

CHAPTER

12

Mass Media Contexts

MASS COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY



Contemporary society maintains a reciprocal, interdependent relationship with the mass media. Society influences the media and is itself influenced by mass or mediated communication. Rarely a day goes by without some mention of how the media and mass communication affect our lives. Newspaper and radio reports scream headlines such as, “Studies link teen suicides with TV news and movies,” “Kids, TV Don’t Mix,” and “Music videos found to be less violent than prime-time TV.” Through mass media, people learn almost immediately about major happenings across town or across the globe. As viewers, we are frequently eyewitnesses to global events both joyous and tragic.

Definitions and conceptualizations of mass media and mass communication have changed considerably over the last decade. At one time, not too long ago, mass media was defined primarily as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. Today, the term *media* is likely to conjure terms such as *cable* and *satellite television*, *satellite radio*, *HD radio*, and *interactive media*, also referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC). Some even include the cell phone as a form of mediated communication (Noll, 2007, p. 1). Indeed, “the idea of ‘new media’ captures both the development of unique forms of digital media, and the remaking of more traditional media forms to adopt and adapt to the new media technologies” (Flew, 2002, p. 11). That is, new media combines computing and information technology, communications networks, and digitized media and information content. There are a few fundamental differences between what has been termed “new media” and traditional media. The new mediated technologies allow the user to communicate in a two-way fashion with others. In the past, after reading a story in a print newspaper, you had



an opportunity to write a letter to the editor and send that via conventional (or snail) mail. Today, after reading the same story on the Internet-based version of the news source, you can send immediate feedback to the source via e-mail. This immediacy factor represents another major difference. Putting a print newspaper or magazine together takes an enormous amount of time. Adding a story to a news Internet site, often complete with video, reduces that time frame considerably.

One consequence of these innovations and of the changing nature of media use has been the development of new theories of mass communication. These theories attempt to explain how individuals respond to media, to predict how rapidly a society will adopt these innovations, and to determine what effect mass communication has on individuals, society, other forms of human communication, and culture. Current research looks at the role of society, culture, and the individual in the *production* of mass communication content. The distinction between mass communication and interpersonal communication has stimulated a considerable amount of investigation by communication researchers. Some theories address how mass communication and interpersonal communication *jointly* influence an individual's decision-making processes. Other theories attempt to offer a new synthesis of interpersonal and mass communication, which has been labeled *mediated interpersonal communication*. Three broad questions have stimulated much of the research and theory building in mass communication:

1. What is the impact of a society on its mass media?
2. How does mass communication function?
3. What effect does exposure to mass communication have on people?

The bulk of mass communication theory and research has concentrated on the third question. Many theorists have investigated how mass media messages affect people's perceptions and behaviors. Examples of those theories will be detailed in this chapter. Some of the theories explore audience involvement in mass communication. Other theories try to explain how mediated messages shape our perceptions of reality. Yet another body of research examines how communication rules are used to guide audience members' collective interaction with mass media.

The **reflective-projective theory of mass communication** asserts that the mass media act like mirrors for society. The media reflect society's attitudes and values as they simultaneously project idealized visions of a society. Individuals interpret these reflections, seeing both their own images and alternative realities. Interpretations are affected by the intellectual, emotional, and sensory responsiveness of each individual. Lee Loevinger (1979) argued that nations or communities are not necessarily formed by maps or geographical

reflective projective theory of mass communication
A theory that asserts the mass media acts like a mirror for society.

boundaries. Rather, nations or communities are formed by common images and visions, along with common interests, ideas, and culture.

EARLY THEORY-BUILDING EFFORTS IN MASS COMMUNICATION



During World War I, the new mass media were used to help activate the population. The mass media presented messages designed to stimulate support for the war effort. The newly developed media effectively promoted the beliefs of the warring nations. Mass communication became an important tool used by individuals engaged in large-scale persuasive efforts. The term *propaganda* first emerged during this time. After World War I, U.S. society witnessed an increasing growth in diversity; the society became less homogeneous. Individuals were no longer so closely dependent on one another. The term “mass society” was created by sociologists to describe not merely a large number of people in a given culture but the *relationship* between the individuals and the social order around them (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982).

The “Magic Bullet” Theory

Sometimes referred to as the “hypodermic needle theory,” the **magic bullet theory** was one of the first developed to explain the influence of the new forms of communication on society. The bullet theory and the many variations of it were derived from the stimulus-response perspective of several early mass communication theorists and researchers (e.g., Lasswell, 1927). This view asserts that any powerful stimulus such as a mass media message can provoke a uniform response from a given organism, such as an audience. Recall that the mass media at this time were thought to exert powerful, direct influence over the audience. The magic bullet or hypodermic needle theory suggested that the mass media could influence a very large group of people *directly* and *uniformly* by “shooting” or “injecting” them with appropriate messages designed to trigger a desired response.

magic bullet theory

A theory of mass communication that suggests media influences people directly and uniformly.

The popularity of these early stimulus-response theories of mass communication was consistent with that of the existing psychological and sociological theories of mass society. In addition, “evidence” of the power of the media existed in its ability to mobilize support for the country’s war effort. The newly emerging mass media did have a profound effect on the audience, but several intervening factors also exerted considerable influence on audiences during that time. After years of additional research, mass communication theorists concluded that the early stimulus-response theories lacked

explanatory and predictive power. They developed alternative theories that address both the power of the media to influence attitudes and behavior and also the influence of different message sources and different audience reactions. Examples of these alternative theories will be presented later in this chapter.

The Two-Step Flow Theory

Several researchers had designed a study to examine how individuals from different social groups select and use mass communication messages to influence votes (see Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The researchers expected to find empirical support for the direct influence of media messages on voting intentions. They were surprised to discover, however, that *informal, personal contacts* were mentioned far more frequently than exposure to radio or newspaper as sources of influence on voting behavior. When questioned further, several participants revealed that they had received their information about the campaign *first* from *others* (who had received information directly from the mass media).

two-step flow Theory that asserts information from media is processed first by opinion leaders who then pass it along via interpersonal channels.

opinion leader A component of the two-step flow theory that reflects a person who pays close attention to the mass media then exerts their influence on others concerning the messages received from the media.

Armed with this data, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955) developed the **two-step flow theory** of mass communication. This theory asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. First, individuals who pay close attention (are frequent “attenders”) to the mass media and its messages receive the information. These individuals, called **opinion leaders**, are generally well-informed people who pass information along to others through informal, interpersonal communication. Opinion leaders also pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. The term “personal influence” was coined to refer to the process intervening between the media’s direct message and the audience’s ultimate reaction to that message. Over the last fifty years, a substantial amount of research has contributed to our knowledge about opinion leadership.

Several characteristics of opinion leaders have been identified. Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. Think of an individual whom you consult before making a major purchase. Perhaps you have a friend who knows a great deal about cars. You may hear a number of messages on television about the favorable qualities of the Ford Fusion and the Toyota Camry. The mass media have clearly provided you with information about each car, but do you rely solely on this information to decide which car to buy? If you are like most people, probably not. You may check *Consumer Reports* to determine what it says about those two cars. Will this information be enough to persuade you to prefer one car to the other? Possibly, but chances are you will also seek out the advice of someone you consider an opinion leader on the topic of automobiles.

The two-step flow theory has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making. The theory refined our ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behavior, and it helped explain why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes and behavior. Despite this contribution, the two-step flow theory has also received its share of criticism. First, some major news stories seem to be spread directly by the media with only modest intervention by personal contact. Acts of terrorism or natural disasters are often heard first from the media, then discussed interpersonally. Second, definitions of opinion leadership are often vague. Werner Severin and James Tankard (2001) suggested that some opinion leaders are self-nominated and are not reported to be opinion leaders by their supposed followers. Another difficulty is that opinion leaders have been found to be both active and passive. The two-step flow theory argues that opinion leaders are primarily active media seekers, whereas their followers are primarily passive information “sponges.” This distinction between media behavior of leaders and followers does not necessarily hold true. Finally, although Katz and Lazarsfeld argued the need for a *two-step* model, the process of media dissemination and audience behavior can involve more steps. Thus, the two-step flow theory gave way to the concept of multistep flow, often used to describe the *diffusion of innovations*.

Diffusion Theory

Diffusion theory examines how new ideas spread among groups of people. The two-step flow theory of mass communication was primarily concerned with the exchange of information between the media and others. Diffusion research goes one step further. It centers around the conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood that a new idea, product, or practice will be adopted by members of a given culture. Diffusion research has focused on five elements: (1) the *characteristics of an innovation* that may influence its adoption; (2) the *decision-making process* that occurs when individuals consider adopting a new idea, product or practice; (3) the *characteristics of individuals* that make them likely to adopt an innovation; (4) the *consequences* for individuals and society of adopting an innovation; and (5) *communication channels* used in the adoption process (see Rogers, 1995).

Communication channels include both the mass media and interpersonal contacts. The multistep flow and diffusion theories expand the number and type of intermediaries between the media and the audience’s decision making. In multistep diffusion research, opinion leaders still exert influence on audience behavior via their personal contact, but additional intermediaries called change agents and gatekeepers are also included in the process of diffusion.

Change agents are those professionals who encourage opinion leaders to adopt

diffusion theory The study of how new ideas spread among groups of people.



change agents Professional who encourage opinion leaders to adopt or reject an innovation.

gatekeepers People who control the flow of information to a given group of people.

or reject an innovation. **Gatekeepers** are individuals who control the flow of information to a given group of people. Whereas opinion leaders are usually quite similar to their followers, change agents are usually more educated and of higher status than either the opinion leaders or their followers. A change agent might be a representative from a national cable television company who tries to persuade local opinion leaders in a community (town officials, for example) to offer cable television or a computer company representative who convinces local school officials to introduce a particular personal computer into the school system. This representative is probably more knowledgeable about the computer system than the opinion leaders (school officials). However, the task of influencing the school board to budget money still rests with the local opinion leaders. Recall that opinion leaders are similar to those they represent. Previous research (see Chapter 9) suggests that similarity or homophily enhances attraction, liking, and influence. A gatekeeper might be the editor of a local news show or newspaper. This person decides what stories will be printed or broadcast. Gatekeepers represent yet another intermediate step in the flow of information between the media and audience. Thus, a number of intermediaries and channels are involved in the process of information dissemination and influence.

