



Mass Media



Defining and Researching Mass Media

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Defining the mass media

Mass media refers to communication with large numbers of people, something traditionally seen as '**one-to-many**' communication: one person (such as the author of a book), communicates to many people (the audience) *simultaneously*.

This basic idea can, of course, be extended to include "a newspaper" or "a television programme" being "the one" that communicates - but the basic principle is always the same.

This simple definition does, of course, hide a number of complexities - how large does an audience have to be, for example, before it qualifies as 'mass'? - and we can note **Dutton et al** (1998) suggest that, traditionally, the mass media has been differentiated from other types of communication (such as **interpersonal communication** that occurs on a **one-to-one** basis) in terms of a range of essential characteristics. Communication between those who send and receive messages (*information*) is:

- **impersonal**,
- **lacks immediacy** and is
- **one-way** (from the producer / creator to the consumer / audience).

There is, in this respect, both a *physical* and *technological distance* between sender and receiver: everyone receives the *same message* and the audience cannot directly interact with the sender to change or modify that message.

Mass communication is **organised** and requires a vehicle, such as a television, computer or phone that allows messages to be sent and received. It is inescapably bound-up with **technology** because a mass medium allows large-scale **simultaneous** communication with many people.

A popular UK television programme, such as Dr. Who or Sherlock can draw around 8 - 10 million viewers, while the global audience for something like the football World Cup runs into hundreds of millions.

Mass communication may also be **commodified** - it comes at a price. You can watch films on TV, for example, if you can afford a television, a license fee (to

watch BBC or ITV) or a subscription to a satellite or cable company, such as Sky or Virginmedia.

Although these characteristics still hold true for the **traditional mass media** (newspapers, magazines, books, television, radio, film and so forth), the picture has been complicated - and in some respects completely changed - by the development of newer, computer-based, technologies that don't fit easily into all but the last of the characteristics we've just outlined (mass communication comes with some sort of price tag...).

This follows because newer technologies, such as mobile (cell) and smartphones or personal computers have the capacity for both **interpersonal** ('one-to-one') communication and **mass** ('one-to-many') communication.

Email, for example, can involve exchanging personal messages with friends and family or

sending one message to many

millions. Over the past 10 - 15 years, therefore, the development of computer **networks** such as the Internet have changed both the way we *relate to*, *use* and, most significantly *define*, what we mean by *mass media*. Their development also raises the interesting question of whether we should now be talking about *many mass mediums* rather than *the mass media*...

Computer networks, in this respect, open up the potential for '**many- to-many**' communication; a mass audience can simultaneously communicate with each other to create a mass medium based on interpersonal communication.



"One-to-many" communication.



The commodification of mass media

Various forms of **social media**, from Facebook to Twitter, arguably conform to two of the components of a 'mass medium' - technology and scale - and commodification is, arguably, a third component, although this is complicated somewhat by the question of *what*, or indeed *who*, is actually being commodified in this particular instance.

Distance is, however, a problem because social media can, simultaneously, involve one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication:

Peer-to-peer networks, using software to link individual computers to exchange information, is another example of **many-to-many communication**. In the workplace, for example, any number of people can contribute to the same document at the same time - although perhaps one of the most common (and frequently illegal) use for peer networks is to share copyrighted music and films. Computer networks also open-up forms of **interactive** communication that change how we define the mass media, in terms of the relationship between the **production, distribution** and **consumption** of information.

