55

Mass Communications

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This chapter begins by taking up two major challenges facing a sociological analysis of mass communications. One is to define and specifically to set boundaries on precisely what constitute mass communications and the other is to specify what constitutes sociological research on mass communications, when much of what should be included in the literature is produced by people who are not sociologists. The chapter then addresses the origins of mass communications research because these roots, particularly concerns about propaganda and an interest in using mass communications for commercial purposes, have had an enormous influence on the development of the field.

Following an overview of the history, the chapter takes up the three primary coordinates for examining the sociology of mass communications: content, communicators, and audiences. The content of mass communications has been examined from two major approaches encompassing varieties of content analysis and discourse analysis. Content analysis has been favored by those who see the interpretation of content as less problematic than those who adopt a discourse analysis approach, which takes into account the subjective nature of texts and the likelihood of multiple readings. Research focusing on media communicators includes analysis of the industry, where the problem of concentrated ownership and control has occupied considerable attention. It also takes up the organization of mass communication activities, with scholars here calling attention to the impact of work practices and organizational routines on media content. Finally, mass communicator research also examines the profession of mass communications and specifically the tensions between professional and worker values and identities. The third element of mass communications research focuses on audiences or the receivers and users of what the media produce. Research here encompasses the nature of the audience, particularly the extent of its active involvement in media interpretation and use, and the relationship of the audience concept to more traditional sociological categories such as social class, status, race, and gender. The chapter concludes by raising questions about the future of mass communications and the challenges that current transformations are posing to sociological research and to communication policy.

WHAT IS THE SOCIOLOGY OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS?

There are numerous useful definitions of communication, starting with the technical meaning provided by Shannon and Weaver (1949). Although the authors begin with the rather ethereal view of communication as the ways in which one mind can affect another, they concentrate on the process by which a communicator or encoder sends a message or signal through a transmitter in such a way as to minimize noise and reach a recipient or decoder. Various forms of this definition have proved to be popular, including the colloquial but useful "who says what to whom for what purpose." I have offered a version that is explicitly sociological and resists the labeling of senders and receivers: Communication is a social process of exchange whose content is the measure or mark of a social relationship (Mosco 1996).

The meaning of communication is debatable, but it is less of a problem than determining what *mass* means. In general, to distinguish it from interpersonal communication or the exchange of messages between two or a few people, mass communications refers to the process of sending messages from one or a few sources to many receivers. The difficulty is determining just when interpersonal becomes mass communications and when mass communications becomes popular communication. At the heart of mass communications are forms defined by their technical means of communication, primarily newspapers, radio and television broadcasting, and cinema. The definitional challenges arise when it is a small group of people producing a newspaper, setting up a small radio network, or making a documentary for another small group of people. Are these forms of mass communication because they are intended for more people than produce it and because they use means of communication that are typically associated with mass communications? Or are they interpersonal communication because of the small scale of the sender-receiver relationship? Or are they examples of another form of communication, what Mattelart (1983) has called *popular communication* to refer to communication that grows out of the grass roots and is intended to expand the power of the masses? There is no fine line to separate interpersonal from mass communications or mass from popular communication. However, the distinctions are useful as long as they are not too sharply drawn. Mass communications relate to message transmission from a small group of people with more power than the large group of people to whom they communicate. Interpersonal communication also involves power but tends to be more horizontal and includes fewer people. Finally, popular communication tends to emanate from the ground up and may include a few or many communicators and a large or small audience.

In addition to the challenge of specifying mass communications, there is the difficulty of defining the community of scholars who carry out research in the field. Sociologists have made significant contributions to all facets of mass communications scholarship from the pioneering methodological strategies of Paul Lazarsfeld and Patricia Kendall (1948) to the analysis of how mass communications work is organized and produced in Gaye Tuchman's (1990) and Herbert Gans's (2004) work, on through the study of social movements and industry power in the research of Todd Gitlin (2003). Nevertheless, there is as much or even more work that takes up key points of interest for the sociology of mass communications produced by people who are not sociologists. Address only the work of those trained in sociology, and you would likely produce a well-integrated map of the sociology of mass communications, but it would be far less than complete, particularly in important areas where sociology meets historical and political economic analysis. Consequently, this chapter takes a more expansive approach to the field by defining broadly the kind of work that fits within the arena of mass communications and by addressing the work of scholars that bears centrally on the sociology of mass communications, regardless of whether these scholars are defined or define themselves as sociologists.