Early theory-building efforts in mass communication relied heavily on psychological and sociological theories. The field of mass communication now has produced theory that can “stand on its own.” Several contemporary theories developed by communication scholars will be presented next. The first theory, the functional approach, was based on the early research and continues to be refined today.



THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

The mass media and mass communication serve many functions for our society. Clearly, one of the main attractions is escapism and entertainment value. We come home after a hard day at school or the office and turn on our favorite television comedy, game show, or dramatic program. Another major use of the media is to provide information. Driving to school or work, we turn on the radio and catch the latest news, weather, and sports scores. We may listen to our favorite talk program to hear what others think about relations between the United States and China. Harold Lasswell (1948) articulated three functions of mass communication: *surveillance*, *correlation*, and *cultural transmission*. Charles Wright (1960) added a fourth function, *entertainment*. In 1984, Denis McQuail added a fifth function: *mobilization*.

surveillance A dimension of the functional theory of mass communication and is the information and news providing function of mass communication.

Surveillance refers to the information and news-providing function of mass communication. When we turn on the radio to obtain the latest weather,

traffic, or stock market reports, we are using the media primarily for its surveillance function. When the stock market dropped 508 points on October 19, 1987, millions of Americans turned on their radio and television sets to obtain information about the plunge. In every major office in the country that day, workers were “glued” to their radios to discover how much their companies’ stocks had fallen. Individuals who did not own stock read in-depth reports in local newspapers concerning the potential influence of the stock market crash on the national and global economies.

The second function, **correlation**, deals with how the mass media select, interpret, and criticize the information they present to the public. The editorials on radio and television and the persuasive campaigns waged using the media are primary examples of the correlation function. “USA for Africa,” “Live Aid,” “Farm Aid,” and “Hands Across America” were campaigns whose origins and major fund-raising drives were stimulated by and developed in connection with the media. The outpouring of funds to help the starving people of Ethiopia was largely stimulated by the poignant images that came into our homes via television. Many political critics suggest that the media, and not the American people, select our political leaders. They point to the tremendous media coverage and scrutiny given to the private lives of politicians and media celebrities as an example of the correlation function of the media. Along with criticism and selection of events, the correlation function of the media also *confers status* on selected individuals. The mass media choose to highlight a number of individuals who then become “legitimized” to audiences.

The third function, **cultural transmission**, refers to the media’s ability to communicate norms, rules, and values of a society. These values may be transmitted from one generation to another or from the society to its newcomers. Cultural transmission is a teaching function of the media, which brings many social role models into the home. Those role models frequently engage in behaviors considered appropriate in a given society (prosocial behaviors). Johnston and Ettema (1986) cited shows such as *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, *Sesame Street*, and the *ABC After School Specials* as examples of children’s programs that attempt to teach or to promote such prosocial behaviors as being polite, dealing with anger or fear, handling new situations, coping with death, persisting at tasks, caring, and cooperating. Prime-time television shows such as *Brothers and Sisters* and *Friday Night Lights* have been mentioned as programs that promote values such as respect for authority, family harmony, and a solid work ethic. As the number of television hours watched increases, regional and subcultural differences appear to be decreasing. The media’s powerful cultural transmission of “common” messages has caused us to speak, think, and dress more alike. These common or unifying messages may have further “homogenized” U.S. culture by dictating the “proper” way to act.

The fourth function of mass communication, **entertainment**, may be the most potent one. Mass communication helps fill our leisure time by presenting

correlation A dimension of the functional theory of mass communication that concerns how the mass media select, interpret, and criticize the information they present to the public.

cultural transmission A dimension of the functional theory of mass communication that concerns the media’s ability to communicate norms, rules, and values of a society.

entertainment A dimension of the functional theory of mass communication that reflects how mass communication helps fill our leisure time by presenting messages filled with comedy, tragedy, play, and performance.

messages filled with comedy, drama, tragedy, play, and performance. The entertainment function of mass communication offers an escape from daily problems and concerns. The media introduce us to aspects of culture, art, music, and dance that otherwise might not be available to us. The mass media can stimulate excitement in viewers (as with sporting events) or calm us (as with classical music broadcasts). Mass communication as entertainment provides relief from boredom, stimulates our emotions, fills our leisure time, keeps us company, and exposes us to images, experiences, and events that we could not attend in person. Numerous critics, however, assert that the media and its messages lower expectations and reduce fine art to pop art.

McQuail's fifth function of mass communication, **mobilization**, refers to the ability of the media to promote national interests (as we saw in the discussion about World War I), especially during times of national crisis. Although this mobilization function may be especially important in developing nations and societies, it can occur anywhere. We may have seen evidence of it in the United States during the days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and during the coverage of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The media's central function was not only to inform us but also to counsel, strengthen, and pull us together.

mobilization A dimension of the functional theory of mass communication that reflects the ability of the media to promote national interests.



AGENDA-SETTING THEORY AND MASS COMMUNICATION

agenda setting A theory that holds intense media attention increases the importance of certain topics, issues, and individuals.

Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media—the ability to tell us what issues are important. For example, if the media choose to highlight declining wages and lower standards of living for the current generation of adults, then concern over the economy becomes an important issue, regardless of the level of importance we placed on it before the media attention. Books addressing the issue start to sell across the country. Suddenly, people are concerned about loss of leisure time compared to previous generations. Entertainers joke about children in their thirties moving home to live with their parents.

Agenda setting has been the subject of attention from media analysts and critics for years. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. Because firsthand experiences are limited, we depend on the media to describe important events we have not personally witnessed. The media provide information about “the world outside”; we use that information to form “pictures in our heads” (Lippman, 1922). Political scientist Bernard Cohen (1963) warned that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Prior to the early 1970s, the prevailing beliefs of mass communication research were that the media had only limited effects. Most research

assumed the following sequence: the media generate awareness of issues through presentation of information; that information provides a basis for attitude change; the change in attitude includes behavior change. Most research looked for attitude and behavior change and found very limited influence. A study by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, changed the emphasis of research efforts and stimulated a flurry of empirical investigations into the agenda-setting function of the mass media.

McCombs and Shaw focused on awareness and information. Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media in the 1968 presidential campaign, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community *said* were important issues and the *actual* content of media messages used during the campaign. They first analyzed the content presented by four local papers, the *New York Times*, two national newsmagazines, and two national network television broadcasts. They ranked importance by looking at the prominence given a story (lead, frontpage, headline, editorial, etc.) and the length. The researchers then interviewed 100 undecided voters (the assumption being that voters committed to a candidate would be less susceptible to media influence). McCombs and Shaw concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign. In addition to pioneering an entire line of research, McCombs and Shaw provided an excellent example of the thinking on which this textbook is premised. They believe that effective scientific research builds on previous studies. As a result, their study of the next presidential election (Shaw & McCombs, 1977) extended the scope of the original study, the objectives, and the research strategies. The study took place in Charlotte, North Carolina, and extended the analysis over time using a panel design. One of the interesting objectives added to this study was the investigation of what types of voters would be more likely to depend on the media. The researchers looked at two factors—the relevance of information to an individual and the degree of uncertainty—in determining **need for orientation**. Voters with a high need for orientation would be more likely to be influenced by the media in determining the importance of issues when issues were relevant and uncertainty was high. Just as McCombs and Shaw expanded their focus, other researchers have extended investigations of agenda setting to issues including history, advertising, foreign, and medical news.

Despite the extensive outgrowth from the original hypothesis, critics charge that there is insufficient evidence to show a causal connection between the order of importance placed on issues by the media and the significance attached to those issues by the public. McQuail (1984, p. 276) argued that, at least for the time being, agenda-setting theory remains “within the status of a plausible but unproven idea.” The direction of influence still needs to be resolved. Do the media influence the opinions of the audience or reflect public concerns? Are both dictated by actual events? Do external or internal forces have more

need for orientation Part of the agenda-setting theory of mass communication concerning the relevance of information to an individual and the degree of uncertainty.

influence on media content? What roles do the elite media play? That is, if the *New York Times* runs a story, can the *Washington Post* afford to ignore it? How much power do special interest groups, the president, senators, or chief executive officers of large corporations have to pressure the media to present their views? Is credibility a balancing factor? The media are in business; does profit and loss play a larger role than a culture that prides itself on presenting unbiased reports? Other research could look at internal processes. What effects do deadlines, space restrictions, and the use of official sources have? The number of variables offer new opportunities for research on this topic for years to come.



MASS COMMUNICATION AND PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

parasocial interaction

A relationship that exists between television viewers and remote media communicators.

The influence of mass communication and the media extends into the domain of relationship development. The concept of **parasocial interaction** has received considerable attention from both mass communication and interpersonal communication theorists. The concept was introduced forty years ago by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe a new type of “relationship” that exists between television viewers and remote media communicators. In a parasocial relationship, members of the audience view performers or the characters they portray as belonging to the audience’s peer group. Media performers with whom audiences develop parasocial relationships include entertainers, talk show hosts, journalists, sport personalities, and a number of other national and local media personalities.

