

# What Is (Mediated) Communication?

*So, a guy walks into a bar . . .*

This is a phrase that many of you have likely heard, as it is the beginning of many jokes (both good and awful). It is also a situation that is not terribly uncommon. However, you may be thinking: Why is a book about computer-mediated communication (CMC) starting out with the opening from a bad joke? Is that a sign of things to come for the rest of this book? We certainly hope that you will not find the rest of this book to be a bad joke. However, if we expand upon this common situation and consider what happens when a guy walks into a bar, we can come to see that it is also a place that is ripe for beginning the study of communication (again, both good and awful). In order to get to that point, we must first begin by talking a little bit about what communication is.

Before beginning this chapter, consider the following questions:

- What is communication?
- What differentiates mass communication and interpersonal communication?
- What is computer-mediated communication?
- Why is it important to consider messages, senders, and receivers?
- What is narrowcasting?

# What Is Communication?

**Communication** There are many definitions of communication. McCroskey and Richmond (1996) defined it as the process by which we stimulate meaning in the minds of others using both verbal and nonverbal messages.

**Audience-centered process** Making sure to consider your receivers' goals, attitudes, knowledge, and so on when attempting to influence them through communication.

There are many definitions of **communication**. For example, on one side of things, communication is narrowly defined as any action or actions that a person consciously uses to affect another's behaviors (Miller, 1966). This suggests that communication is a deliberate and intentional process—we communicate to share information with others when and only when we want to, and when we want to get something out of another person. Another extreme argues that we “cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) and suggests that communication is an unintentional and unavoidable process—we communicate as a natural part of being human. However, we like the definition offered by James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond (1996), who suggest that communication is “the process by which one person stimulates meaning in the mind(s) of another person (or persons) through verbal and nonverbal messages.” (p.3)

Taking a closer look at this definition by McCroskey and Richmond can help us understand more about communication. First, it is a process. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a process as “a series of actions or operations conducing to an end.” In this way—and as partly suggested in the Miller definition previously—communication is an intentional and goal-driven process. Of course, it is also ongoing, constantly changing, and made up of several component parts. For example, consider what might happen if you unintentionally yawned on a first date with somebody. Your yawn might be interpreted by your partner as a suggestion that you are uninterested in the date (even though the act of yawning itself is a physiological response your body has in order to increase the amount of oxygen in your bloodstream and even help regulate the temperature of your brain), and they might communicate back their disapproval or concern for your disinterest. This feedback from your partner would then set into motion a process by which, assuming you were interested in the date, you would use a series of verbal and nonverbal assurances that you were enjoying yourself.

Second, the goal of communication is to get some meaning across to another person or persons. This also suggests that effective communication is best thought of as an **audience-centered process**; that is, one needs to think about what will most likely work to get a desired meaning across to the target. Considering our first date example (and assuming that you wanted the date to continue after your yawn), you would need to think of the different ways in which you could communicate to your partner that you were enjoying yourself even though you might have appeared disinterested. For example, you might explain the yawn away as a result of a long day in class or at work, or you might choose to talk about something unrelated to your yawning to try and change the subject to something more interesting to your partner.

Third, communication can be done through both verbal and nonverbal messages. Considering our first date example once more, you might reassure your partner by reaching out to give them a hug or to touch their shoulder or neck (nonverbal messages) or you might simply tell them plainly “I’m really having a great time with you tonight!” or “Don’t mind my yawning, I’m so glad that we went out today.” To this, we would also like to add that written messages can be used to stimulate



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You might explain your yawning as a long day at work.

meaning in another person. For example, handwritten memos and typed postings on another person's Facebook wall can be used to stimulate meaning in another person, so we would add these to communication as well. Revisiting our first date example one last time, you might send your partner a Facebook message the next morning thanking them for date (and perhaps, planning another one).

As noted previously, communication is a process, and as a process, it is comprised of many components. The next section of this chapter will break down our understanding of communication into several components that can be more clearly analyzed. It begins with a discussion of a more traditional means of understanding communication processes and goes on to address the ways in which advances in communication technologies have challenged these conventions.

