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*Media Culture Society* 2010 32: 505

DOI: 10.1177/0163443710361658

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# Revisiting 'mass communication' and the 'work' of the audience in the new media environment

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'Mass communication' has been an embattled term. As the media environment has evolved, arguments have persisted that it has outlived its usefulness; that it fails to capture the dynamics of the contemporary media system. Though diminished, the term has endured. Technological changes now taking place compel further re-examination of the term and its continued relevance in communications scholarship. However, there have been few efforts to reassess mass communication as a concept in light of the changes that new media technologies such as the internet have imposed upon the media environment (for exceptions, see Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Lorimer, 2002). And no such reassessments have been conducted recently enough to fully consider the implications of recent developments such as the rise of Web 2.0 platforms and user-generated content.

In an effort to address this gap, this article revisits the concept of mass communication, paying particular attention to the role that the audience plays in the process of mass communication, given, as Mosco and Kaye (2000: 33) note, 'the term *audience* has over time become embedded within the literature of mass communication studies'. As this article illustrates, a contemporary approach to mass communication can be articulated around a more robust conceptualization of the idea of the 'mass', in which the term refers both to the senders and receivers of information. Such a formulation of the concept of mass communication, and the role of the audience within it, better reflects the contemporary dynamics of interactive media and user-generated content.

Such an approach highlights the changing nature of media audiences (Napoli, in press). While scholars have devoted substantial attention to the ways new media recast the notion of the audience (Cover, 2006; Livingstone, 1999, 2003), one set of propositions about media audiences that has not been thoroughly reassessed involves the 'work' of the audience (Jhally and Livant, 1986; Smythe, 1977). Like the concept of mass communication, this notion of 'watching as working' (Jhally and Livant, 1986) has been on the wane over the past two decades. However, today's reconfigured dynamics of mass communication compel us to revisit the relevance and utility of this notion of the 'work' of the audience.

## The rise and decline of mass communication

A key argument here is that the term 'mass communication' is inherently flexible enough to satisfactorily account for the dynamics of the contemporary media environment. This position contrasts with assessments over the past three decades that have asserted that the term is something of an historical anachronism, incapable of supporting a useful overarching framework for representing the contemporary media environment (e.g. Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Escarpit, 1977).

### *Origins of the term*

It is difficult to locate the definitive origins of the term 'mass communication'. Chaffee and Rogers (1997) tentatively attribute its origins to Rockefeller Foundation official John Marshall, who, from the 1930s through the 1950s was instrumental in bringing together scholars from around the US with an interest in communications research and funding a substantial amount of early research in the nascent field. Buxton (1994) similarly speculates that Marshall's use of the term in a 1940 memorandum may have been the first use of the term as an analytical concept, though the term itself predates Marshall's use (see Hettinger, 1935; Kaempffert, 1931).

It is within the context of these convenings that Harold Lasswell's (1948) well-known framework for the field: 'Who says what to whom via what channel with what effect?' was developed. There has been speculation that this framework also originated with Marshall (Buxton, 1994). As historians of the field have noted, the effects component of this framework came to dominate, and thus characterize, early mass communication research. This tendency reflected concerns about domestic and international opinion formation and influence that were prominent at the time, in response to events such as the two world wars and the Cold War (Gary, 1996; Peters, 1986). It is also important to note that, in light of the accumulation of findings over the next two decades indicating low levels of the types of media effects that were being investigated, some observers asserted, even at this early point in the history of mass communication as an academic field, that the field was essentially a dead end (Berelson, 1959; Klapper, 1960). Such assessments obviously approached mass communication as an academic field with much narrower parameters than were articulated by Lasswell (1948).

While a review of all of the definitional approaches to the term mass communication is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize that, even in its earliest incarnations, the precise scope of the term was contested territory. In 1953, sociologist Eliot Freidson outlined what he perceived as the predominant definition of mass communication, which included four distinguishing features of the mass audience: (1) it is heterogeneous in composition; (2) it is composed of individuals who do not know each other; (3) the members of the mass are spatially separated; and (4) the mass has no definite leadership and a very loose organization (1953: 313).