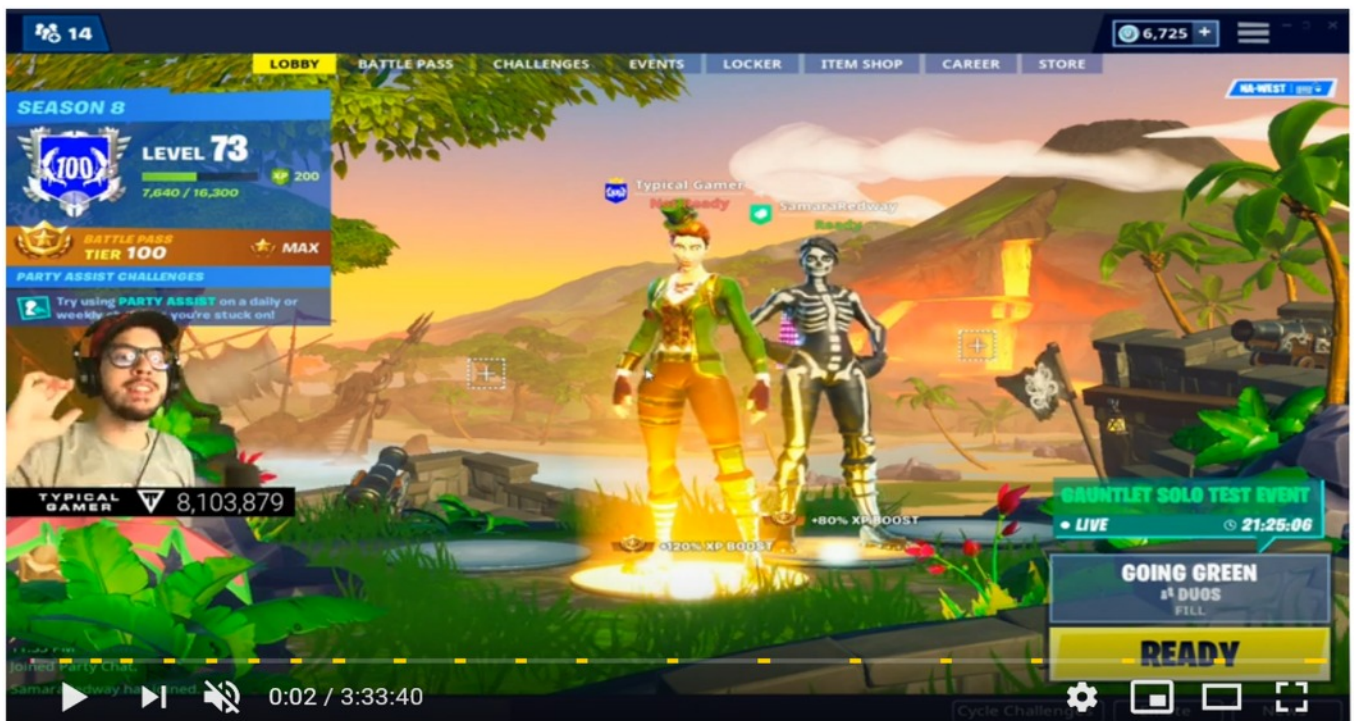
These ideas suggest that, at the very least, we need to redefine conventional concepts of **mass media** by distinguishing between two forms:



Who or what is being commodified through social media?

While an audience can accept or reject the information transmitted, they play no part in its production, nor can they change it. The roles of producer and consumer are, in this respect, both different and *clearly differentiated*.

2. **New media** not only allows for simultaneous two-way communication, it also changes the producer - consumer relationship; someone who sets-up their own web site, writes a blog, maintains a presence on Facebook or regularly uses Twitter is both the *producer and the consumer* of media information. In this respect consumers are also active producers and the roles of producer and consumer are both similar and *largely undifferentiated*.



1. **Old media**, such as television, books and magazines involve 'one-to-many' communication, based on a one-way process; information is produced and distributed by a media owner, such as the State or private corporation, and this is **passively consumed** by a mass audience.

A YouTube gaming channel where the producer is the consumer.

Crosbie (2002) has argued new media has three characteristics that make them very different to other forms of mass media:

- They can't exist without the appropriate (computer) **technology**.
- Information can be **personalised**; individualised messages tailored to the particular needs of those receiving them can be simultaneously delivered to vast numbers of people.
- **Collective control** means each person in a network can share, shape and change the content of the information being exchanged.

