

CHAPTER 13

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- The definitions and applications of public communication
- The role and functions of mass communication
- The effects of public and mass communication in a number of key areas (public speaking, political communication, public relations, and advertising)

Communication occurs in a number of contexts and forms. In this chapter, we focus on communication that takes place in public—including public speaking, mass communication, political communication, public relations, and advertising. As will become apparent, if it is not already, public communication plays a critical role in creating and disseminating the messages that are central to our activities as individuals and in relationships, groups, communities, organizations, and societies.

WHAT IS PUBLIC COMMUNICATION?

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

- The Speech
- The Presentation

UNDERSTANDING MASS COMMUNICATION

- Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- Information Products and Services
- The Audience
- Four Basic Functions of Mass Communication
- Political Communication
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- The Communicator/Producer Perspective
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KEY POINTS

WHAT IS PUBLIC COMMUNICATION?

The term *public* communication can be contrasted with interpersonal, group, or organizational communication. These latter forms of communication are generally more private and personal. Public refers to situations in which messages are created and disseminated to a *relatively* large number of receivers, in a setting that is *relatively* impersonal. Public speaking, concerts, theater, and public debates are examples of public communication. Communication involving mass media such as newspaper and magazine articles, television programs, podcasts, movies, and various forms of advertising are also examples.

The term *relatively* is italicized in this definition in the previous paragraph because what is “public” and what is not is often a matter of degree. When, for example, does communication between individuals in a group or organization qualify as public communication? Most of us would agree that when three or four people who know each other well speak to each other it is certainly interpersonal or perhaps group communication, but not public communication. On the other hand, we would get little disagreement that, if the message were presented to 250 people at an annual meeting of a division of an organization or a professional association, it would be “public communication.” But what if the communication event consisted of prepared and rehearsed remarks (perhaps via webcast or email) to 5, 10, 25, or 50 people, who didn’t know each other all that well? At what point does the situation become “public” communication? It is our view that there is no magical threshold test for when a communication situation is and when it is not public communication. However, there are some general guidelines which are helpful in differentiating these situations from others.

Public communication situations tend to be characterized by:

- **AN AUDIENCE.** Generally, a large number of people are involved in the event, so much so that a communicator tends to think of intended receivers in aggregate terms—as an audience rather than as individuals. Giving a speech to a class would fit the definition, while rehearsing a speech in front of your roommates would not.
- **IMPERSONALITY.** The source often does not know all the participants personally, and this lack of knowledge, the situation, and the number of people involved make it difficult for a communicator to send “personalized” messages. Even though a speaker may know some receivers very well, he or she may not be able to acknowledge or make use of this knowledge and must instead use a “to whom it may concern” approach.
- **PLANNED, PREDICTABLE, AND FORMAL.** The public communication process is planned, predictable, and/or formalized. The physical setting in which an event (a public speech or network news program) takes place may be arranged in a particular way (e.g., seating or layout of a setting) and may follow a predetermined agenda.
- **SOURCE CONTROL.** The source has disproportionate control over determining what messages are created and disseminated. For example, the speaker sets and manages the agenda and determines the content (see Figure 13.1).
- **LIMITED INTERACTIVITY (FEEDBACK).** Audience members have limited means of reacting to the source or his or her message and have little ability to shape the course of the communication event. “Negotiation” of the content does not occur in the sense we’re used to experiencing in interpersonal or most group settings. In most mass communication situations, the message sender and the act of message sending is separated from the message receiver and the act of receiving in time, space, or both, often making interaction and feedback difficult. Often the feedback a speaker receives is too delayed to alter the source’s current content. If, during a speech, a speaker notices that half the audience is yawning, the speaker can adapt and liven up the material. If, however, an audience member does not appreciate the sexist

nature of a television's reporter's language, then he or she could post a comment online and hope that the reporter will receive the message and care enough to try to prevent future occurrences of such language. In an interpersonal context, this delay would not occur, and a speaker could almost instantly amend his or her language to best suit the audience.

- **SOURCE CENTRALITY.** The source has easy and direct access to all receivers, but receivers may not have the same access to one another. For example, a politician speaking on television addresses all members of the viewing audience; however, members of the audience cannot address one another. Of course, social media are breaking down some of these barriers with technology such as live tweeting.

FIGURE 13.1

Public communication often takes place in formal, carefully arranged settings.



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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Although the differences between public communication and other forms of communication are sometimes a matter of degree, these forms and contexts of communication are important to understand in their own right precisely because of the characteristics listed above: (1) a large number of people are typically involved in the audience; (2) the communication event is planned, relatively predictable, formal, and impersonal; (3) the source exercises great control over message content, with little opportunity for interaction with or among recipients; and (4) in the case of mass communication, media are involved that tend to further extend the reach of human communication and their role in shaping our cultures (see Figure 13.2). In addition to the familiar public and mass communication channels, many institutions within society contribute to the creation, perpetuation, and evolution of culture. Schools play a very basic part in the creation, distribution, and sharing of culture, as do churches, governments, and the business community.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

One of the most common public communication events is the public speech. It is important to remember in a public communication context that both the speech and its presentation can and should be considered separately. Obviously, the speech does not exist apart from its presentation. From a practical point of view, however, preparing a speech and preparing a presentation are separate phases of a public communication situation.

The Speech

Preparation for a speech falls into four general categories (adapted from Bradley, 1991; Lucas, 2012):

1. **PREPARING TO CREATE THE SPEECH.** This step involves:
 - Discovering ideas and evidence
 - Gathering and organizing information
 - Assessing the audience
 - Analyzing and focusing the topic
 - Developing a thesis
 - Reaching conclusions
2. **DRAFTING THE SPEECH.** At this point, public communicators try to give a structure and form to their presentation. This step involves creating introductions and conclusions, using evidence to support major conclusions, developing and placing specific examples, and developing visual aids.
3. **REVISING.** This step may involve major changes to the presentation. In this step, the communicator pays particular attention to structure, logic, evidence, examples, and further

FIGURE 13.2

Health communication researcher Itzhak Yanovitzky has found that many public health communication campaigns influence the behavior of target audiences indirectly by promoting change in public health policy (e.g., laws mandating stiffer penalties for drunk driving, increasing taxes on tobacco products, and banning smoking in public parks). These policies change society's views of a particular behavior (e.g., making smoking less socially acceptable) and result in changes in individuals' behavior.