ORIGINS: PROPAGANDA AND ADVERTISING

The process of sending messages from one person or a small group to many people is not new. From antiquity, large organizations such as states and religious organizations depended on steady flow of mass communications. However, it is not after the arrival of the printing press in the fifteenth century that we begin to see an acceleration in the speed and in the reach of mass communications. Nevertheless, mass communications still depended for centuries on the speed of transportation that would be needed to physically carry messages, in whatever print form, to their destination. As Carey (1992) and more recently Starr (2004) have described, the arrival of the telegraph broke the connection between communication and transportation by permitting messages to be sent electronically over ever-increasing distances. Schudson (1978) and Schiller (1981) have documented just how crucial this was in the expansion of the mass-circulation newspaper in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to the telegraph, newspapers reached large numbers of people but only after their news made the long and costly journey over land or sea, taking weeks or months to deliver the results of an election or other major news event. The mass-circulation newspaper also raised the fears of those who worried about the power such forms of mass communications could display and encouraged the hopes of those who saw opportunities to expand commerce.

These fears and hopes grew with the telephone, although it is more the icon of expanded interpersonal communication, and they grew even more with the rise of radio and later television broadcasting. Radio came along in the 1920s at a time of growing tension among states and growing interest in expanding commercial markets. The former led to the worry that foreign states might make use of the new means of communication to penetrate distant societies and use propaganda to accomplish their goals of conquest without having to resort to military invasion. There were also domestic fears among many that their own governments would use radio to expand internal propaganda and thereby shout down the alternative voices that lacked the power to reach the masses but that were necessary to strengthen democracy. For those who feared the growth of fascism, the skilled use of the microphone by early electronic propagandists such as Goebbels was more than just worrisome. But Americans who opposed what they felt was the bigotry of religious zealots such as Father Coughlin or who opposed the New Deal and the "fireside chats" that President Roosevelt used to advance the cause were also deeply troubled. As Barnouw (1966, 1968) demonstrated in his social history of broadcasting in the

United States, serious scholarship on how mass communications work began partly in response to the perceived threat of propaganda. Buxton's research (1994) is important because it demonstrates the pivotal role of the Rockefeller foundation in supporting the early research of scholars such as Lazarsfeld and Cantril into the propaganda power of mass communications. As a result, serious academic attention was paid to understanding the power of specific media events such as the broadcast of Orson Welles's dramatization of *War of the Worlds,* which many interpreted to be a news account of an alien invasion and others saw as a surrogate for what would happen if the United States were attacked by foreign forces.

Mass communications research also got started because business saw enormous opportunities to expand the reach of advertising. Mass advertising began with the newspaper and other forms of print material. The arrival of a medium that permitted mass circulation of audio communication created opportunities to significantly expand mass advertising. But there were many unanswered questions. Would people welcome, or even tolerate, an uninvited voice into the living room? Initial reluctance led to regulations limiting radio advertising to the identification of a product. What forms of advertising would reduce listener resistance and actually sell products? Would it take unvarnished information or entertaining jingles and vignettes? To answer these questions, soap companies and a host of others hired social scientists to carry out experimental and survey research, enabling them to pioneer approaches that would become the mainstays of mass communications research when television came along. The earliest self-conscious and systematic academic studies of mass communications were conducted by researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld, Wilbur Schramm, and others affiliated with commercial research initiatives, such as those supported by the Princeton Radio Research Project. A number of academic studies conducted throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s frequently engaged in analyses of radio audiences, simultaneously, as Buxton (1994) notes, "accepting the framework of commercial broadcasting as a given" (p. 148). Gitlin (1978), in his critique of early mass communications research, argues that an "administrative" agenda derived from the needs of commercial broadcasters drove much of this research, and thus these needs in a sense are responsible for determining much of the so-called dominant paradigm of mass communications studies.

Quantitative and qualitative knowledge of the radio audience became a central concern to both broadcasters and academics during the 1940s. It is here, in this historically important period, that the commercial orientation of much early mass communications research is readily apparent. Indeed, Lazarsfeld and Kendall (1948:82) explicitly call for a connection between the research activities of both commercial media and academic researchers. A concrete example of this is given by Eaman (1994), who cites the participation in 1935 of Lazarsfeld, then professor at Columbia University and director of the Bureau of

Applied Social Research, along with Frank Stanton, the first head of CBS's research department, in the development of the CBS Program Analyzer, a device designed to gauge audience reactions to specific CBS programs.