## Components of Communication

As a process, communication transactions have many components. In general, we might say that a **source** **encodes** a **message** and sends it through a **channel** to a **receiver**, who then **decodes** it. The receiver provides **feedback**. **Noise** can limit the effectiveness of a message in stimulating the desired meaning in another person's mind (See CMC in Action: The Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication).

Thinking about the guy who walks into the bar example from the beginning of the chapter can help illustrate each component in this model. A source is the place from which communication originates. This is the person or entity that a message comes from and who attempts to stimulate meaning in someone else's mind. In our example, the communication source is the guy who walks into the bar.

Encoding is the process that a source goes through when determining what message to send. A source has some desired meaning he or she wants to get across to someone else, but there are many possible messages to choose from. Different messages may result in different meanings inferred by the receiver. Thus, the source must determine how they will turn a desired meaning in their own mind into a message that will hopefully stimulate the desired meaning in another person's mind. For example, the guy who walks into a bar may notice an attractive person at the bar, and they want this person to know that they are interested in them. They now must consider how to prepare a message that conveys "attractiveness" and "interest" to another person; encoding is this process of this preparation.

A message is simply the symbols that a person uses to try to create a particular meaning. Let us assume that the guy who walks into a bar wants to show the attractive other person that he is a creative and clever person and that he is interested. He might ask the other person, "Hey. Are you from Tennessee? Cause you're only the only 10 I see." Thus, the language in his message—the actual English words themselves—would be the message (although it might not end up as the best message, as it might communicate a lack of creativity and cleverness).

The channel is what is used to get the message from the sender to the receiver; given the subject of this textbook, we might also refer to this as the medium. For our example, the guy walking in to the bar and giving his "Tennessee . . . 10 I see" comment is using verbal communication, so we might call the channel face-to-face. Of course, our guy could have chosen to write these words on a bar napkin or sent them as a text message, with each channel requiring a different type of encoding (pronouncing English words compared to legibly scribbling on a tissue or sending

**Source** The person/ place/thing from which communication originates.

**Encoding** A process of choosing the symbols to use to attempt to get a meaning across to another person; turning meaning into symbols.

**Message** The actual symbols used in an attempt to share meaning.

**Channel** What a source uses to send a message through.

**Receiver** The target of a message; whose mind the source wants to stimulate meaning in.

**Decoding** A sort of reverse process to encoding; turning symbols back into meaning.

**Feedback** Messages sent back to a source about the original message sent.

**Noise** Something that impedes successful transmission of a message. This can be literal noise, but can be other things as well.

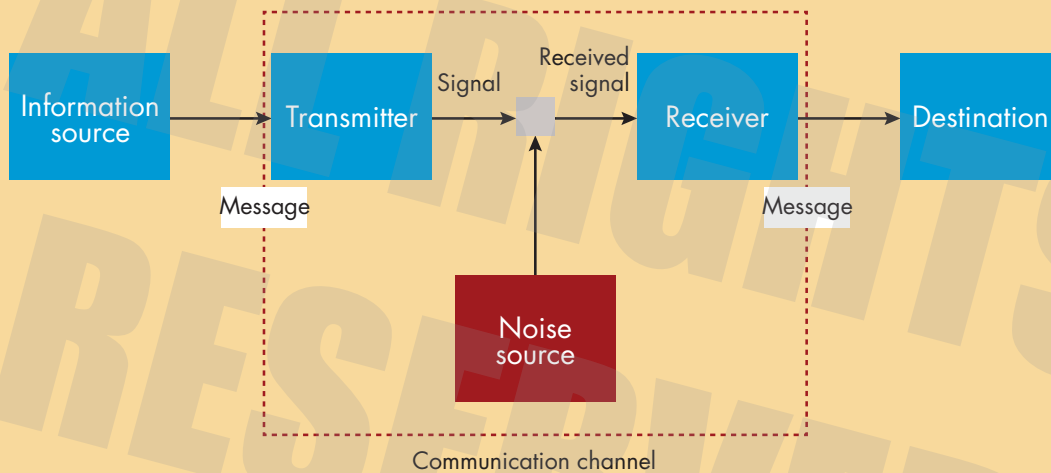


## CMC IN ACTION

### THE SHANNON-WEAVER MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Perhaps one of the most widely used models of communication is the Shannon–Weaver model, first proposed in 1948. Claude Shannon was working for Bell Labs—a company involved in the earliest telephone systems—when he conceived of a mathematical model for representing communication through technology, introducing the earliest concepts of encoding and decoding messages so that they could be sent efficiently through a medium while reducing noise in the transmission that could disrupt the process (in this case, the electronic signals

representing the human voice transmitted through a telephone). Warren Weaver later added the notion of feedback—that is, information communicated from the receiver to the sender—to this model (see Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Although originally designed for telephone communication, this model has been applied to other forms of communication as well and is often referred to as the “mother of all models” for its application to understanding communication, education, psychology, and even electronic engineering.