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development. The speaker must make sure that he or she has given the audience what they need to be informed, persuaded, or for other intended communication goals to be realized.

4. **EDITING.** This step consists of fine-tuning. During this stage the speaker pays particular attention to mechanics such as transitions between major points, delivery and appearance, citing sources, and presentation style.

The Presentation

Preparing the presentation consists of the following four stages:

1. The first and most important activity is *preparing the speech*, as described previously. Once this is done, preparation for the presentation can begin.
2. *Rehearsal.* The public communication event (for example, a speech, a concert, a play) should be rehearsed. Depending on the formality of the situation, a dress rehearsal may be held that includes simulating the situation as closely as possible. Anyone who has ever participated in a wedding rehearsal knows how important it is to completely prepare for the event so that everyone knows his or her role. Less formal events call for rehearsals that help plan the timing of the event or speech and familiarize speakers with the setting and any technology to be used in the presentation.
3. Advanced preparation includes *developing flexible presentation strategies* (such as changes in the length of the presentation or additional visual aids) that can be used as necessary to react to feedback from the audience. For example, if an audience seems confused by a presentation, the effective public communicator is ready to explain major points in more detail or to provide additional examples. If the audience appears bored or already familiar with some of the ideas being presented, a good speaker will condense parts of the presentation or vary his or her vocal tone, speak directly about issues of concern to the audience, or use more interesting visual aids to win back the attention of the audience.
4. *Other presentation elements* such as clothing need to be attended to before a public communication event. Dress is an important unifying force for audiences and speakers. Politicians often wear caps with particular insignias to indicate that they identify with their audience. This type of nonverbal cue signifies the message, “I’m one of you.” On other occasions, the public communicator may want to distance himself or herself from the audience. Religious leaders often wear different clothing while conducting services in order to reinforce their roles as spiritual advisors.

Although we have discussed these steps as if they were sequential, in reality the sequence may be adjusted based upon the circumstances.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS AND ADAPTATION.

Effective public communication always involves consideration of the audience. Simple demographics are the most basic information that is necessary to find out about an audience. For example, people of any age may be interested in learning about a new technique for fly fishing if they are fishing enthusiasts. On the other hand, it would be unwise to speak about casino gambling to a group of people who do not gamble because of their religious beliefs. The importance of any given demographic factor varies depending on the speaker and the topic of the speech.

Some demographic features that may be important in planning a public presentation include age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, country of origin, educational level, language spoken at home, sexual orientation, gender identity, and geographical location.

A good speech is adapted to a particular audience to the degree that the speaker would have to change it (by modifying examples or word choice, for example) for another audience. If a speaker can deliver a speech to another audience without making any changes, the speech is not specific enough for the intended audience.

DEVELOPING A PURPOSE AND A THESIS. As we discussed earlier, one of the major differences between public communication and interpersonal communication is that public communication usually has a predetermined purpose established by the communicator. In arriving at the purpose, a communicator needs to answer three general questions with respect to the potential audience for the message (Lucas, 2012):

FIGURE 13.3

Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) was an investigative journalist who delivered public speeches in the United States and Europe on civil rights and women’s suffrage. She was one of the founders of the NAACP.



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- To whom am I speaking?
- What do I want them to know, believe, or do as a result of my speech?
- What is the most effective way of composing and presenting my speech to accomplish that aim? (p. 98)

In interpersonal communication, ideas may be presented spontaneously without much advance preparation. In a public communication event, a great deal of time is usually devoted to advance thinking about who the audience is, what we want them to gain from listening to us, and what strategies will best accomplish these goals.

One of the ways in which public communicators clarify the purpose for their speeches is through the development of a thesis. The *thesis* of a speech is the one main definite idea to which all others are subordinated. If we think of the topic of the speech as a question, then the thesis is the answer to that question. It is a specific statement of purpose.

Effective theses are (McCrimmon, 1974):

1. **RESTRICTED.** A good thesis limits the scope of what can be discussed in detail in the time allotted to a speech. For example, trying to describe the changing roles of women on television in the last two decades in five minutes would be extremely ambitious. A 20-minute speech on the changing role of the main characters in a specific program would be a more restricted and reasonable idea.
2. **UNIFIED.** A thesis should present one dominant idea. There may be more than one idea a communicator wants to convey, but they should all be unified by some other idea. For example, an effect may have more than one cause so that a speaker may need to discuss three causes, but these causes are united under a single common theme.
3. **PRECISE.** In a good thesis, a restricted, unified idea is presented with clarity. There should only be one possible interpretation. There is no place for ambiguous or vague language (e.g., “voting for this candidate will make all the difference”) or clichés (e.g., “time will tell,” “opposites attract,” or “every cloud has a silver lining”) in an effective thesis. (adapted from pp. 16-18)

Without an effective thesis we often end up treating the entire subject area as a thesis and rambling around purposelessly. We may be providing accurate information to the audience, but it has no clear point. In addition, we have no criteria for selecting and ordering material so we leave ourselves open to the audience asking, “What is the point of this?” Effective public communicators always ask themselves, “What exactly about my subject is the point?” When listening to public presentations, we can judge their effectiveness using these criteria to examine the thesis presented.

MAKING AN ARGUMENT. Making an argument, or *persuasion*, is an attempt to win over or convince an audience to agree with a particular position or to pursue some course of action. There are two

general approaches to making an argument: *emotional appeals* which produce belief and *reasoned appeals* which produce conviction. For example, a speaker who graphically describes the aftermath of an accident that resulted from drunk driving is using emotional appeals to persuade an audience not to drink and drive. A speaker who presents numerous facts demonstrating the negative consequences of credit card debt is using reasoned appeals to persuade an audience not to abuse their credit cards.

