Fake news seems to be everywhere right now. The president accuses the New York Times of being fake news. The Russians are accused of spreading fake news through social media in an attempt to influence elections in the United States and Europe. Websites promote “too good to be true” stories as a way to attract clicks, and comedians use the term to refer to their biting satire of current events. But if all of these are “fake news,” does the term still have any meaning? And if so, what is it?

Before we can answer those questions, let’s start by jumping back nearly three hundred years and look at a news story that actually was fake—and true.

Back in the 1730s and 1740s, the British Parliament passed a law making it illegal for journalists to report on the debates and actions of the government. So Edward Cave, publisher of the Gentleman’s Magazine, started running columns that were supposedly accounts of the fictional “Parliament of Lilliput” but were really thinly disguised accounts of the real British government, largely written by that great man of British letters, Samuel Johnson. (You all remember the fictional nation of Lilliput with its six-inch-tall citizens from Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, don’t you?) Johnson’s fictionalized (and entertaining) accounts of the actions of the British Parliament were acceptable to readers because they understood that British law banned direct reporting on the government. Readers got “fake news” stories that were designed to use fiction in order to tell true stories. Tom Koch, in his book The News as Myth: Fact and Context in Journalism, writes, “Indeed, most of the Parliament of Lilliput copy was, by modern journalistic standards, pure fabrication. It carried the sense of the events in parliament, but almost never the actual words or actions of its members.”

This technique of using fiction to tell true stories was carried out by American writer Mark Twain (best known for his novels Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, who, in addition to being a famed novelist and travel writer, had a brief career as a journalist.

In the early 1860s, Twain deserted from the Confederate army and needed to get away from the United States for a while until the Civil War calmed down. Twain ended up working for the Territorial Enterprise in Virginia City, Nevada Territory. While there, he engaged in writing fake news stories known as “quaints.” Often these were done with the purpose of making a point for the reader, getting at some kind of higher truth. Twain’s “interesting stories” for the Enterprise were sometimes told as stories that were clearly meant to be believed, while others were just as clearly tall tales that he had no expectation of being accepted as fact.

Twain had learned how to do traditional journalism from the staff of the Enterprise, but he quickly became bored with straight reporting about the mining industry. Twain instead developed his use of the exaggerated story and his use of the “wink” to let readers know it’s all a joke—something many people missed.

But it was comedian and commentator Jon Stewart who really brought both the term and concept of fake news to the forefront. Stewart took over as host of Comedy Central’s The Daily Show in the summer of 1996. Despite hosting a show featuring satire that Stewart called fake news, multiple articles listed him as one of the most admired journalists in the United States. Nevertheless, Stewart steadfastly maintained he was just a comedian—a guy who told jokes. Stewart used the term fake news to refer to his brand of satirical news that had its roots in the world of Saturday Night Live’s Weekend Update news satire segment.

Fake news continued to have a low level of discussion throughout the early 2000s, mostly in reference to satire and comedy programs. But then, in 2016, when Donald Trump started running for president, use of the term exploded, with nearly four hundred mentions for the year in the Washington Post. In 2017, when the former reality TV host became president, there were more than eight hundred references to fake news in the Post in the first three months of the year, most of which were connected to the new president.

President Trump used the term fake news in new ways compared to how it had been used in the past. He wasn’t talking about allegorical stories masquerading as news or fiction, as Mark Twain’s and Samuel Johnson’s work did. And
he wasn’t referring to late-night satire on The Daily Show, as host Jon Stewart did. While the president sometimes referred to stories that had errors in them or were fabricated, he also often used the term to refer to stories and news outlets he simply didn’t like. In a tweet from the president dated February 17, 2017, he wrote, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!”

By 2018, the term fake news was so commonly used to refer to so many things that it became hard to know what it means. But there were at least five common usages:

- **Satire**—Fake news as an ironic term refers to stories that stretch the facts in order to make a joke or cultural criticism.
- **Mistakes and fabrication**—Sometimes news stories have errors in them that eventually get corrected. Sometimes stories are actually fabricated by unethical reporters (you can read more about this topic in Chapter 14, “Media Ethics”).
- **Partisan clickbait**—Sometimes websites make up sensational stories designed specifically to attract readers to their pages so that the readers will see the ads that appear with the fake articles. Oftentimes, if you dig deeply enough into these pages, you will see a mention that the stories are “fictional and presumably satirical news.”
- **Foreign political manipulation**—The Russian intelligence agencies have planted and amplified stories throughout the United States and Europe in order to try to manipulate elections. Some of these stories are made up, similar to partisan clickbait, while others are simply manipulated to appear more important and popular than they really are.
- **Media criticism**—Politicians and others often use the term fake news to refer to news outlets they don’t like as a general-purpose media criticism.

Historian and social critic Christopher Lasch wrote in 1979 that even then people were starting to question whether truth or falsity was still an important distinction in the media:

> [T]he rise of mass media makes the categories of truth and falsehood irrelevant to an evaluation of their influence. Truth has given way to credibility, facts to statements that sound authoritative without conveying any authoritative information.⁵

The debate over fake news and whether there is anything we can trust in the news is part of the rapidly changing media world we live in. We experience it through legacy media like newspapers, cable news, magazines, and talk radio, as well as through social media and other online sources.

---

### Levels of Communication

As the director of forensics and a communication instructor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, Aaron Blackman communicates a lot. For both work and hobbies, his communication often flows through social media like Facebook, Twitter, Discord, and Instagram. He uses these outlets to stay in touch with friends and family, attend meetings, and form new connections with gamers around the world. “Communicating with others through social media weaves in and out of my daily routine,” Aaron says.

I check numerous forms of social media throughout the day for a variety of reasons. I use Twitter the most to keep up on video game news, politics, and the weather. I’m a freelance eSports journalist on top of being an instructor, so Twitter serves as my first point of contact when it comes to interviewing pro players and gauging fan reactions to pro games. Twitter is also useful for promoting my articles as well as when I go live with my Twitch stream. I’ve been
streaming video games on Twitch every Monday night (my latest game was *Fortnite*), which, in addition to reaching my general audience, allows me to chat about gaming and life with my friends and family, including cousins from Minnesota that I don’t get to see very often.

I’ve recently started to use Instagram, but mostly for sharing pictures of our adorable 15-year-old Jack Russell terrier named Bailey. Additionally, I picked up cross-stitching video game art as a hobby, so I tend to share my progress pictures via Instagram. Another major service I use every day is Discord, which is a voice/text chat app that lets me connect with various gaming groups and provides a fantastic option for voice communication for meetings or while playing video games. As a member since 2005, I don’t update my Facebook very often anymore, but I find myself scrolling through every day to catch up on life updates from family members, friends, and the forensics community.

When Aaron is on social media, he’s engaging in almost every possible level of communication, but before we try to analyze the levels of communication Aaron is using, we need to define what communication is. Media scholar George Gerbner provides a simple definition: Communication is “social interaction through messages.” More plainly put, communication is how we interact with our entire world, whether through spoken words, written words, gestures, music, paintings, photographs, or dance. The important point is that communication is a process, not a static thing. Communication is an interaction that allows individuals, groups, and institutions to share ideas.

Media scholar and theorist Denis McQuail suggests that the various levels of communication can be viewed as a pyramid with a large base of intrapersonal communication where everyone is sending messages, building up to a peak of mass communication at which a relatively small number of organizations or individuals are transmitting messages (see Figure 1.1).

**Levels of Communication**

**Intrapersonal Communication**

Communication at its most basic level is *intrapersonal communication*, which is really communication within the self. This is how we think and how we assign meaning to all the messages and events that surround our lives. It ranges from the simple act of smiling in response to the smell of a favorite food coming from the kitchen to the complex reaction to an unexpected proposal of marriage. Feedback, or the response from the receiver of the message, is constant because we are always reflecting on what we have done and how we will react. Intrapersonal communication is the most prevalent form of communication and is, therefore, at the base of the pyramid. When Aaron is thinking over in his own mind which game he’s going to stream on Twitch next Monday, he is engaging in intrapersonal communication.
Interpersonal Communication

The next level on the pyramid is **interpersonal communication**, or one-on-one communication: “[t]he intentional or accidental transmission of information through verbal or nonverbal message systems to another human being.”

Interpersonal communication can be a conversation with a friend or a hug that tells your mother you love her. Like communication with the self, interpersonal communication is continual when others are around because we constantly send out messages, even if those messages consist of nothing more than body language indicating that we want to be left alone.