We often develop a sense of involvement with media performers. We follow their careers just as we follow the careers of actual friends and colleagues. We may look forward to reading Internet, newspaper, and magazine accounts of their lives. We may even go to great lengths to meet them. One of our authors, for example, is a fan of “talk radio” programs. For years, he listened to TalkNet radio celebrity Bruce Williams give advice to listeners on a variety of topics. When visiting other cities, the author would scan the dial to locate the nationally syndicated program. This gave the feeling of having the performer “travel with him” and made it seem that he had a “friend,” even in the most distant city. Bruce Williams scheduled a local appearance at a very large ballroom; the author immediately purchased tickets. Convinced that he would be among only a small audience on a wintry evening, the author arrived only fifteen minutes before the event was to begin. He was amazed to discover a capacity crowd, with only a few seats left in the very back of the ballroom! Clearly, he had underestimated the number of people who had also developed a parasocial interactional relationship with this particular radio celebrity.

In parasocial interaction, viewers believe that they know and understand the media personality in the same way as they know and understand their “real”

friends (Perse & Rubin, 1989). The parasocial relationship is based on the belief that the media performer is similar to other people in their circle of friends (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). For most audience members, these parasocial interactions augment their actual face-to-face relationships.

In another study, researchers hypothesized that viewers would regard their favorite media performer as “closer” to them than actual “acquaintances” but more distant than “friends.” Because most of our interpersonal relationships can be classified as “acquaintanceships,” this hypothesis projected that we place our favorite media personality as “closer” to us than many people with whom we interact. Results showed that television personalities hold an intermediate position in “closeness” between friends and acquaintances. Koenig and Lessan (1985) suggested that the term *quasi-friend* may be most appropriate in describing the relationship between viewer and television personality.

Levy (1979) reported that news viewers occasionally reply to a newscaster’s opening greeting with a greeting of their own. Almost 70 percent of network news viewers said they noticed when their anchorperson was on vacation, and 25 percent of viewers indicated that the anchorperson’s absence “upset” them (p. 72). Levy also portrayed parasocial interactions as an alternative to face-to-face relationships for some people who have few or weak social ties with other people. A report by the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on Television and Society reported that the elderly watch television more than any other age group. For this group in particular, as well as for other isolated individuals, television viewing becomes a parasocial activity that helps create the illusion of living in a world surrounded by people. Parasocial relationships with media personalities often fill the “gaps” caused by the death of a spouse or by children leaving home. Alan Rubin and Rebecca Rubin (1985) argued that “it is possible and beneficial to see media in certain contexts as being functional alternatives to interpersonal communication” (p. 38).

Influences of Interpersonal Communication Theory

In Chapter 9 we discussed the major assumptions of uncertainty reduction theory, which suggests that individuals seek to reduce uncertainty about those with whom they wish to develop relationships. We communicate more to reduce the uncertainty we feel about how to behave. We are more comfortable when we have more information. Rubin and McHugh (1987) applied these principles to understand parasocial interaction relationships. They examined whether increased television exposure leads to increased liking and whether parasocial interaction results from both exposure and attraction. The researchers found that television exposure was not influential in either parasocial interaction or attraction to a media personality. This finding contrasts with the assumptions of uncertainty reduction theory. They did discover, however, that parasocial relationships develop only when we are attracted to the media persona.

A study by Turner (1993) attempted to unite another theory of interpersonal communication with the research on parasocial interaction. Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity, examined in Chapter 9, argues that similarity (in attitudes, background, value/morality, appearance) between individuals leads to interpersonal attraction or “liking.” Turner found that attitude similarity emerged as the factor most closely related to parasocial interaction. Background and appearance similarity were also related to parasocial interaction, but the relationship was not as strong. Turner contributed additional insight into what leads to the development of a parasocial interaction and reinforced the mutual influence of interpersonal communication theory and media research.

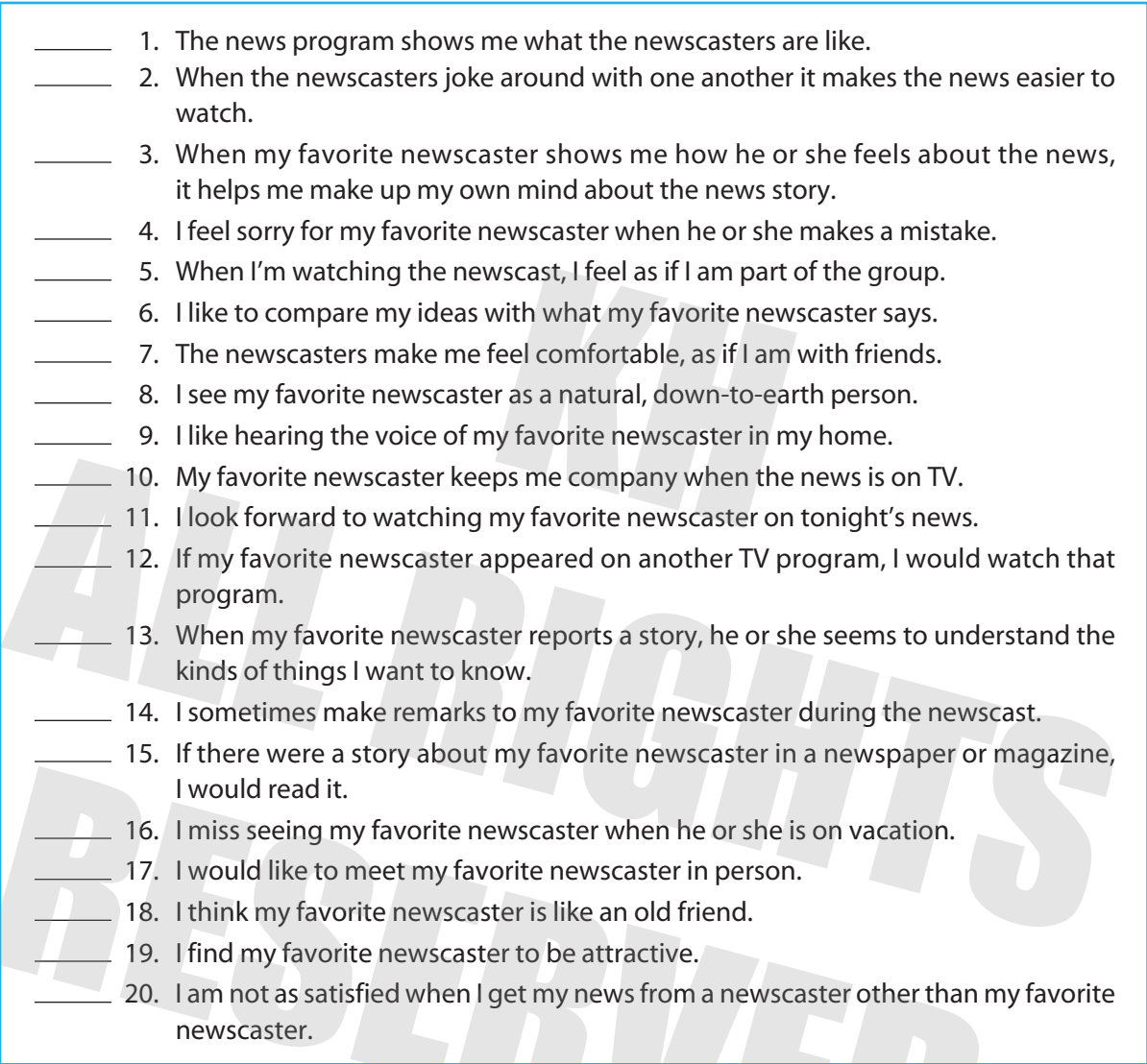
Measuring Parasocial Interaction

Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) developed a reliable and valid questionnaire to measure relationship importance and affinity with media personalities. The Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) is a 20-item measure designed to assess an individual’s feelings of friendship, involvement, and personal concern for a television newscaster and news team. By modifying the target (from newscaster to another type of persona), you can obtain a measure of parasocial interaction with any media personality.

The PSI (see Figure 12.1) includes such items as: “When I’m watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group”; “My favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on television”; and “I think my favorite newscaster is like an old friend.” Individuals respond to each of the 20 items by choosing one of five response options ranging from “strongly agree” (5) to “strongly disagree” (1). The PSI addresses the concepts of empathy, perceived similarity, and physical attraction. The researchers suggested that a fondness for television news would make a viewer feel more attracted and similar to the newscaster, thus contributing to the likelihood of a parasocial interaction.

The PSI was used in a study (Auter, 1992) conducted to determine if parasocial interaction can be increased by certain camera techniques and behavior by mediated personalities “in order to help ‘blur’ the line between audience and characters” (p. 174). To conduct the study, Auter used a 1950s episode from the *George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. This show was unique at the time because George Burns frequently stepped out of character to address the audience, thus “breaking the fourth wall.” Two versions of the program were created, one in which George Burns addressed the audience in asides and one in which those segments were edited out to create a “standard” situation comedy. Students were randomly divided into two groups and shown one version of the show. After watching the tape, the students completed a version of the PSI scale. The results of the study found that parasocial interaction scores were higher for those students who saw the “out of character” version of the



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- _____ 1. The news program shows me what the newscasters are like.
 - _____ 2. When the newscasters joke around with one another it makes the news easier to watch.
 - _____ 3. When my favorite newscaster shows me how he or she feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the news story.
 - _____ 4. I feel sorry for my favorite newscaster when he or she makes a mistake.
 - _____ 5. When I'm watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of the group.
 - _____ 6. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite newscaster says.
 - _____ 7. The newscasters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.
 - _____ 8. I see my favorite newscaster as a natural, down-to-earth person.
 - _____ 9. I like hearing the voice of my favorite newscaster in my home.
 - _____ 10. My favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on TV.
 - _____ 11. I look forward to watching my favorite newscaster on tonight's news.
 - _____ 12. If my favorite newscaster appeared on another TV program, I would watch that program.
 - _____ 13. When my favorite newscaster reports a story, he or she seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
 - _____ 14. I sometimes make remarks to my favorite newscaster during the newscast.
 - _____ 15. If there were a story about my favorite newscaster in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.
 - _____ 16. I miss seeing my favorite newscaster when he or she is on vacation.
 - _____ 17. I would like to meet my favorite newscaster in person.
 - _____ 18. I think my favorite newscaster is like an old friend.
 - _____ 19. I find my favorite newscaster to be attractive.
 - _____ 20. I am not as satisfied when I get my news from a newscaster other than my favorite newscaster.

From Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. Human Communication Research, 12, 155–180. Copyright 1985 by Wiley-Blackwell. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 12.1

Parasocial interaction scale.

program. In addition, the highest parasocial interaction scores came from those who saw that version and those who chose George Burns as their favorite character. The results suggest that not only does the PSI Scale measure what it says it does but that the development of parasocial interaction is “affected by message attributes and audiences’ predisposition to interact with television characters” (p. 180).

Parasocial interaction is an important concept in assessing the relationship between the media and audience members. It offers many avenues for future research.



USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY

As director of the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University, Paul Lazarsfeld published the first work on uses and gratifications (Lazarsfeld & Stanton, 1944). One of his former students, Herta Herzog, worked extensively on a program of research on daytime radio serials. She investigated the characteristics of women who listened to serials, the uses they made of the information they listened to, and the gratifications they received from their choice of programming (Lowery & De Fleur, 1995). The perspective that resulted from this early research presented a direct challenge to the powerful effects conceptualization of the magic bullet theory.

The next major study from this perspective was by Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961). They conducted eleven studies from 1958 through 1960 on how children used television. The emphasis was on the choices of programming children made to satisfy their needs and interests. After these pioneering efforts, numerous studies have mined this vein of research. **Uses and gratifications theory** attempts to explain the *uses* and *functions* of the media for individuals, groups, and society in general; it represents a *systems approach* that uses covering laws methods of investigation.

One tenet of the systems approach is that a change in one part of the system will, of necessity, cause a change in another part of the system. Many claim that DVRs, DVDs, and TiVo have altered television viewing patterns. For example, recording television programs allows people to fast forward through the commercials. As a consequence, advertisers and advertising agencies have reexamined the placement and the format of commercials shown during network programming. Earlier we looked at the five functions of mass communication in terms of the *content* of mass media. The emphasis on content implies a passive audience absorbing what is offered. Uses and gratifications research changed the emphasis to audience members as active participants selecting particular forms of media.

Objectives of the Theory

Communication theorists had three objectives in developing uses and gratifications research. First, they hoped to explain *how* individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. They attempted to answer the question: *What* do people do with the media (A. Rubin, 1985)? A second objective was to discover the *underlying motives* for individuals' media use. *Why* does one

uses and gratifications theory A theory of mass communication that attempts to explain the uses and functions of the media for individuals, groups, and society in general.

person rush home (or stay up late at night) to watch the local news on television while another person prefers reading the newspaper during breakfast or after dinner, while another prefers to get news only from the Internet? Why do some people only watch HBO movies? These are some questions that uses and gratifications theorists attempt to answer in their research. A third objective of this line of theory building was to identify the positive and negative *consequences* of individual media use. Here the systems aspect of uses and gratifications theory emerges. Relationships between the individual and the mass media, media content, the social system, alternative channels of communication (such as friends), and the consequences of media choice are all avenues of inquiry for systems researchers.

Examples of Uses and Gratifications Research

At the core of uses and gratifications theory lies the assumption that audience members actively seek out the mass media to satisfy individual needs. For example, Rubin (1979) uncovered six reasons why children and adolescents use television: learning, passing time, companionship, to forget or escape, excitement or arousal, and relaxation. Television viewing for passing time, for arousal, and for relaxation emerged as the most important uses of television for this age group. Rubin also designed a questionnaire called the Television Viewing Motives Instrument to discover reasons why people watch television. Complete the survey in Figure 12.2 to get a sense of your primary motives for watching TV.

Rubin (1983) designed another study to explore adult viewers' motivations, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interaction. The study looked at whether TV user motivations could predict behavioral and attitudinal consequences of television use. Five primary television viewing motivations were examined: pass time/habit, information, entertainment, companionship, and escape. The strongest viewing motivation relationships were found between pass time/habit and both companionship and escape viewing. The two categories of viewers identified in this study were predecessors to the *ritualized* and *instrumental* users of television discussed next. The first group of viewers used television to pass time and out of habit. The second group used television to seek information or as a learning tool.

Rubin (1984) identified two types of television viewers. The first type (habitual) consists of people who watch television for **ritualized use**. This type has a high regard for television in general, is a frequent user, and uses television primarily as a diversion. The second type (nonhabitual) consists of people who attend to television for **instrumental use**. This type exhibits a natural liking for a particular television program or programs and uses media content primarily for information. This person is more selective and goal oriented when watching television and does not necessarily feel that television is important. Rubin

ritualized use Using television viewing primarily as a diversion.

instrumental use Using television viewing primarily for information acquisition.

INSTRUCTIONS: Here are some reasons that other people gave us for watching TV. Please tell us how each reason is like your own reason for watching television. (Put one check in the correct column for each reason.)

I watch television . . .

A Lot A Little Not Much Not At All

- | | | | | |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Because it relaxes me | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. So I won't be alone | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. So I can learn about things happening in the world | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Because it's a habit | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5. When I have nothing better to do | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Because it helps me learn things about myself | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7. Because it's thrilling | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 8. So I can forget about school and homework | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 9. Because it calms me down when I'm angry | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 10. When there's no one to talk to | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 11. So I can learn how to do things I haven't done before | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 12. Because I just like to watch | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 13. Because it passes the time away | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 14. So I could learn about what could happen to me | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 15. Because it excites me | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 16. So I can get away from the rest of the family | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 17. Because it's a pleasant rest | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 18. Because it makes me feel less lonely | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 19. Because it teaches me things I don't learn in school | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 20. Because I just enjoy watching | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 21. Because it gives me something to do | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 22. Because it shows how other people deal with the same problems I have | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 23. Because it stirs me up | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 24. So I can get away from what I'm doing | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

SCORING INSTRUCTIONS FOR TELEVISION VIEWING MOTIVES INSTRUMENT:

Give a numerical value for each statement in each column. Use the following scale:

A Lot = 4

A Little = 3

Not Much = 2

Not At All = 1

Add your score for each of the following viewing motive factors:

Viewing Motive	Statement Numbers	Mean Score
Relaxation	1, 9, 17	2.41
Companionship	2, 10, 18	1.68
Habit	4, 12, 20	1.97
Pass Time	5, 13, 21	2.13
Learning About Things	3, 11, 19	1.84
Learning About Myself	6, 14, 22	1.84
Arousal	7, 15, 23	1.67
Forget/Escape	8, 16, 24	1.67

After you have added up the scores for each factor, divide that score by 3 to obtain a mean or average score for each television viewing motive factor. Compare your average score on each dimension with the norms obtained from a nonrandom sample of 464 adults (Rubin, 1983).

From Rubin, A. (1979). *Television use by children and adolescents*. Human Communication Research, 5, 109–120. Copyright © 1979 by Wiley-Blackwell. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 12.2

Television viewing motives instrument.

argued that ritualized television use represents a more important viewing experience for the audience member, whereas instrumental television use represents a more involving experience for the viewer.

In a study of Swedish television users, Levy and Windahl (1984) identified three types of audience activity. The first, called *preactivity*, is practiced by individuals who deliberately seek certain media to gratify intellectual needs. For example, some viewers deliberately select newscasts to be informed about current events. The second type, *duractivity*, deals with the degree of psychological attentiveness or involvement audience members exhibit during a television viewing experience. The focus is on how individuals interpret and decipher mediated messages. The comprehension, organization, and structuring of media messages leads to certain intellectual and emotional gratifications for viewers. For example, trying to figure out the plot or ending of a dramatic program on television is one example of the *duractivity* use of the media. The third type of audience activity, *postactivity*, deals with audience

behavior and message use after exposure to mediated messages. People involved in postactivity attend to a mediated message because they feel the information may have some personal or interpersonal value. Individuals who actively seek out television news to provide content for interpersonal communication such as “small talk” exhibit postactivity audience behavior.

Another assumption of uses and gratifications theory is that audiences use the media to fulfill expectations. For example, you may watch a science fiction program such as *Star Trek* to fantasize about the future.

A third assumption of uses and gratifications theory is that audience members are aware of and can state their motives for using mass communication. In Levy and Windahl’s study, participants were able to describe how particular media gratified certain needs. The researchers found that the primary motivation for watching TV news was to gain information about the world, rather than for diversion. Studies that investigate how individuals use the media for gratification primarily employ *self-report measures*, questionnaires that ask participants about their motives for using the mass media. The television viewing motives instrument is one such questionnaire.