There are many techniques that are used in efforts to persuade audiences, for example (Bradley, 1991; Kearney & Plax, 1996):

- Using repetition
- Associating one's claim with something already thought of positively by the audience or associating opposing claims with something already thought of negatively by the audience
- Purposely omitting relevant information
- Using emotional, connotative language
- Using emotional appeals such as guilt, fear, or love (see Figure 13.4)
- Appealing to human needs such as the need for ego gratification, reassurance of worth, emotional and physical security, love, creative outlets, power, roots, or immortality
- Creating cognitive dissonance by presenting inconsistent ideas
- Arguing from ethos, or the source's credibility
- Appealing to cultural values
- Using content appeals based on reasoning and evidence

While persuasive public communicators may make use of some or all of these approaches, effective and ethical persuasion should be based heavily on content appeals using reasoning and evidence. Except with hostile audiences in cases in which the goal is to change the direction of already held attitudes, content appeals should be balanced with controlled emotional and other appeals as long as those appeals work within the structure of the argument. With hostile audiences speakers need to be as unemotional as possible, because any emotion aroused in the audience will intensify

FIGURE 13.4

Using emotional appeals in a speech may be effective in changing your audience's attitudes, but such appeals don't give them any information to use if they are confronted later by someone arguing the opposite point of view.



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already held attitudes. Unless the goal is to reinforce these pre-existing attitudes, all content appeals should use two-sided arguments in which the speaker both provides positive arguments for his or her claims and raises and refutes strong arguments for opposing claims.

Public communicators can develop effective arguments by following these suggestions:

- Make limited claims
- Avoid overstatement, including words such as *never*, *always*, or *everyone*
- Be open about uncertainties
- Control tone—especially avoid over-emotionalism
- Avoid frequent or heavy use of sarcasm
- In addition to using solid reasoning and credible evidence, use devices to keep the audience's attention and sympathy (e.g., intelligent use of understatement, overstatement, metaphor, allusion, humor, or controlled emotions is effective)
- Be sure to produce a clear, logical structure for the presentation with a clear purpose at all points

USE OF EVIDENCE. Evidence to support an argument consists of a series of reasons or facts, details, examples, references, and quotations. Facts do not speak for themselves; they only speak for those who know how to use them, to put them in a strategic place, and to explain their significance. It is important for a speaker to choose a thesis based on an examination of evidence rather than choosing the evidence to support the thesis. Evidence should be used wisely. There is no need to use evidence to support statements that you can reasonably expect an audience to accept without support. Statements that are needed to make a persuasive point, however, should be supported.

An easy way to check if evidence is necessary is to use a three-level pyramid structure with your thesis at the peak as the first level. At level two, put those statements which, if accepted, would persuade an audience to accept the thesis. At level three, provide evidence for all level two statements that members of the audience might hesitate to accept (Jensen, 1981; Larson, 1995). Little time has to be spent giving evidence to support level three statements, which ought to be non-controversial facts.

VISUAL AIDS. There are four types of visual aids that help public communicators convey their messages to large audiences:

1. The *actual object* being talked about (e.g., a person giving a presentation on dog grooming might demonstrate on a real dog)
2. A *model* of the object (e.g., demonstrating on a toy dog)
3. *Mediated objects* (e.g., using pictures or videos of dogs being groomed)
4. *Mediated models* (e.g., charts or diagrams with information on appropriate methods of dog grooming)

Visual aids function to add interest to a presentation by giving the audience something to examine. They may also clarify what the speaker is saying by providing a visual illustration of the points being made. In addition, visual aids like PowerPoint, Keynote, or Prezi can jog a speaker's memory and be used as visual "notes."

There are several guidelines for preparing effective visual aids:

- *Make them visible.* It is frustrating for an audience to be shown a visual aid that is not easily visible. Good public communicators make sure their visual aids are large enough to be seen. Remember that a slide that looks good on a computer screen may not show up effectively when projected to a large auditorium.
- *Make them simple.* Avoid too much detail to keep the visual aid from being confusing. Omit information that is not directly relevant to your thesis.
- *Make them complete.* Although it is important to make visual aids simple, it is also important to present all the needed visual information. Don't leave out important information or the audience may be confused.
- *Make them appropriate.* Good visual aids fit the purpose, tone, and content of the presentation. If the speech is a serious one designed to persuade an audience not to drink and drive, demonstrating a drinking game would not be appropriate, but explaining how much alcohol is in a particular drink would be.
- *Make them communicative.* Good visual aids add something to the speech. Speakers use them because they have a purpose, not just for appearances.
- *Make them relevant.* It is important to display a visual aid only when you are talking about the subject and remove it as soon as you have moved on to another point. If you have finished speaking about methods of dog grooming and are now talking about how much to charge, for example, it will distract the audience if you still have a picture of a dog on display (see Figure 13.5).

FIGURE 13.5

Having too many things to look at during your presentation is distracting for your audience.



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MEDIATED PRESENTATIONS. Access to technology and the Internet has contributed to an increased use of mediated presentations. Examples of mediated public speaking include: producing a presentation as part of a course requirement and sharing it online; completing a job interview via Skype or another mediated software; or using a videoconferencing platform (e.g., Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting) to deliver a presentation to a client located across the world (Fraleigh & Tuman, 2014). The preparation principles discussed earlier in this chapter are certainly applicable to a mediated presentation. However, presenters in a mediated speech should also carefully consider and plan for the effective set-up and operation of the necessary technology and hardware (e.g., camera, recording software). In addition, in almost all cases of mediated presentations, the speaker will face a *virtual audience*. This means that an effective mediated presentation should be designed to appeal to audience members who are in different locations from the speaker and, in the best case scenario, can only be seen via a camera window.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION. Communication apprehension, anxiety before and during a public communication event, is a natural part of the public communication experience. Almost everyone feels anxiety when speaking or performing in front of a large audience. In fact, some communication scholars have argued that a slight degree of anxiety leads to better performances because people who do not feel any anxiety may fail to adequately prepare for a public communication event and, therefore, not perform to the best of their abilities. Thus, controlled anxiety may be desirable for effective performance.