Interpersonal communication provides many opportunities for feedback. Your friend nods, raises an eyebrow, touches you on the arm, or simply answers your question. Not all interpersonal communication is done face-to-face, however. A telephone conversation, an SMS text message, an email, or even a greeting card can be interpersonal communication, though at a somewhat greater emotional distance than in a face-to-face conversation. When Aaron carries out a personal conversation over Discord, sends an email to an editor about a possible eSports story, or talks to his wife over dinner, he’s engaging in interpersonal communication.

Group Communication

**Group communication** is near the top of the pyramid and has reached a level of unequal communication in which one person is communicating with an audience of two or more people. Group communication often has a leader and is more public than interpersonal communication. In a small group—for example, a family at the dinner table or a coach with a basketball team—each individual has an opportunity to respond to the leader and is likely to do so. In a large group—such as a 350-student lecture section of a university class—each individual still has an opportunity to respond but is unlikely to do so. Other situations test the boundaries of group communication, such as a Kendrick Lamar concert at an amphitheater.
or concert hall. With the amplifiers and multiple video screens, there is a high level of communication technology but limited possibilities for audience members to provide direct feedback to the performers. However, there is still interaction between the rapper and his audience. Aaron engages in group communication when he meets with his forensics team, cheers when attending an eSports event in person, or shares a photo on Facebook.

Mass Communication

Mass communication is the pinnacle of the communication pyramid; it is a society-wide communication process in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large, mixed audience, most of whose members are not known to the sender. Nationally broadcast speeches by politicians, stories about crime in the newspapers, and popular new novels are all forms of mass communication. These communications are fundamentally different from the forms described previously because the sender is separated in space, and possibly in time, from the receiver. Also, the audience is not really known to the communicator. When a communicator appears on television or writes an article for a newspaper, he or she doesn’t know who will be listening or reading. What is more, the audience consists of many types of people. It might contain a young man in prison, an old woman in a nursing home, a child eating Cheerios for breakfast, or Aaron as he’s getting ready to go to the office to meet with his speech students. The message is communicated to all these people and to thousands or millions of others.

Traditionally, mass communication has allowed only limited opportunities for feedback because the channels of communication are largely one way, but with the rise of interactive communication networks, the opportunities for feedback are growing rapidly. Aaron consumes a wide range of mass communication during his day, including binge-watching series on Netflix, Hulu, and HBO Go; watching video game streamers and Heroes of the Storm tournaments on Twitch; playing video games on Blizzard, Steam, and the PlayStation Network; and listening to music through YouTube or Spotify. “My wife and I haven’t paid for cable or satellite for years,” Aaron says. “Aside from Westworld and Game of Thrones, we are perfectly content to catch up on TV shows months or years after their initial run. Entertainment fits into our busy schedules, not the other way around.”

A Mix of Levels

The distinctions among the various levels of communication are useful, but don’t assume that every instance of communication can automatically be placed in one category or another. In reality, there are frequent crossovers in the levels of communication. Consider online communication. You can share a photo with a friend via Snapchat. Through a Tumblr blog, you can share your favorite images and videos. With a listserv, an employer can communicate with employees throughout the world. And through websites and podcasts, messages can go out to the entire world. The same is true of a newspaper, in which a classified ad can carry a proposal of marriage, a notice of a group meeting, or a political manifesto. When Aaron goes out to dinner with friends, they cheer when the Heroes of the Storm eSports tournament being shown on ESPN gets exciting and talk about the competitors with each other, thus engaging in mass and group communication at the same time.

The purpose of this book is to help you better understand mass communication and the mass media. In the fifteen chapters of this book, we look at a variety of topics:

- The institutions that make up the media and how they function in and affect our society
- Who owns and controls the media business
• The media themselves, including books, magazines, newspapers, radio, recorded music, movies, television, and the internet
• The industries that support the media, including advertising and public relations
• The laws and ethics that regulate and control the media
• The roles the media play in countries and cultures around the world

By the time you are finished, you will better understand what the media are, why they function as they do, and what roles they play in your life.

Elements of Mass Communication

Although people often use the terms mass communication and mass media interchangeably, they are significantly different concepts. Mass communication is a process, whereas the mass media are simply the technological tools used to transmit the messages of mass communication. Earlier in this chapter, we defined mass communication as a society-wide communication process in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large mixed audience, most of whose members are not known to the sender. Let’s now take a closer look at all the players in the mass communication process and at several models that describe how these elements interact with each other.

The Players in the Mass Communication Process

There is an old way of describing mass communication known as the Sender Message Channel Receiver (SMCR) or transmission model. This transmission model does not do justice to the complexity of the mass communication process because it tends to portray mass communication as a largely one-directional flow of messages from the sender to the receiver, rather than as a complex interaction where senders and receivers are constantly changing places. But the model is still useful in helping to identify all the players we will be working with throughout this text.

The Sender. When critics talk about “the media” as a potent force, they are often talking about the ability of a few large corporations to control the messages that go out through the various channels of mass communication. These corporations, which are discussed in depth in Chapter 3, are the major senders in the mass communication process. They are the large, bureaucratic organizations that produce the complex messages we receive through the mass media, and they employ large numbers of people. If you look at the credits of a major movie, you’ll see hundreds, if not thousands, of names listed. Even a relatively straightforward medium such as a newspaper requires a substantial staff of writers, editors, graphic artists, photographers, computer specialists, printers, truck drivers, delivery people, janitors, librarians, circulation clerks, accountants, advertising salespeople, business managers, and a publisher.

As you may have already figured out, there are many other senders besides the major corporations. For example, although the majority of the most frequently visited websites are produced by large media organizations, social media and other forms of online communication have given rise to smaller, more intimate media without the accompanying structure and staff. For example, Six Until Me, one of the leading blogs for persons with diabetes, is operated by patient and diabetes advocate Kerri Morrone Sparling, assisted by one other person. Six Until Me started back in 2005 with a total of two readers: Kerri’s mother and her then boyfriend. By 2018, Kerri was communicating with her readers through a variety of social media platforms that point to her blog. As of this writing, she had 4,500 followers on Instagram, 27,500 followers on Twitter, and 7,800 likes on her Six Until Me Facebook page. You act as a “sender,” too, every time you post something publicly on your social media accounts.
Mass communication has generally been thought of as one-on-many communication, with few senders and many receivers, in contrast to interpersonal communication, which involves roughly equal numbers of senders and receivers. Sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote that the real power of the mass media is that they can control what topics are being covered and how much attention they receive. The most significant change brought about by the media in the United States, he said, was that public communication became a matter of sending information to a large number of receivers rather than a dialogue between roughly equal numbers of senders and receivers.  

The balance of power between senders and receivers in the mass media has started to change in recent years, however, with the rise of social media. Bloggers are people who post their thoughts on a regularly updated website. We got a big reminder of the importance of blogs on Thursday, June 28, 2012, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Affordable Care Act, otherwise known as Obamacare, was constitutional. Everyone in the news media knew that this story would be breaking at 10 a.m. on Thursday, June 28. The decision coming down was definitely not a surprise. And yet . . .  

Both CNN and Fox News initially got the story wrong. In their effort to be first, both cable networks initially reported that the court had overturned the individual mandate requirement that everyone purchase health insurance or pay a fine/tax because the court rejected the argument that this was justified by the Commerce Clause of the Constitution—except that Chief Justice John Roberts’s opinion went on to say that the mandate could be justified under Congress’s authority to levy taxes. And so . . . two of our biggest sources of breaking news got the story flat-out wrong. Meanwhile, a little blog that typically draws a few thousand readers a day, SCOTUSblog, was the authoritative news site that everyone turned to for immediate and accurate news about the decision. And on a day that several bigger websites had trouble staying online because of heavy demand, SCOTUSblog had server capacity to spare despite drawing hundreds of times more traffic than normal.  

The Message. The message is the content being transmitted by the sender and reacted to by the receiver. Before a message can be transmitted, it must be encoded. Encoding requires at least two steps. First, the sender’s ideas must be turned into a message: A script for a broadcast is drafted, a graphic is created, or a newspaper story is written. Second, the message must be prepared for transmission: The script is taped and sent out over the air, the graphic is placed on a web page, or the newspaper is printed.  

Mass communication messages are transmitted rapidly to the receivers. Audience members can receive the message simultaneously, as they would in the case of a radio broadcast; at similar though not identical times, as in the case of a newspaper or magazine; or occasionally over an extended period, as in the case of a CD, movie, or video. In addition to being transmitted rapidly, mass communication messages are available to a wide audience. Mass communication messages also tend to be transient—here today and gone tomorrow. The newspapers and magazines are recycled; a new movie replaces the old at the theater; the tweet moves through your feed so fast you don’t realize it was ever there. Even though the message can be stored in the form of a computer file, it is generally replaced when something new comes along. The receiver’s attention fades even if the physical item remains.  

