

Varieties of Communication

convergence when content that has traditionally been confined to one medium appears on multiple media channels

audience fragmentation the process of dividing audience members into segments based on background and lifestyle in order to send them messages targeted to their specific characteristics

mass production process the industrial process that creates the potential for reaching millions, even billions, of diverse, anonymous people at around the same time

industrial nature what distinguishes mass communication from other forms of communication is the industrialized—or mass production—process that is involved in creating the message material. This industrial process creates the potential for reaching billions of diverse, anonymous people simultaneously.

The traditional notion of the audience as a large mass of anonymous individuals has given way beneath the fragmenting of audiences to reveal smaller, specially targeted media audiences made up of individuals who are segmented by any number of characteristics.

To understand why some writers suggest that the term *mass communication* doesn't connect to what's going on in today's world, we have to look at how the term has traditionally been used. Over the past one hundred years, people who wrote about mass communication tended to relate it to the size of the audience. That made a lot of sense back then. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, new technologies such as high-speed newspaper presses, radio, movies, and television provided access to the huge "masses" of people. Not only were those audiences very large, they were dispersed geographically, quite diverse (that is, made up of different types of people), and typically anonymous to the companies that created the material. The essential reason newspapers, radio, television, and other such media were considered different from other means of communication had to do with the size and composition of the audience.

This perspective on mass communication worked very well until the past couple of decades when the key aspects of the traditional definition of mass communication as reaching huge, diverse groups no longer fit. The reason is that the arrival of media channels—including the growing number of radio and TV stations, the rise of the VCR, the multiplication of cable networks, and the rise of the Web—led to **audience fragmentation** (see Figure 1.1). That is, as people watched or read these new channels, there were fewer people using any one of them. Because these new media channels do not necessarily individually reach large numbers of people—the "masses"—some writers suggested that we can abandon the term *mass communication*.

However, the view in this book is that mass communication is still a critically important part of society. In our view, what really separates mass communication from other forms of communication is not the size of the audience—it can be large or small. Rather, what makes mass communication special is the way the content of the communication message is created.



Mass communication is carried out by organizations working together in industries to produce and circulate a wide range of content—from entertainment to news to educational materials. It is this industrial, **mass production process** that creates the *potential* for reaching millions, even billions, of diverse, anonymous people at around the same time (say, through televising the Olympic games). And it is the **industrial nature** of the process—for example, the various companies that work together within the television or Internet industries—that makes mass communication different from other forms of communication even when

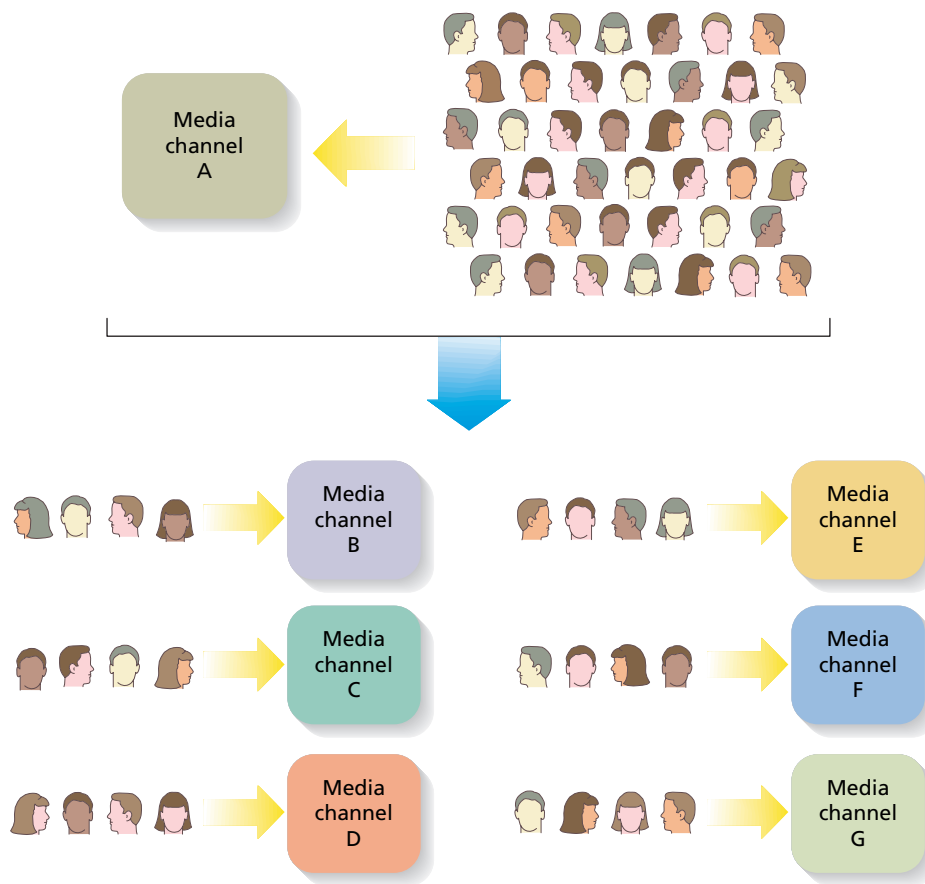


Figure 1.1

Audience Fragmentation

The arrival of the diverse array of media channels has had a fragmenting effect on audiences—as audience members move to watch, read, or listen to a new channel, fewer people use any single channel.

the audience is relatively small and even one-to-one. To help you understand how mass communication relates to other forms of communication, let’s take a closer look.

Communication Defined

Different types of communication are a basic feature of human life. In general, the word **communication** refers to people interacting in ways that at least one of the parties involved understands as messages.

What are messages? **Messages** are collections of symbols that appear purposefully organized (meaningful) to those sending or receiving them. Think about the many ways that you signal to others what you want to do or how much you care about them. The signals are often verbal but they can also be through body language. When Jane shouts excitedly to her friend Jack and leaps with joy into his arms after she wins a tennis match, that’s a form of communication. It’s likely that Jack, whose arms she almost broke, realizes that she wants to tell him something. People who study communication would typically call the interaction just described **interpersonal communication**, a form that involves two or three individuals signaling to each other using their voices, facial and hand gestures, and other signs (even clothes) that they use to convey meaning. When you talk to your parents about your coursework, discuss a recent movie over dinner with friends, or converse with your professor during her office hours, you are participating in the interpersonal form of communication.

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Mediated Interpersonal Communication Breakdown

CULTURE TODAY

When tragedy strikes, it is not unusual for people to lose their sense of security in the world—at least temporarily. Yet large-scale crises may also prompt people to lose faith in the communication systems that they have come to depend on for information.

During the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, many media channels were inaccessible. Phone lines were jammed for hours, and some local radio and television stations were knocked off the air. In addition, a number of websites crashed while others failed to provide information about the attacks, leading one reporter to declare that “the Internet failed miserably.”

In 2007, during the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech, discussions resurfaced about communication during crises. This time, however, the focus was not on the technology but on the way people were using it, particularly new media formats such as mobile devices, blogs, and social networking sites.

As the attacks unfolded, many students used their Facebook and MySpace pages to let family and friends know they were okay. In fact, science reporter Alan Boyle remarked that “the media methods employed during [the] crisis broke new ground—and undoubtedly saved lives in the process.”

Others, meanwhile, questioned why Virginia Tech authorities did not take advantage of communication technologies to immediately alert members of the campus community that they were in danger. Andrew Kantor, a technology reporter for *USA Today*, saw this event and its aftermath as evidence that people have yet to adapt fully to new types of communication.

Sources: Alan Boyle, “How Smart Mobs Coped with a Massacre,” *MSNBC*, accessed on 6/11/07, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18184075/>; Andrew Kantor, “Virginia Tech Tragedy Highlights Differences between Old, New Media,” *USA Today*, accessed on 6/11/07, www.usatoday.com; Jen Muehlbauer, “Reporting the Unthinkable,” *The Industry Standard’s Media Grok*, accessed on 9/12/01, <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0109/msg00273.html>.

mediated interpersonal communication a specialized type of interpersonal communication that is **assisted by a device**, such as a pen or pencil, a computer, or a telephone

intrapersonal communication an individual “talking” to himself or herself

small group communication communication among three or more individuals

organizational communication the interactions of individuals in a formal working environment

Mediated interpersonal communication, which is a specialized type of interpersonal communication, can be described as interpersonal communication that is assisted by a device, such as a pen, a computer, or a telephone. When you write a thank you note to your grandmother, send an email to your graduate teaching assistant, or call a friend on the phone, you are participating in the mediated form of interpersonal communication. In this form of communication, the people you are interacting with can’t touch you and you can’t touch them. You might even be thousands of miles from each other. The technology—the pen and paper, the computer, the telephone—becomes the vehicle (the medium) that allows you to interact with them.

Communication scholars also differentiate among other forms of communication. Some write about **intrapersonal communication**, which involves an individual “talking” to himself or herself—for example, an internal “conversation” that weighs the pros and cons of a decision.

Other researchers write about *small group communication*, *organizational communication*, or *public communication*. **Small group communication** involves communication among three or more individuals. Think of the deliberations of five friends who get together to plan a ski trip. **Organizational communication** involves the interaction of individuals in a formal working environment. When an executive sends messages down the chain of command, this is a form of orga-

nizational communication. **Public communication** involves one person who speaks to a large number of people—for instance, a professor speaking to students, or a candidate for public office talking to a crowd at a rally.