The normal range of communication apprehension can be controlled by several techniques (adapted, in part, from Bradley, 1991, pp. 33-38):

- *Attitude:* Face each public communication opportunity as a challenge to get a message to a large audience and not as an insurmountable obstacle.
- *Experience:* The more experience a person has in public communication situations, the easier it is to face the next situation.
- *Preparation:* Never attempt to “just wing it” during a public communication event. Even speeches that seem totally spontaneous may have been thought out far in advance. Obviously, it is impossible to have a comment memorized for every public situation we might ever face, but some type of advance preparation will improve our performance in almost any type of public or mediated event.
- *Gestures:* Often gestures that are appropriate for interpersonal communication situations “get lost” in a public communication context. Effective public communicators learn to modify or enlarge their natural repertoire of gestures to reach a larger audience. Gestures can often be an effective way to manage our anxiety by using extra energy that otherwise might get transformed into nervous habits like excessive blinking or gripping the podium too tightly (see Figure 13.6).

- *Remembering that most physiological reactions are not perceived by the audience:* It is important to remember that the audience rarely perceives the anxiety a public communicator may feel. Even when they do, signs of slight anxiety such as a wavering voice or shaking hands will usually be perceived with empathy and not criticism.
- *Talking to the audience as individuals, not just as a group:* Mild anxiety can often be managed by addressing remarks to individual members of the audience. Talking directly to several people makes a public communication situation seem more interpersonal in nature. It is often easier to think about the individual people in an audience and their opinions rather than to try to address the group as a collective.

Making eye contact with individuals in an audience can often help to allay anxiety. Many people become anxious when talking to a group, but their anxiety is lessened when they begin to “talk to” particular people in the audience. Receiving individual feedback instead of just seeing a sea of faces is often enough to turn an anxiety-provoking public communication event into a more pleasant, rewarding experience.

Recognizing that audience members usually are friendly and want the speaker to succeed: Most audiences are composed of individuals who would like the speaker to do a good job. Audiences are rarely openly hostile to a speaker. Knowing that the audience is on the speaker’s side can help an individual to be a more effective speaker. Sometimes, however, we know that the audience disagrees with us. This often occurs in a persuasive speaking situation when we are trying to convince an audience to change their attitudes. Nevertheless, even if the audience is antagonistic toward a speaker’s opinion or point of view, audience members still want the speaker to give a good presentation.

FIGURE 13.6

Make sure your gestures are appropriate for the point that you want to communicate.



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UNDERSTANDING MASS COMMUNICATION

Mass communication is an extension of public communication. Particularly where traditional mass media are involved, the informative, persuasive, or entertaining messages of public communication efforts can be amplified, multiplied, duplicated, and distributed far beyond the context of a lecture hall or concert with the aid of communication technology.

As with public communication, mass communication is generally a more formalized, planned, and purposeful process than face-to-face communication. To a greater extent than in many other contexts of communication, economic considerations also are important. The production of news or television programming, advertisements, and political campaigns are extremely expensive undertakings. Developing websites and maintaining a social media presence also involve expenses. And, as we shall see, questions of social impact are also important when one considers mass communication because of the potential for the rapid and widespread distribution of messages made possible by traditional and new media.

Production, Distribution, and Consumption

The Industrial Revolution (about 1760 to 1840) began an age in which the mass production, distribution, and consumption of *manufactured goods* was central to the economic and social fabric of our society. In a similar way, the communication revolution has brought us to an age in which the basic commodity is *information*. Mass communication organizations produce, distribute, and market information products and services (Hunt & Ruben, 1993; Ruben, Reis, Iverson & Hunt, 2010). The P-I-C framework (illustrated in Figure 13.7) includes the following components:

- *Production* refers to the creation, gathering, packaging, or repackaging of information.
- *Information production and distribution* from the point where messages are created to the point where they are available to consumers. The movement may occur immediately, as with a live television broadcast, or it may involve substantial time delays, as with magazines, books, films, or recorded programs.
- *Consumption* refers to the uses, impacts, and effects that mass communication can have for a single individual, relationship, group, organization, or society. Examples include: being informed, entertained, persuaded, educated, amused, motivated, or deceived. For a society, the influences of mass communication may be social, political, cultural, economic, or technological.

FIGURE 13.7

Model of Mass Communication



Description:

Mass communication organizations create and distribute information products and/or services

Organizations:

- Television networks
- Newspaper publishers
- Movie producers
- Magazine publishers
- Book publishers
- Record companies
- Advertising agencies
- Public relations firms
- Libraries
- Museums
- Information services
- Etc.

Description:

Information products and/or services are distributed to an audience

Products/Services

- Television programs
- Newspapers
- Movies
- Magazines
- Books
- Record/tapes
- Ads
- Public relations campaigns
- Documents
- Exhibits
- Research reports/databases
- Etc.

Description:

Information products and services compete for the attention of, acceptance by, and use by audiences

Audiences:

- Individuals
- Couples, families, co-workers, etc.
- Groups
- Organizations
- Societies

Uses/Impact:

- Information
- Entertainment
- Persuasion
- Education
- Diversion
- Motivation
- Deception
- Socialization
- Etc.

The economic relationship between consumers and producers may be direct, indirect, or a blend of the two. In the case of films or purchased downloads, for example, consumers directly underwrite production and distribution costs through their purchases. Network television and commercial radio producers and distributors are supported by advertisers who want to gain access to the consumers of those mass communication products. In such instances, consumers provide indirect financial support for production and distribution each time they purchase an advertiser's product. With newspapers and magazines, cable and satellite radio and television, and many Internet services, the economic link between consumers and producers is partially direct—through payment of subscription charges or provider connection fees. It is also partially indirect—through the purchase of advertisers' products.

Information Products and Services

Information products are collections of messages—textual, visual, or vocal—organized in a particular way for a particular purpose or for use by a particular audience. Information products include not

only news but also entertainment, public relations and advertising, computerized databases, even museum exhibits or theatrical performances.