One study addressed several social and psychological factors associated with patterns of audience media use. Donohew, Palmgreen, and Rayburn (1987) tested a random sample of subscribers to cable television. Through telephone and mailed questionnaires, they collected demographic (age, sex, income, education, marital status) and lifestyle information. Participants also provided information on their social, political, economic, cultural, and communication-related behaviors. The researchers asked questions about the need for stimulation, gratifications sought from cable TV, satisfaction with cable TV offerings, number of hours of cable TV viewing per day, and number of newspapers and magazines subscribed to by the respondents. Four lifestyle types emerged. Type I was labeled the **disengaged homemaker**. This individual was primarily female, middle-aged, lower in education and income and used the media for companionship and to pass the time rather than for information or arousal. According to Rubin’s classifications, the disengaged homemaker appears to represent the *ritualized* media user. The second type of individual, the **outgoing activist**, was also frequently female, somewhat younger, well-educated, had a good income, and was less likely to be married. Outgoing activists were highest in need for stimulation among the four types. They enjoyed staying informed and were primarily print media users. They did not watch a great amount of television and were least gratified by cable TV. Donohew, Palmgreen, and Rayburn speculated that type II’s active lifestyle leaves them little time for television viewing. The third type of individual was labeled the **restrained activist**. These individuals were older and had the highest educational levels. More than half were female, and they were likely to be married and to have relatively high incomes. They had low need for sensation but high need for intellectual stimulation. They exhibited strong informational needs and viewed

disengaged homemaker

A lifestyle type indicating primarily female, middle-aged, lower in education and income, and use the media for companionship and to pass time.

outgoing activist A lifestyle type primarily consisting of female, younger, well educated, with a high need for stimulation, good income, and less likely to marry.

restrained activist A lifestyle type primarily male and female who are older, highly educated, opinion leaders likely to marry, and have high incomes.

themselves as opinion leaders. They were heavy users of both print media and television, especially for informational purposes. Their media use patterns follow those of Rubin's *instrumental* user. The final type of user identified was called the **working class climber**. This person was primarily male, lower in education and income, and middle-aged; most were married. Working class climbers were ambitious and self-confident. They did not engage in an activist lifestyle and ranked low in need for intellectual stimulation. They were highest among the four types on television exposure and satisfaction with cable TV. They were quite low on print media usage. According to Rubin's taxonomy, they would be classified more as ritualized than as instrumental media users. The results of this study helped clarify our understanding of the many lifestyle variables that influence mass media use.

working class climber

A lifestyle type primarily consisting of males, lower in education and income, middle-aged, and married.

Criticisms of the Theory

Since its inception, uses and gratifications theory has enjoyed widespread popularity among mass communication theorists, researchers, and practitioners. The theory has also received its share of criticism. Much of the criticism points to an insufficient theoretical basis, particularly in defining key concepts. Alan Rubin (1985) argued that there are too many different meanings associated with the terms "audience motives," "uses," and "gratifications," which has slowed unified theoretical development in this area.

The research has been criticized on methodological grounds. Self-report questionnaires have typically been used in uses and gratifications studies; the *reliability* and *validity* of self-report data have been questioned. Some critics believe that individuals cannot respond accurately to questions about their own feelings and behavior. For example, researchers often identify the "needs" of participants through questions asked about why they use the media (Severin & Tankard, 2001). The self-reported answers about motive may be suspect or the categories assigned by the researcher may be questioned as to whether they are scientifically verifiable. If respondents cannot supply reasons when asked open-ended questions but quickly select answers from a list provided by the researcher, are those answers reliable and valid?

Even contributors to this body of research find problems with its scope. Blumler (1979) and Windahl (1981) suggested that uses and gratifications does not represent a single theory. They call uses and gratifications an umbrella concept in which several theories reside. McQuail (1984) argued that scholars have tried to do too much—trying to link the identity and attributes of audiences with the behavior traits of individuals and the role of the media in society plus the cultural origins of the patterns and meanings sought by users and producers. He suggests that the research should be more limited in scope and should take a cultural-empirical approach to how people choose from the abundance of cultural products available.

Other critics find that the theory pays too much attention to the individual without looking at the social context and the role of media in that social structure. This lack of a unified theory has led to misuse of the empirical method of inquiry. Alan Rubin (1985) suggested that audience motive research based on this theory has been too compartmentalized within particular cultures or demographic groups. This has thwarted synthesis and integration of research results, activities critical to theory building.



CULTIVATION THEORY

cultivation theory of mass communication This theory asserts that television influences our view of reality.

enculturation A type of cultural adaptation reflecting when we learn to speak, listen, read, interpret, and understand verbal and nonverbal messages in such a fashion that the messages will be recognized and responded to by the individuals with whom we communicate.

The **cultivation theory of mass communication** effects was developed by George Gerbner and his associates at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The theory has been tested by numerous empirical studies. Cultivation theory asserts that television influences our view of reality. A causal relationship is suggested between television viewing and perceptions of reality—thus situating the theory in the law-governed approach to mass communication. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1986) asserts that television is primarily responsible for our perceptions of day-to-day norms and reality. Establishing a culture's norms and values was once the role of formal religion and other social initiations. Previously the family, schools, and churches communicated standardized roles and behaviors, serving the function of **enculturation**. Television now serves that function. It has become the major cultural transmitter for today's society (Gerbner & Gross, 1976a, 1976b). "Living" in the world of television cultivates a particular view of reality. Some argue that television provides an experience that is more alive, more real, and more vivid than anything we can expect to experience in real life!

The Interaction of Media and Reality

One of the authors read an article in a local newspaper that illustrates the tendency to confuse a real event with images absorbed from television. A reporter had stopped his car at the intersection of a rural road and a larger highway. He noticed a car speeding on the highway at approximately 100 miles per hour. As the car reached the point where the reporter was stopped, it suddenly tried to make a left turn without slowing down. It clipped a light pole and flipped over on its back, wheels still spinning. No one else was in sight. The reporter described staring forward, not believing what he had just seen. He recalled his mind saying to him very clearly, "What you are seeing isn't real. You are just watching a movie." For almost ten seconds he just sat there, waiting to see what would happen next. Of course, nothing happened, and he realized that it was up to him to help. He fell prey to two fears as he approached

the car—one artificial (induced by previous television images) and one very real (which contradicted other images received). Television portrayals of overturned cars invariably end with fires and explosions. With televised accidents, no “real man” thinks twice about rushing to a scene where someone may be dead or horribly mutilated. The reporter was very afraid on both counts. Television is so pervasive that the line between illusion and reality is blurred. We sometimes mistake a real event for a televised one; we probably make the opposite mistake more frequently. This phenomenon provided the basis of the research into cultivation theory.

Heavy versus Light Television Viewers

George Gerbner’s participation in two national studies provided the foundation for cultivation theory. He contributed a content analysis of television programming to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1967 and 1968 and for the Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior in 1972. Gerbner and his colleagues tracked the incidents of violence portrayed during a randomly selected week of fall prime-time programming plus children’s weekend programming. They compiled the percentage of programs marked by violence, the number of violent acts, and the number of characters involved in those acts. They found violent acts portrayed in 80% of prime-time programming; children’s shows were the most violent of all. Older people, children, women and minorities were the most frequent victims—despite the fact that three quarters of characters portrayed on television were white middle-class males.

Building on this work, the researchers surveyed viewers to determine the number of hours spent watching television daily, the programs selected and why, attitudes about the probability of being a victim of crime, perceptions about the numbers of law enforcement officials, and general attitudes about trusting other people. Gerbner and his associates classified people as heavy viewers (four or more hours daily) and light viewers (two hours daily or less).

Cultivation theory predicted that heavy viewers would perceive the world as more dangerous because of repeated exposure to violent television portrayals. Persistent images of danger and violence color views of reality and create the perception of a mean world. Heavy viewers overestimated their chances of being involved in a violent crime. They also overestimated the number of law enforcement workers in society.

Individuals frequently confuse media-constructed reality with actual reality. Gerbner and Gross (1976b) reported that in the first 5 years of its broadcast life, the television show *Marcus Welby, M.D.* (a fictional doctor portrayed by Robert Young), received over a quarter of a million letters from viewers. Most of the letters contained requests for medical advice! Television is highly effective in the cultivation process because many of us never personally experience

some aspects of reality but the pervasive presence of television—constantly available for relatively little expense—provides a steady stream of mediated reality. We may have limited opportunities to observe the internal workings of a real police station, hospital operating room, or municipal courtroom. Thus, the media images become our standards for reality. Have you noticed that the New Year's Eve parties we actually attend *never* seem quite as exciting as the New Year's Eve parties we see on television?

The theory predicted uniform effects for all heavy viewers—regardless of factors such as gender, education, socioeconomic group, or media preferences (for example, reading newspapers versus viewing televised newscasts). As the primary source of socialization, television's messages provide a symbolic environment that transcends demographic differences. The only factor that seemed to have an independent effect on perceptions was age. Respondents under thirty consistently reported that their responses were more influenced by television than those of people over thirty (Gerbner & Gross, 1976b). Because people thirty and under have been “weaned” on television, the influence of media messages may be especially potent.

Refinement of Cultivation Theory

In response to criticisms that cultivation theory ignored the contributions of other variables (see next section), Gerbner and his associates introduced the factors of mainstreaming and resonance (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). **Mainstreaming** refers to the power of television to present uniform images. Commercial sponsors want to appeal to the broadest possible range of consumers, so television presents mainstream images. Differences are edited out to present a blended, homogenous image acceptable to a majority of viewers. Differences in perceptions of reality due to demographic and social factors are diminished or negated by the images projected on television. Ritualistic patterns reinforce sameness and uniformity. **Resonance** describes the intensified effect on the audience when what people see on television is what they have experienced in life. This double dose of the televised message amplifies the cultivation effect.

mainstreaming The power of television to present uniform images acceptable to a majority of viewers.

resonance Argues that media's influence on perceptions are intensified when media depict “real life.”

Criticisms of the Theory

Despite the large data set supporting the theory, the cultivation effect has encountered several challenges. Hughes (1980) reanalyzed data used in the original research and failed to support the core assumptions of cultivation theory. He suggested that the measures of heavy viewing only relate to total exposure to television, not specifically to what is watched. Certain personality characteristics related to the selection of television programs were not controlled in the earlier studies. He also reported that television may actually cultivate realistic

and functional perceptions of the world. Hirsch (1980) found that if other variables are controlled simultaneously, very little effect remains that can be attributed to television. In his review of the original data, he found that even people who did not watch television perceived the world as violent and dangerous.

