Communication is an active, dynamic experience that demands your fullest attention and energy. The moment that someone approaches you and initiates a conversation, you become engaged in a rapid sequence of activities:

- Receiving a message
- Selecting relevant information
- Forming appropriate responses
- Responding to the message

Immediately after you have formed an appropriate response, the roles are reversed: you shift from audience to communicator, and vice versa.

In order for people to communicate effectively, a relationship of mutual trust and respect must be established. The communicator and audience formulate a communication contract that governs their conduct. Both parties agree to abide by the rules. For instance, the participants implicitly agree to maintain a comfortable distance from one another during conversations (neither too close nor too distant). There is also an unwritten understanding that one person should not dominate the conversation. Any violation of these agreements results in an instant breakdown of the social contract. For example, if you feel that the person with whom you are conversing isn't really listening to you or doesn't respect what you have to say, then the conversation is doomed.

There are *three* primary types of communication:

1. *Intrapersonal communication* takes place within ourselves. It is the basis of all forms of communication, because until we know what it is that we want to say, we will not be able to communicate effectively with other people.
2. *Interpersonal communication* is based upon face-to-face interaction with another person.
3. *Mass communication* is that in which messages are communicated through a channel of communication (e.g., radio or television) to a large group of people who may not be in direct contact with the communicator.

## The Communications Model

The basic *communications model* consists of the following elements:

- The *communicator* is the person who delivers the message.
- The *message* is the information being communicated.
- The *channel* refers to the passage through which the information is being conveyed. For example, your voice, eyes, and facial expressions are the channels employed in interpersonal communication. In mass communication, the media—newspapers, photographs, film, radio, television, and the Internet—serve as the channels of information to large groups of people who are separated in time and/or space from the media communicator.
- The *audience* consists of the person or people who receive the message.

## Communication Elements: Feedback and Interference

Two elements are critical to the communications process: *feedback* and *interference*.

Feedback offers audience members the opportunity to ask questions or comment, in order to better understand what the communicator is trying to say. Feedback can also be used to reassure the communicator. When listeners nod their heads, smile, or repeat key phrases, they are letting the communicator know they are alert, interested, and involved in the conversation.

Interference refers to those factors that can hinder the communications process. Interference can occur at all points of the communications model:

- *Communicator interference* arises when the communicator obstructs the message. As an example, people may have difficulty expressing themselves clearly at times. Communicator interference can also occur when the communicator does not know exactly what he/she wants to say. In this instance, the communicator might ramble on until the listener eventually loses interest. Communicator interference also takes place if the communicator is not *self-aware*. For instance, you may be angry with a friend but are unwilling to admit it—even to yourself. As a result, you may be sending mixed messages—denying that you are angry at the same time that your behavior is contentious and abrupt.
- *Channel interference* occurs when a glitch in the channel distorts the message. For example, if you have laryngitis, your audience may be unable to understand your speech. In mass communications, channel interference occurs when your television screen suddenly goes blank, or your computer freezes while you are on the Internet.

Channel interference may also result from using an *inappropriate* channel to send a particular type of message. As we will discuss later in the chapter (see “Comparative Media”), a particular medium may not be the most effective channel to convey specific types of information. For instance, corporations may spend enormous amounts of money on promotional videos, when the detailed information they are trying to convey would be more suitable in print.

- *Environmental interference* refers to distractions within the setting in which the information is received. For example, we have all attended movies in which people behind us have talked throughout the picture, or have had our view blocked by a tall person seated in front of us.
- *Audience interference* occurs when audience members obstruct the communication process. For example, *attention span* may be a factor in audience interference. As mentioned earlier, communication is an active process that demands concentration and energy. Occasionally we’ll just take a break and tune out the speaker. This option is particularly tempting when we are presented with information outside of our personal frames of reference. Healthy teenagers and adults can sustain attention for about 20 minutes. At the same time, focused attention—the kind that is the result of a distraction, whether it be a ringing telephone or a television commercial—typically only lasts about eight *seconds*.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, audience members often filter messages through their *egos*. That is, they only hear those aspects of a conversation that

pertain to them, ignoring the rest of the message. Audience members are not always paying strict attention while the other person is speaking. Instead, they are busily formulating their responses or are anxiously awaiting their chance to talk.