An oft-cited definition by Wright (1960) emphasized the following three elements of mass communication: (a) content is directed toward large, heterogeneous, anonymous audiences; (b) content is transmitted publicly, and often reaches audiences simultaneously; and (c) the communicator tends to be, or operate within, a complex organization that may involve great expense. Early on, the concept also was strongly associated with the broader theoretical notion of the 'mass society' (e.g. Wirth, 1948), which tended to emphasize audiences as an aggregate of somewhat passive, atomized individuals highly susceptible to mass mediated messages (see Beniger, 1987; Peters, 1996).

*A concept in decline*

By the 1970s, scholars began to question the applicability of such formulations of the concept of mass communication to the dynamics of a changing media environment, in which a greater proportion of the media system was composed of outlets serving relatively narrow segments of the audience (e.g. Maisel, 1973). In a 1977 article in the *Journal of Communication*, Robert Escarpit described the notion of the 'mass' as 'rapidly dissolving to be replaced by the puzzling yet far more workable image of an intricate network of communication channels' (1977: 47). As Maisel noted in 1973:

... we must begin to think of, and study, the individual in our society as a communicator having access to a very powerful set of media tools and as a recipient of a wide range of equally enriched communications directed to him by others. (1973: 170)

Certainly, these statements from over 30 years ago are quite reflective of the dynamics of contemporary communication. Underlying them, however, was the premise that the mass communication concept does not – or cannot – account for communications dynamics that extend far outside of the mass society paradigm.

This impetus behind the decline of mass communication as an orienting term accelerated in the late 1980s and picked up increased momentum in the 1990s (Turow, 1990). During this time, the evolving media environment, with its ability to facilitate the targeting of small, homogeneous audience segments due to increased media fragmentation (particularly the growth of cable, the VCR and, later, the internet), and its ability to facilitate more interactive forms of communication, increasingly became one in which perceived traditional notions of mass communication, involving the one-to-many dissemination of content to a large, heterogeneous audience who simultaneously received the content, represented an increasingly rare form of communication (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Neuman, 1991).

Such critiques affected the self-image of the field, as many academic departments renamed themselves, abandoning the mass communication label in favor of terms such as 'media studies' or 'telecommunications'. In 1996, one of the field's major academic associations changed its name from the International Association for Mass Communication Research to the International Association for Media and Communication Research (Nordenstreng, 2008). In 2001, one of the prominent journals in the field, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, changed its name to *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Clearly, the term mass communication has been on the wane.

*Alternative interpretations*

The above account represents the fairly standard narrative of the decline of mass communication as an orienting term. It is important to emphasize, however, that some scholars have sought to defend mass communication from decline by offering reinterpretations that better position the term to capture contemporary communications dynamics (e.g. Budd and Ruben, 1988). Turow (1990, 1992) proposed an approach in the early 1990s that stripped away many of the term's (perceived) traditional definitional elements and focused instead exclusively on the industrialized production and distribution of content. Such an approach foregrounds a scholarly focus on the structure and behavior of media institutions and the consumption of the content they produce (Turow, 1992). This 're-positioning' of mass communication can be seen as an effort to maintain the relevance of the term in the face of the fragmentation taking place in the media environment in the 1980s and early 1990s by 'shifting the primary

focus of the word “mass” from the nature of the audience to the nature of the process” (Turow, 1990: 16).

Obviously though, Turow’s effort fails to maintain the term’s relevance in the face of the ways that the dynamics of mediated communication have changed since the pre-internet days of 1992, in which the diminished prominence of the institutional communicator and the rise of the individual as mass communicator are defining characteristics. However, efforts such as Turow’s do suggest a level of persistent definitional ambiguity and flexibility in the term that allows for, and perhaps even justifies, continued reconsideration in light of ongoing technological changes.