Production of mass communication messages is generally expensive. The average cost of producing the top hundred biggest-budget movies as of the spring of 2018 was $212 million,
with 2009’s *Avatar* coming in at the top at an estimated $425 million and 2007’s *Evan Almighty* coming in at #100 with a budget of $175 million. That, of course, is just the cost of making the movie. Advertising and promotion add a lot to that figure. Pamela McClintock, writing for the *Hollywood Reporter* in 2014, said that a typical big-budget studio blockbuster would have a promotion budget north of $200 million, and a more modest film would still have a $40 million promotion budget. (Current numbers on average movie production and promotion budgets are hard to come by as studios frequently go to significant lengths to avoid letting people know what movies really cost to make.) Thirty seconds of commercial time during the 2018 Super Bowl cost approximately $5 million. (That’s $166,666 per second!) This was expected to generate $500 million in revenue for NBC from the Super Bowl–related programming (including the episode of *This Is Us* that followed the game). But, again, if people do not seek to make money with their messages, they can reach a large audience online at a relatively low cost. For example, your author pays about $400 per year to keep his blog online and secure (ralphehanson.com).

What do all these messages mean? According to media scholar James Potter, the meaning of messages depends on who is receiving them and what kinds of media literacy skills the receivers can use to decode them. Potter writes that people with low levels of media literacy will look at the surface meanings in media content, whereas those with higher levels of media literacy can interpret messages from a wide range of perspectives with many choices of meanings. For example, Patty Jenkins’s *Wonder Woman*, released in the summer of 2017, was the first modern superhero movie to be directed by and star women. The movie tells of Amazon and demigod warrior Diana as she is forced to confront the evil events of World War I. The movie can be seen as a simple heroic adventure story, an allegory on the nature of good and evil, or a treatise on differences between masculine and feminine responses to the modern world. Which of these interpretations is correct? Although *Wonder Woman* is most emphatically an adventure story, it also tells of the mythical conflict between Ares, the god of war, and Diana, a demigod whose responsibility is to defend humans.

**The Channel.** The channel is the medium used to transmit the message. Recall that a mass medium is a technological tool. Think about a newspaper. It consists of black and colored ink printed on relatively low-quality paper. It is portable, readily available, and cheap. An article can be clipped from the paper and placed in a pocket. A newspaper also provides local and regional news in greater depth than is possible with almost any other medium.

Print media include books, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and posters. Audiovisual media include radio, sound recordings, broadcast television, cable and satellite television, and video recordings. Interactive media include the web, social media, mobile media, and video games.

What about faxes, text messages, letters, and email? Do they fit in as channels of mass communication? Although email is not generally considered to be a mass medium, an unsolicited commercial email, known as spam, could satisfy at least part of the definition of mass communication, since spam is distributed widely to a large, mixed, and anonymous audience. News reports and sports scores arriving via SMS text messages on the small screen on a mobile phone would also seem to qualify. But our phone calls, texts, and emails from friends are generally considered to be interpersonal communications unless we post them to a blog or social media site for everyone to see.
Back in 2013, the Washington Post reported that mobile internet use was expected to grow at a rate of 66 percent a year globally as more and more people connect more and more devices online. In fact, the number of online devices in the world was expected to exceed the number of people on earth. (You wondering when the computers are going to take over? They already outnumber us.)

In addition to outnumbering people, mobile devices have outnumbered traditional personal computers since 2012.

According to Pew, in 2016, 12 percent of Americans used a smartphone as their primary means of going online at home. That means they have no computer, just a smartphone. Not surprisingly, those most likely to be smartphone-onlys are younger, non-white, and lower-income Americans.

In times of disaster, we depend on our mobile devices to stay in touch. We can call and text or send social media messages. People check in via their Facebook app to let their friends know that they are okay or send text messages when phone calls can’t go through. But sometimes disasters can be so severe that even mobile communication can’t go through. A week after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, the island was almost entirely without electricity, half of its residents—3.4 million U.S. citizens—were without running water, and 90 percent of the island was still without cell phone service. The Federal Emergency Management Agency depended on satellite phones to communicate with, and on much of the island, amateur radio operators (ham radios) were the only way to get word to the mainland.

With the prevalence of mobile media, going online is not something we do; it’s something we are. In the days of AOL and dial-up internet, going online was something that you did at a specific time and space. With the coming of broadband access, you could go online as much as you wanted, but you were still tethered to a space. But with mobile internet, the online world is where we live. It goes with us everywhere. We have moved to a world where, instead of deliberately going online, we need to deliberately go offline.

---

**How** do people communicate during times of disaster? What do they do when even cell service is knocked out? Why would mobile service be talked about in the same breath as access to power and running water following a natural disaster?

**How** do you do most of your online activity? What do you do from a desktop computer? A laptop? Your phone or tablet? Do you ever have to limit how much you are online in order to conserve your mobile data?

**How** has your life been changed by the fact that you are connected online 24/7? Do you feel uneasy when you have to “go dark”? Do you ever deliberately try to take time off from the media and communication technology?

**Have** you ever needed to use your mobile device during a time of emergency? What was that like? Were you able to connect with the people you needed to reach?
The nature of the channel used to transmit a message can change the meaning of the message. Take, for example, the daily news. On the radio, the news is something happening in the background; read in a newspaper, news is something that demands your undivided attention. But can you call information news when it is presented by comedian Jimmy Kimmel on ABC’s Jimmy Kimmel Live? A dramatic speech given by a great orator on television will likely be much more influential than a transcript of the speech that’s published in a newspaper the next day.

The Receiver. The receiver is the audience for the mass communication message—that is, the people who are receiving and decoding the message. Decoding is the process of translating a signal from a mass medium into a form that the receiver can understand. The term mass can have at least two meanings when referring to audiences. In one sense, the term refers to the mix of ordinary people who receive the message—“the masses.” In another sense, the term refers to the size of the audience. The concept of mass, or popular, taste is an old one, but the concept of a massive, or large, audience developed in the twentieth century. The mass audiences reading major newspapers, listening to the radio, watching network television, or going to the movies are much larger than the crowds of people who gather for events such as political rallies or rock concerts. They form a heterogeneous audience—an audience made up of a mix of people who differ in age, sex, income, education, ethnicity, race, religion, and other characteristics. As with size, heterogeneity is a matter of degree. A small-town radio station is likely to reach an audience whose members are more similar than those listening to a station in a major urban area.

Receivers don’t always get a clear message from the sender, however. Several types of noise can interfere with the delivery of the message. There is semantic noise, which occurs when the receiver does not understand the meaning of the message, such as when you can’t understand the lyrics on a Latin music channel because you don’t speak Spanish; mechanical noise, which occurs when the channel has trouble transmitting the message, such as when a thunderstorm produces too much static for you to hear the score of a baseball game being broadcast on an AM radio station; and environmental noise, which occurs when the action and sounds surrounding the receiver interfere with the reception of the message, such as when your roommate’s loud stereo keeps you from concentrating on your Introduction to Mass Communication textbook.

The receivers of a mass communication message have traditionally been seen as an anonymous audience. This means that the sender does not personally know all, or even most, of the people receiving the message. This doesn’t mean that the audience consists of isolated people who have no connection to anyone else; audience members simply don’t expect the sender to know who they are. But with the increasing number of channels available for audience members to send feedback to the senders—through the web, social media, email, faxes, text messages, and phone calls—audience members typically on the receiving end are becoming senders themselves and are becoming better and better known to the original senders. Sometimes, in the case of reality TV programs such as The Voice, audience members become active participants by voting on which contestants should advance to the next level of the competition.