From: “A Mathematical Theory of Communication” by C. E. Shannon. *The Bell System Technical Journal*, Vol. 27, pp 379–423, July, 1948. Copyright© 1948 John Wiley and Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

a text-conversation to a cell phone) and each channel having a potentially different impact on how the message is received. To speak of media in more detail, we might consider that in many situations, the source will have multiple options to choose from and may try to use multiple channels to convey the same message. For example, a person may follow up an e-mail to their boss with a phone call to see if she has received the e-mail yet. Receivers may even attempt to make choices about which channel they would like to get a message through when they know someone is likely to try to send them one (either to the benefit or detriment to the source of the message).



## CMC IN ACTION

### Is COMMUNICATION EASY?

Many people might suggest that communication is easy, both as an area of study and as an everyday practice. However, think about it . . . if it is so easy, why are so many people seemingly so bad at it? And why do people who have known each other for a long time, such as married couples, often seem to have problems communicating? Consider the nature of encoding and decoding. One person has a meaning they would like to stimulate, and they have to choose the right

symbols to try to stimulate that *exact* meaning in another person's mind. This is not easy and it takes a lot of effort and practice. In fact, when considering all of the things that could be potentially misrepresented in communication—from a facial expression to the tone of one's voice to using a word with multiple meanings for different people to even the slightest leaning to one side or another—we might start to wonder how communication is ever successful!

Receivers are those who are the intended targets of a message. They are the ones to whom a source attempts to get a meaning across. In our example, this would be the attractive person standing at the bar (intended receiver). However, it is important to consider that there can be other receivers who get the message and who are not the intended target. This would be anyone else who overhears the cheesy pickup line (unintended receivers) and for whom the entire scenario might be seen as either hilarious or romantic (depending on the receiver).

Decoding is the opposite process on encoding. When the receiver gets the symbols sent by the source through the chosen channel, they must try to understand what was intended by those symbols and get some meaning from them. Of course, the meaning that a receiver decodes from symbols may not be the same one intended by the source (see CMC in Action: Is Communication Easy?). For example, if the attractive target thinks that this cheesy pickup line is just an attempt by the source to impress or entertain his friends, they will likely decode a meaning that is very different from the one intended by the target.

Feedback comprises messages sent back to the sender by the receiver about the original message. For example, if the attractive person at the bar from our story slaps our guy across the face, this should tell him something about the pickup line he attempted. Likely, it communicates that the message was not processed as intended, or if it was, the receiver does not share the same sentiment as the sender!

Finally, noise is anything that gets in the way of successful message transmission. Successful transmission would exist when the meaning attempted by the sender is the same exact meaning that the receiver gets. This can be literal noise (in our example, the bar is crowded and loud so the receiver does not even hear the cheesy pickup line), but it can also be plenty of other things that get in the way. For example, psychological noise can exist as well. If the receiver of the pickup line has had a rough day and is just not in the mood to listen to stupid pickup lines from anybody, this

would likely lead to a different meaning being taken from the message than the one intended. Indeed, a central concern for Shannon and Weaver was reducing noise in telephone transmission lines so that signals would not be disrupted.

## Mass-Mediated Communication

Before going on to discuss the concept of CMC in more depth (literally, using computers to communicate with each other), let us first dive into two major areas of communication that are often considered distinct from each other in the field of communication: mass-mediated communication and interpersonal communication.

When most people talk about mass-mediated communication, they are usually referring to newspapers, radio and television stations, and so on. Thus, they focus on the channels, or media, typically associated with this type of communication. Although each of these channels would fall into a working definition of mass-mediated communication, we borrow from Chaffee and Metzger (2001), who offer three characteristics of “mass” communication: mass production, a lack of individual (audience) control, and it is finite in its available channels.