Conversely, it has been argued that major assumptions of cultivation theory may be correct, but the procedures used to study it may be incapable of uncovering the effect. Hawkins and Pingree (1982) reviewed 48 research studies conducted on the cultivation effect. They concluded that modest evidence supports the influence of television viewing on perceptions of reality. In fact, covering laws researchers find fault with the admission by Gerbner and his associates that the measurable effects of television are relatively small. Although the creators of the theory point to the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to limited influence (something like the steady drip of a faucet that eventually overflows the pail), scientific research relies on observable effects in laboratory settings that control for other influences. Cultivation researchers used self-reports of viewing habits; they did not observe respondents in a carefully controlled setting.

Potter (1986) concluded that the cultivation effect may be more complex than is currently stated; the amount of exposure to television may be less important than the attitudes and perceptions of individuals exposed. His conclusions match the criticisms from the rules perspective that fault cultivation theory with treating all viewers as helpless to withstand the manipulated images of reality projected by television. The interactions of audiences, television, and society are complex and cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect.

Cultivation theory links heavy television viewing with a distrustful view of a violent world. The final criticism questions the meaning of that link. The research has demonstrated a correlation between certain behaviors and certain attitudes, but has it proven the direction of influence? Do people who are distrustful watch more television because they have few friends? Cause and effect have not been established. There is no doubt that the controversy surrounding the media's influence on our perceptions and behavior will continue to rage. We can expect more research from scholars of mass communication in this area. New findings will refine and advance our efforts to theorize about the effects associated with the mass media.

spiral of silence theory A theory about how minority viewpoints disappear from public awareness. People remain silent because of the fear of being different and isolated. The media play a major role in informing people what is normative.

THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY



The **spiral of silence theory** was developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German researcher, in 1974. The theory has implications in three areas: (a) mass media and communication, (b) the individual and interpersonal communication, and (c) public opinion (Salmon & Glynn, 1996). It is considered one of the “most highly developed and one of the most researched theories in

the field of public opinion” (McDonald, Glynn, Kim, & Ostman, 2001, p. 139). The theory has generated a considerable amount of research, as well as controversy, since its debut.

Contemplating the question: “Are you more or less willing to express your beliefs on an issue depending on whether you think those beliefs are widely shared by those individuals around you?” guides us to an appreciation of the theory. Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence theory argues that individuals who think that their opinions and beliefs are not widely shared by others (in a given reference group, or in society in general) will feel pressure to express another opinion (the majority opinion) or will choose to remain silent.

According to the theory, people assess whether their opinions match those of the majority from several cues in their environment (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). The media are important sources for these cues. The mass media often “serve as the representation of the dominant views in society” (Perse, 2001, p. 110) and help shape public opinion. People depend on the media as a primary source of information about social norms, customs, acceptable styles of dress and fashion, and even what to think.

Spiral of silence theory suggests that people have a fear of social isolation; that is, they do not want to be seen as different from the majority. Adolescents are especially sensitive to “fitting in” with the majority regarding the clothes they wear and the expressions they use to communicate. Noelle-Neumann believes that most people also strive to avoid social isolation by refusing to express beliefs and opinions that they feel do not enjoy majority support. To express a belief that is either “old-fashioned” or “socially unacceptable” is more than most people are willing to do (Salmon & Moh, 1992). Indeed, isolating yourself from others by expressing your true belief, when it goes against the majority view, is seen as a far worse outcome than remaining silent (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). Noelle-Neumann suggested that this “spiral of silence” leads one viewpoint or one position to dominate public opinion, while others (perceived minority viewpoints) often disappear from public awareness because the people who hold less accepted views or positions remain silent. However, if people find that their opinions are widely shared by the majority or are gaining acceptance, they will be more likely to express their positions.

Some people do not succumb to the spiral of silence. Labeled “hardcores,” these people do not feel the same constraints of social pressure or fear the social isolation attached to expressing minority viewpoints. Hardcores have an unusually high amount of interest in the issue; their positions remain relatively unchanged (McDonald, Glynn, Kim, & Ostman, 2001). Hardcores represent only about 15 percent of the population (Salmon & Moh, 1992).

The issue of cigarette smoking in public offers an excellent example of the effects of majority opinion on verbal (and nonverbal) behavior. For many years nonsmokers were apprehensive about speaking out against smoking in public, and the nonsmoker almost certainly did not approach smokers and request

that they put out their cigarettes. In the last two decades, however, this situation appears to have changed dramatically. The nonsmoker now represents the majority opinion—that smoking has no place in public contexts (Salmon & Glynn, 1996). The reticence about criticizing smoking behavior disappeared when public opinion changed.

How did this change occur? How did the former “minority view” become the current “majority view”? The spiral of silence theory suggests that the changing messages projected by the mass media contributed greatly to the change of public opinion. According to the theory, individuals scan the environment for information about which opinions are gaining support and which are losing (Gonzenbach, King, & Jablonski, 1999). Clearly, over the last two decades the media’s predominant message has been one of “antismoking.” The removal of ads for cigarettes on broadcast television, the increased frequency of “public service” spots describing the dangers of smoking, and the reports in the media that fewer Americans are smoking today compared to two decades ago have helped create change. Today, the smoker is caught in the “spiral of silence” regarding expressing opinions about smoking in public. This reversal of positions is a prime illustration of a tenet of the theory: willingness to speak out changes the climate of opinion so that the dominant opinion becomes stronger. In turn, the dominant view as presented in the media yields a greater likelihood that individuals will speak up (Gonzenbach et al., 1999).

People who hold the less-dominant position will become increasingly reluctant to express their position. Their silence erodes the less-supported position even more. When the media report that adherents to a given position are criticized frequently or even physically attacked (Gonzenbach et al., 1999), they reduce the probability that individuals will voice the unfavored position. For example, when the antifur message of groups such as P.E.T.A (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) received more attention from the media, including reports of individuals wearing natural fur being physically attacked, individuals who previously expressed support grew more silent.

Communication studies have examined the role of the spiral of silence theory regarding a number of different issues and from several methodological perspectives to help refine and extend the theory. One study tested the spiral of silence theory that judgments about majority opinion are made through direct observation and, in particular, from television. The researchers measured both the exposure to media by individuals in the national sample and their perceptions of what position was most supported on the issue of whether homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the U.S. military. The study found that respondents with higher levels of media exposure believed that more of the public agreed with them, whereas those with low levels of media exposure perceived lack of support for their position on that issue (Gonzenbach et al., 1999, p. 290).

Spiral of silence theory was also used to test public opinion on another controversial issue: whether the United States should declare English as the

official language (Lin & Salwen, 1997). The study hypothesized that an individual's willingness to speak out about this issue would be related to his or her perceived national and local public opinion. Participants in two diverse cities (Miami, FL, and Carbondale, IL) were randomly surveyed by telephone. They were asked whether they were "willing" or "unwilling" to express their opinion about this issue in public with another person who held a different opinion about the issue of making English the official language of the United States. The findings generally supported the assumptions of the spiral of silence theory. Respondents in both cities indicated greater willingness to discuss the issue in public when the media coverage of this issue was seen as generally positive or supportive (Lin & Salwen, 1997). As the national and local media coverage of this issue became more positive, younger and better-educated respondents indicated even more willingness to express their opinion on this issue (Lin & Salwen, 1997).

Some researchers have explored how the realism of the setting for the expression of public opinion might affect an individual's willingness to speak out (Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001). Would people in a more realistic setting be less willing to present their position than those who were asked to speak out in a hypothetical situation? College students responded to questions concerning their levels of media use, their knowledge about genetically altered foods, and their attitudes toward that topic. Half of the respondents were asked if they would be willing to discuss their opinion about the topic at a hypothetical "social gathering." The other half were told that there would be a second part of the study in which they could express their opinions about genetically altered food in greater detail with other students in a focus-group interview context. The study supported a major tenet of the spiral of silence theory: fear of isolation was negatively related to people's willingness to express an opinion on genetically altered food. The data also suggested that the situation influences willingness to speak out on an issue. Respondents who were told that they would be presenting their opinions in a focus group interview context were less willing to present their opinions than those in the hypothetical "social gathering" context.

Researchers have questioned whether the "spiral of silence" effects can be observed or even studied in cultures other than Germany (Salmon & Glynn, 1996). Several researchers have challenged the methodology used in studies attempting to test the theory (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). In particular, they questioned whether the "fear of isolation" adequately explains willingness to speak out in experimental studies (Glynn & McLeod, 1985) and whether the hypothetical versus actual nature of this willingness to speak out in experimental studies may be sufficient to produce "spiral of silence" effects (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). Some researchers have proposed alternative methods to measure willingness to speak out, a critical variable in spiral of silence research. Jeffres, Neuendorf, and Atkin (1999) suggested that the results of studies using

the “hypothetical situation” method (where participants are asked to place themselves in a hypothetical situations and then asked how they would respond) “either have been mixed or have not supported the theory” (p. 121). Instead, these researchers obtained actual opinions and quotations both orally and in writing during interviews in shopping centers, waiting rooms, on the street, and in coffee shops, thus securing behavioral measures of willingness to express an opinion to a stranger. Another study employed a unique method to obtain the measure of “willingness to speak out.” The researcher studied letters to the editor published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* before and after the shootings at Columbine High School to determine attitudes toward gun control (Lane, 2002).

MEDIA DEPENDENCY THEORY



Media dependency theory was developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976). Although Ball-Rokeach is a professor of sociology and communication, this research emerged from the communication discipline. Media dependency theory’s debut was in a communication journal, and many of the articles that present extensions of this theory also appear in communication journals.

Media dependency theory argues that the more dependent an individual is on the media for having his or her needs fulfilled, the more important the media will be to that person. Although some communication scholars consider media dependency theory to be an offshoot of the uses and gratifications theory of mass media, there are some differences. A major issue in uses and gratifications theory is, “Where do I go to gratify my needs?” whereas media dependency theory focuses on the issue, “Why do I go to *this* medium to fulfill *this* goal?” (Ball-Rokeach, Power, Guthrie, & Waring, 1990). Dependency theory suggests that media use is primarily influenced by societal relationships, whereas uses and gratifications theory places greater emphasis on individual media selection. Uses and gratifications theory focuses more on a person’s active participation with mass media, whereas dependency theory tends to focus more on the social context in which media activity occurs. Because it emphasizes the interaction of the individual, media, and society, dependency theory uses a systems approach to studying mediated communication.