The interpretive flexibility of the term is further reflected in the alternative narrative of its intellectual history that has been convincingly constructed – one in which the logic of the term’s decline seems much weaker. Historical research has revealed the prominence of a much richer conceptualization of mass communication, even in the term’s early, formative stages. Peters (1996), for instance, argues that it was only *after* the Second World War that the dominant approach to the process of mass communication involved the simplified one-to-many exchange between media outlet and a large, undifferentiated, largely passive, audience. Prior to, and during, the war:

thinkers who pondered broadcasting were attentive to the potential for interchange within large scale communication.... Many were fascinated and alarmed by radio’s apparent intimacy, its penetration of private spaces, and its ability to stage dialogues and personal relationships with listeners. The question was often less how radio amassed audiences than how it individualized them. (Peters, 1996: 109)

Along similar lines, many histories of media audiences have emphasized that the arrival of what are typically termed ‘mass media’ operated early on with much more robust, individualistic and interactive conceptualizations of the mass audience than is commonly assumed (Butsch, 2000, 2008; Lenthall, 2007; Newman, 2004; Ross, 1999).

As this discussion suggests, the meaning of the term ‘mass communication’ has not been as rigidly narrow as is often assumed. Ultimately, the extent to which one sees the concept as having diminished relevance depends upon what one embraces as the concept’s key defining characteristics. For instance, some approaches to defining the term have downplayed the centrality of simultaneous delivery of content, given that the long shelf-life of content allows it to aggregate audiences over time (Webster and Phalen, 1997). Similarly, the centrality of an undifferentiated, anonymous audience has been critiqued as more ideal-typical than realistic, given the history of efforts to segment audiences according to identifiable criteria (Webster and Phalen, 1997). A number of scholars have taken issue with mass communication ever being exclusively associated with the one-way dissemination of content among a large, undifferentiated, and largely passive audience (Cantor and Cantor, 1986; Corner, 1979; Mosco and Kaye, 2000). Such perspectives extend back almost 60 years. Like many later scholars, Freidson (1953) questioned these somewhat limited interpretive approaches to mass communication, emphasizing instead the innately social character of being part of a mass audience.

Beniger’s (1987) overview of the theoretical perspectives that characterized mass communication research from the 1930s through the 1980s illustrates the prominence of theoretical approaches (ranging from uses and gratifications to audience decoding to framing) that extend well beyond notions of one-to-many dissemination of messages, simultaneously received, and similarly interpreted, by large, heterogeneous and largely passive audiences, that came to (mis)characterize the field in many circles. Thus, it would seem that mass communication has always extended beyond the limitations inherent in the mass society paradigm.

This continues to be the case, as many assessments of the ‘de-massifying’ effects of the new media environment prompted by the emergence of the internet have concluded

that the concept of mass communication maintains a position of relevance – and even prominence – in the online realm (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Downes, 2000; Napoli, 1998, 2008; Roscoe, 1999). The prominence of this perspective reflects that many of the more critical approaches to the term have tended to significantly oversimplify its meaning, and that these oversimplifications were misleading in terms of the characterizations of the media audience produced by the field and in terms of the range of scholarship being produced under the ‘mass communication’ heading (Beniger, 1987; Lorimer, 2002).

As should be clear, at the very least we can see that a precise definition of ‘mass communication’ has long been contested territory. Indeed, the main point here is that this is a term whose definitional origins are sufficiently ambiguous, and whose definitional history has been sufficiently dynamic, to allow – and even to warrant – contemporary reconsideration.

### Reconceptualizing mass communication

The concept of mass communication can effectively account for the dramatic changes taking place within the contemporary media environment when the term ‘mass’ is conceptualized a bit more inclusively, to account not just for the receivers of content, or for the nature of the production process, but for the senders of content as well. The communication dynamics reflected in Web 2.0 (see Mabilot, 2007) applications such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter increasingly foreground an approach to mass communication in which the individual audience member operates on nearly equal footing with traditional institutional communicators. The new media environment is one in which the tools of participation in public discourse and creative activity are much more widely distributed (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Benkler, 2006; Kendall, 2008). Mass communication is now a much more egalitarian process, in which the masses can now communicate to the masses (Fonio et al., 2007). The one-to-many dynamic at the core of the meaning of ‘mass communication’ persists here – there simply are many, many more instances of it. This proliferation of the one-to-many capacity represents the communication dynamic that was largely absent from previous incarnations of our media system, in which the capacity to mass communicate was confined to a select few.