Mass production means that the products made—in this case, the messages—are made for large and often anonymous audiences, with the goal being to attract as big of an audience as possible. Similar to an assembly line, mass messages are produced in a “one size fits all” manner to appeal to as many people as possible in a standardized way. Some have referred to this phenomenon as appealing to the lowest common denominator, usually as a criticism of this type of programming. For example, most modern U.S. newspapers are written to a fourth- or sixth-grade reading level to ensure that all possible audiences can read the news without barriers, but writing stories at a lower-reading level also means that they are sometimes oversimplified and might not present in-depth coverage of societal events. Just as is demonstrated in our definition of communication, the choice of encoding can alter how a message is received.

When we talk about a lack of individual control, we are suggesting that you as an individual audience member or media user have very limited control over the content provided and over how you consume it. The content itself is created by large, anonymous companies and organizations with very little input from audience members before creation (Nielsen ratings and the like may be seen as audience input after creation and broadcast to help set advertising rates and inform future creation of content). Also, if you want to consume mass communication, you have to do it on the schedule created by the content creators. For example, if you want to watch a particular television show, you need to be in front of a television at a particular time. For the most part, traditional mass media audiences were at the mercy of the media production company and those running the channel in terms of when, where, and how a media product was consumed.

**Mass communication** is also finite in its available channels. In crafting messages for mass consumption, there are only a few channels that are actually able to reach large audiences. Highway billboards, major metropolitan newspapers, and radio and television signals are among the channels most easily accessed by large populations. Mass communication works with limited bandwidth. Bandwidth is the amount of capacity a channel has to carry a signal/information. Be it the plywood surface of a

### Mass communication

Communication from a singular and impersonal source to a large and anonymous audience.

highway billboard, a particular television or radio frequency, or the amount of space on a newspaper page, each channel is physically limited in the amount of content it has, and (usually) having more content is more expensive. Therefore, only a limited amount of content can be produced and broadcasted through mass-mediated channels. More recent thinking on media has, however, challenged the importance of these defining characteristics.

## Changes in Technology Highlight Changes in Lines of Delineation

Chaffee and Metzger (2001) pointed out that new communication technologies decrease the importance of the three characteristics of mass communication. In fact, they go so far as to suggest a shift in nomenclature (labeling) from “mass communication” to “**mediated communication**” that focuses attention on the idea that while communication via technology is still mediated, it is no longer necessarily “mass.” In this way, we can understand that mediated communication differs from non-mediated communication in one very clear way: one requires technology for a message to get from the source to the receiver (mediated) and the other does not (non-mediated).

Of course, this is nothing brand new. Media technologies have a long history of “demassifying” communication; that is, working against the three characteristics that Chaffee and Metzger point out. For example, cable television introduced a much greater availability of television channels—cable customers often have hundreds of channels compared to the half-dozen or so broadcast channels one can get through an antenna—and with these new channels, content producers were able to create content for more specific and smaller audiences (a practice known as **narrowcasting**). In this way, cable television became less finite in available channels and also less “one size fits all” in terms of content. Considering the notion of audience control, we can look at the advent of the VCR as an invention that shifted this. By recording television and storing it to watch later, VCRs gave media audiences much greater control over when and how they watched a program by allowing you to watch a show not at the time it was broadcast, but also fast-forwarding or rewinding through recordings (such as skipping commercials). Thus, trending away from these traditional mass communication characteristics is not new. However, newer technologies allow this to occur to a much greater degree and even allow a great deal more interpersonal communication as well.

## Interpersonal Communication

In general, **interpersonal communication** differs from mass-mediated communication in at least two ways. First, we can consider the intended audience size. Although mass-mediated communication considers messages meant for large audiences, interpersonal communication considers messages that are exchanged between much smaller numbers of people, such as friends, romantic couples, or a small work group. Second, we can consider the nature of the relationship that typically exists between the source and receiver(s) of a message. With mass-mediated communication,

**Mediated communication** Communication that relies on a technology channel in order to send a message between two entities.