Note that these forms of communication can each take place interpersonally or they can be mediated. A group planning a ski group can meet face-to-face or can interact through email. The boss could talk to her department heads



in her office, or leave a message on their phone mail system. A professor can talk in front of the class, or leave a video of himself or herself for the students to watch.

While the types of communication described above have their differences, they have a central similarity: they involve *messages*. Seven major elements are involved in every interaction that involves messages. These elements are the *source*, *encoder*, *transmitter*, *channel*, *decoder*, *receiver*, and *feedback*. Let's take them one at a time.

Source The **source** is the originator of the message. The source may be a person (when Jane speaks to Jack), or several people (a choir singing). But the source can also be an organization. For example, suppose you receive a notice in your mailbox from your bank. While individuals who work there created and sent the notice, from your standpoint, “the bank” was the source of the message. The source may or may not have knowledge about the intended receiver of the message, but it does have a thought or idea to transmit to some other person or organization.

Encoding **Encoding** is the process by which the source translates the thoughts and ideas so that they can be perceived by the human senses—these are primarily sight and sound, but may also include smell, taste, and touch. A source creates or encodes a message in anticipation of its transmission to a receiver. When the source is an individual, the encoding goes on in the individual's brain. When the source is an organization, encoding takes place when people in the organization create messages.

Transmitting The **transmitter** performs the physical activity of actually sending out the message. Picture an employee apologizing to a supervisor for taking an unauthorized day off from work. The employee's vocal cords and face muscles—in fact, his entire body—will be involved in the transmission of the words, tone, and physical movements that the supervisor standing in front of him will understand as meaningful. Now, picture this same employee apologizing to his supervisor, not in person, but over the phone. In this case, a second type of transmitter operates along with the vocal cords. That second transmitter is the telephone, which turns sound waves from the vocal cords into electrical impulses that can travel across the phone lines.

The telephone is an example of a mediating technology, or medium, of communication. A **medium** is part of a technical system that helps in the transmission,

In communication, the source is the originator of a message.

public communication one person who speaks to a large number of people

source the originator of the message which may be a person, several people or an organization

encoding the process by which the source translates the thoughts and ideas so that they can be perceived by the human senses—primarily sight and sound, but may also include smell, taste, and touch

transmitter performs the physical activity of distributing the message

medium part of a technical system that helps in the transmission, distribution, or reception of messages

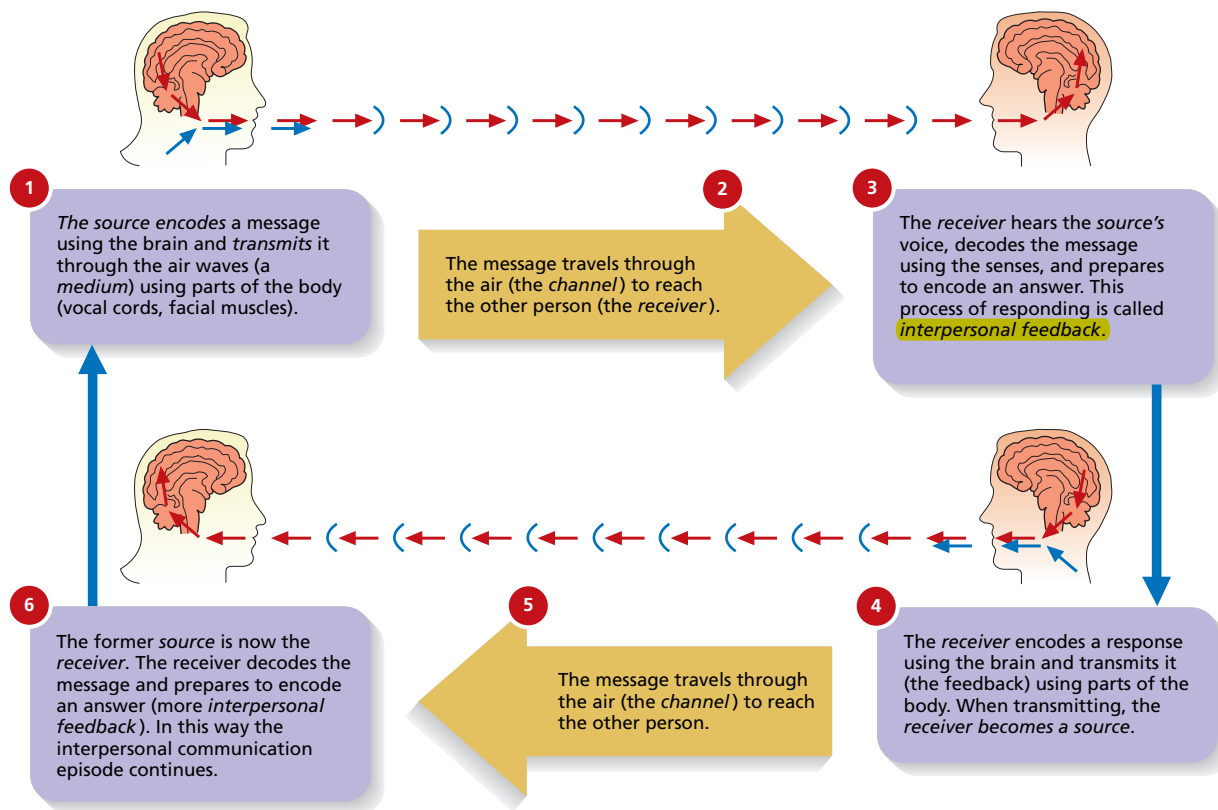


Figure 1.2
A Model of Interpersonal Communication

In this model of interpersonal communication, information moves from a starting point at the source, through the transmitter, via the channel, to the receiver for decoding.

channels the pathways through which the transmitter sends all features of the message, whether they involve sight, sound, smell, or touch

decoding the process by which the receiver translates the source's thoughts and ideas so that they have meaning

distribution, or reception of messages. It helps communication take place when senders and receivers are not face-to-face. The Internet is an example of a medium, as are the radio, CD, television, and DVD. (Note that the term *medium* is singular; it refers to one technological vehicle for communication. The plural is *media*.)

Channel All communication, whether mediated or not, takes place through channels. **Channels** are the pathways through which the transmitter sends all features of the message, whether they involve sight, sound, smell, or touch. When a man on the street walks up to you and shouts at you in a way that you can hardly understand, the *channel* is the air through which the sound waves move from the man's vocal cords. If your roommate yells at you through the phone, two channels are at work: one channel is the air that vibrates the phone mechanism, and the other is the wire through which the electrical impulses move toward you.

Decoding Before a receiver can hear (and make sense of) a source's message, the transmitted impulses must be converted to signs that the brain can perceive as meaningful. **Decoding** is the way in which this is done. It is the reverse of the encoding process—it is the process by which the receiver translates the source's thoughts and ideas so that they have meaning.

In the case of the interpersonal communication, the decoder is biological: the brain is the decoder. When the telephone is involved, the electrical impulses that traveled through the phone lines must be decoded into sound waves before they can be decoded by the brain. In fact, all media require this sort of decoding. When you play music on an MP3 player or iPod, it decodes the impulses that have been laid down on the disk so that you can hear the tunes. Similarly, the television is the