The distinction between old and new forms has important implications for our understanding of the mass media in terms of ideas about ownership and control, the selection of media content and the possible effects of the mass media on audiences that will be explored in more detail in subsequent sections.

Conventional debates, for example, have focused on the extent to which the media, as a **secondary socialising agency**, determines audience behaviour.

Similarly, debates over something like **censorship** - in terms of access to various kinds of information - have been transformed by the development of new media.

Researching the mass media

1. Content analysis

Quantitative forms of this research method are a statistical exercise, based on a content analysis **grid**, that involves *categorising* and *quantifying* aspects of behaviour to *systematically* reveal underlying patterns and themes in the media.

Meehan's (1983) study of US daytime television, for example, revealed the limited number of stereotypical roles played by female characters at this time and suggests this form is particularly useful for identifying and classifying **recurrent themes** in a media text, such that quite complex forms of social interaction can be explored.

In a slightly different way **Hogenraad** (2003) used computer-based content analysis to search historical media accounts of war to identify key recurring themes that signify the lead up to conflict. The objective here was to identify the *ideological markers*, transmitted to the audience that signified support for aggression.

Similarly, **Miller and Riechert** (1994) developed the idea of **concept mapping**, where computer technology is used to identify and describe 'themes or categories of content in large bodies of text'.

For **Page** (2005) this involved using computer technology to analyse different texts (such as newspaper articles going back many decades) to search for key words or phrases indicating the use of similar ideas or concepts - an idea similar to **tag clouds** where the most popular search options appear as larger text on a web site.

Page was interested in the social construction of global warming and he used "content analysis of prominent media streams from the mid-80s" to investigate whether or not the media advanced a **dominant interpretation** of this concept, as either a man-made or natural phenomenon.

In this way content analysis can be used **longitudinally** to track how ideas develop or are consolidated and can reveal media **patterns and trends** over a given time period that may be hidden to individual audience members.

This idea applies not just to *national* media - differences in understanding, interpretation and emphasis across *international* boundaries can also be revealed by content analysis.



Evaluation

We can illustrate these ideas further by outlining examples of research on "gender scripts" designed to tell an audience how to be male and female.

- **McRobbie** (1977) argued female identities - as depicted in the pages of Jackie", the best-selling teenage magazine of the time - were shaped by a "narrow and restricted view of life", marked by "Romance, problems, fashion, beauty and pop", coupled with an "idealised and romanticised" view of boys. Jackie girls inhabit a world of "romantic individualism" where the objective is to find and keep "her man".
- **Ferguson's** (1983) longitudinal analysis of women's magazines described a "cult of femininity" revolving around traditional female values of caring for others, marriage, and concern with appearance. The general message was women should define themselves in terms of male needs.
- **Sharpe's** (1976) study of teenage girls found female identities were shaped around "love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order".
- **Cumberbatch** (1990) found TV adverts used male and female identities in different ways - older men and younger women were more likely to be used than other age groups. The former featured heavily when an advertiser wanted to convey authority, especially when an advert featured technical expertise, while young women were used to convey sexiness.
- **Best** (1992) demonstrated how pre-school texts designed to develop reading skills are populated by sexist assumptions and stereotypes about males and females.
- **Kraepelin** (2007) examined how popular magazines aimed at teenage girls linked personal appearance with consumerism and consumption ("Women are constantly being made aware of their imperfections, then offered products that will help them attain the socially constructed ideal").
- **Ward** (2016) examined how the content of celebrity messages on Instagram affected the largely female fanbase response to different messages.

These examples, although relatively recent, largely predate the development of **new media** and this adds a new layer of diversity to the range of information now available; one that questions the kind of "cosy consensus" about gender represented through these studies, since the idea of a media consensus is more difficult to sustain where both access to and consumption of media has changed.

Cumberbatch's study, for example, was based on two commercial TV stations; there are now many hundreds of channels available.

Robson (2002) also points to a couple of **methodological strengths** of content analysis.