Building on this foundation, the state and the corporation would continue to have an intimate relationship with mass communications research, helping to fund its development and refine its methodologies and also contributing to tensions between the pure and applied advocates in the field.

CONTENT

There is no ideal way of carving up the research terrain in mass communications, but one useful approach is to distinguish between the study of content, production, and reception. In practice, it is not easy to separate the three since the structure of production has an influence on content, as does audience response. But as long as one keeps in mind the mutual constitution of all three, it is heuristically valuable to address each one. Perhaps prompted by the fear of propaganda or taken by the opportunities to sell, the initial response from casual observers to scholars was to believe that mass communications had a direct and powerful impact on audiences, the equivalent of what some liked to call a hypodermic needle that could inject influence into the societal bloodstream and thereby shape public attitudes and values, whether that meant which political party to support or which perfume to buy. The results of this research were mixed, revealing that indeed mass communications did have an impact but the process by which it worked was complex. An early and influential attempt to document the effects of media content on viewers was conducted between 1929 and 1932 through the Payne Foundation. Known as the Payne Fund studies, these investigations responded to the popularly held belief that violent and sexually suggestive movie content contributed to juvenile delinquency and other social ills. According to Lowery and DeFleur (1995), these studies had two main objectives:

> In one category, the goals are to assess the content of the films and to determine the size and content of their audiences. The second category attempts to assess the effects on those audiences of their exposures to the themes and messages of motion pictures. (P. 24)

These studies concluded that media content did indeed have an effect on audiences, a conclusion that served to reinforce public perceptions of the dangers of uncontrolled media content, but that there were mediating factors.

Notions of audience activity came quickly after the academics entered mass communications studies. The early focus on ratings research was not sufficient to sustain prolonged academic investigation. Likewise, the deepening debate over the approach to questions of media effects

required theories that would have to go beyond simple quantitative and passive models of the audience. Yet the focus on audiences remained, even as we see a rise in theoretical perspectives stressing the active nature of audiences and the relative lack of power of media texts and hence of broadcasters.

One of the earliest of this type of theoretical perspective was the "two-step flow" model of communication offered by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) in 1948. This model introduced the intervening variable of the "opinion leader" to help explain why media texts do not necessarily have the desired, direct effect. While the merits of this approach have been widely debated and critiqued, the important feature is that for the first time people were seen as playing an active, albeit institutionally circumscribed, role in the consumption of media texts. This broke somewhat with the history of "audience" as a numerically defined entity, transforming what was essentially a statistical entity into an organic and reflexive social grouping. The political significance of this was not only to theoretically diminish the power of the mass media but to further elevate the audience to the status of a legitimate feature of social life. Changes in attitudes and values were more likely to take place when the mass communications process was mediated by what came to be called opinion leaders or respected members of the relevant community. With their support of a particular message, these political, business, or community leaders would strengthen the message by giving it a personal touch of legitimacy that would, it was found, overcome the reluctance to internalize a message sent by a more impersonal voice. As a result, the two-step flow approach to understanding mass communications replaced approaches that relied on direct-injection models. This also strengthened the sociological purchase on mass communications research because it gave added weight to the view that, however sophisticated the technology, communication, even mass communications, remained a distinctly social process.

The early research also had important methodological implications. The initial perspective on mass communications gave support to a straightforward analysis of media content, which amounted to different versions of content analysis. If media messages directly influenced a mass public, then one could read the impact directly from the messages themselves. Given the recognition that, at the very least, opinion leaders could shape the process of media reception, leading to acceptance or rejection, and to a strong or a weak response, then it was necessary to examine the structure of social relations involving transmission and reception along with the assessment of content. This was important because it contributed to the inclusion of social structural analysis in mass communications studies and, perhaps even more important, to the inclusion of mass communications as a component in the study of all sorts of social and political movements and organizations. This did not mean that content analysis completely gave way to a more mediated approach.

The rise of television and its perceived power created a new wave of interest in content analysis particularly in the study of problem areas such as violence, advertising, and pornography. One of the primary centers for this work, especially for the study of televised violence, was the Annenberg School of Communication, which used the support of the Annenberg Foundation and government funding to carry out content analyses of televised violence as well as of commercial advertising (Gerbner and Gross 1980). This research was widely followed by activists and policymakers who used the results on what they perceived to be extensive televised violence, commercialism, and explicit depictions of sexuality to promote regulation and to pressure broadcasters. The research and its influence gave new life to content analysis, and it has remained a leading approach to examining media content. But content analysis has also come under criticism, not only because it neglected the role of opinion leaders and other important social actors but because it neglected to account for the interpretive powers of audiences.