Contemporary Models of Mass Communication

Though the transmission model (SMCR) is useful for laying out the various elements of the mass communication process, it does not explain how mass communication works in our lives. It focuses primarily on the process of transmitting messages largely from the point of view of a sender trying to have an effect on the receiver. Media scholar Denis McQuail lays out three contemporary models that help us answer three different questions about the nature of mass communication (see Table 1.1):
Ritual Model. Whereas the transmission model looks at how a message is sent, the ritual model puts audience members at the center of the equation. The ritual model looks at how and why audience members (receivers) consume media messages. This model suggests that we watch a program such as The Voice not so much to learn about aspiring singers or to receive advertising messages, but rather to interact in a shared ritual with family and friends. This ritual is then extended through television to other groups of people all across the United States. Media consumption thus goes beyond simply delivering messages and becomes a shared experience that brings us together as a people. For example, following a terrorist bombing that killed twenty-two people and injured approximately fifty others in Manchester, England, at an Ariana Grande concert, the young singer posted a tweet that read:

The tweet resonated with fans of the singer and former Nickelodeon star, with them providing more than 2.6 million “likes,” 1.1 million shares, and 131,000 comments. Of course, it’s not just tragedies that bring social media attention. Carter Wilkerson, a then 16-year-old from Reno, Nevada, holds the record for Twitter engagement with 3.6 million retweets and 1 million likes for his tweet trying to get a year’s worth of free chicken nuggets from Wendy’s. The fast-food chain told him he would need to get 18 million shares to get his free chicken, but in the end they gave him his nuggets anyway. For what it’s worth, Wilkerson told the New York Times that he might use his experience as a launching ground for a career in marketing. “It’d be pretty cool to put on my college applications that I’m the No. 1 retweeted tweet of all time,” he said.

Publicity Model. Sometimes media messages are not trying to convey specific information as much as they are trying to draw attention to a particular person, group, or concept. According to the publicity model, the mere fact that a topic is covered by the media can make the topic important, regardless of what is said about it. For example, when Justin Timberlake exposed Janet Jackson’s right nipple for nine-sixteenths of a second during the 2004 Super Bowl, there were all sorts of charges that broadcast network CBS was lowering the moral standards of America’s young people. The major effect of Jackson’s stunt was that the Federal Communications Commission adopted increasingly strict rules on broadcast decency. As a result, at least twenty Sinclair-owned ABC affiliates refused to air the World War II movie Saving Private Ryan the following November for fear that they would be fined for all the bad language contained in the movie. Concerns about changing television standards had existed for several years prior to Jackson flashing Super Bowl viewers, but the attention Jackson brought to the issue put broadcast decency in the limelight.

Reception Model. The reception model moves us out of the realm of social science analysis and into the world of critical theory. Instead of looking at how messages affect audiences or are used by the senders or receivers, the reception model looks at how audience members derive

![TABLE 1.1](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Orientation of Sender</th>
<th>Orientation of Receiver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transmission Model</td>
<td>Transfer of meaning</td>
<td>Cognitive processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual Model</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Shared experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publicity Model</td>
<td>Competitive display</td>
<td>Attention-giving spectatorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Model</td>
<td>Preferential encoding</td>
<td>Differential decoding/ construction of meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


How much are you on social media? Do you post original material, or do you mostly share things other people have posted? Do you go online to chat about a show as you watch it? Could you even watch a single show from beginning to end without being on social media?
and create meaning out of media content. Rather than seeing content as having an intended, fixed meaning, the reception model says that each receiver decodes the message based on his or her own unique experiences, feelings, and beliefs. You can take a single news story and show it to liberal and conservative observers, and both will claim that it is biased against their point of view. In fact, a 1982 study showed that the more journalists tried to present multiple sides of an issue, the more partisans on either side of the issue viewed the story as biased.34

Evolution of The Media World

Where did our media world come from? Is it just a product of the late twentieth century with its constant flow of print and electronic messages? Not really. The world of interconnected and overlapping communication networks that surrounds us has been evolving for hundreds of years. Before the advent of the mass media, people interacted primarily face-to-face. Most of the time, they interacted only with people like themselves and had little contact with the outside world. But people gradually created communication networks that used first interpersonal channels, then print media, electronic media, and, most recently, interactive media. This section examines how various communication networks have grown over the centuries to form the media world in which we now live.

Before Print: Pre–Mass Media Communication Networks

The first major communication network in the Western world predates the mass media and was developed by the Roman Catholic Church in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. During that period, messages flowed from the Vatican in Italy through the cardinals and bishops to priests in cathedrals and villages throughout Europe and finally to congregations through sermons from the pulpit.35

Print: Arrival of the Book

The first major expansion in communication beyond the Church was the development of the printing press—in particular, the invention of movable type in the 1450s—and the subsequent mass production of printed materials. Mass printing made it possible for major social changes, such as the Protestant Reformation, to spread from their country of origin to the rest of Europe and the world beyond.

Although the printing press allowed for the mass production of information, printing was still relatively slow, and publications remained fairly expensive. The addition of steam power to the printing press in 1814 dramatically increased the rate at which printed material could be reproduced.

Electronic Networks: Telegraph, Gramophone, Radio, Movies, and Television

The advent of electronic communication made the media world much more complex. This type of communication began in 1844 with the opening of the first telegraph line from Baltimore, Maryland, to Washington, D.C. In 1866, telegraph cables spanned the Atlantic Ocean, overcoming a seemingly insurmountable barrier that had long hindered transoceanic communication. Instead of sending a message on a two-week journey by boat across the ocean and waiting for a reply to come back the same way, two people on opposite sides of the ocean could carry on a dialogue via telegraph.
Test Your Media Literacy

Can Television Take Anything Seriously?

Back in 1985, New York University communication professor Neil Postman published his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In it, Dr. Postman argues that the primary effect of television is that it changes how people see the world; that is, with television, people start viewing everything as entertainment. Young people get their news in a comedy format, watching *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* the same way they watch the newsmagazine *60 Minutes* on CBS. They learn about politics on the same channel that shows a professional football game. 35

In an interview with Robert Nelson for the *Civic Arts Review*, Postman described the major point of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

Television always recreates the world to some extent in its own image by selecting parts of that world and editing those parts. So a television news show is a kind of symbolic creation and construction made by news directors and camera crews. . . .

Americans turn to television not only for their light entertainment but for their news, their weather, their politics, their religion, their history, all of which may be said to be their curious entertainment. What I'm talking about is television's preemption of our culture's most serious business. It is one thing to say that TV presents us with entertaining subject matter. It is quite another to say that on TV all subject matter is presented as entertaining and it is in that sense that TV can bring ruin to any intelligent understanding of public affairs. . . .

And stranger still is the fact that commercials may appear anywhere in a news story, before, after, or in the middle, so that all events are rendered essentially trivial, that is to say, all events are treated as a source of public entertainment. How serious can an earthquake in Mexico be or a hijacking in Beirut, if it is shown to us prefaced by a happy United Airlines commercial and summarized by a Calvin Klein jeans commercial? Indeed, TV newscasters have added to our grammar a new part of speech altogether. What may be called the “now this” conjunction. “Now this” is a conjunction that does not connect two things but does the opposite. It disconnects. When newscasters say, “Now this,” they mean to indicate that what you have just heard or seen has no relevance to what you are about to hear or see. There is no murder so brutal, no political blunder so costly, no bombing so devastating that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, “Now this.” The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the matter, let's say 45 seconds, that you must not be morbidly preoccupied with it, let us say for 90 seconds, and that you must now give your attention to a commercial. Such a situation in my view is not news. And in my opinion it accounts for the fact that Americans are among the most ill informed people in the Western world. 37

Who Is the Source?

Neil Postman (1931–2003), a prominent American educator, media theorist, and cultural critic, founded the media ecology program at New York University and chaired the NYU Department of Culture and Communication. Postman wrote eighteen books and more than two hundred magazine and newspaper articles for such periodicals as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and the *Washington Post*. He also edited the journal *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* and was on the editorial board of the *Nation*.

What Is He Saying?

Postman argues that the primary effect of television is that it changes how people see the world; that is, with television, people start viewing everything as entertainment. In comparison, think about your own viewing habits. Do you watch the news the same way you watch *Big Bang Theory*? Or learn about politics on the same channel that shows *Big Brother*? Or see news about the war in Syria, followed by a commercial for Domino’s Pizza?

What Kind of Evidence Does the Book Provide?

What kind of data does Postman provide to support his arguments? What kind of evidence is needed to bolster these claims? Is there evidence that disputes his claims? How do you think Postman’s background is likely to have shaped his view of television?

How Do You or Your Classmates React to Postman’s Arguments?

What does the title *Amusing Ourselves to Death* mean to you? Do you feel that television trivializes important issues or makes them more palatable? Have you noticed similar effects in yourself as described by Postman? Do you notice differences in how news anchors make the transition from news to commercials and back again? Are the stories before and after the break any different from stories during the rest of the newscast?

Does It All Add Up?