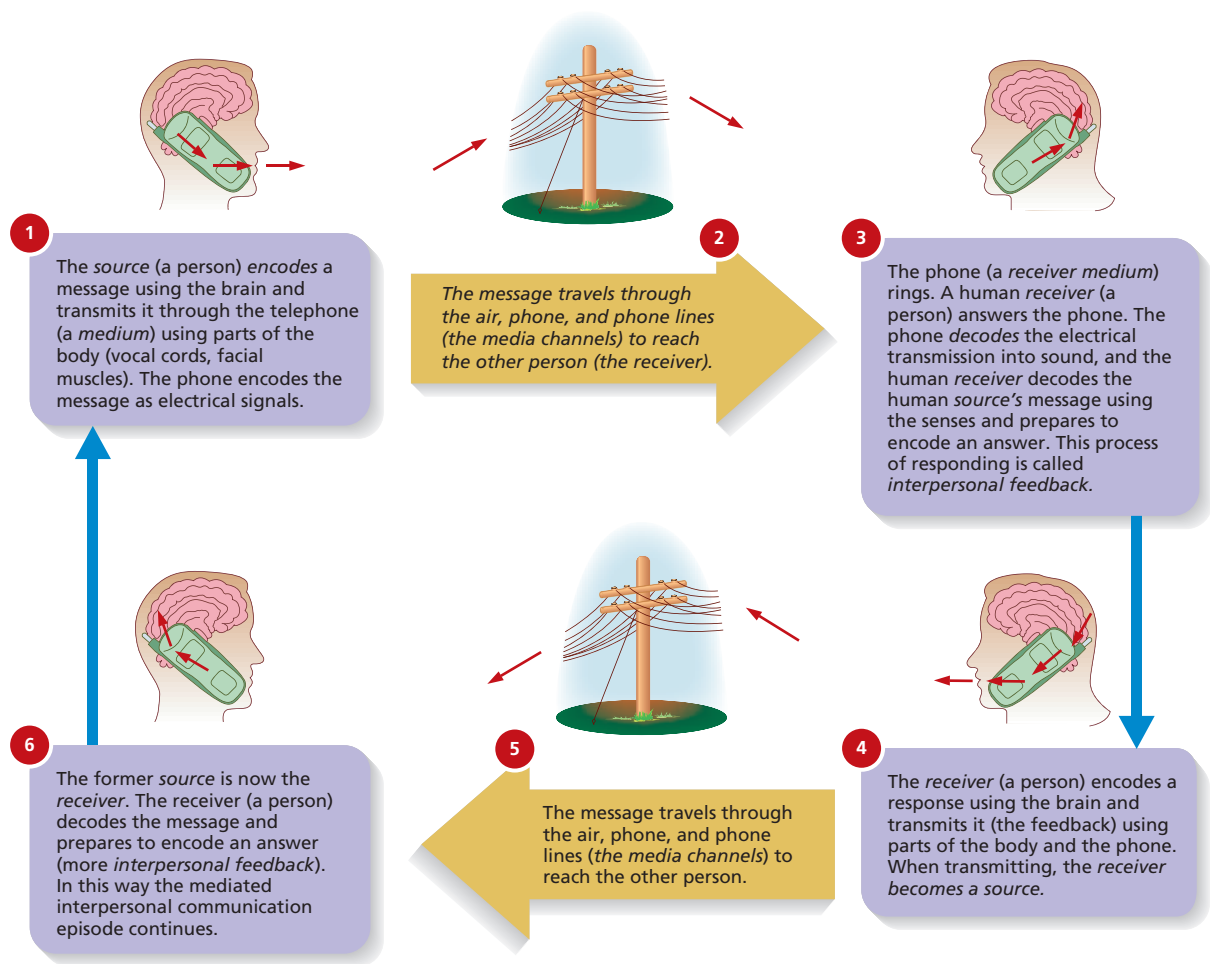


Figure 1.3
A Model of Mediated Interpersonal Communication

In this model of mediated interpersonal communication, information moves from a starting point to a source, who encodes a message. The message is transmitted through channels to the receiver, who decodes the message.

receiver the person or organization that gets the message

feedback when the receiver responds to the message with what the sender perceives as a message

decoder that takes the electrical impulses from the air or cable and converts them into the programs you watch.

Receiver As suggested above, the **receiver** is the person or organization that gets the message. Sometimes the source's message will reach its intended receiver; sometimes it reaches another receiver altogether. But even if someone other than the intended receiver receives the message, communication has still taken place. Say, for example, that you assume that your friend Brad is in the next room and, as a result, you shout your opinion about his new girlfriend, Keiko. Even if it turns out that Brad wasn't in the next room at all and did not hear (receive) the message you sent him, but instead his girlfriend, Keiko, was in the next room, the episode can still be considered interpersonal communication: your message was encoded, transmitted via your vocal cords, sent through the channel of the air, decoded by the receiver (although not the one you intended), and received.

Feedback **Feedback** occurs when the receiver responds to the message with what the sender perceives as a message. When Keiko, your friend's girlfriend, tells you, "I never knew you felt that way about me, you jerk," that is feedback. In fact, this sort of feedback continues the interpersonal communication process. As Figure 1.2 shows, two people continue their communication by continually receiving and responding to each other's messages. The same thing happens with mediated interpersonal communication, as shown in Figure 1.3. The communication "episode"

between the two ends when one of them sends no more feedback to the other (the person walks away, the parties hang up the phone).

Feedback doesn't always take place immediately, especially in mediated interpersonal communication. Say you send your friend an email. Keiko reads it, gets embarrassed by something you wrote and decides to write you a reply. You read the note and then, after thinking about it for a day, write back directly to her. Her email and your response are examples of delayed feedback.

noise is an environmental, mechanical, and semantic sound in the communication situation that interferes with the delivery of the message. Environmental noise comes from the setting where the source and receiver are communicating. Mechanical noise comes from the medium through which the communication is taking place. Semantic noise involves language that one or more of the participants doesn't understand.

Noise Noise is an environmental, mechanical, and semantic sound in the communication situation that interferes with the delivery of the message. Environmental noise comes from the setting where the source and receiver are communicating. In an interpersonal communication situation, Ahmed, the source, may be at a cricket match trying to talk on the phone, and Sally, the receiver, might be at an auction where people are screaming bids. Mechanical noise comes from the medium through which the communication is taking place. Say there is static on the phone—that would be mechanical noise that would add to the environmental noise. Semantic noise involves language that one or more of the participants doesn't understand. Let's say Ahmed tells Sally that "the bowler attempted a bouncer that turned into a beamer." Even when Ahmed repeats the words three times through the environmental and mechanical noise so that she hears them, Sally has no idea what Ahmed is talking about, since she knows little about the sport of cricket.

From Communication to Mass Communication

One way to understand mass communication is to show its similarities to and differences from other forms of communication. One similarity is that mass communication takes place through media. Small groups can come together in virtual chat rooms that are connected by wired networks, organizations can connect their far-flung employees via video conference facilities that are linked through cables and satellites, and professors who deliver public lectures can record them for projection from a computer server to different classes at different times. In other words, the channels used in mediated forms of interpersonal, group, organizational and public communication are sometimes similar to those used in mass communication.

Yet another similarity between these other forms of communication and mass communication is that we can describe mass communication using the same terms of source, encoder, transmitter, channel, decoder, receiver, feedback, and noise that are shown in Table 1.1. But here is also where we begin to see differences. The most important differences relate to the source of the message, its transmitter and the way feedback takes place.

Differences in the Source In the other forms of communication we've discussed, *individuals* are the source of the message that scholars study. In mass communication, by contrast, complex organizations, often companies, take responsibility for the activity. The source is an *organization* such as a company, not a single person.

To get a strong grasp of the difference, think of Jon Stewart delivering his version of the news on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. If Jon were in the same room as you telling you about what he just read in the paper, that would be a clear case of interpersonal communication and Stewart would be a source. If your friend were to record that conversation on his video camera and his brother were to watch

Table 1.1 Differences in Types of Communication

	Interpersonal Communication	Mediated Interpersonal Communication	Mass Communication
Message	Uses all the senses	Typically verbal and/or visual	Typically verbal and/or visual
Source	An individual	An individual	One or more organizations
Encoding	By an individual's brain	By an individual's brain and technology	By an organization and technology
Channel	The air	The air, technology	The air, technology
Receiver	A few individuals in the same location	A few or many individuals in the same location	Typically, many people in different locations
Decoding	By an individual's brain	By technology and an individual's brain	By technology and an individual's brain
Feedback	Immediate and direct	Immediate or delayed; generally direct	Immediate or delayed; generally indirect
Noise	Environmental, mechanical, and semantic	Environmental, mechanical, and semantic, with environmental sometimes caused by organizations	Environmental, mechanical, and semantic, sometimes caused by organizations

the video of Jon talking about the news, that is an example of mediated interpersonal communication where Jon is still the source.

The difference between these two examples of the source and Jon's appearance on *The Daily Show* is that behind Stewart is an organization that is creating the news satire for him to present. Sure, Jon is reading the messages, and so it may seem that he should be called "the source." But employees of *The Daily Show* helped him write his script, produced and edited the videos he introduces, and prepared his set for the broadcast. Moreover, the photos and clips he satirizes sometimes come from news firms, such as ABC News. So Jon is really just the most visible representative of an *organizational source*.

Differences in Transmission The critical role of organizations in mass communication compared to other communication forms also shows up in the transmission of the message. In interpersonal, small group, and public communication, an individual sender or a committee takes responsibility for transmitting the message—perhaps using microphones when speaking to a crowd or telephones when speaking at a distance. In mass communication, however, transmission is too complex to be accomplished by an indi-



Mediated forms of interpersonal, group, organizational, and public communication may use channels similar to those used in mass communication.

Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, isn't a one-man band. It takes the entire Comedy Central organization—writers, producers, engineers, stage managers, sound technicians, camera people (to name a few)—to create each evening's program. Stewart is the most visible representative of the organizational source that creates *The Daily Show*.



vidual or even a few people. That is because transmission involves distributing the material to several locations and presenting the material (that is, exhibiting it) at those locations. Instead of a few individuals, a number of organizations (usually large ones) are typically involved in the process.

Think of our *Daily Show* example again. When Jon reads the script on *The Daily Show*, his vocal cords transmit the words into a microphone; the air and electric current are a channel for them. That may seem no different from mediated interpersonal communication, but it is only the beginning. Transmission of Jon on Comedy Central involves a number of further steps. First the show is sent to a satellite company that the network uses to send its programs to cable TV systems around the country. The cable systems, which themselves are complex organizations, receive those messages and send them to “head-end” transmission centers that they own. These centers send out the program through coaxial cables that eventually connect to television sets in locations (homes, bars, hotels) where subscribers have paid to receive the signal. In this way, millions of people around the country can watch *The Daily Show* at the same time.

Of course, individuals do work for production and distribution firms involved in mass communication. Unlike mediated communication activities, though, the creation and transmission of mass media messages—of news articles, television programs and recorded music, for example—are the result of decisions and activities by many people working together in companies that interact with other companies.

Differences in Feedback The third major difference between mass communication and other communication forms relates to feedback. We can talk about

feedback in two ways, (1) whether it is immediate or delayed and (2) whether or not it goes directly to the initial message creator or to someone else who may or may not pass it on to the creator.

In other forms of communication, feedback from the people receiving the message goes directly to the individual who created the message, either immediately (the clapping of an audience in response to a speaker) or in delayed form (your email in response to your mom's email). In mass communication, though, feedback from all the receivers is often impossible because of the number of people involved. (Think of the millions of people watching a TV program.) Even when feedback does happen (for example, when you respond right away by clicking on an Internet ad), the people in the organization who created the message in the first place (in this case the ad creators) will typically not get it. Someone else who is specifically appointed to deal with feedback will generally receive your message.