**Narrowcasting** Transmitting information to smaller, less anonymous, and more well-defined audiences.

**Interpersonal communication** Communication between two individuals who share some sort of relationship.



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Interpersonal communication considers messages that are exchanged between smaller numbers of people.

messages come from large and largely anonymous organizations, and it is unlikely that the source really knows any of the receivers of the message beyond a general “understanding” of the audience such as their age, sex, and geographic location. However, sources and receivers of interpersonal communication are likely to have some understanding of each other—they very possibly already have a relationship together—and this understanding and relationship gives them far more information for which to craft meaningful messages for each other.

In this change from what Chaffee and Metzger (2001) call “mass” to “media” communication, six differences between the two are highlighted:

- 1. Channels** As mentioned previously, mass communication is typified by a finite availability of channels, and newer technologies have allowed for many channels. For example, the Internet allows for a near infinite number of possible channels that are readily available for consumption by anyone with a network connection.
- 2. Audience** Under the notion of mass media, the audience is often considered as one large and anonymous “mass” (hence the term mass communication). However, newer technologies allow message producers to identify smaller and more focused audiences that allow them to tailor content to satisfy a variety of niche markets. Moreover, as bandwidth—an important consideration in the cost of producing messages—becomes cheaper and cheaper (and in some cases free), producers can be profitable without having to attract an enormous audience, allowing for even greater narrowcasting. Even more recently, social media has helped create circumstances in which media audiences are producing as much, if not more, content than the media producers themselves! Examples of this include YouTube videos and CNN.com’s popular iReport section (which features stories, photos, and videos from CNN readers).
- 3. Control** Mass communication puts control of message distribution and consumption squarely in the hands of the sender—usually a media company or organization—but newer technologies move that control to the hands of the audiences, or users. Because there is such an increase in the number of available channels and because those channels can be accessed (nearly) anywhere and anytime, the individual audience members have much greater choice in what, and how, to consume.
- 4. Transmission** Mass communication messages are often transmitted in a very regimented and particular way. Messages go from source to receiver(s) only (a one-way flow of communication), and they are transmitted in a time-specific manner. This means that if an individual wanted to watch a television show, that show would be beamed from a station (for instance, ABC) to the individual’s television at a particular time (8:00 PM).



So, if an individual were to get home at 8:05 PM and spend a few minutes stumbling through the television channels, they would miss a good part of the show's opening scenes. However, newer technologies have allowed transmission to be more interactive (two-way) and, in terms of timing, to be more at the convenience of the audience. Referring to television as an example, many broadcast and cable stations now stream many of their more popular shows on Web sites or make them available for download, allowing audience members to both choose the particular program of the show they want to watch and control when that program is watched.

5. **Typification** Another way to think about the differences between “mass” and “media” is to consider the channels that best typify each, particularly as we see a continued evolution in communication technologies. As referenced in short earlier, we often associate “mass” communication with newspapers and television, while we often associate “media” communication as being Internet-based, such as Web pages and social media applications. Indeed, these different types embody some of the other elements of “mass” and “media” on this list.
6. **Learning** The sixth and final difference that Chaffee and Metzger (2001) addressed when distinguishing “mass” from “media” has to do with how each encourages learning. With mass communication, the learning process is often done through modeling and observation. When somebody watches a television program—such as a segment on hand-washing on Sesame Street—they watch the segment, remember the lesson, and attempt to re-enact what was just learned (more on this in Chapter 6). However, learning through newer media technologies is more of an experiential process, particularly as new media are often more interactive. Instead of learning simply by watching others and imitating, newer media allow the opportunity to learn by experiencing things directly (or at least, more directly). This can be seen in video game systems such as the Nintendo Wii and the Sony PlayStation Move—both technologies require the user to physically interact with on-screen content; of course, even a Web site that has a child click a mouse to move objects from one screen to the next also has a layer of interactivity beyond what could be accomplished in a flat book. Even more promise for experiential learning will exist as augmented and virtual reality systems become more popular, systems that blend the virtual and actual worlds (see CMC in Action: Google and Project Glass).

## Changes in Mediated Communication

There are other characteristics of new media that add to these changes for communication. The first is digitization. **Digitization** is simply the storage of information as 1s and 0s—a language known as **binary code**. Because information is now stored in this way, very interesting things became possible, as pointed out by Bryant and Thompson (2002) and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 12.