Dependency theory emphasizes the *relationship between society and the media*. There are a number of mutual dependencies. The media rely on government for legislation to protect media assets and for access to political information. The political systems of a society rely on the media to reinforce political values and norms, to help mobilize citizens to vote, and to inspire active involvement in political campaigns. Society depends on the media for the creation of information, advertising, and technology that it uses (Rubin & Windahl, 1986).

media dependency theory

A theory of mass communication that assumes the more dependent an individual is on the media for having his or her needs filled, the more important the media will be to the person.

The commercial broadcasting system of the United States, for example, is built on dependency between the media, advertisers, and audiences. Television programs are produced to attract large audiences so that advertisers can sell their products and services to those audiences. The media then depend on this advertising revenue to stay in business. Each system depends on the other.

The *relationship between the media and the audience* is crucial as well, for it influences how people use mass media. Audiences may depend on the media for information, for escape, and for “information” on what is considered appropriate or normative behavior. Television programs that emphasize prosocial messages such as honesty and morality are designed to teach acceptable behavior in our society.

The *relationship between society and the audience* examines how society influences the audience and vice versa. Society depends on audiences because individuals who comprise a society are seen as potential voters, potential consumers, and as members of different social and cultural groups who contribute in numerous ways to the development of a society and its culture.

The theory’s authors define dependency as a relationship in which the attainment of goals by one party is contingent on the resources of another party. People develop dependency relationships with the mass media as a way of attaining their goals of understanding, orientation, and play (Grant, Guthrie, & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). According to the theory, people develop expectations that the media can help them satisfy their needs. Thus, people develop “dependency relations” with the media (or a particular medium) that they believe will be most helpful in attaining a particular goal (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993).

The theory identifies dependency relations on media information sources. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur suggested that individuals depend on media for information in situations ranging from the need to identify the best buys at the supermarket to more general informational needs such as how to maintain a sense of “connection” with the world outside your neighborhood. The theory suggests that an individual’s reliance on mass media develops when the person’s informational needs on certain issues cannot be met by direct experience.

Media dependency is also linked to media *influence*. That is, the more important the media are to an individual, the more influence the media exert on that individual. Our society relies heavily on the mass media for information, entertainment, and the communication of societal norms and values. In our society, information is considered a prized commodity; we regard information as power. Today, most people use their personal computers to access information sources on the Internet. The theory recognizes, however, that dependency on the media varies greatly from one individual to another, from one group to another, and even from one culture to another.

A number of key assumptions about the media, the audience, and audience dependency have been identified: (a) if the media influence society it is because the media meet the audience’s needs and wants, not because the media exert any “control” over individuals; (b) the uses people have for media in large

part determine how much the media will influence them. For example, the more the audience depends on information from the media, the greater the likelihood the media will influence the audience's attitudes, beliefs, and even behavior; (c) because of the increasing complexity of modern society, we depend a great deal on the media to help us make sense of our world, to help us make decisions that allow us to cope better with life. The theory suggests further that we come to understand and even experience our world largely through the media. What a person learns about the world beyond their direct experience is influenced by the media. Our understanding of international politics, the global economy, and music, for example, are in part shaped by the content offered by the media (Baukus, 1996); (d) Individuals who have greater needs for information, escape, or fantasy will be more influenced by the media and have greater media dependency.

Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur suggested that media dependency ranges on a continuum from individuals who are totally dependent on the media to satisfy their needs to individuals who satisfy their needs independently from the media. (Remember that Shaw and McCombs addressed a similar concept with their *need for orientation*.) In addition, each individual displays variations within each category of media dependence. For example, you may depend heavily on news and newsmagazine shows for information yet have very little interest in escape and fantasy programs such as soap operas or situation comedies. Others may depend totally on the media for business news—monitoring sources such as CNN Business News, the Financial News Network, and CNBC, but ignoring the Weather Channel.

Most individuals are media dependent when conditions demand quick and accurate information. If you live in a climate that is prone to many tornadoes or hurricanes during the summer months or blizzards during the winter months, you may need an almost constant source of information about the weather. Your dependency on the media for weather-related information may even have stimulated you to purchase a “weather radio,” which broadcasts bulletins and information from the local office of the National Weather Service. During times of weather-related crises, individuals become very dependent on the media.

Constant attention to and dependence on the media also emerged during the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986, the stock market crash of 1987, the war in the Persian Gulf in 1991, the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and the destruction of the World Trade Center by terrorists on September 11, 2001. Other crises, both local and national, also cause individuals to become more dependent on the media. For example, in the days following an airplane crash individuals tend to become more media dependent on the medium they believe will best satisfy their informational needs. For some this may mean purchasing national newspapers, such as *USA Today*, which will devote additional coverage to this type of story. For others, this may mean monitoring CNN throughout the day. Still others may turn to

one of the many news-related websites to learn more details as they become available. Given the complex interactions of the individual, the media, and society, the social context often dictates the level of dependency. In times of conflict and uncertainty, the need for information increases, and dependency on the media also rises. During relatively calm periods of stability the audience relies less heavily on the media for guidance.

Media dependency is related to the complexity of the society in which a person lives. In a society as complex as ours, the media provide a number of essential functions: they provide information useful for the elections that are the centerpiece of democracy, they serve as whistle-blowers if the government oversteps its authority, they announce important economic or technological developments, they provide a window to the rest of the world, and they are a primary source of entertainment. The more functions served by the media, the more important they become.

Depending on the type of information goal a person has, he or she may choose one particular medium over another. Different media require different degrees of effort in satisfying one's informational goal. Preferences for particular media (for example, television, newspapers, Internet, or radio), differ according to information needs, the sources of media available, and the effort expended by the information seeker. For example, an individual may prefer to get information from television due to its immediacy, but because that medium may not be available in an office or an automobile, they must use radio instead. Some individuals choose newspapers over television because newspapers are perceived to cover stories in greater depth than television.

Media dependency theory asserts that the media have powerful effects on individuals and society. During the last decade several studies have investigated the assumptions of media dependency theory. One study investigated the union of media dependency theory and the theory of parasocial interaction discussed earlier. Grant, Guthrie, and Ball-Rokeach (1991) wondered if the development of parasocial interaction with a television personality increases the intensity of one's dependency on that medium or the reverse. Did an intense media dependency relationship stimulate the development of a parasocial interaction? They used the medium of television shopping (such as QVC and the Home Shopping Network) to investigate this relationship. One of the most important findings was that individuals who developed strong media dependency relationships with television shopping tended to develop parasocial relationships with television shopping personalities. In addition, they found that purchasing a product from a television shopping channel reinforced media dependency on that channel because it gave viewers a greater sense of connection to the show. The researchers also suggested that people tune in to television shopping not only to purchase products but to satisfy their entertainment goals and to learn about new products. The more the viewers had these goals, the more they watched, and the more parasocial interactions they developed with television shopping hosts.

Alan Rubin and Sven Windahl (1986) proposed a combination of uses and gratifications theory. They offered a “uses and dependency model,” which incorporates elements of both theories. The uses and dependency model recognizes that the audience is somewhat active in their media-related behavior, and that individuals seek media that will fulfill personal needs. The model also represents the society-media-audience interaction and the mutual influences working to create interests and to influence the selection of particular media to satisfy goals. Needs are not always the sole product of the social and psychological characteristics of individuals; they are influenced by culture and society. This union of two theories also bridges the gap between the limited effects model of uses and gratifications and the powerful effects posited by dependency theory.

One test of the uses and dependency model found that “television dependents” contrasted with “newspaper dependents” (Baukus, 1996). Television dependents tend to see media coverage of conflict as “entertainment.” This may account for why heavy television users may have been more likely to watch a great deal of coverage of the trial of O.J. Simpson or watch cable channels such as truTV. The study also found that television dependents believed the media are a source of information that helps us better understand the impact of social conflict on a community, country, or culture. Highly involved television-dependent groups differed from the other groups in their information belief. People who are highly involved *and* television dependent seem to want information as quickly as possible, and the ability of television to cover an event instantly with accompanying video is very important to this type of individual. Another study observed that dependency needs for understanding oneself and society were related to newspaper readership. Individuals who had greater need for understanding how society and its institutions function were more dependent on the newspaper than those without that need (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993). Thus, media dependency theory helps us understand the relationships between the media and society, dependency relations with particular media, and the choice of particular media to satisfy information goals.

Media scholars have challenged media dependency theory on the grounds that it has “not yet been conclusively demonstrated that the experience of media dependency by average people is strongly related to a broad range of effects. Is there some ideal level of media dependency? Will new media increase our dependency or make us more independent?” (Baran & Davis, 1995, p. 229).

THEORIES OF MEDIATED INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION



The impact of mediated communication on interpersonal communication is more dramatic today than ever before. The computer has emerged as the primary medium in which individuals interact with each other for both personal and professional communication. According to the Pew Internet and American

Life report (Fallows, 2004) about 30 billion e-mails are sent every day, and 93% of Americans adult Internet users report using e-mail. This statistic supports the notion that much “interpersonal communication” is being conducted via that medium. One indication of this is that the number of phone messages professors receive from students has decreased dramatically, whereas the number of e-mail messages they receive has increased dramatically.

We are confident that many readers of this text have their own pages on “social networking” sites such as MySpace and Facebook, suggesting that people are using computer-mediated communication to fulfill social and interpersonal needs. Stefanone and Jang (2007) reported that even blogs are being widely adopted by individuals to engage in a form of mediated interpersonal communication.