Discourse analysis provided the major alternative in the study of content. This approach drew heavily from cultural studies that extended its influence across the social sciences and humanities in the 1970s. Cultural studies is a broad-based intellectual movement that concentrates on the constitution of meaning in texts, defined broadly to include all forms of social communication. It has grown from many strands, including one based on the drive to oppose academic orthodoxies, particularly the tendency to organize knowledge in disciplinary canons such as English literature. The approach now contains numerous currents and fissures that provide considerable ferment from within as well as without. From the beginning, especially in the British context, cultural studies have been strongly influenced by Marxian perspectives, including the tendency to see culture as intimately connected to social relations, particularly as organized around class, gender, and race, with a focus on their asymmetries and antagonisms. Furthermore, Marxian concerns with power, particularly the power to define and realize needs and interests, influenced the development of cultural studies, as is evidenced, for example, in the work of Thompson (1963) and Willis (1977), which brought to the fore the cultural construction of class relations. Marxian concerns are also exemplified in the work at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, prominent in the research of Hall (1982). This concentrated on the view that culture is neither independent nor externally determined but rather is best viewed as the site of social difference, struggle, and contestation. Indeed, commentators have noted that one of the significant differences between the British and American approaches to cultural studies is that the former has adopted a more explicitly Marxian and generally political position. Cultural studies in the United States also contain numerous divisions, but one can safely conclude that there is a greater tendency for them to draw inspiration

from a pluralist conception of society and politics that sees power as widely dispersed, from functionalist anthropology and sociology, which concentrate on how cultural practices maintain order and harmony in social life, and from symbolic interactionist social psychology, which uses the language of ritual and drama to examine the production and reproduction of symbolic communities (Carey 1979).

Discourse analysis drew from cultural studies a broad conception of media content as embedded in texts and subject to multiple readings and interpretations—that is, texts are polysemic. Two main directions characterized the approach. The first emphasized the polysemic nature of texts and concentrated on the ability of receivers to interpret and make use of communication to satisfy various instrumental and emotional needs. Communication may be purposive, but even the interpretation and behavioral consequences of propaganda are unpredictable. Some discursive analyses would go so far as to view receivers and audiences as co-constituting or producing texts. From this perspective, audiences author their own texts and do so in a multiplicity of ways. One cannot read an audience from the content analysis of texts, but one can understand interpretations through in-depth readings of texts and by engaging the audience that creates its own meanings (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2001). Another approach to discourse analysis emphasized the power of texts as sent and, while accepting the potential for multiple readings, including oppositional and alternative ones; this approach made more room for the ability of original creators to set the agenda for a narrow range of interpretations. For these analysts, texts become part of a dominant ideology or hegemony that forms the taken-for-granted "common sense" within which interpretation would have to be fit for it to be accepted as legitimate (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980; Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998).

COMMUNICATORS

Sociological research has examined communicators in three primary ways. It has analyzed the industry mainly through political economic research. It has examined the structure of media production primarily by using an organizational sociology approach. Finally, sociological studies of the occupational dimension of communication have been carried out largely through a sociology of professions and a labor studies approach. The development of the media industry has not differed sharply from that of other industries. One of the critical differences is that the media industry has been the subject of regulation, particularly in the broadcasting and related sectors dependent on the use of scarce electromagnetic spectrum. Nevertheless, the secular trend is toward larger corporations controlling more sectors in the communication industry. Specifically, early research on the media industry demonstrated that one or a few companies dominated their specific sectors. For example, in the 1930s, concerns were raised about the

power of RCA to control radio through outright ownership of stations, affiliation agreements with other stations, and control over sources of information and entertainment. This research prompted government inquiries and some regulatory controls (McChesney 1994). Later research found companies such as RCA and CBS branching out from radio and music into television through the ownership of networks and stations and through affiliate agreements with local stations. This change in industry structure, referred to as cross-ownership control or media concentration, was fueled by opportunities to profit from the ability to leverage power in one medium to assert control over another (McChesney 1999). This was easier to accomplish in the mass communications business because of the ease with which its products could be reproduced after their initial production. Current research focuses on the ability of a handful of media conglomerates to extend cross-media ownership across the full range of print, broadcasting, cable television, film, and video, on to newer Web-based media. Many of these are U.S.-based firms such as Time Warner; General Electric, which owns NBC; Viacom, which owns CBS; and Disney, the owner of ABC. However, research has demonstrated that media conglomeration is now a global phenomenon, with firms such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Germany-based Bertelsmann, and the Sony Corporation joining the dominant tier of mass communications powers (Bagdikian 2004).