Rogers (1986) also suggested other characteristics that new media share. The first is interactivity. There are many definitions that exist for interactivity, but the preferred one for us is “the degree to which users of a medium can influence the form or content of the mediated environment” (Steuer, 1992, p. 80). Thus, interactivity is a

**Digitization** Converting information into binary code to be decoded upon request by a computer processor.

**Binary code** The language of computing technology, this is the storing of information in electrical circuits using a series of “1” and “0” commands to represent “on” or “off.”



## CMC IN ACTION

### GOOGLE AND PROJECT GLASS

To label Mountain View, California-based Google Inc. as a technology innovator is a bit of an understatement. Currently one of the most profitable technology companies of the twenty-first century, Google (NYSE: GOOG), and in particular the company's X Lab, has earned a reputation for launching Internet-based technologies that make use of their search algorithms for any number of applications. A recent invention that is turning heads (pun intended) is Project Glass—an initiative to develop and distribute a wearable Web browser and streaming

camera platform in an average-looking pair of eyeglasses. These glasses are capable of displaying information directly on the inside of both lenses and are designed to be operated with voice commands, displaying the same information that one would normally access on a smartphone or laptop computer. Industry estimates predict that these glasses could be available to the average U.S. consumer for about the price of a high-end smartphone by early 2014. So, soon you may be wearing these even as you read this book!



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Project Glass is a wearable Web browser in a pair of eyeglasses.

continuum, and all media have some level of interactivity, but newer media provide more interactivity than older ones. The second characteristic is known as demassification. This general idea is that media become less “mass,” and allow for greater personalization and interpersonal content. Third, newer technologies allow for some levels of asynchronicity. This means that messages do not have to be received at the same time they are sent. Looking back at the typical mass medium, television, it is a synchronous medium, as messages must be received when they are sent. Interestingly, the classic interpersonal channel, face-to-face, is also a synchronous one. However, more and more options exist that break this constraint, (e.g., DVRs for television content and e-mails for interpersonal content), and the Internet allows for more of these types of asynchronicity.



## CMC IN ACTION

### WAS DEAR ABBY MY FRIEND?

*There is always an answer; even if it's . . . you can't change anybody but yourself. Pauline "Dear Abby" Phillips*

In early 2013, longtime newspaper columnist Pauline Phillips died at the age of 94. For traditional newspaper audiences, Phillips was known to the world as “Abigail Van Buren”—a renowned advice columnist who authored the world’s most widely syndicated newspaper column, reaching over 1,400 newspapers and an estimated 110 million people each time it was published. From her first column—appearing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1956—Phillips’ columns were popular because of the pithy advice she gave readers. Readers were invited to write her letters describing their struggles in relative detail, and Phillips would select a few, publishing the complete letter text and a pseudo-name for the letter writer (“Troubled in Tacoma” or “Desperately Depressed”) along with her advice.

From a communication perspective, we might consider what compelled so many anonymous strangers to write Abby about their lives. Most readers knew that Abby was

not a real person—the pen name Abigail van Buren—and they were also aware that if Phillips did respond to their letters, she would publish the entire letter text in thousands of daily newspapers around the world. Common themes of these letters included stories about adultery, drug and substance abuse, and other social taboos that most people would consider highly private information, yet they shared openly with Phillips and, as a proxy, with the world . . . and she would respond with a similar level of detail and personability. So, is this an example of interpersonal communication—a letter to a friend and a response back—or is this an example of mass communication—a letter to a newspaper to be shared with the world?

Today, the voice of Abigail van Buren has been filled by Phillips’ daughter, Jeanne Phillips and is still one of the most widely-distributed newspaper columns. And of course, she now has a Twitter handle: @DearAbby.

## Moving Toward CMC

To this point, mass and interpersonal communication have been discussed as if they are separate from each other, and historically they have usually been considered as such (particularly in the scientific study of communication). However, there are also scholars who have suggested this distinction is a false dichotomy (for example, see Reardon & Rogers, 1989). For example, when we communicate—whether through mass or interpersonal communication—we often have the same goals in mind. As noted in the very beginning of this book, communication is a goal-driven process. We may seek information, we may try to persuade others, we try to start, maintain,

and/or end relationships, and we also seek entertainment, and each of these can be done through mass and interpersonal communication.