Firstly, it's an **unobtrusive** method; data can be taken from texts without the need to interact with research subjects. Consequently, there are few **ethical** problems with this type of research. In addition, the researcher doesn't rely on a respondent's memory or personal knowledge which removes a layer of potential bias from the research process.

Secondly, **reliability** is improved through the ability to **replicate** the research - something made easier by the unchanging nature of the source material.

In terms of **weaknesses**, while content analysis uncovers themes within texts, it doesn't tell us much about how audiences understand - or decode - media messages. Just because a theme is present, it doesn't mean an audience recognises it or necessarily accepts it.

Methodologically we have to assume identified patterns aren't simply **artefact effects** - a product of how data is classified. How a researcher categorises the content they observe, for example, may suggest a pattern of behaviour that is neither present nor has any affect on people's behaviour in the real world.

In addition, where the analysis involves making judgements about the categorisation of behaviour - the researcher decides the categories used - this may lower **reliability**: different researchers may use different categories or different criteria for placing behaviour into similar categories.

Qualitative forms of content analysis take a different approach.

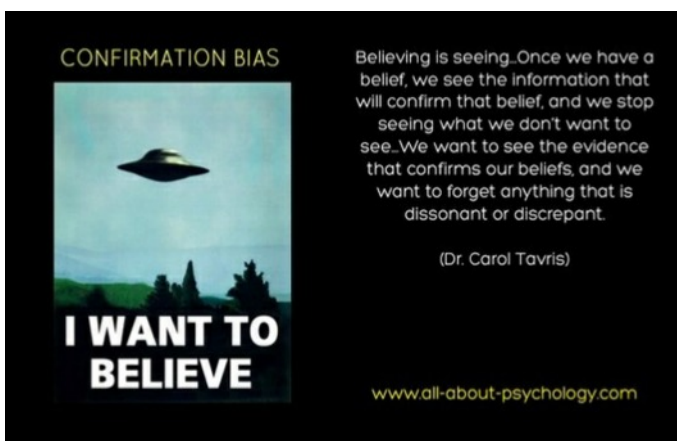
Conceptual (or **thematic**) analysis, for example, extends quantitative analysis by focusing on the concepts or themes that underlie media content such as news reports and magazine articles.

Philo and Berry (2004), for example, identify recurring themes in news reports of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, such as language differences when referring to similar forms of behaviour; Palestinians were frequently classed as 'terrorists' while Israeli settlers were called 'extremists' or 'vigilantes'.

Relational (or **textual**) analysis examines how texts encourage readers to see something in a particular way.

Hall (1980) refers to this as a **preferred reading** - how a text is constructed, through the use of language, pictures and illustrations, for example, subtly "tells" the audience how to interpret the information presented. Professional sport in British popular newspapers, for example, is frequently presented in a way that suggests it is almost exclusively a male activity.

In terms of **limitations**, the depth and complexity of qualitative analyses makes them labour-intensive and time consuming, while the **subjectivity** of the analysis introduces **reliability** problems - different researchers may interpret the meaning of the data differently, depending on their initial theoretical perspective.



They are also prone to **confirmation bias** (*cherry-picking*); it's relatively easy for a researcher to interpret data in ways that confirm their initial hypothesis, while ignoring data that doesn't fit neatly into the hypothesis.

2. Semiology

Semiology is the study of **cultural meanings** embedded in media forms and, as **Stokes** (2003) suggests, is frequently combined with content analysis to produce a more-rounded picture of media texts through its ability to explore and interpret the 'hidden messages' embedded within texts. In this respect, semiology is based on two fundamental ideas: **signs** and **codes**.

Danesi and Perron (1999) define **signs** as:

"something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity"

while **Saussure** (1974) argues signs consist of two ideas:

1. The **signifier** - the particular form taken by a sign.
2. The **signified** - what the sign represents.

The word "natural", for example, is a signifier for something "not artificial"; however, it can also represent a range of different ideas, depending on the context.