Terms such as ‘prosumers’ and ‘produsage’ have been coined to capture the ways in which the media audience is evolving, and the ways in which content production and distribution are migrating beyond the traditional industrial paradigm (Bruns, 2007; Deuze, 2003). As Beer and Burrows (2007: 8) note: ‘Perhaps the key defining feature of Web 2.0 is that users are involved in processes of production and consumption as they generate and browse online content, as they tag and blog, post and share.’ One forecast estimates that, by 2010, 70 percent of the content available online will be created by individuals (Slot and Frissen, 2007).

What is surprising about many user-generated content discussions is that the focus is often misguidedly on the revolutionary or disruptive aspects of users’ abilities to *produce* content. Even the term *user-generated* content reflects this misplaced emphasis. This is not the aspect of contemporary developments that is new or of the greatest significance. Users’ capacity to generate content has been around for some time, due to the long-established availability of technologies such as home video cameras, PCs, typewriters and home recording equipment. What is different today is the ability of users to *distribute* content, to use the web to circulate their user-generated content (as well as, to media companies’ dismay, traditional media content) to an unprecedented extent.

Shifting our focus to the distribution issue highlights how the increasingly global reach of the internet eliminates any notion of the relevance of the mass communication concept being undermined by the dramatic fragmentation of media audiences that has taken place over the past 15 years. As fragmented as the media environment may be, it is still possible for homemade videos produced by individuals sitting at their computers to be watched by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people worldwide via YouTube, or for a song produced by an unsigned band to attract a similarly large listenership via online distribution. The globalization of the potential audience available online serves as a counterweight to media and audience fragmentation. A study by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company indicated that the primary reason that people post user-generated videos online is to achieve fame and recognition (Bughin, 2007). Clearly, the intention here is to reach as large an audience as possible – not to target narrow niches. In the contemporary media environment, the masses often seek to reach the masses.

### *The diminishing importance of institutional communicators*

This re-orientation of the mass communication concept runs contrary to some previous efforts (e.g. Budd and Ruben, 1988; Turow, 1990, 1992) in one very important way – it suggests a definition of the term that is not dependent upon the involvement of an ‘institutional communicator’. Though the notion of mass communication emanating from some form of complex organization has been central to many definitions of the term (e.g. Budd and Ruben, 1988; O’Sullivan et al., 1983; Turow, 1990), it has not been central to all of them. Some definitions do not directly address the nature of the source of the communication, focusing instead on the nature of the content and/or the audience (e.g. Freidson, 1953). In other instances, the presence of the institutional communicator has been expressed as a tendency, rather than as a fundamental component. Wright (1960: 606), for instance, states that: ‘the communicator *tends* to be, or operate within, a complex organization that may involve great expense’ (emphasis added).

An approach to mass communication that eschews the centrality of the institutional communicator does not seem to contradict the term’s intellectual history. In addition, to the extent that the de-institutionalization of mass communication is a defining characteristic of the new media environment, such an interpretive approach to the term is fundamental not only to the term’s continuing relevance, but also to its logical consistency. An adherence to a definition that accounts *exclusively* for the institutional communicator is one in which, in assessing two different speakers utilizing the same medium and transmitting the same type of content to an audience of the same size and composition, we would – based solely on the characteristics of the speakers – determine that one is engaging in mass communication while the other is not (think, for instance, of a record label’s and an unsigned band’s use of the web to distribute music). Utilizing the institutional communicator as a point of distinction made more sense when the institutional communicator had exclusive access to communications platforms that other speakers did not. Of course, online this is no longer the case.

The point here is that the traditional institutional communicator has no status of exclusivity within the mass communication concept. That being said, it is important to recognize that many of the de-institutionalized forms of mass communication that are now taking place still involve traditional institutional communicators – only in more ancillary roles as content aggregators, navigation services or platform providers (e.g. Google, YouTube, MySpace and Facebook). These forms of integrated activity between the institutional communicator and the individual user are, in fact, central to the emerging significance of the ‘work’ of the audience.