There is little disagreement in the literature over the structure of the media industry, but there is intense debate over the significance of media concentration. On the one side are concerns that industry structure restricts the free flow of information and entertainment, limiting diversity and biasing the news to support the interests of corporate owners and their advertising partners. Drawing from a broad neo-Marxian perspective, Herman and Chomsky (2002) go so far as to consider this a new form of propaganda, a way of manufacturing consent. Others whose focus is critical sociological theory (Garnham 2000; Murdock 2000) and political economy (Murdock and Golding 2000; Schiller 1999) argue that media concentration is a threat to democracy and an extension of imperialism or neocolonialism through the control over media and new technologies. These views would lead to support for a variety of policy measures, including breaking up media monopolies to promote competition, deepening regulation of large media firms to insist that they support a diversity of media voices, and strengthening public and community media.

Alternatively, some argue that there is less to worry about. Drawing on neoclassical economic theory, Compaine (2000) has questioned the extent of media concentration and the power of companies to translate their organizational control into control over the content produced by media professionals. According to this view, large media companies succeed because they meet the demands of audiences as registered in the marketplace.

This leads Compaine to promote less government involvement in the marketplace to free companies to better serve their diverse audiences. Starting from postmodern and postcolonial theory, Featherstone (2003) challenges the view that media conglomerates have the ability to shape minds worldwide. Much of this work updates policy debates that began in the 1960s and 1970s about media imperialism and the need to support or oppose the development of a New World Information and Communication Order that would rectify imbalances in global flows of communication (Schiller 1992). Today, the policy debates are about things such as the global digital divide and the need to develop global movements for cultural diversity or, on the other hand, to support global free trade as the primary means of advancing economic development with the means of communication (Compaine 2001; Klein 2002; Mosco and Schiller 2001; Murdock and Golding 2004; Servon 2002).

Research on mass communications has also addressed communicators from the perspective of organizational theory, specifically by assessing the process of producing mass communications. Rather than focus on the broad sweep of political economy that informs so much of the work that examines the industry, this perspective concentrates on the narrower view that the content of mass communications is heavily influenced by bureaucratic considerations, organizational routines, and work rules. Initially, this research focused on newspapers and concluded that news organizations set up schedules and routines that regularized the process of news gathering and production to meet the need to fill a news hole of a certain size every day. Coverage of scheduled events such as government meetings and the assignment of reporters to news beats (e.g., crime and sports) provided a defense against the uncertainty inherent in producing a product with unpredictable content. Making the job as predictable and routine as possible, Tuchman (1990) and Fishman (1990) argued, helped to explain the content of newspapers. This work has been extended to the study of broadcasting and film, where predictability and routine are argued to matter just as much whether the end result is news or entertainment (Gans 2004; Wasko 2003).

More recently, organizational research has begun to address a different but equally interesting question. How can bureaucratic organizations, with their beats and routines, meet the challenge of the Internet, where bloggers, independent musicians, and amateur video makers count on a culture that is increasingly infused with the view that communication is free (Lessig 2004)? Can media bureaucracies survive in a networked world (Boczkowski 2004)? Some argue that they can by changing key elements of the old bureaucratic routines, including adopting the post-Fordist practices that accept more uncertainty but have independent contractors and strategic partners take on the risk (Wayne 2003). They are also aiming to do so by pressing strongly for intellectual property protections that, if applied worldwide, would make it more difficult to treat information and entertainment as public goods (Vaidhyanathan 2004). Finally, following a historical pattern, large bureaucratic media organizations are actively co-opting their competitors by hiring bloggers, producing low-cost music downloading services that feature independent artists, and developing a strong Internet presence (Boczkowski 2004; Lessig 2004). The key research question remains how to control uncertainty. The difference today is that the uncertainty emanates more powerfully from a global networked world.