Although this distinction between mass and interpersonal may have always been somewhat false (see CMC in Action: Was Dear Abby My Friend?), newer media have really blurred the lines between the two. For example, is Facebook a form of mass communication? Interpersonal? Neither? Both? It is these kinds of questions that led communication scholar Patrick O'Sullivan to suggest an idea known as "masspersonal" communication.

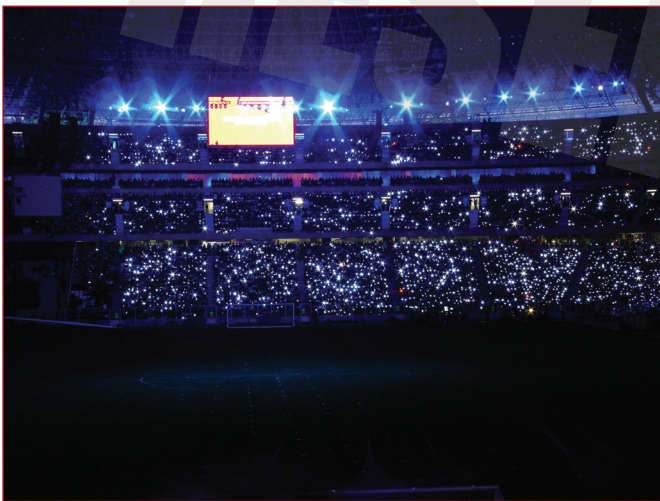
In general, the notion of **masspersonal communication** suggests that historically we have often used mass channels for interpersonal reasons and interpersonal channels for mass reasons. For example, based upon sheer audience size, the big screen in a major college football stadium during a game is a mass channel. However, if a person proposes to their significant other over that same screen, this would seem like the ultimate in interpersonal reasons. On the flip side, e-mail and telephones are often considered interpersonal channels. But when spam messages are sent over either one, they are generalized messages without regard for idiosyncratic information for each receiver and thus seem like a mass communication.

Based on this, O'Sullivan (2005) suggested that we delink, or separate, the channel of communication from the type of communication. Historically, mass has been linked with physical and electronic media and interpersonal has been linked with face-to-face (indeed, some even suggest that mediated interpersonal interaction is not true interpersonal communication because there is no physical connection between individuals, although we disagree with this contention throughout the rest of this book). Again, newer technologies highlight that mediated communication is not always mass, and instead of differentiating types of communication simply based upon channel or audience size, it may be better to focus on more meaningful distinctions. Indeed, the masspersonal notion proposes two: message personalization and message access exclusivity.

Message personalization refers to the degree that a message is crafted to a recipient in a manner that treats the recipient as an individual with distinctive interests, history, relationship network, and so on. Such an explanation is very similar to classic definitions of interpersonal communication, which argues that interpersonal communication takes place only when predictions about the interaction are made based on knowledge of the other and not on roles or on cultural attributions (Miller & Steinberg, 1975). This is not unintentional, as interpersonal messages tend to be those with higher personalization and mass messages tend to be those with lower personalization.

Message access exclusivity involves the breadth of access to a particular message, or how public or private the message is. By traditional definitions, access to interpersonal messages would be exclusive to the intended recipient (private), whereas mass

**Masspersonal communication** Patrick O'Sullivan's idea that technology makes the division between mass and interpersonal communication blurry, and thus we should look for more useful distinctions in communication.



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Based on sheer size, a big screen in a major college football stadium during a game is a mass channel.