Information services are activities associated with the preparation, distribution, organization, storage, or retrieval of information. Information services include news or editorial research, public relations consulting, and electronic information delivery.

The Audience

The term *audience* refers to the group of individuals who have the potential for being exposed to and using an information product or service. In the terminology of information science, the audience is the *user group*.

Traditionally, when talking about mass communication, the word *audience* evoked an image of a large, diverse group of viewers or readers all being exposed to the same information at more or less the same time and all unknown to the information producers. However, newer communication technologies make it easier to direct messages to specific segments of a mass audience, all of whom may not be watching or listening at the same time. This view of “audience” does not presume that the user group must be of a specific size, nor be particularly diverse, nor that all of its members are exposed to the same information at the same time, nor that members of the group are unknown to the information producers. More basic is the requirement that the information product involved must have been purposefully produced and distributed by an organization for a particular constituency (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2015). A network television program fits this definition, as does an online video for a corporation, a church website, or a museum exhibit.

This approach to mass communication takes account of:

- Traditional mass media and newer communication technologies
- Convergence among once distinct mass communication media, products, and services
- Interactive capabilities of many mass media
- Active decision-making roles played by mass communication producers *and* consumers
- Complex individual, social, economic, and cultural dynamics that contribute to the interplay between mass communication producers and consumer groups
- General and specialized mass communication producers, products, services, and consumer groups

Four Basic Functions of Mass Communication

Mass media and mass-mediated communication serve a number of functions. Sociologist and mass communication scholar Charles Wright (1986) describes four of these functions: surveillance, correlation, socialization, and entertainment (adapted from pp. 14-22):

SURVEILLANCE. Media provide a constant stream of news-related messages that enable audience members to be aware of developments in the environment that may affect them. *Surveillance* may consist of a warning function, alerting members of the audience to danger—a hurricane or a terrorist alert, for example.

Mass-mediated communication also serves a *status conferral function*; individuals, organizations, and issues that are reported on by mass media tend to be seen as significant by members of the audience. Additionally, mass-mediated communication serves an *agenda-setting function* in that it helps to set the public agenda as to issues, individuals, and topics of concern to mass media audience members.

CORRELATION. Mass media serve to interrelate and interpret information about the events of the day. The *correlation function* serves to help audience members determine the relevance that surveillance messages have for them.

SOCIALIZATION. Partly as an extension of the surveillance and correlation functions, mass-mediated communication socializes individuals for participation in society. Mass media provide common experiences and foster shared expectations as to appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Mass-mediated communication also plays a central role in the transmission of cultural heritage from generation to generation.

ENTERTAINMENT. Mass media are a pervasive source of mass entertainment and provide the basis for diversion and release for audience members.

Wright's functions of mass communication can be observed in the fields of political communication, public relations, and advertising. In those three key applications of public communication we can observe a number of common concepts that we have discussed in this book including the use of symbolic messages, the effects of persuasion, and the importance of mediated communication.

Political Communication

The field of political communication is multidisciplinary and draws on research from scholars in the areas of political science, communication, and mass media. Perloff (2014) defines political communication as:

the process by which language and symbols employed by leaders, media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects of the political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state, or community. (p. 30)

This definition leads to the specification of five main characteristics—political communication (Perloff, 2014):

- Is a process
- Relies on words and symbols
- Involves three main players (political elites, media, citizens)
- Can have intended or unintended effects
- Can have influence at the micro (individual thoughts and behaviors) and macro (public opinion and policy) levels (adapted from pp. 30-33)

The availability and access to modern mass communication technologies have resulted in an increased focus on political communication messages and the variety of influences they may have. It is increasingly the case that political campaigns at the national level cannot be successful without a consistent and strong social media presence.

Public Relations

The formal study of *public relations (PR)* is a relatively recent phenomenon despite the fact that from a practical standpoint evidence of PR can be traced back to events

FIGURE 13.8

Lucy Stone (1813–1893) delivered her first public speech on women’s rights in 1847 at a time when many people considered it inappropriate for women to speak in public. For a time, she appeared at her public lectures wearing the controversial “Bloomer dress” (long pants topped by a shorter skirt).



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like the Boston Tea Party in 1773. In 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) adopted the following definition:

Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. (PRSA, 2015).

According to PRSA, there are three key aspects associated with this definition: (1) *process* which illustrates the dynamic nature of the communication processes that take place during a public relations campaign; (2) *relationships* which highlights the importance of the connection on behalf of the public relations official or agency; and (3) *publics* which refers to the target audiences of a public relations message and can be either internal (within the organization, e.g., employees) or external (outside the organization, e.g., government officials).

The basic functions of public relations include activities such as community relations (e.g., organizing an event for the community which is sponsored by the organization and securing adequate media coverage of it), government affairs (lobbying the government/elected officials to act favorably on legislation that would be favorable to a specific industry sector), and crisis communication (responding effectively to a crisis faced by an organization). Regardless of the public relations function that is applicable to an organization or scenario, the goal of a PR practitioner is always the same: portray the company/client in the best possible light. Given that goal, spin tactics or spin control (where events and actions are given an alternate or better interpretation during interactions with media representatives and the associated publics) are key to successful public relations.

Advertising

The entertainment function of mass communication as described by Wright (1986) is best illustrated through contemporary modes of advertising. Advertising today is a multibillion dollar global industry. One notable trend in this industry is the increase in mobile and online ads. The ability to skip commercials in a television show through the use of DVRs and a shift to mobile media consumption through the use of social media networks have resulted in advertisers finding alternate ways to deliver their messages including through online and mobile media platforms. According to a report from the Interactive Advertising Bureau, Internet advertising revenue in 2015 reached \$13.3 billion just in the United States alone (IAB, 2015).