## Psychological Principles: Comprehension of Information

The following psychological principles explain ways in which members of the audience process information:

- *Selective exposure* refers to how an individual's personal values and interests affect his/her selection of information. People often seek out information with which they agree while avoiding information that does not fit their preexisting views. Reporter Franco Ordonez provides the following example:
  - The television remote control has become a de facto ballot in today's hyper-polarized world of politics. Turn the dial to the left to watch MSNBC and it's more likely you lean left. Turn it to the right to tune in Fox, and it's more likely you lean right. Which cable news channel people watch has become a bona fide indicator of what they think about taxes, health care, immigration and the size and scope of the federal government. . . .
  - Take the big debate this year over the role of the federal spending in the economy. Just 19 percent of Fox viewers think that increasing government spending would help the economy, while 79 percent think increasing the debt in the process would hurt the economy. MSNBC viewers lean the other way, with 55 percent saying more spending would help and 43 percent saying the debt would hurt the economy.<sup>2</sup>
- *Selective perception* is the phenomenon in which people's interpretation of content is colored by their predispositions and preconceptions. To illustrate:
  - Individuals who consume alcohol are more likely to remember seeing anti-drunk-driving PSAs and moderation ads than individuals who don't drink.
  - Those who do not consume alcohol are *less* likely to remember seeing anti-drunk-driving PSAs and moderation ads.
  - Those who smoke will be more likely to remember seeing anti-smoking messages than non-smokers.

- Individuals who do not smoke will be *less* likely to remember seeing antismoking messages.<sup>3</sup>

Taken further, individuals may reject information that conflicts with their preconceived ideas. This would account for charges of bias against the media from both ends of the political spectrum. Conservatives rail against the “liberal media,” while progressives decry the “conservative press.” As a result, media messages must be modified in order to be equally effective with different segments of the population.

- *Selective retention* occurs when a person selectively remembers (or forgets) information. People tend to tune out conversations when they are exposed to subject matter in which their interest level is low. For instance, if you decide to talk about a subject I know nothing about (e.g., nuclear physics), I will focus my attention elsewhere, where I am more comfortable. An individual’s recall of information may be influenced by a number of other factors as well: whether the person was distracted at the time, a sense of nostalgia (reconstructing past events so that they appear more positive), or the impulse to minimize unpleasant thoughts or experiences.
- *Cultural insulation* is one of the unintended consequences of the evolution of digital media; people are becoming immersed in a few selected areas of personal interest, remaining completely uninformed and disinterested in other cultural spheres. That is, individuals now know more and more about less and less. For example, if you are only interested in country music, you are never in a position to be exposed to hip-hop. As a result, audience members are not introduced to perspectives of other groups.

Cultural insulation can undermine the very foundation of culture, which is built on common understandings, experiences, and values. To illustrate, James O’Neill, a professor at South Puget Sound Community College, gave his class a cultural indicators test to determine his students’ general knowledge of American culture. O’Neill found that his students no longer have a shared cultural heritage, simply answering “I don’t know” up to 86 times in a test containing 100 questions.

An essential aspect of media literacy involves looking beyond the materials that have been directed at your particular demographic group in order to get a broader perspective. For instance, it can be

worthwhile to watch MSNBC for a liberal ideology, while Fox News provides a conservative perspective on events.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL AND MASS COMMUNICATION

While the principles discussed above apply to all forms of communication, some significant differences exist between interpersonal and mass communication.

### *Mass Communications Model*

When Marshall McLuhan declared, “The medium is the message,” he was suggesting that the media have reconfigured the traditional communications model. The channels of mass communications have now assumed a primary role in determining content, choice of communicator, and the audience (see Table 2.1).

To illustrate, the medium of television dictates the choice of *communicator* in news programming. Anchorpersons must be likable, convincing, and attractive. To that end, the Fox News network keeps stylists on staff whose task is to make its anchors and reporters more appealing to a young audience.<sup>4</sup> In the process, journalistic ability has become subordinate to performance skills.

The characteristics of a medium also affect the content—or *messages*—in news presentations. Print journalism lends itself to the detailed presentation of complex issues. Consequently, newspaper coverage of a story tends to be issues oriented, providing detailed context and background.

In contrast, television is less successful in its ability to present the context, interpretation, and implications of these incidents. However, because of the visual properties of television, television news is an ideal medium for showing events in the process of unfolding. Thus, in order to take advantage of the visual capabilities of the medium, television news generally emphasizes *events* rather than *issues*.

**Table 2.1 Mass Communications Model**

Communications Model	Mass Communications Model
Communicator	Channel
Message	Communicator
Channel	Message
Audience	Audience

In addition, TV news is influenced by the entertainment sensibility of television. News producers tend to select stories that are dramatic and sensational, and have an identifiable cast of characters and a clear narrative structure (with a beginning, middle, and conclusion).

Finally, the choice of medium has a significant impact on the *audience*. To illustrate, in 2011, 66 percent of Americans designated television as their primary source of news. However, people under 30 cite the Internet as their primary news source, while newspapers are the choice of people 65 and older.<sup>5</sup>

### **Feedback in Mass Communications**

The advent of digital media technology has resulted in more direct lines of feedback than had previously been the case in media communications.