In addition to having an interest in industry and organizational processes, scholars have addressed the roles and identities of direct media producers, including professionals and technicians responsible for creating news and entertainment for the masses. Those who make media have experienced a conflicted identity because they share some characteristics, including advanced education/training and the independence born of skills and certification, but they lack the power enjoyed by more guildlike professions such as law and medicine. Moreover, because their work is often highly regimented and precarious and because they are often organized in trade unions with long histories of collective bargaining and some militancy, they have a lot in common with the working class. This is especially the case, as McKercher (2002) has demonstrated, because they are increasingly subjected to the processes of automation and de-skilling, which were once limited to industrial occupations. Moreover, with Reuters shipping newswire jobs to Bangalore, Disney sending animation work to Asia, and Hollywood turning to Canada for what the Screen Actors Guild calls low-wage "runaway production," media workers are increasingly threatened by outsourcing (Elmer and Gasher 2005; Mosco 2005).

Two questions are particularly prominent in this area of research. Drawing on the literature in the sociology of the professions and on labor process research, how do media workers respond to their conflicting identities as professionals and as workers? The answer to this question takes up historical research on the evolution of media professions, the changing social composition of media professions, and changes in the relative status of media work in society (Ewen 1976, 1998; Schudson 1978, 1984; Tunstall 1981). The second question asks how media workers are responding to the changes in work, including automation, de-skilling, and outsourcing. This area of research takes up the reorganization of traditional labor unions and the development of new sources of social movement organization. In the United States, Canada, and Europe, labor organizations have built large unions that represent workers across the full range of communication activities. In the United States, the Communication Workers of America now bills itself as a "trade union for the information age" because it represents workers in print, broadcasting, telecommunications, and information technology sectors. In Canada, the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers union is a similarly convergent organization of communication and knowledge workers. In Europe, Union Network

International is a federation made up largely of media and information labor. These efforts represent a response to the changing communication landscape that supporters claim provides opportunities to present a united front against media conglomerates. Additionally, workers in hard-to-organize sectors such as computer communication, and those in a workforce with little union knowledge or experience such as the computer game industry, have established social movement labor organizations that do not negotiate contracts but defend workers rights in a variety of areas. Good examples include the National Writers Union and the Washington Alliance of Technology workers, an organization that represents Microsoft workers. Research on convergent trade unions and social movement organizations draws from labor studies to determine whether these represent a genuine return of labor power in a fast-growing industry or just evidence of the failure of trade unions using more traditional forms of organization (Mosco 2005).

THE AUDIENCE

The *audience* concept is one of the fundamental ideas of mass communications and also one of the most hotly contested. Even scholars providing a critical view of the idea acknowledge its importance. In a widely cited assessment of the term, Allor (1988) concluded that "the concept of the audience . . . is the underpinning prop for the analysis of the social impact of mass communications in general" (p. 217). As Meehan (1990) has demonstrated, audience research goes back to the early days of radio. Other mass media such as print and film could rely on circulation numbers and box-office receipts, respectively, to tell them how large their audience was. But the anonymity of radio broadcasting necessitated a different approach, one that would call for systematic research techniques. This need to determine how many people were listening was one shared by commercial (primarily American) and public service broadcasters (notably British and Canadian). While the underlying rationales of public service and commercial broadcasting may differ, the impetus behind audience research remained the same: Broadcasters needed to know that their programming was reaching people. Given the financial stakes in the media business, it is not surprising that the techniques of survey research were finely honed by the ratings services to determine the size of audiences and their responses to programs and to advertising. The growing investment in radio and television broadcasting can be attributed in part to the certainty, sometimes reasonable and sometimes not, that people were listening and watching and that research could quantify the value of placing investment bets on a particular station or program.

The implicit, and sometimes explicit, perspective underlying this research is that the audience is an important but largely passive component in the mass communications system. This idea fit well with those who leaned to a mass society perspective, a view that industrial society created not only a labor force but also a mass of largely docile consumers who carried out their role as passive recipients of products and messages without disturbing the social fabric. The notion of the audience as a passive mass recurs throughout the history of mass communications studies. The propaganda function of the commercial mass media posited by Marxist cultural theorists, such as those of the Frankfurt School, often assumes a passive, consuming role for the audience by emphasizing the relative power of ideologically loaded media content. Mass society theorists make similar assumptions, arguing that media content reinforces the existing social order and that people are generally resigned to this fate (McQuail 1983). But for others, the *audience* was a strange concept, largely a marketing term with no lineage in the corpus of sociological concepts. These would rather deal with social class, race, ethnicity, and gender, and with social organization and social movement, because these concepts are embedded in classical and contemporary theoretical traditions (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Butsch 2000).