An indirect approach to audience feedback marks a common difference between mass communication and other forms of communication. In unmediated interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication, and public communication, feedback is often both immediate and direct. In mass media organizations, however, feedback is not only often delayed, it is indirect. It is generally routed through layers of the company that deal specifically with "audience" concerns, weighed for its relevance, and only then summarized for the people who sparked the feedback in the first place.

Consider the following comparison: you meet Jon Stewart in a movie line and have a leisurely conversation with him about current events in New York City, where he lives. Jon nods in response to your comments, answers your questions, and parries your criticisms of his positions on the issues. By contrast, a week later you see a satirical piece about New York City on *The Daily Show* that angers you. Moved to complain, you phone Comedy Central in New York to speak to Stewart or a producer. Instead, you get an operator who will politely take down your comments, send you to a voicemail service that will record them, or suggest that you provide feedback through the program's website. If you write to Jon Stewart or one of the show's producers, chances are that staff members whose job it is to summarize complaints for production executives will intercept it. That is typical of mass media organizations. *The Daily Show* gets thousands of letters and emails, and its principals are too busy to attend to all audience letters and phone calls themselves.

Differences in Noise It's not hard to show how the idea of noise as applied to mass communication can be similar to and different from its use in other communication forms. Remember our example of Ahmed and Sally? If their microphones were not working properly, the television announcers at a cricket match might have the same environmental problems being heard as Ahmed—but by more people. We can apply this situation to mass communication, but put game announcers working for a TV network in the position of Ahmed. Similarly, people at a party where the game is on TV can take Sally's place; they might not be able to hear because of noise in the apartment. Mechanical noise in a mass communication situation can take place in the sending-and-receiving technologies. Breakdowns in cable or satellite receivers, for example, can create mechanical noise problems for large audiences. To complete the comparison, the announcers' use of cricket terms might befuddle some people in the audience just as Ahmed befuddled Sally.

A hypothetical comparison of interpersonal and mass communication might further help explain these differences in sender, transmitter, feedback and noise. Meet Antwaan Andrews, a self-employed independent insurance agent who is working hard to support himself by selling life insurance policies. Using names of potential clients that he received from friends, acquaintances and other clients,

Antwaan writes postal or email letters to ten people a night for two months to tell them about his service. He develops his sales pitch himself and tailors it to each person. Each note contains his name, postal address, phone number, and email address, along with the assurance that he will reply quickly to their messages.

Note that Antwaan's audience—the receivers of his postal letters and email messages—are limited in number by the people he can learn about from others and contact personally. Note, too, that any feedback goes straight to Antwaan. They either speak to him directly or they leave a message on his voicemail or email. (Of course, if a potential client doesn't return his message at all, Antwaan may take that as feedback that the person is not interested in buying life insurance.) One example of unwanted noise might be a problem Antwaan sometimes has with a hum on his answering machine. It's a pain in the neck, he says, but it generally works OK and he doesn't want to spend money for a new one.

Contrast Antwaan's mediated interpersonal work with the mass communication activities of SafetyTrust Mutual, one of the insurance companies Antwaan represents. SafetyTrust is mounting its own campaign to help agents like Antwaan attract specific groups of clients that they have identified as particularly profitable. In fact, SafetyTrust has recently hired an advertising agency and a public relations agency for the express purpose of attracting potential clients who fit the following profile: young parents with a combined income of over \$75,000 a year. Members of the advertising and public relations teams have come up with a multimedia marketing plan built around the twin themes of safety and trust. Their plan involves:

- Creating commercials using the two themes and airing them on two or three TV series that rate highly with young married couples
- Creating print ads and buying space for those ads in upscale newspapers and magazines
- Attempting to place SafetyTrust's young and photogenic president on NBC's *Today Show* and ABC's *Good Morning America* to speak about new government insurance regulations
- Paying a custom-magazine firm to create and mail a glossy new magazine for young, upscale SafetyTrust clients
- Advertising during a VH1 cable series
- Paying an Internet advertising company to send an email ad to 30,000 people, on a list the company bought of individuals who fit the profile and have indicated that they would be interested in learning about how to save money on insurance
- Reworking a website where customers can learn about their plans and send responses to the company

Note that although these messages reach millions of people, getting feedback from them is difficult. Typical feedback would include phone responses to an 800 number in the TV commercials and print ads, but this would probably include only a tiny percentage of the people who saw the messages. SafetyTrust might also pay a company to conduct research to estimate the number of people who viewed the materials and what they thought about them.

These methods would often yield delayed feedback from potential customers. SafetyTrust executives are particularly proud of the plan for the website, because it customizes the message and encourages immediate feedback. The site changes its sales pitch and look based on information that the person types in at the site. For example, whenever a person goes to the company's homepage at www.safetytrust.com, that person is asked a number of questions about age, salary,

marital status, and educational background, among other things. Based upon a person's responses to such questions, and a computer program's evaluation of those responses, the person will be able to view a site that is tailored to their replies. This instantaneous response to consumer feedback helps SafetyTrust to best explain its products and sell its services. At the same time, the feedback helps tailor the message so as to minimize semantic noise that might drive some potential customers away.

Additionally, users of the website may choose to email SafetyTrust at any time with questions, concerns, or requests for more information. This feedback doesn't reach a real agent at SafetyTrust. Instead, it is collected and analyzed daily by "consumer response specialists," who may eventually contact people who seem good prospects and refer them to an agent the specialists choose. Their conversations may not be the carefully responsive discussions that individual agents like Antwaan carry out when they call back every person who has left messages on their voicemail services. SafetyTrust finds that its approach is quite efficient, however, since it can quickly weed out people that the company considers too old for its programs or high insurance risks. But just in case a person who comes to the site wants to speak to an agent near his or her home, SafetyTrust has links to those of its agents who have websites. Antwaan is one of these agents with his own content, and he finds that many of the best prospects who come to his home page are referred through the SafetyTrust site.

With his much smaller operation, Antwaan couldn't possibly do what SafetyTrust is doing with its website and feedback from prospective customers. In fact, even if he had thought of all of SafetyTrust's marketing activities, Antwaan could never implement them without adding enormously (and unrealistically) to his staff and overhead costs. After all, SafetyTrust—a large insurance company with millions of dollars in its marketing budget—hired an advertising agency and a public relations agency to help it create its messages to potential customers. It also used large organizations (NBC, ABC, VH1, and an Internet access firm) to help distribute its messages.

The difference between mediated interpersonal and mass communication, then, can be seen as a difference between personal, hand-crafted production on the one hand, and mass production on the other. (See Table 1.2 for an illustration of these differences as they relate to Antwaan and SafetyTrust.) Put another way, SafetyTrust's work is part of an industry process. An **industry** is a grouping of companies that use technology to work together in a regularized way to produce and distribute goods and services. It is this industrial approach that makes it possible for SafetyTrust to get its messages out to its intended audiences.

Mass Communication Defined

And so we come at last to the definition of mass communication that we have been building: *mass communication is the industrialized production and multiple distribution of messages through technological devices*. The industrial nature of the process is central to this definition of mass communication, as shown in Figure 1.4.

As the definition suggests, mass communication is carried out by mass media industries. Think, for example, of the movie industry, in which many different companies—from production studios, to film providers, to catering firms—work to make and circulate movies. **Mass media** are the technological instruments—for example, newsprint, televisions, radios—through which mass communication takes place. **Mass media outlets** are companies that send out messages via mass media. Magazines and television are mass media; for example, *Time* magazine and the NBC

industry a grouping of companies that use technology to work together in a regularized way to produce and distribute goods and services

mass media the technological vehicles through which mass communication takes place (note that the term *mass media* is plural; it refers to more than one vehicle; the singular version is *mass medium*)

mass media outlets companies that send out messages via mass media

Table 1.2 Comparing Antwaan’s approach to SafetyTrust’s approach

	Antwaan’s approach (mediated interpersonal)	SafetyTrust’s approach (mass communication)
Message	A postal mail and email sales pitch tailored to what he knows about the potential customer	TV commercials, newspaper and magazine ads; public relations activities on <i>Today</i> and <i>Good Morning America</i> ; a custom magazine for upscale clients; sponsorship of a VH1 cable program to reach young adults; a website
Source	Antwaan himself	SafetyTrust’s advertising agency and public relations agency
Encoding	Antwaan’s creation of his phone messages	The activities by the advertising and public relations agencies that create the messages
Channel	The postal mail, the Internet and (sometimes) telephone answering machine	Broadcast and cable television networks, newspapers, magazines, the Web
Receiver	The dozens of individuals that Antwaan contacts over the phone	The millions of people who see or read SafetyTrust’s ads, custom magazine, public relations activities, or website
Decoding	The individuals who read email or postal messages	Members of the target audience who see SafetyTrust ads or visit the website
Feedback	The returned phone calls and emails of individual potential customers—or their failure to contact Antwaan	Letters from listeners, messages sent from the SafetyTrust website, research indicating the number of people who read/watched the ads
Noise	Hums on Antwaan’s answering machine	Messages that use language certain types of potential customers wouldn’t understand

television network are mass media outlets. The term *mass media* is plural; it refers to more than one technological instrument. The singular version is *mass medium*.