Do you believe that Postman’s arguments are true today? In October 2017, CBS News was so eager to break the news about the death of rock legend/entertainer Tom Petty that its anchors started reporting it in the early afternoon, nearly half a day before he actually died. The news then rapidly spread to other major news outlets that didn’t want to miss out on the breaking story, including *Entertainment Weekly*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Rolling Stone* magazine. This led to music stars such as John Mayer, Shania Twain, and Jon Bon Jovi expressing their

(Continued)
sympathy. But within an hour of having set off this flurry of interest, the Los Angeles Police Department, supposedly the source of the story, said it could not confirm the report. Finally, at 11:30 on the evening of October 2, the LAPD confirmed that Petty had died. 38

Do you think that this fascination with celebrity deaths supports Postman’s claims? Why or why not? Do you think that Petty’s death was newsworthy enough to merit the coverage it received? Or were CBS and its fellow news channels just trying to entertain their viewers?

In the 1880s, Emile Berliner invented the gramophone, or phonograph, which played mass-produced discs containing about three minutes of music. Just as printed books made possible the storage and spread of ideas, so the gramophone allowed musical performances to be captured and reproduced.

The invention of radio in the late nineteenth century freed electronic communication from the limits imposed on it by telegraph wires. Messages could come into the home at any time and at almost no cost to the receiver. All that was needed was a radio set to receive an endless variety of cultural content, news, and other programming.

Movies were first shown at nickelodeon theaters in the late 1890s and early 1900s and were produced by an entertainment industry that distributed films worldwide. Young couples on a date in London, Ohio, and London, England, could see the same movie, copy the same styles of dress, and perhaps even practice the same kisses they saw in the movie. Due to radio and the movies, the media world became a shared entertainment culture produced for profit by major media corporations.

In 1939, patrons in New York’s neighborhood taverns no longer had to settle for radio broadcasts of Yankees games being played at the Polo Grounds. Instead, a small black-and-white television set located on a pedestal behind the bar showed a faint, flickering image of the game. After a series of delays caused by World War II, television surpassed radio in popularity. It also became a lightning rod for controversy as people stayed home to watch whatever images it would deliver.

**Online and Mobile Media: Interactive Communication**

After several decades of television, people had gotten used to the idea that news, information, and entertainment could be delivered almost magically into their homes, although they could do little to control the content of this medium other than change channels. Then a new medium emerged, one that made senders and receivers readily interchangeable. The internet became a full-fledged mass communication network in the 1990s (though many people were unaware that the first nodes of this new medium were being linked together as far back as 1969). Rather than simply making it easier for individuals and organizations to send messages to a mass audience, the new computer networks were designed for two-way communication. Audience members were becoming message providers themselves.

Online media’s interactivity was the culmination of a trend toward giving audience members new control over their communication world. The growth of cable and satellite television, along with the VCR, had already given viewers more choices and more control, and the remote control allowed them to choose among dozens of channels without leaving their chairs.

The implications of interactivity are significant. Whereas the commercial media have come to be controlled by a smaller and smaller number of large corporations (see Chapter 3), an important channel of mass communication is open to ordinary people in ways that were never before possible. With a trivial investment in a mobile device or computer, individuals can grab the spotlight with news and entertainment through social media and the World Wide Web.

Consider the example of artist Danielle Corsetto, creator of the popular web comic *Girls With Slingshots*. Her comic started under the name *Hazelnuts* when she was in high school, but she took it online in October 2004 when fans of her sketches asked her when she was going to start publishing her comic. Corsetto explained to the *Frederick News-Post* that *Girls With Slingshots*...
(or GWS) is a slice-of-life comic that tells the story of “sour, grumpy girl” Hazel and her best friend, Jamie, a “bubbly girl who is very comfortable with herself.” One of the fascinating things about the comic is the level of diversity within its cast. There is Melody, who is deaf; Soo Lin, who is blind; Darren, who is gay; Erin, who is asexual; and McPedro, a cactus who talks when Hazel has been drinking. Anna Pearce, writing for *Bitch Media,* says that her favorite thing about the comic is that it looks at disability from the point of view of a disabled person. “What I like about the jokes in this strip are that they are all over the place. Some are about how clueless people can be about blindness. Some are disability-related humour as told by people with disabilities.”

Although her comic is online, she still does her drawing by hand. Corsetto explains, “It’s more realistic and less stereotypical. All the characters have these unusual relations, both romantic and platonic . . . that are not what you would find in, say, a sitcom, but it’s written like a sitcom. I’m kind of trying to normalize these things that are taboo.”

Since 2007, she has made her living exclusively through drawing and writing comics. In addition to *Girls With Slingshots,* Corsetto works on a variety of side projects, including writing three volumes of the *Adventure Time* graphic novel series. Although GWS started out small, Corsetto’s website drew about one hundred thousand readers a day at its peak. In March 2015, Corsetto brought GWS to a close, with her heroine Hazel coming to terms with her long-absent father. Given the subject matter, alcohol use, and language in GWS, Corsetto would not have been able to publish her work in a legacy newspaper or magazine. Although the strip is distributed online, Corsetto makes her drawings using pen and ink on heavyweight paper, with the coloring being electronically added.

Following the completion of the comic, Corsetto has taken what she called a “sabbatical,” working on advancing her art skills, teaching art classes, editing a two-volume hardcover book edition of GWS, and developing various side projects. Corsetto says she has been depending on donations from the crowdfunding platform Patreon for most of her current income.

While Corsetto is “making a living” from her artwork, she wrote in a recent post to her Patreon supporters that this can mean different things to different people:

> I net more than the average schoolteacher, but less than the average accountant. My income fluctuates year to year. I live comfortably and I feel wealthy. . . . But I guarantee if I showed my bookkeeping to an old-school cartoonist who hit it big in newspaper syndication in the 90s, they’d think I was insane to say that I “feel wealthy.”

Some critics would argue that the growth of cable television stations, websites, and magazines creates only an illusion of choice because a majority of the channels are still controlled by the same five or six companies. Even so, it is a new media world, one in which audience members are choosing what media content they will consume and when they will consume it. It’s a world that even media giants are being forced to adjust to.

**Understanding The Media World**

Most people have ambivalent feelings about their high levels of media use. The convenience of the mobile phone is offset by the fact that it makes a person available to others at all times. The wide selection of programming on cable television is wonderful, but the content on some of those channels can be disturbing. It is liberating to be connected to the entire industrialized world through the internet, but the risk of invasion of privacy is troubling. This section discusses the concept of media literacy and examines some common misconceptions about the mass media. It also examines in detail “Seven Secrets” about mass media and mass communication that are at the center of this book’s look at media literacy.
Defining Media Literacy

The term media literacy refers to people’s understanding of what the media are, how they operate, what messages they are delivering, what roles they play in society, and how audience members respond to media messages. Media scholar James Potter writes that people with high levels of media literacy have a great deal of control over the vision of the world they see through the media and can decide for themselves what the messages mean. In contrast, those with low levels of media literacy can develop exaggerated impressions of problems in society, even when those impressions conflict with their own experience. For example, media consumers who spend large amounts of time watching television often perceive society as far more dangerous and crime-ridden that it is because that’s the image they see on television. \(^5^5\) Potter says that too often consumers with low levels of media literacy assume that the media have large, obvious, and mostly negative effects on other people but little or no effect on themselves. Finally, those with low levels of media literacy tend to blame the media for complex social problems, such as teen pregnancy or school violence.

Potter has identified four basic dimensions of media literacy: cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral. \(^4^6\) Let’s take a closer look at each of these dimensions.

The Cognitive Dimension. The cognitive dimension of media literacy deals with the ability to intellectually process information communicated by the media. This can involve interpreting the meaning of words on a printed page, appreciating the implications of ominous music in a movie, or understanding that a well-dressed character in a television show is wealthy. For example, while the Wonder Woman mythos has changed multiple times through its incarnations in comic books, as a TV series, and now as a big-budget movie, the version directed by Patty Jenkins and portrayed by Israeli actress Gal Gadot makes extensive use of Greek and Roman mythology, giving a depth of meaning to those who know the stories. \(^4^7\)

The cognitive dimension also includes the skills necessary to access the media: using a tablet, accessing high-definition programming on your HDTV, or finding a book in the library. All of these are learned skills. We learn to read in school, learn the meaning of musical cues from movies we’ve seen, and learn how to navigate online through repeated practice.