## The new mass audience and its work

The previous section suggested an approach to mass communication involving a definition of 'mass' that encompasses both the senders and the receivers of messages. This redefinition strikes directly at the notion of the 'mass audience' that has long been a central element of the concept of mass communication (see e.g. Neuman, 1991; Webster and Phalen, 1997).

One important outgrowth of this proposed re-orientation is the way it resurrects a line of thinking about the mass audience that has been largely dormant in recent years. Specifically, when we consider an approach to mass communication that incorporates the mass audience not only as receivers of messages but also as senders, and when we also look at how the place of the audience as mass communicators is now being integrated into our media system, we are confronted with the issue of the 'work' that the audience engages in in the new media environment.

### *Revisiting the audience commodity and its work*

The notion that media audiences work began with Dallas Smythe (1977), who, in providing the initial influential formulation of the media audience as a 'commodity' manufactured and sold by ad-supported media, argued that the act of consuming media represented a form of wageless labor that audiences engaged in on behalf of advertisers. According to Smythe (1977: 6), the work that audiences engaged in was to 'learn to buy particular "brands" of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly. In short, they work to create the demand for advertised goods.' Smythe's observation was central to his critique of what he saw as a failing by Marxist theorists to adequately account for the production of audiences in their analyses of the political economy of the media, which, according to Smythe, tended to focus overwhelmingly (and misguidedly) on content production.

Smythe's notion of the work of the audience was taken up and expanded by Jhally and Livant (1986: 127), who, with a focus on television, argued that the advertising revenue programmers earn that extends beyond the costs of the programming represents 'surplus watching time'. Jhally (1982) and Livant (1982), in earlier iterations of the ideas that would be central to their later collaborative piece, emphasized their departure from Smythe in the extent to which they saw audiences working not for the advertisers but for the mass media (Jhally, 1982: 208; Livant, 1982: 213). The viewing audience, having already received their 'wage' in the form of free programming, was now, in their program viewing, working on behalf of the programmer. The programmer is then able to convert this surplus watching time into additional advertising revenue.

This perspective on the media audience was the subject of substantial debate and discussion at the time (e.g. Livant, 1979; Murdock, 1978; Smythe, 1978). In the years since, however, this perspective has received relatively little attention in communications scholarship (Artz, 2008; for exceptions, see Andrejevic, 2002; Cohen, 2008; Shimpach, 2005). However, just as contemporary developments in the media environment have invited a reconsideration of the concept of mass communication, so too do they invite reconsideration of this corollary notion of the work of the mass audience.

Again, the key driver here is the way that the new media environment empowers the audience to serve as both receivers and senders of mass communication. Specifically, the notion of the work of the audience, which may have been a bit more tenuous when the work being monetized was isolated to media consumption, becomes more concrete in an environment in which the creative work of the audience is an increasingly important source of economic value for media organizations.



This brings us back to Web 2.0 applications and the ways they help the masses to mass communicate. Here, the concern is not just with the fact that such communication is taking place, but also with the fact that the communication itself often becomes a revenue generator for media organizations. The dynamic under consideration here is well-expressed by Cohen:

Web 2.0 has altered the terrain of the media business, notably by adjusting consumers' roles in the production process. Business models based on the notion of the consumer as producer have allowed Web 2.0 applications to capitalize on time spent participating in communicative activity and information sharing. In mass media models, the role of consumers has been just that, to consume, or to watch and read the product. Web 2.0 consumers, however, have become producers who fulfill a critical role. (2008: 7)

The advertising revenues that sites such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace generate are derived substantially from audience attention captured with content produced by members of the user/audience community. Aggregating or providing a common platform for user-generated content, and then selling advertising on these platforms, represents the core business model of most Web 2.0 applications. User-generated content such as comments, ratings and reviews has also become an important source of added value for organizations involved in the production or distribution of traditional institutionally produced content. Examples along these lines include the user ratings/comments on sites such as Netflix or Amazon, and the increasing extent to which newspapers' websites incorporate reader feedback and comments into their presentation of traditional journalism.