The communication discipline has developed a number of scholars who identify their specialty as “CMC, or computer-mediated communication.” The *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (JCMC) is a Web-based, peer-reviewed scholarly journal whose focus is on social science research on computer-mediated communication via the Internet, the World Wide Web, and wireless technologies.

A Theory of Mediated Interpersonal Communication

The union of mass, or mediated, and interpersonal communication is not a new phenomena. As noted in the two-step flow theory, the individual plays a significant role in the mass communication process. Almost a quarter century ago, Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) examined the social and personal uses people have for mass communication. With the diffusion of computer-mediated communication, their theory is even more relevant today. Cathcart and Gumpert (1983) argued that media is not synonymous with mass communication (meaning communication over time and space to large numbers of people). They argued that the term *media* should not be excluded from other forms of human communication such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, or public. When we talk or text-message a friend or family member on the cell phone, we are using a medium to make our interaction possible. When using instant messaging or participating in an Internet chat group, we are engaged in mediated interpersonal and small-group communication.

Cathcart and Gumpert claimed (a) some interpersonal communication situations require media, (b) the media influence attitudes and behavior, (c) media content both reflects interpersonal behaviors and contains projections of them, and (d) the development of an individual’s self-concept depends on the media. They offer the term “mediated interpersonal communication” to refer to any situation in which a mediated technology is used to replace face-to-face interaction. Cell phone conversations, text messaging, e-mail, the use of videoclips on YouTube, and even T-shirts are “media” that are used to facilitate

interpersonal interaction. Another form of communication that bridges mediated and interpersonal forms are the teleparticipatory media, such as the terrestrial and satellite forms of two-way talk radio in which callers and the host(s) communicate with each other on the radio.

Gumpert and Cathcart's theory of mediated interpersonal communication emphasizes the pervasiveness of media and its importance as an element in interpersonal communication. It is gratifying to note that their call to theorists to incorporate the notion of media in their efforts to build theories of interpersonal and group communication has been heeded. One such theory, Social Information Processing Theory, is presented next.

SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING THEORY



In this chapter, we described an early theory of mediated interpersonal communication developed by Cathcart & Gumpert (1983). **Social information processing theory** (SIPT) represents a more contemporary theory that also addresses this phenomenon of mediated interpersonal communication. SIPT “explains how people get to know one another online, without nonverbal cues, and how they develop and manage relationships in the computer-mediated environment” (Walther, 2008, p. 391). The computer-mediated environment lacks the traditional nonverbal information that is exchanged in face-to-face (FTF) interaction. This nonverbal exchange provides invaluable sense-making feedback for the participants. In its absence, people interacting in the computer-mediated environment tend to group others as being either part of their in-group (i.e., people who share similar demographics, values, interests) or their out-group (i.e., people who do not share similar demographics, values, interests) (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). According to Walther, SIPT predicts that “people may indeed get to know one another online, albeit more slowly and through different mechanisms than face to face interaction” (p. 392).

social information.

processing theory A theory that explains how people get to know one another online, without nonverbal cues, and how they develop and manage relationships in the computer mediated environment.



SIPT is based on two principle arguments. The first concerns impression-bearing (i.e., there is something in the information [misspellings, word choices, etc.] that makes an impression on the receiver) and the emotional, and relational management of information (Walther, 2003). In other words, we generally gather relational information, as opposed to task information, through nonverbal cues. When online, the nonverbal aspects are absent, so we must seek other ways of gathering such relational information. Therefore, it is also important to understand how nonverbal cues are translated into verbal and textual information. The second argument of SIPT reflects the rate of information that flows through computer-mediated communication (CMC) as compared to face-to-face communication. The main assumption about the rate of information is that when enough time has passed, and there are many communication exchanges between people, personal and relational information builds

up and eventually renders CMC as equal to face-to-face communication in relational development and relational maintenance. For example, it is common for people to join computer dating services and make initial contact via computer-mediated communication. Consider Web sites such as Eharmony.com and Match.com, which serve as testaments to the effectiveness of romantic relationship development via CMC.

Another unique feature of SIPT concerns “the functions of impression-bearing and relational cues, and the degree to which nonverbal and verbal or textual cues may perform them” (Walther, 2008, p. 393). Previous theories of computer-mediated communication assume that due to the absence of nonverbal cues, people lose relational interest in each other as real people as well as lose the ability to relay information regarding descriptive, emotional, and personal information. Instead, SIPT assumes that people have an innate need to form impressions of other people, regardless of the medium being used. With nonverbal cues unavailable, people use surrogate communication systems to the point where the written word (via e-mail or text messaging) is considered the same as nonverbal cues. According to Walther (2008), SIPT considers time and rate differently from other theories of computer mediated communication in that “SIPT recognizes that verbal and textual cues are those that convey social and affective information in CMC, and that these written cues are the only cues to convey that information within text-based online communication” (p. 395). Unlike in face-to-face communication where there is a simultaneous exchange of verbal and nonverbal information (which can serve to accentuate, duplicate, or compliment messages), when verbal and nonverbal are restricted to one code as it is in CMC, the one code becomes responsible for the functions of other meaning transmission systems (e.g., occulesics [eye behavior], haptics, proxemics). As such, SIPT assumes that the rate of both social and task information are slower than FTF because people transmit less information per exchange. Thus, it takes more exchanges in computer-mediated communication to reach the same level of relational development that it does for FTF. Walther (1993) believes that this information exchange process is further hampered by the level of typing skills people possess as well as whether or not the mediated communication is synchronous (i.e., real-time exchange such as chat rooms and instant messaging) or asynchronous (i.e., time-delayed exchange such as e-mail).

SIPT treats communication symbols as interchangeable. In other words, besides nonverbal information, there are many other ways to express attitudes and emotions. As human beings are resourceful creatures, and in light of the absence of nonverbal information, people interacting via CMC cleverly utilize word content, word style, and message length, among other devices to fill the nonverbal void. This is not to suggest that CMC is deficient in the transfer of meaning as much as it takes more time to achieve the same

goal when compared to the more rapid transfer of information that occurs during the multichanneled face-to-face communication.

The SIPT takes a developmental perspective on relationship development. That is, relationships develop as a process based on time and move from relational infancy to relational maturity. Given one of the main assumptions (i.e., a longer rate and time associated with the exchange of information in CMC compared to FTF), Walther (2008) made the logical connection that close relationships via CMC are going to take longer to develop than those of FTF. Walther argued that SIPT has a broad scope and is applicable to a host of CMC settings that include, among others, virtual work groups (Walther & Bunz, 2005), chat rooms (Henderson & Gilding, 2004), and online dating (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Walther (2008) argued that “SIPT appears to be a popular theory of CMC for two contrasting reasons: (a) its intuitive application, on the one hand, and (b) its formal articulation of assumptions and propositions, on the other” (p. 399).

The future of SIPT, in terms of its refinement and extension, is based on technological advancement. For example, synchronous Webcams allow people to utilize nonverbal channels in real time. Thus, the future of SIPT is only constrained by what future technological developments may evolve. Another phenomenon is the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. According to Walther (2008), these forums hold unique challenges for SIPT regarding whether or not the theoretical assumptions of the theory hold true in these CMC venues. Interpersonal factors such as interpersonal deception is also a potential fruitful avenue for the test of social information processing theory. According to deception scholars such as Buller and Burgoon (1996, interpersonal deception theory) and Ekman (1985, leakage hypothesis), much of deception takes place via nonverbal channels. Given that SIPT compensates for nonverbal communicating through other avenues, investigating deception over a variety of CMC venues should prove fruitful in the extension and further development of social information processing theory.

SUMMARY

Mass communication and other forms of mediated communication exert a profound influence on the world. Mass communication is said to serve five functions for a society: surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission, entertainment, and mobilization. The mass media also serves an agenda-setting function as they influence our attitudes and perceptions of events by selectively focusing attention on certain issues. The media influence extends into the domain of relationship development. Parasocial interaction theory suggests that we often develop a sense of personal involvement and a type of “relationship” with media performers such as news and weather forecasters, talk show hosts, and other media celebrities and personalities. Uses and gratifications theory explains the underlying motives for individual use of mass communication. A core assumption of this theory is that an audience is an active group that seeks out and uses certain media to satisfy their needs. Cultivation theory suggests that television is largely responsible for the development of perceptions of day-to-day norms and reality. The theory argues that cumulative exposure to television’s ritualistic patterns of images manipulates how we see ourselves, others, and society in general. Spiral of silence theory argues that because people are reluctant to express beliefs contrary to widely accepted opinions and because the media are often the source for conveying accepted opinions, the media contribute to a spiral of silence in which minority views are suppressed, which creates a climate that reinforces majority views. Media dependency theory is derived from the systems approach and examines the multiple interactions of audience, media, and society in determining why a medium is selected, for what goal, and the dependencies created by the intricate relationships. As the computer has emerged as a primary medium in which people interact with each other for personal and professional communication, theories of computer-mediated communication have emerged. Gumpert and Cathcart’s theory of mediated interpersonal communication examines the interaction of media and interpersonal communication. This theory recognizes the impact of mediated technology such as the computer and the cell phone on interpersonal communication. Social information processing theory represents one such theory. This theory explains how people develop relationships using computer-mediated technology. It takes into account the absence of nonverbal cues in forming mediated interpersonal relationships.



KEY TERMS

agenda setting
change agents
correlation
cultivation theory of mass communication
cultural transmission
diffusion theory
disengaged homemaker
duractivity
enculturation
entertainment
gatekeepers
instrumental use

magic bullet theory
mainstreaming
media dependency theory
mobilization
need for orientation
opinion leaders
outgoing activist
parasocial interaction
postactivity
preactivity
reflective-projective theory of mass communication
resonance

restrained activist
ritualized use
social information processing theory
spiral of silence theory
surveillance
two-step flow theory
uses and gratifications theory
working class climber

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