The Emotional Dimension. The emotional dimension of media literacy covers the feelings created by media messages. Sometimes the emotions can be overwhelming; examples include the fear of a young child watching a scary movie or the joy of a parent watching a news story about a child in danger being rescued. People often spend time with songs, movies, books, and other media specifically to feel the emotions they generate. \(^4^8\) Wonder Woman became a box office champion in part because groups of women went together to see the movie, sometimes attending special women-only screenings to experience a sense of empowerment from a story that focused on a powerful female superhero. \(^4^9\) And it is unlikely that many of the truly fake news stories out there would spread so quickly if they didn’t resonate so emotionally with audiences.

The Aesthetic Dimension. The aesthetic dimension of media literacy involves interpreting media content from an artistic or critical point of view. How well is the media artifact produced? What skills were used in producing it? How does it compare in quality to other, similar works? Understanding more than the surface dimensions of media content can require extensive learning. Wonder Woman was unquestionably a commercial success, and it was largely a critical success as well. The movie was praised for excellent performances by the leads Gal Gadot and Chris Pine, but also for the casting of Robin Wright, who played Princess Buttercup in 1987’s The Princess Bride, as the fierce and powerful General Antiope. \(^5^0\) This didn’t stop critics, though, from almost universally panning the movie’s ending with an all-too-conventional boss fight.

For as long as there have been media, there have been those who blame the media for society’s ills. Others believe that critics are just trying to place the blame on a convenient target. How do you feel about this debate? Why?
The Moral Dimension. The moral dimension of media literacy consists of examining the values of the medium or the message. In a television situation comedy, for example, an underlying message might be that a quick wit is an important tool for dealing with problems or that a problem can be solved in a short time. In an action movie, the moral lessons may be that violence and authority are needed if one is to succeed and that the world is a mean and dangerous place. The moral message of most advertisements is that problems can be solved by purchasing something. According to New Yorker movie critic Richard Brody, one of the most powerful issues raised by Wonder Woman is that evil doesn’t come from “overtly monstrous villains but arises within humankind itself.”

The Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know

Media literacy is a tricky subject to talk about because few people will admit that they really don’t understand how the media operate and how messages, audiences, channels, and senders interact. After all, since we spend so much time with the media, we must know all about them, right? As an example, most students in an Introduction to Mass Communication class will claim that the media and media messages tend to affect other people far more than themselves. The question of media literacy can also become a political question, for which the answer depends on whether you are a liberal or a conservative, rich or poor, young or old. But the biggest problem in the public discussion of media literacy is that certain routine issues get discussed again and again, while many big questions are left unasked.

Five editions of this book ago, I first came out with the Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know. These were things we don’t typically hear about in the media. Secret things. Perhaps it’s because there is no one out there who can attract an audience by saying these things. Or maybe it’s because the ideas are complicated, and we don’t like complexity from our media. Or maybe it’s because “they” (whoever “they” may be) don’t want us to know them.

But the media world has changed considerably since the secrets were first developed in 2006:

- Netflix had no streaming service—it was only a DVD-by-mail service.
- There was no iPhone—the BlackBerry with its little Chiclet keyboard was the height of smartphone technology.
- There were no tablet computers.
- Cell phone service was typically sold by the minute, and most mobile plans had a limit to the number of text messages that were included in the basic plan.
- Google was in the process of buying a cell phone video sharing service called YouTube created by three former PayPal employees.
- Facebook was only two years old, and use of it was limited to college students.
- Instagram hadn’t yet gone online—that wouldn’t happen until 2010. By 2018, it had eight hundred million active users.

The Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know 2.0

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secret 1</th>
<th>The media are essential components of our lives.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secret 2</td>
<td>There are no mainstream media (MSM).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret 3</td>
<td>Everything from the margin moves to the center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret 4</td>
<td>Nothing’s new: Everything that happened in the past will happen again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret 5</td>
<td>All media are social.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret 6</td>
<td>Online media are mobile media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret 7</td>
<td>There is no “they.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Today, my students tell me they watch most of their video using Netflix streaming, virtually all of them have a smartphone and several social media accounts, and their most frequent way of going online is with a mobile device. So in the sixth edition, it became clear that it was time to update the Seven Secrets to better match the current media world—we were releasing the Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know 2.0. These key issues of media literacy—which don’t get the discussion they deserve—provide a foundation for the rest of the chapters in this book. (And just who are “they”? Wait for Secret 7.)

SECRET 1 ▶ The Media Are Essential Components of Our Lives. Critics often talk about the effects the media have on us as though the media were something separate and distinct from our everyday lives. But conversations with my students have convinced me otherwise. Every semester I poll my students as to what media they have used so far that day, with the day starting at midnight. I run through the list: checking Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram; listening to the radio; checking the weather on a mobile device; binge-watching Stranger Things on Netflix; reading the latest John Green novel; listening to Spotify on an iPhone; and so it goes. In fact, media use is likely to be the most universal experience my students will share. Surveys of my students find that more of my morning-class students have consumed media content than have eaten breakfast or showered since the day began at midnight. Are the media an important force in our lives? Absolutely! But the media are more than an outside influence on us. They are a part of our everyday lives.

Think about how we assign meanings to objects that otherwise would have no meaning at all. Take a simple yellow ribbon twisted in a stylized bow. You’ve seen thousands of these, and most likely you know exactly what they stand for—“Support Our Troops.” But that hasn’t always been the meaning of the symbol.

The yellow ribbon has a long history in American popular culture. It played a role in the rather rude World War II–era marching song “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.” The ribbon was a symbol of a young woman’s love for a soldier “far, far away,” and the lyrics mention that her father kept a shotgun handy to keep the soldier “far, far away.” The yellow ribbon was also a symbol of love and faithfulness in the John Ford film She Wore a Yellow Ribbon. In the 1970s, the ribbon became a symbol of remembering the U.S. staff in the Iranian embassy who had been taken hostage. This meaning came from the song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree,” made popular by the group Tony Orlando and Dawn. The song tells about a prisoner coming home from jail hoping that his girlfriend will remember him. She can prove her love by displaying the yellow ribbon. The prisoner arrives home to find not one but one hundred yellow ribbons tied to the tree. The display of yellow ribbons tied to trees became commonplace in newspaper articles and television news stories about the ongoing hostage crisis after the wife of a hostage started displaying one in her yard.

Later, during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, Americans were eager to show their support for the troops fighting overseas, even if they did not necessarily support the war itself, and the stylized ribbon started to become institutionalized as a symbol of support. The yellow “Support Our Troops” ribbon was followed by the red ribbon of AIDS awareness, the pink ribbon of breast cancer awareness, and ribbons of virtually every color for other issues. And how do we know the meanings of these ribbons? We hear or see them being discussed through our media. The meaning is assigned by the creators of a ribbon, but the success of the ribbon depends on its meaning being shared through the media. So, do the media create the meanings? Not really. But could the meanings be shared nationwide without the media? Absolutely not. The media may not define our lives, but they do help transmit and disseminate shared meanings from one side of the country to the other. 54

SECRET 2 ▶ There Are No Mainstream Media (MSM). We often hear charges related to perceived sins of the so-called mainstream media. But who exactly are these mainstream media?
For some, the MSM are the heavyweights of journalism, especially the television broadcast networks and the major newspapers, such as the *New York Times*. For others, the MSM are the giant corporations that run many of our media outlets. New York University journalism professor and blogger Jay Rosen says that the term MSM is often used to refer to media we just don’t like—a “them.” It isn’t always clear who constitutes the MSM, but in general we can consider them to be the old-line legacy media—the big-business newspapers, magazines, and television.

But are these old media more in the mainstream than our alternative media? Look at talk radio. Afternoon talk radio is dominated by conservative political talk show hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Limbaugh, in particular, is fond of complaining about how the MSM don’t “get it.” But how mainstream are the MSM? In April 2018, Fox News averaged 2.4 million viewers in prime time, MSNBC 2 million, and CNN about 1 million.

With all the talk of cable news, it’s easy to forget that the legacy broadcast networks have significant audiences as well: ABC with 9.4 million viewers, NBC with 8.9 million, and CBS with 6.9 million, as of the first three months of 2018. (The Fox broadcast network does not have a network evening news broadcast.) The *Rush Limbaugh Show*, on the other hand, averages 14 million listeners a week, and Fox host Sean Hannity’s radio show draws about 13.5 million listeners per week. (Note that television audiences and radio audiences are measured differently.) So which is more mainstream? A popular afternoon radio show with a large daily audience or a television news program with a somewhat smaller audience?

And then there is video game streamer Daniel Middleton, aka DanTDM, who has nearly 17 million followers and more than 11 billion (that’s billion with a b) views on YouTube, streaming *Minecraft* and other video games. What could possibly be more mainstream than 17 million viewers and 11 billion views? Again, these numbers are not directly comparable with television ratings—they are much, much bigger. Overall, YouTube claims to have more than 1.5 billion monthly users. Most videos don’t get a particularly large viewership, but the combined total is massive.