Media Innovation

Media companies are usually in business to make money from the materials they produce and distribute (which is another way they are different from interpersonal communication activities like gossip among friends or the construction of an Internet site by a class). Because of this focus on making money, media professionals view the programs, articles, and films they create at least partly as **commodities**, as goods in a real marketplace.

In many ways, the making of mass media commodities is similar to the industrial manufacture of other products like soap, candles, and cars. An important difference between industries making these kinds of products and making media products, however, has to do with the pace of innovation. **Innovation** means the introduction of something new in a company’s products. Companies of all kinds have **research and development (R&D)** departments that explore new ideas and generate new products and services aimed at helping the firm attract customers in the future. Even so, companies that are not involved in mass communication can allow successful products to roll off the assembly line unchanged for long stretches of time. For an example, identical bars of Ivory Soap have been rolling off mass-pro-

commodities goods in a real marketplace

innovation the introduction of something new into a company’s products

research and development (R&D) departments within companies that explore new ideas and generate new products and services aimed at systematically investigating potential sources of revenue through surveys, focus groups, or the analysis of existing data

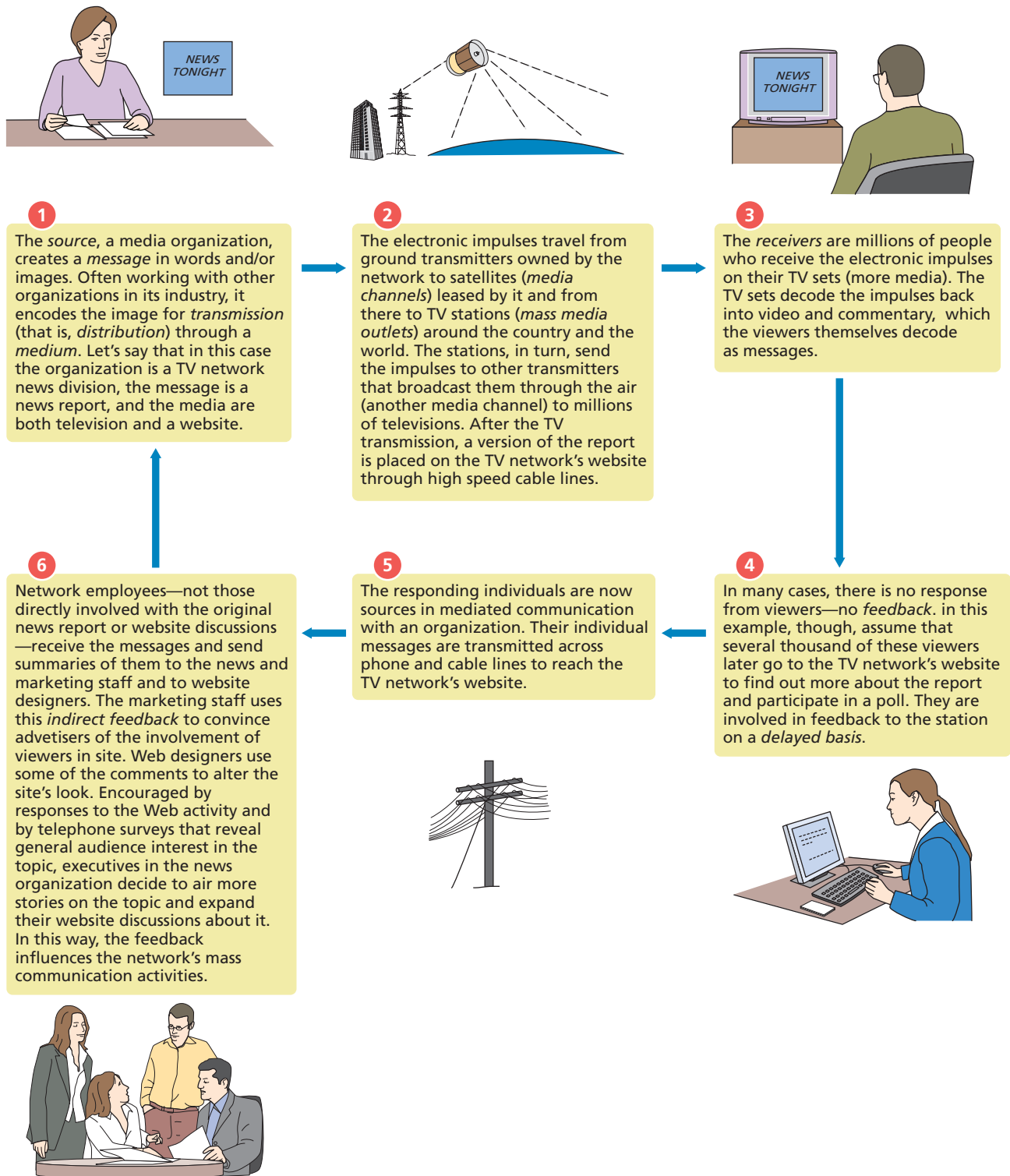


Figure 1.4
A Model of Mass Communication

In this model of mass communication, the elements (source, message, transmission, etc.) are all marked by the industrial production and multiple distribution by mass media organizations.



Where Does the Term *Media* Come From?

CULTURE TODAY

Until the “Roaring” 1920s, to most Americans a medium was a fortune teller or palm reader, not a publication, and as for media—well, there was no such thing. The term *media* was just an obscure Latin plural of the word *medium*.

Then came modern advertising and a sense of media that had nothing to do with psychics. Advertisers began to speak of placing ads in different media.

The original means of mass communication were print—magazines, journals, and newspapers—and their collective name was already in place: publications. Then radio and television were added to the mix, and the term *publications* would not stretch to fit. Needing a term that would encompass all these means of communication, writers borrowed *media* from the advertising people and have used it ever since to accommodate these and even newer means of communication, such as the Internet.



duction lines for decades. The manufacturer may make new products with the Ivory name, but an Ivory Soap bar that you bought on Tuesday will be the same as the one you will buy on Friday. But in mass media firms, both the R&D function and the basic production line for the same product must focus on change continually. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* must update its stories or people will stop buying the paper and subscribing to their website; Twentieth Century Fox cannot survive on only one film; executives at the MTV cable network realize that if they run only one music video or one reality program, viewers will catch on and tune out.

This need for constant innovation means constant risk. The next day’s issue of a newspaper could turn off many readers. Fox’s next film could fail. MTV’s lineup of programs could lead people to reach for their remote controls. For this reason, media employees always look for ways to balance the need for continual, rapid innovation with a desire to control risk. As we will see in Chapter 2, they try to lower their chances of failure by relying on themes and plots and people that have done well in the past. The ways in which they solve these problems can influence much of what we see and hear.

Mass Media in our Personal Lives

Mass media materials speak to the most personal parts of our lives. They also connect us to the world beyond our private circumstances. As a result, mass

media industries are a major force in society. To understand what this means, we have to dig a bit deeper into how people use the media and what they get out of them.

How People Use the Mass Media

Scholars have found that individuals adapt their use of mass media to their own particular needs.² Broadly speaking, we can say that people use the media in four ways: *enjoyment*, *companionship*, *surveillance*, and *interpretation*. Let's examine these uses one at a time.

Enjoyment The desire for enjoyment, or personal pleasure, is a basic human urge. Watching a television program, studying the Bible, finishing a newspaper crossword puzzle, even reading an advertisement can bring this kind of gratification to many people.

News stories, daytime soap operas, sports, and primetime dramas can ignite everyday talk with friends, relatives, work colleagues, and even strangers. During the mid-1990s, for example, many local television stations around the United States were advertising their morning talk programs with the phrase "We give you something to talk about." This process of using media content for everyday interpersonal discussions is called using media materials as **social currency** or coins of exchange. "Did you hear Jay Leno's joke last night?" someone might ask around the water cooler at work. "No, I watched Letterman," might be one reply. That might trigger a chain of comments about TV comedy that bring a number of people into the conversation.

social currency media content used as coins of exchange in everyday interpersonal discussions

Of course, another way people can bring mass media material into friendly conversation is by experiencing the content together. If you have attended Super Bowl parties, you have an idea of how a televised event can energize friends in ways that have little to do with what is taking place on the screen. In this way, the media provide us with the enjoyment we seek as a basic human need.

Companionship On a very different note, mass media bring pleasure to the lonely and the alone. A chronically ill hospital patient or a home-bound senior citizen may find companionship by viewing their favorite sports teams on TV, or listening to the music of days gone by on the radio.

Sometimes, media can even draw out people who feel troubled and in need of friends. The term **parasocial interaction** describes the psychological connections that some media users establish with celebrities they learn about through the mass media. People who are involved in a parasocial interaction typically enjoy a feeling of bonding with those celebrities. You might know someone who gets so involved with media images of rock or rap stars that they sometimes act as if they know them well. In a few publicized cases, this feeling has gotten out of control, leading individuals to stalk, and even harm, the media figures who were the objects of their adulation. In 1999, for example, actor Brad Pitt found himself with an unwanted visitor when a nineteen-year-old woman broke into his home. He was not there at the time, but a caretaker found this self-styled "Number one fan" wearing Pitt's clothes and asleep in his bed.³

parasocial interaction the psychological connections that some media users establish with celebrities that they learn about through the mass media

Surveillance Using media for **surveillance** means employing them to learn about what is happening in the world around us. We do this every day, often without realizing it. Do you turn on the radio or TV each morning to find out the weather? Do you check the stock listings to find out how your investments are

surveillance using the media to learn about what is happening in the world around us



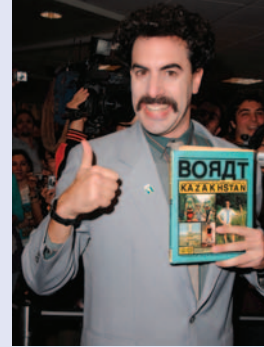
Catch Phrases as Social Currency

CULTURE TODAY

Have you ever considered why some phrases from movies, television shows, songs, and advertisements become *social currency*, phrases that people use with one another to show that they are “in”? Several years ago, conversations were frequently peppered with the quips, “You’re fired!” and “That’s hot,” made popular by reality TV stars Donald Trump and Paris Hilton, respectively.