Before the age of digital media technology, media communicators had no immediate way of knowing whether the audience was truly involved in the communication process. Much of the feedback in the mass communication process was delayed (e.g., letters to the editor, petitions, or phone calls), indirect (e.g., revenue from sales or critical responses, such as the Oscars) or cumulative (reflecting a collective opinion). But although ratings systems like the Nielsen system present numerical information about how many people watch a particular program, these ratings cannot measure whether the audience actually *enjoy* the program.

However, the interactive feature of digital media gives audience members the opportunity to respond immediately to media programming. Indeed, programs like *American Idol* incorporate audience response into the presentation, as viewers vote for their favorite performers.

### **Saturation of the Mass Media**

In interpersonal communications, the speaker enjoys direct, personal access to the audience; however, the size of this audience is limited. In contrast, a media communicator can reach a vast audience simultaneously with a uniform message. For example, after the signing of the Treaty of Ghent, which officially ended the War of 1812, it took nearly two months for the news to reach America. In contrast, when the Japanese earthquake/tsunami occurred in March 2011, Al Jazeera and NHK from Japan provided a live feed of the event as it happened.

But although mass communications is unrivaled at providing a *breadth* of information, there are limits to the *depth* of information it can furnish.

Clearly, some media are more limited than others. But whether it is a two-minute news report or a two-hour documentary, media presentations operate within strict time frames that may or may not meet the informational requirements of the subject.

### ***Ability to Preserve a Message***

In interpersonal communication, information is exchanged on an informal basis. Consequently, we may forget precisely what we said. Or we may choose to reinterpret the conversation on the basis of what we *meant* to say—particularly if we said something silly or embarrassing.

In contrast, media presentations (e.g., newspapers, DVDs, CDs) are characterized by a degree of permanence, so that they can be scrutinized and re-examined by the audience. As a result, mass communicators are highly accountable for the material that they produce and must be prepared to accept responsibility for their work.

### ***Media as Collaborative Process***

Unlike interpersonal communications, the production of a newspaper, news broadcast, or ad campaign often requires a production team. For example, a Hollywood film project comprises the following crew members:

- The *producer* is responsible for the business arrangements (e.g., financing, business planning, insurance, contracts, and personnel).
- The *scriptwriter* develops the screenplay. He/she may be solely responsible for the original treatment, or be part of a team. In addition, additional writers may be brought in to revise a script that has been obtained by a producer or studio.
- The *director* is the film's principal creative authority, responsible for the presentation of the script on screen.
- *First and second assistant directors* assist with cast and crew management, crowd control, and coordination of the schedule.
- The *continuity* department is charged with making sure that the props, clothing, and makeup remain consistent. This can be a difficult task, given that scenes are often filmed out of sequence.
- The *cast* includes the stars, supporting players, bit players, and uncredited extras. Additional cast members consist of stunt doubles, who perform dangerous shots, and stand-ins, who work with the crew to set up the proper camera positions and lighting for the performers.

- The *cinematographer* is responsible for the artistic and technical quality of the film, including lighting, framing, and color values.
- The *production designer*, or art director, is responsible for set design.
- The *editor* assembles, arranges, and selects the footage, often in concert with the director.

Other crew members include a gaffer (chief electrician), best boy (gaffer’s assistant), grips (who haul heavy lights), costume designer, music director, sound editors, and the publicity team.

Because members of the crew may hold different opinions about content and approach, compromise is a large part of the decision-making process. As a result, the final presentation may be disjointed and confusing.

However, one of the major changes in the evolution of digital media production is that in many productions, one person can shoot and edit video, produce animation, and incorporate graphics into the production.

### **Media as Industry**

Most media programming is extremely expensive to produce. For instance, the cost of making the blockbuster film *Titanic* (1997) exceeded \$200 million—more than the cost of building the actual ocean liner.

As a result, many producers are reluctant to take artistic risks, relying instead on “bankable” stars and genres. Instead of challenging the audience artistically, major studios tend to bankroll films that rely on violence, sex, and flashy music. In addition, sequels, comic-book adaptations, and franchise films cater to a well-established audience and provide studios with less risk. Indeed, 14 of the top 20 domestic-grossing films of all time were assured of a built-in audience by employing this strategy.

However, individuals now have access to sophisticated media technology on their laptops that, not long ago, was available only in professional studios. This equipment can cut down on production costs and give individuals more room to experiment with form and content.

The first key to interpreting media messages—*process*—consists of the following elements:

- **Media communicator**
- **Function**
- **Comparative Media**
- **Affective Response**
- **Audience**