So it is largely meaningless to describe one medium as mainstream and another as nonmainstream. They are all significant presences in our world. Can we distinguish between old and new media? Perhaps. Can we argue that our alternative sources of news and entertainment are any less significant than the traditional ones? Absolutely not.

**SECRET 3 ▶ Everything From the Margin Moves to the Center.** The mass media, both news and entertainment, are frequently accused of trying to put forward an extremist agenda of violence, permissiveness, homosexuality, drug use, edgy fashion, and nonmainstream values.

People in the media business, be they entertainers or journalists, respond with the argument that they are just “keeping it real,” portraying the world as it is by showing aspects of society that some people want to pretend don’t exist. They have no agenda, the argument goes; they just want to portray reality.

Now it is true that much of what the media portray that upsets people is real. On the other hand, it is a bit disingenuous to argue that movie directors and musicians are not trying for shock value when they use offensive language or portray stylized violence combined with graphic sexuality. Think back to any of a number of recent horror movies. We all know that teenagers routinely get slashed to ribbons by a psycho killer just after having sex, right? Clearly,
movie producers are trying to attract an audience by providing content that is outside of the mainstream.

The problem with the argument between “keeping it real” and “extremist agenda” is that it misses what is actually happening. There can be no question that audiences go after media content that is outside of the mainstream. By the same token, the more nonmainstream content is presented, the more ordinary it seems to become. This is what is meant by Secret 3—one of the mass media's biggest effects on everyday life is to take culture from the margins of society and make it into part of the mainstream, or center. This process can move people, ideas, and even individual words from small communities into mass society.

We can see this happening in several ways. Take the 1975 cult movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that tells the story of a gay male transvestite (Dr. Frank-N-Furter) who is building a muscle-bound boyfriend (Rocky) for himself when a newly engaged straight couple show up at his castle's doorstep seeking shelter from a storm. While the movie found success as a midnight movie in the counterculture community, it took years to move from being considered a flop to being a cult classic.

But in recent years *Rocky Horror* has moved from being a midnight movie to being a core element of popular culture. The Fox Broadcasting show *Glee* did a Halloween episode in 2010 where the kids in the show's glee club produced *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a high school musical. But the *Glee* version had actress Amber Riley playing the part of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, while the part of Rocky was still played by a male actor, Chord Overstreet. Thus, the central plotline went from gay to straight. The *Glee* version also had Frank-N-Furter singing about being from “Sensational, Transylvania” instead of “Transsexual, Transylvania.” With these changes, *The Rocky Horror Glee Show* became a perfect example of Secret 3. *Rocky Horror* started out as a camp musical in the 1970s that found enormous success in the counterculture community. But *Glee* sanitized it from a celebration of cross-dressing gay culture into a mass-market story of straight people playing with gay themes. In 2016, Fox Broadcasting showed a full remake of *Rocky Horror* that aired in October featuring trans actress Laverne Cox (of *Orange Is the New Black* fame) as Dr. Frank-N-Furter. *Hollywood Reporter* reviewer Daniel Finberg noted in 2016 that the show is no longer shocking in that “one of the most unorthodox characters in the history of musicals has become oddly conventional.”

An alternative approach is to look at how the media accelerate the adoption of activist language into the mainstream. Take the medical term *intact dilation and extraction*, which describes a controversial type of late-term abortion. A search of the LexisNexis news
database shows that newspapers used the medical term only five times over a six-month period. On the other hand, partial-birth abortion, the term for the procedure used by abortion opponents, was used in more than 125 stories during the same time period. Opponents even got the term used in the title of a bill passed by Congress that outlawed the procedure, thus moving the phrase into the mainstream through repeated publication of the bill’s name.

This process is not a product of a liberal or conservative bias by the news media. It’s simply a consequence of the repeated use of the term in the press.

**SECRET 4** Nothing’s New: Everything That Happened in the Past Will Happen Again.

Secret 4 is a little different than the oft-repeated slogan, “Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it.” Instead, it says that media face the same issues over and over again as technologies change and new people come into the business.

The fight between today’s recording companies and file sharers has its roots in the battle between music publishers and the distributors of player piano rolls in the early 1900s. The player piano was one of the first technologies for reproducing musical performances. Piano roll publishers would buy a single copy of a piece of sheet music and hire a skilled pianist to have his or her performance recorded as a series of holes punched in a paper roll. That roll (and the performance) could then be reproduced and sold to anyone who owned a player piano without further payment to the music’s original publisher.

Then, in 1984, Sony successfully defended itself against a lawsuit from Universal Studios by arguing that it had a right to sell VCRs to the public because there were legitimate, legal uses for the technology. Universal had protested the sales because the video recorders could be used to duplicate its movies. Before long, the studios quit trying to ban the VCR and started selling videocassettes of movies directly to consumers at reasonable prices. All of a sudden, the studios had a major new source of revenue.

This can also be seen with the repeated fears of new media technologies emerging over the years. In the 1930s, there was fear that watching movies, especially gangster pictures, would lead to precocious sexual behavior, delinquency, lower standards and ideals, and poor physical and emotional health. The 1940s brought concern about how people would react to radio programs, particularly soap operas. Comic books came under attack in the 1950s. The notion that comic books were dangerous was popularized by a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent* by Dr. Fredric Wertham. Wertham also testified before Congress that violent and explicit comic books were a cause of teenage delinquency and sexual behavior. The industry responded to the criticism by forming the Comics Code Authority and ceasing publication of popular crime and horror comics such as *Tales From the Crypt* and *Weird Science*.

The 1980s and 1990s saw controversies over offensive rap and rock lyrics. These controversies reflected widespread concern about bad language and hidden messages in songs. In 2009, pop star Britney Spears had a not-so-hidden allusion to the “F word” in her song “If U Seek Amy.” If you speak the title aloud, it sounds like you are spelling out F, U, . . . well, you get the picture. Critics were, of course, shocked and dismayed at this example of a pop star lowering public taste. Of course, Spears didn’t really create her naughty little lyric on her own. Aside from a host of rock and blues singers who have used similar lines, Slate writer Jesse Sheidlower notes that James Joyce used the same basic line in *Ulysses*, when he has a group of women sing:
If you see kay
Tell him he may
See you in tea
Tell him from me.

A careful reading of the third line will let you find a second hidden obscenity as well. Numerous media critics and scholars have argued that television and movies present a distorted view of the world, making it look like a much more violent and dangerous place than it is. More recently, mobile devices have been blamed for a range of social ills, from car accidents caused by distracted drivers to promiscuity caused by sexually explicit mobile phone text and photo messages.

Why has there been such long-running, repeated concern about the possible effects of the media? Media sociologist Charles R. Wright says that people want to be able to solve social ills, and it is easier to believe that poverty, crime, and drug abuse are caused by media coverage than to acknowledge that their causes are complex and not fully understood.

Writing in 1948, sociologists Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld identified four major aspects of public concern about the media:

• Concern that because the media are everywhere, they might be able to control and manipulate people. This is a large part of the legacy of fear.
• Fear that those in power will use the media to reinforce the existing social structure and discourage social criticism. When critics express concern about who owns and runs the media, this is what they are worried about.
• Fear that mass entertainment will lower the tastes and standards for popular culture by trying to attract the largest-possible audience. Criticism of action movies, soap operas, and wrestling as replacements for healthier entertainment, such as Shakespeare’s plays, is at the heart of this concern.
• The belief that mass entertainment is a waste of time that detracts from more useful activities. When your mother told you to turn off the television set and go outside, this was her concern!

SECRET 5 • All Media Are Social. No matter what media you are using—whether it be a legacy newspaper or television station or a social media channel like Facebook—you are always interacting with it at a social level—whether it be face-to-face, with friends on Facebook, or with the entire world via Twitter.

Take, as an example, when your author went to hear President Obama speak at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) campus. I got the expected reactions from friends to the selfie of my wife and me standing in line to enter the arena. I also shared news on Twitter about the president’s visit from social media guru Dr. Jeremy Lipschultz. And while I was on Dr. Lipschultz’s Twitter page, Omaha World-Herald weather reporter Nancy Gaarder tweeted out a photo of me at work. Now, in this case, Gaarder and I were interacting because she was sitting behind me and we got to talking face-to-face. But this was only the first of many social interactions for the day based on news being shared socially.