Catch phrases can come from a variety of media sources. During the 1984 presidential campaign, Walter Mondale asked his Democratic rival Gary Hart, “Where’s the beef?” when he wanted to question his opponent’s political experience. Although the expression has since died, at the time there was widespread use of this phrase, which originated from a Wendy’s hamburger chain television commercial.

Other examples of catch phrases include Homer Simpson’s ubiquitous “D’oh”; “Bringing sexy back,” from Justin Timberlake’s hit single; “I’m kind of a big deal,” a famous line from the 2004 comedy *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*; the Black Panthers’ slogan “right on” during the



The catch phrases and comedy bits of comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen, here as Borat, are often a source of social currency we use everyday in our personal and professional conversations.

1960s; and “A-OK,” which was originally used by astronauts during the early days of the space program. Many catch phrases disappear, but some become embedded in popular culture, particularly when they fill a void in the language.

Think about how many catch phrases you know and try to figure out their origin.

faring? Have you read classified ads online to look for a job, concert tickets, or previously owned furniture? Have you ever called or logged on to Fandango or Moviefone to find out where and when a film is playing? All these activities are illustrations of using the mass media for surveillance. Of course, our surveillance can be more global. Many people are interested in knowing what is going on in the world beyond their immediate neighborhood. *Did the flooding upstate destroy any houses? Will Congress raise taxes? What’s going on with the negotiations for peace in the Middle East?*

Interpretation Although surveillance through the mass media satisfies many people, it supplies only part of what they want to know about the world. They also want to find out *why* things are happening—who or what is the cause—and what to do about them. When people try to find reasons, they are looking for **interpretation**.

Many of us turn to the media to learn not just what is going on, but also why and what, if any, actions to take. We may read newspaper editorials to understand the actions of national leaders and come to conclusions about whether or not we agree with these actions. We know that financial magazines such as *Money* and *Barron’s* are written to appeal to people who want to understand how investment vehicles work and which ones to choose. And we are aware that libraries, bookstores, and some websites (howstuffworks.com comes to mind) specialize in “how to” topics ranging from raising children, to installing a retaining wall, to dying with dignity. Some people who are genuinely confused about some topics

interpretation using the media to find out *why* things are happening—who or what is the cause—and what to do about them

find mass media the most useful sources of answers. Pre-teens, for example, may want to understand why women and men behave romantically toward each other but they may feel embarrassed to ask their parents. They may be quite open to different opinions—in *Spiderman*, *Oprah*, Justin Timberlake’s music, or *Mad* magazine—about where sexual attraction comes from and what the appropriate behavior is.

But how do people actually use the explanations they get from the mass media? Researchers have found that the credibility people place in the positions that mass media take depends on the extent to which the individuals agree with the values they find in that content.⁴ For example, a person who is rooted in a religiously conservative approach to the Bible would not be likely to agree with a nature book that is based on the theory of evolution; a political liberal would probably not be persuaded by the interpretations that politically conservative magazines offer about ways to end poverty. Keep in mind, however, that in these examples, these people would probably not search out such media content to begin with. Unless people have a good reason to confront materials that go against their values (if they will be engaging in a debate on the ideas, for example), most people stay away from media that do not reflect (and reinforce) their own beliefs, values, or interests. And if they do come across materials that go against their values, they tend to dismiss them as biased.

Multiple Use of Mass Media Content The example of a pre-teen seeking interpretations of romance from four very different outlets—a movie series, a television talk show, a musical record, and a magazine—raises an important point about the four uses that people make of the mass media: the uses are not linked to any particular medium or genre. If we take television as an example, we might be tempted to suggest that enjoyment comes from certain sitcoms or adventure series, that companionship comes from soap operas, that surveillance is achieved through network and local news programs, and that interpretation can be found in Sunday morning political talk shows such as *Meet the Press*, as well as from daily talk shows such as *Jerry Springer* and *The View*. In fact, we may divide many kinds of content in these ways. Communication researchers point out, however, that individuals can get just about any gratification they are seeking from just about any program—or any kind of mass media materials.⁵

You might find, for example, that you use the *CBS Evening News* for enjoyment, surveillance, and interpretation. *Enjoyment* might come from the satisfaction of watching reporters’ familiar faces day after day (is a little parasocial interaction working here?); *surveillance* might be satisfied by reports from different parts of the globe; and *interpretation* might flow from stray comments by the reporters and those they interview about what ought to be done to solve problems.

Mass Media, Culture, and Society

At the same time that mass media are fulfilling private desires for enjoyment, companionship, surveillance, and interpretation, they often lead us to share the materials we are reading and listening to with millions of people. This sharing is made possible, of course, because of the industrial nature of the activity and its technology of production and distribution. When complex organizations comprising of many workers join together to use the latest technology to produce media,

Millions of people around the world saw *Shrek* in theaters within a few months of its release thanks to global publicity campaigns by Dreamworks and Universal.



those organizations have the potential to distribute the same message to huge numbers of people.

Consider the typical television broadcast of the Grammy Awards, the ceremony in which the recording industry honors its most successful talent. It is transmitted via satellite from Los Angeles to broadcast television production facilities in New York, then distributed “live” to every corner of the United States, as well as to many parts of the world.

Or, consider a typical presidential news conference. It is covered by dozens of newspaper reporters and television and radio news crews. Snippets of the event will commonly end up confronting Americans around the country in many different forms during that day and the next on the national news, on the local news, in the morning paper, and throughout the day on hourly radio news reports.

As a third, and slightly different example, consider a mega-hit film such as one of the *Shrek* movies. Millions of people around the world saw it in theaters within a few months of its release. In addition, word of the movie’s popularity sped around the globe as Dreamworks and Universal, its joint domestic distributors, and UIP, its distributor outside the United States, revved up a publicity and advertising machine. It peppered as many media outlets as possible with word of the high-octane action and head-lobbing digital effects.

Shrek, the presidential news conference, and the Grammy Awards represent only three examples of activities that happen all the time in industrialized countries such as the United States. Linking large numbers of people to share the same materials virtually instantly has become standard practice for the broadcast television, Internet, radio, cable TV, and satellite television industries. Just as significant is the sharing that takes place relatively more slowly when newspapers, magazines, books, movies, billboards, and other mass media release their messages. Because of mass media industries and their abilities to mass produce media content, millions of people within the United States and around the world can receive the same messages within a fairly short time. Think about it: here are huge numbers of people who are physically separated from one another, have no obvious relationship with one another, and most often are unknown to one another. Yet on a daily basis they are watching the same news stories, listening to the same music, and reading the same magazine articles.

What is Culture?

We can understand why this large-scale sharing of messages is important by exploring the cultural context in which the mass media operate. **Culture** is a very broad term. When we use the term *culture*, we are talking about ways of life that are passed on to members of a society through time and that keep the society together. We typically use the word **society** to refer to large numbers of individuals, groups, and organizations that live in the same general area and consider themselves connected to one another through the sharing of a culture.

What is shared includes learned behaviors, beliefs, and values. A culture lays out guidelines about who belongs to the society and what rules apply to them. It provides guideposts about where and what to learn, where and how to work, how to eat and sleep. It tells us how we should act toward family members, friends, and strangers, and much, much more. In other words, a culture helps us make sense of ourselves and our place in the world.

A culture provides people with ideas about the kinds of arguments concerning particular subjects that are acceptable. In American culture, people would likely feel that on certain topics (vegetarianism, for example), all sorts of positions are acceptable, whereas on other topics (cannibalism, incest) the range of acceptable views is much narrower. Moreover, American culture allows for the existence of groups with habits that many people consider odd and unusual but not threatening to the more general way of life. Such group lifestyles are called **subcultures**. The Amish of Pennsylvania who live without modern appliances at home represent such a subculture, as do Catholic monks who lead a secluded existence devoted to God.

For small populations living close together, people use interpersonal communication to share an awareness of their culture and to pass on that way of life to the next generation. Consider campers and their counselors coming together in a summer camp as an example of a culture. The counselors establish their leadership over the campers by making sure everyone follows traditional rules. The counselors threaten them with extra chores if they violate rules, and give them rewards when they follow the rules. Traditional camp songs encourage campers to feel good about the camp, to see themselves as connected to each other, and to want to return year after year. Arguments over certain rules—like Friday night lights-out time—may be tolerated, but arguments over other rules (for example, daily bunk inspection) are not. Subcultures considered dangerous aren't tolerated. If campers decide that they wanted to live alone in the woods instead of in the bunks, for example, they would not be allowed to do that and would be punished if they disobeyed.