Regardless of the delivery method of the advertisement, the goal is always the same: highlight the unique selling proposition (especially for product-based ads). The unique selling proposition is the concept or idea that makes the advertised product different from similar ones within the same industry. Through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages, advertisers attempt to produce effective persuasion. But what is the point at which an advertisement moves from persuasion

to deception? The pros and cons of advertising have been extensively debated over the years. Proponents of advertising highlight the information and entertainment functions of the advertising industry, whereas critics point to the deceptive aspects of commercial advertising and the likelihood of creating false needs for unnecessary products.

Identifying ethical advertising as a tool of public communication is not an easy process. For example, how would you feel if your instructor ended each class session with the following statement: “This lecture is brought to you by company XYZ.” Would it make a difference if, in exchange for listening to that statement, you were offered high-tech technology in your classroom including seating with individual monitors and an outlet to charge your phone or laptop?

Broader Functions of Public and Mass Communication

PACKAGING AND DISTRIBUTION OF CULTURE. In any society, mass communication institutions package and distribute the cultural knowledge base. This knowledge base consists of news and entertainment programs, public relations, and advertising, along with other information products and services provided by libraries, museums, theme and amusement parks, cable and satellite services, software producers, computer services, art galleries, sports, and even shopping malls (Hunt & Ruben, 1993).

Mass media such as newspapers, television, and film have long played a fundamental role in packaging and transmitting cultural information. However, when we think more broadly, we realize that many other organizations whose primary function is not mass communication in the usual sense of the term also serve these same functions.

POPULARIZING AND VALIDATING FUNCTION. While the concept of a cultural information base may seem abstract, its consequences are not. Through mass communication, concepts of what is real and make-believe, or right and wrong, are distributed from place to place and from generation to generation and, in the process, are popularized and sanctioned. News, entertainment, sports, and advertising programming tell us stories about people and how they live, provide insights into how people think, and portray the consequences of particular behaviors. In subtle ways, they provide lessons about relationships, family life, war, crime, music, religion, and politics. Whether the topic is sex, violence, fitness, drugs, or racial issues, they contribute to the visibility, currentness, and validity of the topics they address.

NEWS AND INFORMATION. Sometimes intentionally, but more often unintentionally, news and informational programming have the effect of popularizing and validating particular concerns and ideologies (ways of thinking) by focusing on some while ignoring others. Even interviews and public opinion polls contribute to the popularity and legitimacy of certain issues through the choices that

information producers make. Interviews and polls, for example, deal with particular topics and questions. Many topics are available, but only some are included. To ask respondents their opinions on environmental pollution, the actions of a local political figure, or a government policy is to state by implication that these are important topics of the day. Their importance is further underscored when the results of the poll are published. These selected topics are given a visibility and legitimacy that is not afforded to other topics of perhaps equal significance but which were not selected for examination.

Mass communication news and informational programming contributes to the popularization and legitimation of culture through the selection of what is and what is not “news.” For example, the selection and repeated rebroadcasting of particular images, events, or excerpts from a political speech elevate the visibility, permanence, and significance that are associated with these sights or “sound bites.” Mass communication also contributes to the cultural agenda by the interpretation (or lack of interpretation) of news events and through the way “causes” and “effects” are implied.

ENTERTAINMENT AND ADVERTISING. Entertainment programs contribute to the web of culture, often in subtle ways. They provide commentary on how people should live, look, think, talk, and relate to others. Advertisements also provide strong cultural messages regarding economics and consumption. In other words, they urge us to become consumers. Encouraging consumption is a universal theme in advertising and many kinds of promotion. However, rarely is the message “We want you all to get out there and buy goods and services whether you need or can afford them” made explicit. One area where this theme is apparent is in advertising for credit cards. Direct mailings and “take an application” posters urge college students “to establish your credit now” and assure that “you have been pre-approved” or that the bank will “say yes” when you apply. The implicit economics lesson is a simple one: It is important to be a consumer, it is necessary to establish credit—the sooner the better—and it is good to use credit cards to make purchases.

SPORTS: HEROES AND VILLAINS. Sporting events provide another interesting illustration of the ways in which mass communication serves as a carrier of cultural messages. Nimmo and Combs (1983), in their book *Mediated Political Realities*, discuss how sports programming prepares viewers for political participation in society. Sporting events, particularly when distributed by mass media, are presented as suspense-filled contests with heroes and villains. They present a story of the “triumph of justice or the intervention of fortune, . . . heroic deeds and untimely errors, dramatic climaxes, and the euphoria of the victors along with the gloom of the vanquished” (p. 126) Sports commentators contribute further to the melodramatic nature of sports by introducing rivalries and quarrels among players, salary and contract disputes, fights and fines, winning and losing, romance and death. Sporting events teach about playing by the rules, losing gracefully, sportsmanship, competition, and persistence.

These themes influence the way other facets of life are viewed. Media coverage of politics or criminal trials, for example, often places more emphasis on rules, tactics, and “spin” strategies than on issues of right or wrong, guilt or innocence.

VIDEO AND COMPUTER GAMES: CONTROL AND CONSEQUENCES.

Video games—another somewhat less obvious form of mass communication—also provide implicit cultural messages (see Figure 13.9). Trees, people, houses, animals, and other cars buzz back and forth across the road in front of your metallic red Lamborghini as you screech around the turns. Suddenly a bike pulls out in front of you and you are forced to swerve off the road into a ditch, where your car crashes into a brick wall and blows up. Is this a problem? Not if the press of a button brings you back to the start of the track in the same shiny car—and this is exactly how things work in the world of video-gaming. One of the strongest messages that video games send is immortality and the possibility to redo what went wrong without consequence (R. Ruben, 1989) since you can always hit the “restart” button and characters are reborn

Not only is violence in these types of entertainment media prominent and often graphic, it has increased dramatically and continues to do so (Anderson & Dill, 2000). When video games first appeared in the 1970s, they contained simple and apparently harmless content, such as the wildly popular *Pong*. In the 1980s, games like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* became dominant. In the 1990s, with the decline of arcades and the increasing popularity of home consoles, more violent video games became popular, including *Mortal Kombat*, in which realistic human fighters battle to the death. Today, with games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *The Last of Us*, the level of violence has increased substantially. However, long-term studies have not demonstrated the influence of video game violence on societal violence (Ferguson, 2015).