As everyone in the arena waited for the president to appear, I tweeted out a photo of the press corps area on the floor of the arena, along with the hashtag #POTUSatUNO, one
of several in use at the event. Before long I picked up a response from Marjorie Sturgeon, a multimedia journalist for Omaha’s Action 3 News, who noted she could see herself in my photo. Meanwhile, I was sharing news from the *Omaha World-Herald*, UNO student journalists, and other observers. Media recall research tells us that one of the best predictors of the news we will remember is the news we talk about. Thus the news we share socially will become the news that matters most to us.

When important news breaks, it’s likely we’ll hear about it first through social media. When a mass shooter killed at least fifty-eight people and left more than five hundred people injured in Las Vegas in October 2017, there were lots of contradictory stories circulating on Twitter and other social media. But with all the reports circulating, it could be hard to tell which stories should be believed. New Hampshire Public Radio reporter Casey McDermott noted that NPR included the following statement at the bottom of its web stories about the shooting:

> This is a developing story. Some things that get reported by the media will later turn out to be wrong. We will focus on reports from police officials and other authorities, credible news outlets and reporters who are at the scene. We will update as the situation develops.

NPR’s media news show *On the Media* has a guide for consumers dealing with breaking news that was shared widely on social media at the time of the shooting. Here’s an example of it from Matthew Gertz of the watchdog group Media Matters:

**SECRET 6  ► Online Media Are Mobile Media,** Going online used to mean going someplace where there was a computer plugged into an Ethernet cable, but increasingly, going online now means pulling out your mobile device. And in many parts of the world, the mobile internet is the only internet.

Recent data from the Pew Research Center show that, as of 2018, 95 percent of American adults have a mobile phone and 77 percent of us own smartphones. That’s up from 35 percent just seven years earlier. When we just look at young adults, ages 18–29, 100 percent of them have mobile phones, and 94 percent have smartphones. That stereotypical image of young people always having their nose in their phone does have some basis in fact. If we look at it from the point of view of the media providers, we see that 45 percent of U.S. adults often get news from a mobile device compared to 36 percent who often get news from their desktop computer or laptop.

Another way to get a feel for the growing impact of mobile media is to look at the size of the audience for various channels. Those that allow people to express themselves publically through their mobile devices have much bigger audiences than those that call for passive consumption. So Facebook has an audience of 2 billion, YouTube has 1.5 billion, and the Super Bowl (on television) has an audience of 119 million. Think about it—the Super Bowl has just over 5 percent of the audience size of Facebook.
WHAT DID THE MEDIA’S FUTURE LOOK LIKE IN THE PAST?

From the 1950s to the 1980s, it was fun talking about what the “world of tomorrow” might look like. From art deco skyscrapers, to personal jet packs, to videophones, it all sounded pretty exciting. In 1967, CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite hosted a series called The 21st Century in which he made a number of pretty good predictions for what home office technology might look like in 2001. In 1982, the Institute for the Future published a book on what we might expect from electronic information technology. As the Pew Research Center points out, the report predicted that by 1998 electronic information services would have “relatively widespread penetration. It may not be in every home, but it is probably in a neighbor’s home, and you might be considering getting it yourself.” Pew points out that in reality, about 25 percent of the United States was online in 1998. The report also suggested that the following would be common:

- We would each be able to design our own custom news feeds.
- We would be concerned about the amount of information technology we would be revealing about our personal lives.
- We would have access to electronic banking.
- We would be able to call up music and video programming on demand.
- We would be able to interact with people who are outside our existing peer groups that we connect to through our electronic home information systems.
- We would be able to vote electronically from home in elections.
- We would have access to a wider variety of political candidates through the electronic information system, thus bringing to an end the two-party system.

WHO are the sources?
Walter Cronkite was one of the most respected journalists of the 1960s and anchored the top-rated nightly news program, and the Institute for the Future is a Silicon Valley think tank. How credible of sources are these? Were they capable of making predictions about the future? Why or why not?

WHAT is the report saying?
What are the major predictions made from each of these two reports? What did they say our world would look like today?

WHAT kind of evidence does the study provide?
What kinds of data do the researchers use? How do they justify their predictions? What evidence do they have to back up their predictions?

HOW do you or your classmates react to these predictions about our current media world?
How close do you think these two reports came to predicting what our media world would be like? What did they get right? What did they get wrong? What did they miss? What surprised you the most about these predictions?

If you look outside the United States, the use of mobile media becomes even more significant. Among refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, mobile media are the only media people have access to. During the Arab Spring movement in Egypt in 2011, much of the news coming out of the country was by way of mobile phones. Computers and laptops are still important tools for going online, but with the growing power, size, and availability of mobile devices, we can now think of online being everywhere/all the time.

SECRET 7 ▶ There Is No “They.” If you listen to media criticism for long, you will hear a pair of words used over and over again: they and them. It is easy to take potshots at some anonymous bogeymen—they—who embody all evil. I even engaged in it at the beginning of this section with the title “The Seven Secrets About the Media ‘They’ Don’t Want You to Know 2.0.”

So who are they? No one. Everyone. A nonspecific other we want to blame. Anytime I used they in a news story, my high school journalism teacher would ask who “they” were.
And that’s what you need to ask whenever you hear criticism of the media. It isn’t that the criticism is not accurate. It very well may be. But it probably applies to a specific media outlet, a specific journalist, a certain song, or a particular movie. But we can make few generalizations about an industry so diverse that it includes everything from a giant corporation spending a reported $1 billion to produce *Avengers: Infinity War* and its unnamed *Avengers 4* sequel to young people posting photos and messages on Snapchat. There are a lot of media out there, but no unified them.

**CHAPTER REVIEW**

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Communication takes place at a number of levels, including intrapersonal (within the self), interpersonal (between individuals), group (between three or more individuals), and mass (between a single sender and a large audience). Mass communication is a communication process that covers an entire society, in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large, mixed audience, most of whose members are not known to the sender. Mass communication can be examined in terms of the process of transmission; the rituals surrounding its consumption; the attention its messages draw to persons, groups, or concepts; or how audience members create meaning out of media content.

The first communication network was developed by the Roman Catholic Church, which could send messages reliably throughout Europe as early as the twelfth century. In the mid-fifteenth century, the development of printing made it possible for books and other publications to be mass produced for the first time, leading to numerous cultural changes. Books, magazines, newspapers, and other printed media forms became readily available, although they were expensive before steam-driven printing presses became common in the nineteenth century.

The electronic media emerged in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of the telegraph, followed by recorded music, radio, movies, and television. These media allowed popular culture to be produced commercially and to be delivered easily and inexpensively into people’s homes. The first interactive digital communication network, the internet, was developed starting in the late 1960s but wasn’t available to the general public until the 1990s. Online media added a return channel to the mass communication process, initiating a much higher level of audience feedback. Online media also allowed individuals to disseminate their own ideas and information without the costs of a traditional mass medium.

The rapid growth of the mass media has led the public and media critics to raise questions about the effects various media might have on society and individuals. Scholars have suggested that the best way to control the impact of the media in our lives is to develop high levels of media literacy—an understanding of what the media are, how they operate, what messages they are delivering, what roles they play in society, and how audience members respond to these messages. Media literacy includes cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral dimensions.

Your text suggests that the following seven principles can guide your understanding of how the media operate: (1) The media are essential components of our lives, (2) there are no mainstream media, (3) everything from the margin moves to the center, (4) nothing’s new—everything that happened in the past will happen again, (5) all media are social, (6) online media are mobile media, and (7) there is no “they.”

**KEY TERMS**

- legacy media
- communication
- intrapersonal communication
- interpersonal communication
- group communication
- mass communication
- mass media
- Sender Message Channel Receiver (SMCR) or transmission model
- bloggers
- message
- encoding
- channel
- receiver
- decoding
- heterogeneous audience
- noise
- anonymous audience
- ritual model
- publicity model
- reception model
- media literacy
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did "fake news" come from? What are the forms that it can take?

2. What are the four different levels of communication? Explain how many of our interactions with mass communication involve several levels of communication.

3. What are the elements that make mass communication mass? Would you consider social media like Facebook to be mass communication? Why or why not?

4. Some people compare the development of the internet to the invention of moveable type and the printing press. Do you think they are of comparable importance? Why or why not?

5. List two of the Seven Secrets and provide a current example of each from the news.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

Get the tools you need to sharpen your study skills. SAGE edge offers a robust online environment featuring an impressive array of free tools and resources.

Access practice quizzes, eFlashcards, video, and multimedia at edge.sagepub.com/hanson7e