Mass Communication and Culture The camp's culture provides the camp society's members with direct evidence of who belongs and what the rules are. In places with large numbers of people—cities or countries, for example—such notions cannot always be understood simply by looking around. The mass media allow us to view clearly the ideas that people have about their broad cultural connections with others, and where they stand in the larger society. When mass media encourage huge numbers of people who are dispersed and unrelated to share the same materials, **they are focusing people's attention on what is culturally important to think about and to talk and argue with others about.** In other words, mass media create people's common lived experiences, a sense of the common culture and the varieties of subcultures acceptable to it.

The mass media present ideas of the culture in three broad and related ways: (1) They direct people's attention toward **codes of acceptable behavior** within

culture ways of life that are passed on to members of a society through time and that keep the society together

society large numbers of individuals, groups, and organizations that live in the same general area and **consider themselves connected to one another through the sharing of a culture**

subcultures groups with habits that many people consider odd and unusual but not threatening to the more general way of life



the society and how to talk about them, (2) they tell people what and who counts in their world and why, and (3) they tell people what others think of them, and what people “like themselves” think of others. Let’s look at each of the ways separately.

The Mass Media Direct People’s Attention Toward the Codes of Acceptable Behavior Within Society and How to Talk About Them

A culture provides individuals with notions about how to approach the entire spectrum of life’s decisions, from waking to sleeping. It also gives people ideas about the arguments concerning all these subjects that are acceptable. If you think about the mass media from this standpoint, you’ll realize that this is exactly what they do. Newspapers continually give us a look at how government works, as do Internet sites such as Wonkette and Huffington Post. TV’s *CSI* series act out behavior the police consider unacceptable and open up issues where the rules of police and “criminal” behavior are contested or unclear. Magazine articles provide ideas, and a range of arguments, about what looks attractive, and how to act toward the opposite sex. We may personally disagree with many of these ideas. At the same time, we may well realize that these ideas are shared and possibly accepted broadly in society.

These cultural rules and arguments can be found in even the most sensational mass media materials. You may have heard of, or remember, the first trial of O. J. Simpson, the ex-football star and actor accused of murdering his wife and her friend. The criminal prosecution, covered live on Court TV and the Cable News Network (CNN), became *the* media event of the mid-1990s. Although some observers dismissed the trial as sensationalist trash, others pointed out how it paraded for viewers cultural rules and arguments about marriage, race, and violence. Years later, in 2006, anger erupted in many media outlets when Regan Books announced that it would release a memoir by Simpson that would discuss how he *might* have killed the two people. Commentators voiced the opinion that such a book was taboo, and public indignation seemed so intense that the book company’s owner, News Corporation, decided not to release the title and recalled printed copies from stores.

The Mass Media Tell What and Who Counts in Their World and Why

Mass media tell us who is “famous”—from movie stars to scientists—and give us reasons why. They define the leaders to watch, from the U.S. president to religious ministers. News reports tell us who these people are in “real life.” Fictional presentations such as books, movies, and TV dramas may tell us what they (or people like them) do and are like. Many of the presentations are angrily critical or bitingly satirical; American culture allows for this sort of argumentation. Through critical presentations or heroic ones, though, mass media presentations offer members of the society a sense of the qualities that we ought to expect in good leaders.

Fiction often shows us what leaders *ought* to be like—what values count in the society. Actor Denzel Washington excels at playing law enforcement officers who are courageous, smart, loyal, persevering, strong, and handsome; think, for example, of the movies *Déjà Vu* and *Inside Man*. Sometimes, mass media discussions of fiction and nonfiction merge in curious ways. During the election of 2000, for example, several mass media commentators noted that President Bartlett of the then-popular *West Wing* TV drama would be a better choice than any of the real candidates because of his better leadership qualities.



The mass media can connect us with people and events far beyond the confines of our own homes.

The Mass Media Help People to Understand Themselves and Their Connection With, or Disconnection From Others

Am I leadership material? Am I good-looking? Am I more or less religious than most people? Is what I like to eat what most people like to eat? Is my apartment as neat as most people's homes? How do I fit into the culture? Mass media allow us, and sometimes even encourage us, to ask questions such as these. When we read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch TV we can't help but compare ourselves to the portrayals these media present. Sometimes we may shrug the comparisons off with the clear conviction that we simply don't care if we are different from people who are famous or considered "in." Other times we might feel that we ought to be more in tune with what's going on; this may lead us to buy new clothes or adopt a new hair style. Often, we might simply take in ideas of what the world is like outside our direct reach and try to figure out how we fit in.

At the same time that the mass media get us wondering how we fit in, they may also encourage feelings of connection with people whom we have never met. Newscasters, textbooks, and even advertisements tell us that we are part of a nation that extends far beyond what we can see. We may perceive that sense of connection differently depending on our personal interests. We may feel a bond of sympathy with people in a U.S. city that the news shows ravaged by floods. We may feel linked to people thousands of miles away that a website tells us share our political opinions. We may feel camaraderie with Super Bowl viewers around the country, especially those rooting for the team we are supporting.

Similarly, we may feel *disconnected* from people and nations that mass media tell us have belief systems that we do not share. U.S. news and entertainment are filled with portrayals of nations, individuals, and types of individuals who, we are told, do not subscribe to key values of American culture. Labels such as *rogue*

nation, Nazi, communists, terrorists, and Islamic extremists suggest threats to an American sense of decency. When mass media attach these labels to countries or individuals, we may well see them as enemies of our way of life, unless we have personal reasons not to believe the media portrayals.

Criticisms of Mass Media's Relation to Culture

stereotypes predictable depictions that reflect (and sometimes create) cultural prejudices

political ideologies beliefs about who should hold the greatest power within a culture

Some social observers have been critical of the way mass media have used their power as reflectors and creators of culture. One criticism is that mass media present unfortunate prejudices about the world by systematically using **stereotypes**—predictable depictions that reflect (and sometimes create) cultural prejudices—and **political ideologies**—beliefs about who should hold the greatest power within a culture, and why. Another is that mass media detract from the quality of American culture. A third criticism, related to the first two, is that the mass media's cultural presentations encourage political and economic manipulation of their audiences.

Criticisms such as these have made people think deeply about the role that mass media play in American culture. These criticisms do have *their* weak points. Some might note that it is too simplistic to say that mass media detract from the quality of American culture. Different parts of the U.S. population use the mass media differently and, as a result, may confront different kinds of images. Related to this point is the idea that people bring their own personalities to the materials they read and watch. They are not simply passive recipients of messages. They actively interpret, reshape, and even reject some of them.

Nevertheless, the observations about stereotypes, cultural quality and political ideology should make us think about the power of mass media over our lives. Many people—most people at one time or another—do seem to see the mass media as mirroring parts of the society and the world beyond it, especially parts they do not know first hand. Most people do accept what the mass media tell them in news—and even in entertainment—about what and who counts in their world and why. Many seem to believe that the mass media's codes of acceptable behavior accurately describe large numbers of people, even if the codes don't describe their own norms. And they accept the mass media's images as starting points for understanding where they fit in society in relation to others and their connection with, or disconnection from, others. They may disagree with these images, or think that they shouldn't exist. Nevertheless, the media images serve as starting points for their concerns about, and arguments over, reality. We will have more to say about critical views on the effects of media in Chapter 4.

Media Literacy

It is no exaggeration to say that everyone is influenced in one way or another by mass media messages. Some people, though, have learned how to step back and seriously examine the mass media's role in their lives and in American life. The aim of this book is to help you to be one of those people. The goal is not to make you cynical and distrustful of all mass media. In the vast landscape of the media, there is much to enjoy and appreciate. Instead, the goal is to help you think in an educated manner about the forces that shape the media and your relationships with them so that you will better evaluate what you see and hear. The aim is to help you to be media literate.

There are very practical benefits to being media literate.

- Consider your use of the Internet. Most Americans go online on a regular basis, but research shows that they have little understanding of the privacy policies of the websites they visit. As a media literate person—certainly as someone who has read this book—you would know about website privacy issues and how to take care not to give out private information about yourself.
- Consider your use of the TV set. Do you know that the United States is going through a conversion to digital television that may make your TV obsolete? Did you know that Americans who have the obsolete television sets can apply for government funds to buy a special converter so that they can continue to receive over-the-air TV? As a media literate person, you would understand why all this is happening and how to save money as a result of the government program.
- Consider that you are applying for a job working for a media firm, or a position that requires you to relate to media personnel. The person who interviews you may test your knowledge of the business by using industry terms and discussing new developments. Would you know how to engage in an energetic conversation on the present and future of new and traditional media industries? If you were media literate, you would.

More generally, being media literate can be satisfying and fun. For example, knowing movie history can make watching films fascinating because you will be able to notice historical and technical features of the films that you wouldn't have otherwise noticed. Having a comparative understanding of different forms of news can help you think more clearly about what you can expect from journalism today and how it is changing. Understanding the forces that shape formulas and genres, and the social controversies around stereotyping and violence, can make playing even the most predictable video games and watching even the most hackneyed television shows jumping-off points for thinking critically about yourself in relation to images of others in society. All these and other media activities can also start important conversations between you and your friends about the directions of our culture and your place in it. That, in turn, can help you become a more aware and responsible citizen—parent, voter, worker—in our media-driven society (see Figure 1.5).