COMMERCIALIZING FUNCTION. Mass communication often plays a role in giving commercial value to and helping to sell particular cultural symbols. In this sense, mass communication institutions are part of the cultural industry, which UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; unesco.org) describes as an industry involved in the large-scale production, reproduction, storage, or distribution of cultural goods and services.

FIGURE 13.9

Research shows that children who play video or computer games for an average of an hour or less per day are more social and satisfied with life than children who don't play these games at all. But the positive effects disappear if children play such games for more than an hour a day (Przybylski, 2014).



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Herbert Schiller (1989), a communication and culture scholar, writes that increasingly:

cultural creation has been transformed into discrete, specialized forms, commercially produced and marketed. Speech, dance, drama (ritual), music, and the visual and plastic arts have been vital, indeed necessary, features of human experience from earliest times. What distinguishes their situation in the [present] . . . era are the relentless and successful efforts to separate these elemental expressions of human creativity from their group and community origins for the purpose of *selling them* to those who can pay. (pp. 30-31)

Mass communication plays a major role in the commercialization of celebrities, brand names, art objects, music, and other elements of culture. This is especially obvious in areas where the popularization of particular individuals through public and mass communication has given great value to them, their names, and anything associated with them. One example is the endorsement of clothes or other products by actors or sports figures. Commercialization also takes place when a celebrity's name is added to products, services, or ideas as a way of enhancing their value or marketability. Ironically, public and mass communication play a role in giving celebrities commercial value and are then used to enhance and market the value of products or services they endorse.

SOCIAL CONTACT AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY. Mass communication consumption can serve as a substitute for human contact, helping individuals avoid isolation and loneliness. As noted by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990):

Those who lack structured interactions with other people due to unemployment, divorce, widowhood, personality factors, or declining health are more likely than others to turn to television for companionship, information, and escape. Older people who are widowed and/or retired, for example, are among the heaviest television viewers. (p. 168)

Interactive media may be seen as serving mass communication and interpersonal communication functions at the same time.

Mass communication gives people a sense of community and connection to others. It can also provide a stimulant to interaction to the extent that we share the same interests as other information consumers. Reading celebrity news online, attending a particular concert, watching a popular television series, or viewing a football game may facilitate interaction by providing topics for conversation.

In general then, mass communication plays a major role in the production and distribution of social realities. In our society, and in most others, the mass media are the major providers of standardized messages regarding people, products, situations, and events—messages that often have a major influence on the understandings, knowledge, and images members of the audience develop.

THE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC AND MASS COMMUNICATION

In general terms, there are two ways of thinking about public and mass communication effects. One focuses on the communicator, the message, and the technology. The second emphasizes the audience members.

The Communicator/Producer Perspective

The communicator/producer-centered approach sees the source, message, technology, information products, and services as controlling influences on audience members. This way of thinking is suggested by statements such as “His speeches and media campaign made him a winner,” or “Decaying morals within society are a consequence of increasing sexuality in public communication, television, records, and music videos.” Each statement implies a *causal relationship* between public and mass communication on the one hand and individual, group, or societal behavior on the other.

The Audience/Consumer Perspective

Consumer approaches emphasize the role audience members play in public and mass communication outcomes. While most communicator/producer theories may portray audience members as *passive* and *controlled*, the audience/consumer perspective emphasizes their *active* and *controlling* role. This way of thinking is implied in the statement, “When I hear a political speech filled with oversimplification and generalization, I just tune it out,” or “Today’s audience members are sophisticated enough to enjoy all forms mediated entertainment without being adversely influenced.”

FIGURE 13.10

Media scholar Joseph Turow reminds us that media companies are usually in business to make money from the materials they produce and distribute, which is another characteristic that sets them apart from such communication activities as gossip among friends and construction of an Internet site by a class. But, by surrounding huge populations with words, sounds, and images, media firms go beyond mere money making. They contribute to the notions people carry in their heads about what society is like, how they fit in, and what power they have to change things for the better.



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The tension between views of mass communication as highly influential (those emphasizing source/producer influences) and those which view audience members as more powerful (emphasizing the consumer perspective) is ongoing. Do violent movies cause people to develop violent tendencies or do individuals' needs for violence lead them to watch (and producers, therefore, to continue to create) violent programs? As we have seen earlier, attempting to explain communication outcomes in a one-way, cause-and-effect manner (as is characteristic of the $S \rightarrow M \rightarrow C \rightarrow R = E$ paradigm) may underestimate the fundamentally interactive, mutual influences that systems theorists believe are fundamental to communication. The systems framework implies that outcomes (or effects) are the result of interactions that take place over time between the individual and his or her physical and social environment.

Uses and Gratifications

The foundation of the consumer approach to mass communication theory comes from a tradition called “uses and gratifications,” originally advanced by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974):

[The uses and gratifications approach] . . . views members of the audience as actively utilizing media contents, rather than being passively acted upon by the media. Thus, it does not assume a direct relationship between messages and effects, but postulates instead that members of the audience put messages to use, and that such usages act as intervening variables in the process of effect. (p. 12)

This perspective views audience behavior as being guided by the pursuit of particular goals and needs. One of the particular benefits of the uses and gratifications approach is that it provides a generalized way of thinking about mass communication “effects.” That is, rather than viewing mass communication and its effects as a unique and specialized form of human communication, mass communication outcomes are seen as arising from interactions between individuals and the environment, in the same manner as in interpersonal, group, organizational, and other settings. As Littlejohn and Foss (2011) put it: “Audience members are largely responsible for choosing media to meet their own needs, and media are considered to be only one factor contributing to meeting needs” (p. 351).