The work of the contemporary media audience can be taken one step further. Increasingly, not only are audiences contributing content that can be monetized by content providers, but it is also increasingly the case that audiences engage in the work of the advertisers and marketers who traditionally support these content providers. Audiences today assist with the marketing of products in a variety of ways, ranging from producing commercials to engaging in online word-of-mouth endorsements, to integrating brand messages into their own communication platforms (e.g. their MySpace or Facebook pages) (Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Deuze, 2007; Spurgeon, 2008). Contemporary marketing and advertising strategy increasingly focus on taking the value of consumer 'word-of-mouth' to entirely new levels and developing new methods for encouraging consumers to do the work of the marketers and advertisers in the dissemination of brand messages. Thus, the early division between those who perceived the audience as working for advertisers (Smythe, 1977) and those who perceived the audience as working for media organizations (Jhally and Livant, 1986) seems to have been bridged in the new media environment, in which audiences seem to be working for both.

The nature of these extensions of the work of the audience highlights one of the most distinctive, yet under-examined, aspects of the economics of media – the extent to which individuals engage in the production of media products absent any guarantee – or even expectation – of financial compensation. This has always been the case, ranging back to unpublished novels and short stories stashed in desk drawers, to garage bands toiling away without a recording contract. What is different today, of course, is that producers of content now have access to potential audiences that was largely missing in previous generations. Another distinguishing characteristic of the activities of today's audience is their demonstrated willingness to allow others (typically media organizations) to capture the revenue generated by their aggregated efforts.

This latter point reflects the value that individuals place on enhancing their opportunity to reach audiences. This need helps to maintain a role for the institutional communicators

who typically manage the Web 2.0 platforms that provide an opportunity (via the aggregation of content and the investment in marketing resources) for greater audience reach than individual communicators could likely achieve on their own. Thus, it is this enhanced ability to access an audience with one's creative expression that online media organizations are now providing in exchange for that creative expression – which they in turn monetize. This is obviously a very different content production/distribution/exhibition/consumption dynamic than has characterized traditional media, and one that requires substantial further research.

## Conclusion

As Morris and Ogan (1996: 42) noted in an early assessment of the internet: 'A new communication technology ... allows scholars to rethink, rather than abandon, definitions and categories.' In engaging in such an effort, this analysis has focused on why the concept of mass communication *can* effectively reflect the communication dynamics of the new media environment. However, it is also important to address the question of why it *should* continue to be used; otherwise, this analysis is primarily a semantic exercise. Maintaining the use of the term 'mass communication' in the new media environment is, in many ways, a corrective to the narrow approaches to the term that, as this article has illustrated, to an extent misrepresented and over-simplified what the term actually meant throughout its history, and the nature of the academic field that emerged around it. Maintenance of the term reflects the continued relevance and analytical utility of associated theoretical approaches such as uses and gratifications and agenda-setting (regarding the latter, for instance, we are only just beginning to understand the complex inter-media agenda-setting effects taking place between the mainstream media, the 'blogosphere' and the public). The concept of mass communication has never been the poor fit for the communications dynamics of the new media environment that many of the term's more recent critics have asserted.

In many ways, the field is at an historical moment today that is not unlike that nearly 50 years ago, when the absence of evidence of powerful attitudinal media effects was seen by some as signifying the death of the field (Beniger, 1987). However, mass communication was always about more than narrowly defined media effects, as Lasswell's original framework makes very clear. Thus it was a mistake to define the field of mass communication purely in terms of its ability to document significant, empirically measurable effects on attitudes and opinions. So too is it a mistake – in terms of mischaracterizing the field's history and in terms of mischaracterizing the historical meaning of the term – to define the field of mass communication purely in terms of the analysis of the mass production and one-way dissemination of messages by institutional communicators to audiences. In this regard, then, reasserting a more robust, well-rounded – and historically grounded – conceptualization of the term and its associated field highlights the relevance of both to today's media environment.

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