Foundations of Media Literacy

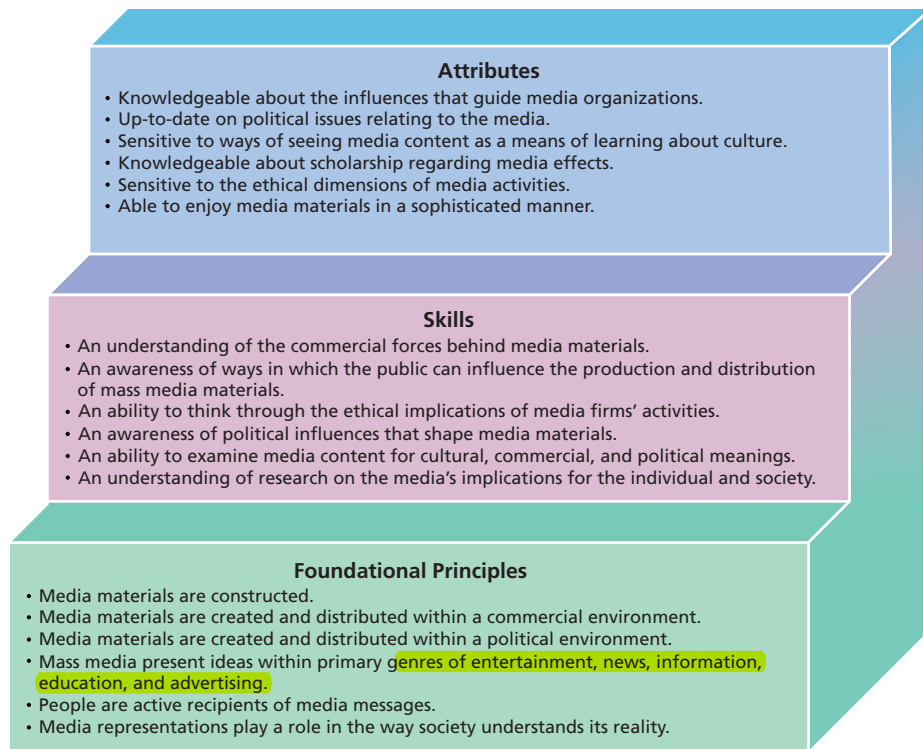
When we speak about **literacy**, we mean the ability to effectively comprehend and use messages that are expressed in written or printed symbols, such as letters. When we speak about **media literacy**, however, we mean something broader. To quote the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, it is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.”⁶

There are many views of exactly what media literacy is and what it can do for people. It seems, however, that most scholars would accept the following six “foundation principles” for teaching people literacy skills.⁷ We have already been building these principles in this chapter, so you will be familiar with the ideas behind them.

literacy the ability to effectively comprehend and use messages that are expressed in written or printed symbols, such as letters

media literacy the ability to apply critical thinking skills to the mass media, thereby becoming a more aware and responsible citizen—parent, voter, worker—in our media-driven society

Figure 1.5
Constructing Media Literacy
 Steps to becoming a media literate citizen.



Principle 1: Media Materials are Constructed

As we already know, when we read newspapers, watch TV, and surf the Web we should continually be aware that what we are seeing and hearing is not any kind of pure reality. Rather, it is a construction—that is, a human creation that presents a kind of script about the culture.

Principle 2: Media Materials are Created and Distributed Within a Commercial Environment

When we try to understand media materials as human-created cultural scripts, we must look at many considerations that surround and affect the humans who are involved in creating and releasing the media materials. We have already noted in this chapter that mass media materials are produced by organizations that exist in a commercial setting. The need to bring in revenues, often to sell advertising, is foremost in the minds of those who manage these organizations. In forthcoming chapters we will elaborate on what this means and how it affects the media products.

Principle 3: Media Materials are Created and Distributed Within a Political Environment

“Political” refers to the way a society is governed. When it comes to mass media, the term refers to a variety of activities. These range from the specific regulations that governments place on mass media, to decisions by courts about what restrictions the government can place on the media, to the struggle by various interest groups to change what media do (often using government leverage). For many media observers, being aware that media operate within a political environment leads to the idea that this environment deeply influences the media content itself. To them, it means being aware that the ideas in the media have political implications—that they are ideological.

Principle 4: Mass Media Present Their Ideas Within Primary Genres of Entertainment, News, Information, Education, and Advertising

Media scholar Patricia Auferheide and others note that every medium—the television, the movie, the magazine—has its own codes and conventions, **its own ways of presenting cultural reality.** Although you probably haven't thought about it, it's a good bet that you recognize the differences between the way these media do things. A report of a presidential press conference looks different depending on whether it was written for a newspaper or a magazine, presented on TV as news, described on a website's blog, or put together for the big screen. You probably also recognize, though, that mass media are similar in some of their approaches to presenting the world. The most important commonality is that they organize the world into a number of basic storytelling forms that we recognize as entertainment, news, information, education, and advertising.

Principle 5: People are Active Recipients of Media Messages

As we noted earlier, the process of meaning-making out of media forms consists of an interaction between the reader and the materials. **People bring their own personalities to the materials they read and watch.** They may get angry at some ideas and reject or change them. We also noted, though, that emphasizing the input of the individual does not take away from the broad social importance of the media. Because so many people share mass media materials, we might expect that large segments of the society see mass media as having cultural importance for the society as a whole. That realization points to the final foundation principle.

Principle 6: Media Representations Play a Role in the Way Society Understands its Reality

People may like what they see about their society or they may complain about it. They may want people to view media images about themselves and others,



Media literacy allows you to examine the forces and influences behind the media you consume on a daily basis.

or they fear that others will be influenced by presentations (for example, stereotypes and violence) in ways that could cause problems. Even with an active audience, then, mass media hold crucial importance for society's visions of itself.

Media Literacy Skills

While it is important to understand the foundational principles of media literacy, there are skills you'll need to acquire if you are to make use of those elements in your daily life. They are presented below, along with some of the questions you should be able to answer if you have those skills:

An Understanding of the Commercial Forces Behind Media Materials

How do firms in various media industries make money? How exactly does advertising fit into that? What role does market research play in the activities of media producers and distributors? How do all these activities influence actual mass media materials and how do I know when they do?

An Awareness of Political Influences That Shape Media Materials

What are current political issues relating to the regulation of media industries? How is the federal government approaching the regulation of new media such as the Internet? What roles do states and local communities play in regulation of the mass media? What are ways to think about the ideological messages in mass media materials?

An Ability to Examine Media Content Systematically for Broadly Cultural as well as Specifically Commercial and Political Meanings

How do we systematically examine news, entertainment, and advertising from various critical perspectives? How, for example, can we see the popularity of the Fox TV show *American Idol* as a reflection of broad trends in American culture? To what extent can we see the show as a product of the network's particular commercial situation within the changing TV industry? And to what extent can we see it as an ideological statement about the American people's readiness to vote when they are enthusiastic about a person or topic?

An Ability to Think Through the Ethical Implications of Media Firms' Activities

How do we explore and analyze the moral dilemmas that might be created as a result of commercial or political pressures that weigh on mass media organizations? Consider sexist and racist gangsta rap as an example. The music can be very profitable. Some observers insist, however, that producing and distributing such music is immoral. Others argue that the music reflects a part of U.S. culture that should not be swept under the rug. What is an executive to do? How should firms systematically think about such issues? How should consumers respond to them?

An Understanding of Research on the Mass Media's Implications for the Individual and Society

What have scholars learned over the years about the effects of violent programming on children? How much do people really learn from news programs? What kinds of conversations do people have about what they watch and read? What can cultural historians tell us about the long-term effects of media such as the book and the television on society?

An Awareness of Ways the Public Can Influence the Production and Distribution of Mass Media Materials

How can a group concerned about certain media images complain effectively about that material? How can the group add its pressures to the many industrial and political pressures on media organizations in ways that will be make its arguments effective? What constitutional and moral issues might be relevant here?

Becoming a Media Literate Person

Once you understand the foundational elements of media literacy, and have developed key media literacy skills, you are on your way to becoming a media literate person. Based on what we have just discussed, you can see that a media literate person is:

- Knowledgeable about the influences that guide media organizations
- Up-to-date on political issues relating to the media
- Sensitive to ways of seeing media content as a means of learning about culture
- Sensitive to the ethical dimensions of media activities
- Knowledgeable about scholarship regarding media effects
- Able to enjoy media materials in a sophisticated manner

Questioning Media Trends

For executives and would-be executives, understanding the strategies of multi-media conglomerates can mean the difference between a successful career and failure. But changes in the media business affect more than just the fortunes of the people who work in the business. For members of the media literate public, the power held by the mass media raises a host of social issues. Here are just a few:

- Do media conglomerates have the ability to control what we receive over a variety of media channels? If so, do they use that ability?
- Are portrayals of sex and violence increasing in the new media environment, as some critics allege? Do media organizations have the power to lower the amount of sex and violence? Would they do it if they could?
- Does the segmentation of audiences by media companies lead to groups that those firms consider more attractive, getting better advertising discounts and greater diversity of content than groups that those firms consider less important? If so, what consequences will that have for social tensions and the ability of parts of society to share ideas with one another?
- What (if anything) should be done about the increasing ability of mass media firms to invade people's privacy by storing information they gain when they interact with them? Should the federal government pass laws that force companies to respect people's privacy, or should we leave it up to corporate self-regulation? What do we know about the history of corporate self-regulation that would lead us to believe that it would or wouldn't work in this situation?
- Should global media companies adapt to the cultural values of the nations in which they work, even if those values infringe upon free press and free speech?