Dependency theory extends the core concepts of the uses and gratifications approach and helps to reconcile this view with earlier theories that envisioned mass media as extremely powerful in bringing about effects in the audience members (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Dependency theory suggests that audience members do rely on media to meet their needs, but they come to depend on some media more than others and, moreover, their dependence on media both influences, and is influenced by, their needs and uses. Thus, some individuals may depend largely on particular mass media for their information on current events (such as television),

while others may meet their needs for diversion and entertainment using other media (such as the Internet). Depending on the choices made by members of the audience, particular media will become more important and influential, while others become less so. The dependency model also suggests that in times of societal change and conflict, audience members are more likely to question social institutions and their own beliefs and, in such circumstances, the importance of mass media increases for audience members (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

Integrating Perspectives

Both the communicator/producer and audience/consumer perspectives are valuable to understanding the dynamics of public and mass communication. Communicator-oriented approaches remind us that public and mass communication sources play an important and influential role in our lives through the creation, packaging, commercialization, validation, and distribution of the information that fills our environment—information we must organize ourselves in order to function.

Consumer-oriented theories stress the role individual audience members play in explaining the impact of mass communication. They emphasize the significant role of individual needs and uses, attitudes, and beliefs in the dynamics of message reception. In so doing, they remind us that as consumers we play an active role in the communication process and in determining its effects.

How can these two perspectives be integrated? Consider the following analogy: “High-powered sports cars cause accidents.” It is true that high-powered sports cars are involved in a number of accidents—more accidents than cars lacking such power. Are the cars themselves to blame? Would we eliminate all these accidents if we stopped producing fast cars? To what extent are the drivers to blame?

A person can certainly speed and drive recklessly in a Ferrari. The car *is* designed for high performance. But these same behaviors are also possible in a Honda Civic, if a driver chooses to *use* it in these ways. However, we can’t take this argument too far; without a car, after all, there can be no speeding or reckless driving. We might, therefore, want to conclude that in any given instant a high-powered sports car *contributes to*, but does not itself *cause*, accidents. Thus, accidents are the result of particular *patterns of consumption in relation to product characteristics and availability*.

If we think of public—and particularly mass—communication, the case of high-powered cars provides a helpful analogy because it involves a relationship between technology and human behavior. As with cars and drivers, it seems reasonable to assume that communication technologies and products facilitate but are seldom the sole cause of audience behavior. Generally, the effects that occur between public and mass communicators and consumers are *mutually causal* or *mutually controlling*.

As in the Ferrari example, the influences of public and mass communication result from *both* (1) the availability of particular messages and technologies with particular characteristics and capabilities and (2) the uses to which audience members attend to, interpret, remember, and use those messages.

Thus, the “effects” of public and mass communication are the result of particular *patterns of message reception in relation to characteristics and availability of messages and technology*. Communicators, messages, and technologies play an important role in defining, influencing, and shaping the available options, direction, and limits of those uses. As audience members we influence the impact of public and mass communicators, individual and institutional, through the choices we make—to attend or not, buy or not, read or not, listen or not, watch or not, and so on. Over the long term, these choices influence what is made available to us through public and mass communication, which in turn influences the range of choices we have available.

CONCLUSION

Public and mass communication play a critical role in creating and disseminating messages. Public and mass communication refer to situations where messages are created and disseminated to a *relatively* large number of receivers, in a setting that is *relatively* impersonal. Public speaking, theater, and public debates are examples of public communication. Communication involving mass media such as newspaper and magazine articles, television programs, and advertising are examples of mass communication. The term *relatively* is italicized, because what is “public” or “mass” and what is not is often a matter of degree.

The public speech is one common example of public communication. The speech and its presentation should be considered separately. Developing a speech falls into four general categories: preparation, creating the speech, revising, and editing. The presentation consists of preparing the speech, rehearsal, developing presentation strategies, and other presentational elements. Audience analysis and adaptation, developing a purpose and a thesis, making an argument, the use of evidence, visual aids, and communication apprehension are all important considerations in understanding the dynamics of public communication.

Mass communication is an extension of public communication involving technology. Key considerations in the process include: production, distribution, and consumption; information products and services; and the audience. Four basic functions of mass communication are: surveillance, correlation, socialization, and entertainment. Broader functions of mass communication include: the packaging and distribution of culture; the popularizing and validating function; the commercializing function; and social contact and sense of community.

In general, there are two ways to think about public and mass communication effects. One emphasizes the role played by the communicator/producer; the other the role played by the audience/consumers. Both perspectives are valuable for understanding mass communication and can, and should, be integrated for a comprehensive view of the process.

As producers of public communication and consumers of mass media, we have a number of responsibilities. Perhaps the most important of these is to behave ethically. It is easy to see why ethical behavior is so important for public speakers. As speakers, we must always try to present the most accurate information that is available to us. Outright lies and even stretching the truth are not acceptable in a public context. In fact, speaking ethically enhances one's credibility. It is well known that speakers who present information that is contradictory to their point of view and who then effectively refute this information are more persuasive than speakers who ignore opposing arguments.

Today's information-rich environment is providing more opportunities for unethical behavior using technology. For example, it is very easy to send a potentially harmful message to thousands of people via Facebook. Some people pass along obscene or offensive messages. While we have the right to view all of the information that is available to us on the Internet, we do not have the right to consciously inflict harm on others. It is every person's responsibility, ultimately, to make sure that his or her messages are not inappropriate or harmful to others.

To become more effective consumers and producers of public or mediated messages, we should expose ourselves to a variety of media and to a variety of products in these media. There is a wealth of information available today in mediated formats, but much of it is repetitious and designed to appeal to a mass audience. Unfortunately, the plot of the latest reality show or action/adventure movie is much like the plot of last year's big hit of the same genre. It is important to seek out alternative mediated messages to expand our knowledge about the role of communication in the contemporary world. For example, look for films directed by African-American or women directors. Listen to college radio stations or National Public Radio. Read magazines designed for audiences interested in particular topics such as politics, hobbies, or self-development. Go to museums that contain collections focused on unfamiliar topics. All of these experiences improve our own ability to communicate by enhancing our personal experiences of the world and helping us to understand others' experiences of it.

KEY POINTS

After having read this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define public communication
- Analyze the main functions and applications of public communication in contemporary society
- Describe how political communication, public relations and advertising represent the basic functions of mass communication
- Evaluate the effects of public communication in today's world

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