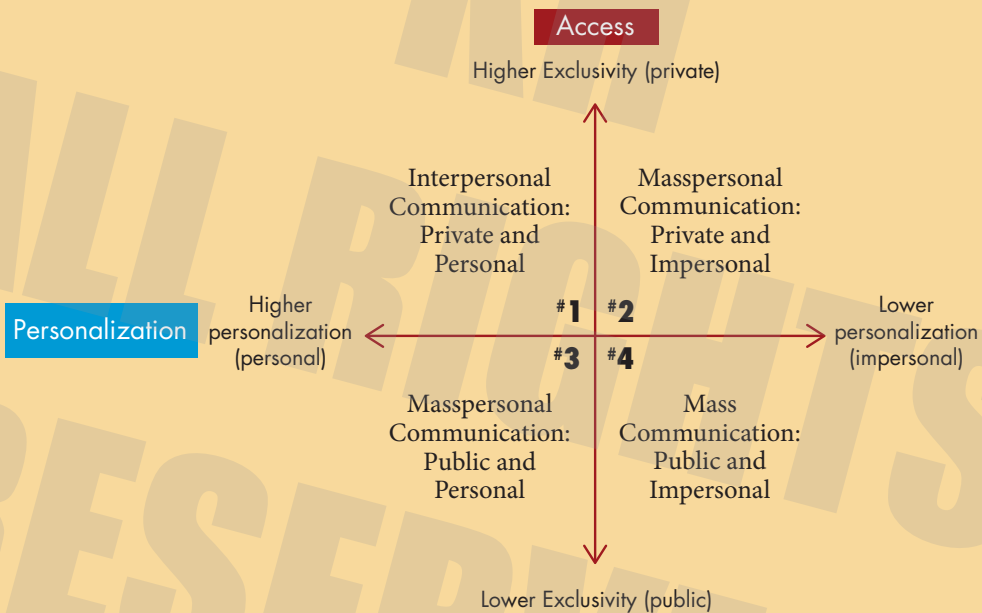
# CMC IN ACTION



## MASSPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, CHARTED

In an unpublished essay from the International Communication Association ([www.icaheadq.org](http://www.icaheadq.org)) convention in 2005, communication scholar Patrick O'Sullivan wrote about the increasingly blurred lines between mass and interpersonal communication. While never published in an academic journal, his essay has been read nearly 2500

times on the scholarship network service Academia.edu ([https://www.academia.edu/468715/Masspersonal\\_communication\\_Rethinking\\_the\\_mass\\_interpersonal\\_divide](https://www.academia.edu/468715/Masspersonal_communication_Rethinking_the_mass_interpersonal_divide)) and has influenced many of the current studies examining how human communication works across a variety of different media.



From: *Masspersonal communication: An integrative model bridging the mass-interpersonal divide* by Patrick O'Sullivan. Copyright © 2005 by Patrick O/Sullivan. Reprinted by permission.

As an exercise, let us consider a few different communication technologies such as e-mail, television, a social media application such as Facebook, and a handwritten letter. Can you think of where these different technologies would fit onto the preceding O'Sullivan's

Masspersonal chart? Do some technologies fit into different sections of the chart? Do any of these technologies fit into all four sections of the chart? Can you think of other technologies and where they also might fit?

communication is by definition nonexclusive and accessible to a large number of recipients (public).

Overall, traditionally mass messages had low personalization and low exclusivity, and interpersonal messages had high personalization and high exclusivity. Yet, the masspersonal approach recognizes that there are many messages that cross the two (see CMC in Action: Masspersonal Communication, Charted). In this way, O'Sullivan's concept allows us to explain traditional as well as new media technologies, and accounts for the entire communication process rather than merely focusing on the channel.

## So What Is CMC?

In our view, CMC is simply communication that takes place using computers. More emphasis is placed upon the second C (communication) rather than the first C (computer), although the particular channel (i.e., the computer or communication technology) provides interesting questions and answers that will be discussed throughout this book. Also, it is important to note that as a "communication first" perspective, the same goals of functions of communication in general—to inform, persuade, relate, and to entertain—apply to CMC as well. This approach will also be discussed in greater detail in later chapters as well.

### Key Terms

- Communication** (pg 2)
- Audience-centered process** (pg 2)
- Source** (pg 3)
- Encoding** (pg 3)
- Message** (pg 3)
- Channel** (pg 3)
- Receiver** (pg 3)
- Decoding** (pg 3)
- Feedback** (pg 3)
- Noise** (pg 3)
- Mass communication** (pg 6)
- Mediated communication** (pg 7)
- Narrowcasting** (pg 7)
- Interpersonal communication** (pg 7)
- Digitization** (pg 9)
- Binary code** (pg 9)
- Masspersonal communication** (pg 12)

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