In **advertising**, for example, "natural" is frequently used to signify ideas like "good" and "healthy" (even though there are numerous things in nature that are neither good nor healthy). This general idea can be further expressed in terms of two levels of **meaning**:

1. The **denotative** or what something *is* - a literal representation.
2. The **connotative** - what something **means**.



*A light bulb denotes a source of light.
But what connotations can it have?*

Signs always have a meaning - although the meaning can differ from group to group or culture to culture.

In our culture a man giving a woman 12 red roses might intend to symbolise his love or affection; doing the same in Russia symbolises death - even numbers of flowers are only given to people at funerals.

Chandler (2009) notes "the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated"; codes "provide a framework within which signs make sense".

Codes, therefore, refer to **conventions** that "need to be learned" and language itself is an example of the relationship between signs and codes. The meaning of a word (sign) depends on the grammatical context (code) within which it is located.

Codes have three significant features:

1. They are an **integral** part of communication - language cannot function without them.
2. They must be **shared**; in any communication system everyone needs to understand the cultural codes being used; where two people don't speak the same language, for example, they often use **visual codes** (*non-verbal communication*) such as hand gestures, as a way of finding some common grounds for communication.



Probably just tired?

3. Codes can create "hidden meanings" within a text - advertisers, for example, use words like "natural" as a cultural code to suggest "health" (using a variety of visual cues to embed this association) without actually having to support the claim their "natural product" is indeed healthy.

*Death Cap mushrooms:
perfectly natural and perfectly poisonous
(the clue is in the name)*



The death of love?

These features of coding means semiology can be used to analyse media texts in two ways:

Firstly, to understand how **conventions** are used by media organisations to convey a variety of messages - from selling *things*, such as consumer goods, to *ideas* - such as lifestyles or ideologies.

Advertising, for example, uses simple codes to encourage people to both **consume** and, of course, consume the "right things" (an advertiser's product rather than that of a rival). **Jhally's** (1987) study of 1000 U.S. television commercials, for example, looked at how product advertising is **framed** in relation to different target audiences, such as males and females - something that involved two processes:

- inventing qualities for products that define the **essence of their existence** (such as "the science bit" in the advertising of female cosmetics).
- **disconnecting** products from their overt, practical, use and reconnecting them to a range of abstract qualities. This allows *consumers* to invest products with the qualities they personally desire. Where one floor cleaning product is much like any other, the advertiser seeks to imbue their product with desirable, but abstract, properties (ease of use, efficiency, time saving...).



Jhally combined **content analysis** - identifying the characteristics of different types of advert - with **semiology** to uncover how products are sold to different audiences using different cultural appeals:

- 75% of adverts aimed at men were focused around transport, alcohol and personal care.
- 60% of adverts aimed at women focused on personal care, food and drugs.

Jhally found the most common codes involved **testimonial appeals**; associating the product with someone the audience:

- *admires*, using popular personalities to endorse a products
- *wants to be*, using "idealised" individuals: fantasy figures the consumer could be if they bought the product
- *is* - using "ordinary people" with the same characteristics as the target consumer.

Semiologically, therefore, it's possible to identify codes used by something like advertising that cover a range of possibilities:

- from **exclusions** - repetitive messages that exclude or drown-out rival interpretations, "because you're worth it".
- through **associations** between something culturally desirable, such as status or sophistication, and the product: "designer clothing" is a good example here,
- to **disassociations**; trying to ensure a product is disconnected from associations that may damage its image.



Secondly, semiological analysis allows us to understand *why* various conventions are used by the media - something that, for Marxist approaches, involves ideas about **power** and **manipulation**.

Althusser (1972), for example, suggests semiological analysis reveals the *ideological assumptions and manipulations* underpinning media texts and, by so doing, demonstrates how:

"knowledge is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations".



Contemporary consumption sites such as Instagram have taken "celebrity endorsements" to a whole new level of influencing...

For **Althusser** media texts are part of the **ideological state apparatus** in capitalist societies; they promote ideas favourable to the interests of a ruling class in increasingly sophisticated ways using a variety of devices - one of which, as we've suggested, is through **preferred readings**. Newspaper headlines and subheadings, for example, tell the reader what to expect before they've read the article, while captions tell an audience what a picture **means**.

The **Glasgow Media Group** (1976) show how semiology can be used to identify the **assumptions** that lie behind the presentation of television news. Their analysis of how **industrial disputes** were portrayed illustrated subtle (and not so subtle) forms of bias:

- Employers, for example, were generally filmed in a relatively calm environment (an office, behind a desk) and the reporter would ask respectful questions the employer was allowed to answer without interruption.
- Employees, often simply identified as "striking workers", were most often pictured outside and the questioning was more aggressive with the emphasis on the employee justifying their actions.

Evaluation

Rose (2007) argues semiology has a range of advantages:

- it requires very few resources.
- is relatively cheap to carry out.
- **reliability** issues, while always relevant, are less so when the researcher isn't necessarily trying to **generalise** their findings from the group they are studying to wider society.

Although it is an *interpretive method*, analysis can be grounded in **empirical research** (as with, for example, the **Glasgow Media Group**) and can be combined with quantitative forms of content analysis to produce *triangulated research*.



Does semiological research involve taking a privileged position whereby the researcher is both judge and jury on the meaning of the behaviour they're studying?

Semiology provides useful tools for analysing the meaning of media texts, to demonstrate how and why the media construct "social realities" in fundamentally ideological and manipulative ways (from selling products to selling ideas).

Marxism, in particular, has used semiology to reveal how various cultural conventions, such as social and economic inequality, are presented as "natural", inevitable and unchangeable. Where semiological analysis is underpinned by **empirical** research it provides insights into the way powerful groups, from corporations to political parties, use the media to influence public perceptions and opinions.

Semiological analysis does, however, tend to be on much weaker ground in relation to how audiences understand and interpret media messages and codes. We can't, for example, simply *assume* that because a researcher is able to uncover "hidden meanings" in a text this is necessarily the case for a casual audience. **Rose** also points-out that a researcher requires a thorough grounding in their subject matter if they are to identify and understand the codes and conventions involved; a semiological analysis of Hollywood films, for example, would be difficult for a researcher who had little or no knowledge of cinema.

A more-fundamental criticism, particularly as it applies to Marxist analysis, is the belief that media messages are **layered**; "core ideas" are embedded in layers of seemingly inconsequential ideas.

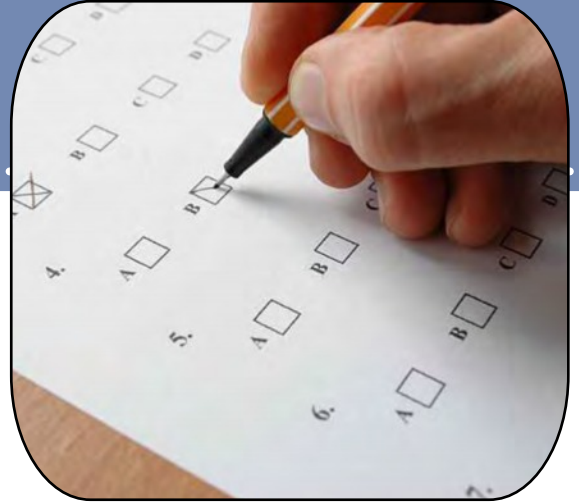
The "real message" of advertising, for example, is not about buying one product rather than another; it's about *consumption*.

This assumes there are "real" messages that can be found by peeling back the layers under which they're disguised and the researcher gives themselves a **privileged position** - someone who "knows the real meaning" of media messages.



When **Hebdidge** (1979), for example, writes about 'the meaning of style' in youth subcultures, he argues some punks wore Nazi swastikas in an 'ironic way'.

Young (2001), however, argues, that whatever the truth of this assertion it is simply an interpretation unsupported by evidence.



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