Whether or not they used the term *audience,* scholars also grew uncomfortable with the view that audiences were passive recipients of media messages and began to develop research programs that documented the active nature of audiences. Much of this work arose out of cultural studies and the increasing sociological interest in agency (Hagen and Wasko 2000; Ross and Nightingale 2003). Audiences were active agents, if not authors of their own texts, and sociological studies increasingly examined the nature and extent of this activity. Some of this research went to the other extreme by claiming that the process of cheering for or complaining about a television show constituted audience resistance and demonstrated that the media space produced by large media conglomerates was far from hegemonic. Nevertheless, this marked a maturing of sociological research on audiences because it moved the question from how we measure audiences to better service the commercial side of the business to how we understand the behavior of audiences and their role in contributing to the production of meaning in media texts. Assisted by the growing field of audience history research (Butsch 2000), scholars began to move the audience from a statistical category to a complex force made up of many tendencies and numerous social identities.

Research informed more by political economy than by cultural studies reasserted the value of thinking about the audience as a significant category for understanding how mass communications work. Much of this work drew from Smythe's (1977) view that the audience was a marketable commodity whose activity or labor was sold to advertisers. Other work has taken on a more sociological character and has been produced by scholars who believe that one way out of the audience morass was to consider alternative approaches to the interpretation of media consumption, approaches that decline to accept audience status as a fundamentally determinant social relation. One such example

is provided by Press (1991; see also Meehan and Riordan 2002), who situates the experience of television viewing within the wider social relations of gender, class, and age. The analysis of media effects remains the focus here, but it does not treat women as a specific audience, constituted by their relationship to television. Rather, what is important is the lived experiences women bring to television viewing, and how these experiences help one to interpret the social relations of media activity.

Press acknowledges that the process of media reception is complicated, and her approach avoids the extreme conclusions that viewers are passive in the face of dominant media ideology and that viewer interpretation is automatically valorized. Using ethnographic research on women's television use, she argues that not only does gender influence media consumption and interpretation, but class and generational affiliations also further shape such media habits. When approached along these lines, the fact that different groups of viewers interpret media content differently is not altogether surprising. In a sense, she could be said to be documenting an "active audience." However, Press's approach has the conceptual strength to sidestep this intellectual dead end and ask the questions that deal with why such differences emerge. Lived experiences such as gender, class, and age are what constitute people as human beings, and it is these experiences that are brought to the act of watching television.

Long (1994) provides another useful example in her project that confronts the image of the solitary reader, reconceptualizing this cultural act as a fundamentally social one. Her research entails an examination of women's reading groups, analyzing how these groups have allowed women to come together to determine meaning from media texts and how this social activity has served to transform their own image of women's role in society. As with Press, Long's approach allows her to move beyond a simplistic conception of women as audiences for reading materials, instead seeing how they actively constitute themselves in relation to the media. By focusing on the reading groups themselves, Long provides us with a close understanding of how specific collections of people organize themselves into specific audiences. This approach also leaves room for class and race considerations, and for how these identities play a part in the choice of texts to be read, how interpretation is achieved collectively, and what, if any, political and social agenda is behind such activities.

Long (1994) also exhorts us to pay attention to what she terms the "social infrastructure of reading." This consideration has two basic dimensions. First, we need to remember "that reading must be taught, and that the socialization into reading always takes place within specific social relationships" (pp. 192–93). This is an important reminder for those who study mass communications. Applying this observation, we can say that one's socialization into viewing also takes place within specific social relationships, be they familial, gendered, racial, generational, or otherwise. Long leads us, as does Press, to consider the social relations that

constitute us as social human beings prior to our membership in any particular audience. The second dimension of this social infrastructure Long refers to as the "social base" (p. 193), comparing this to the physical infrastructure required for transportation systems. This consideration is vitally important because it directs us to the spheres of production and distribution, reminding us that what is available for consumption is often institutionally circumscribed, something that political economists, among others, have long argued. Audience "activity," however conceptualized, is constrained both by factors of socialization and what fundamentally amounts to the institutional distribution of power.

A final example of an intellectual approach that transcends the traditional treatment of the audience is offered by folklore scholar Susan Davis (1986), who provides us with an analysis of the uses of parades and street theatre in antebellum Philadelphia. Spectacles such as these can be considered precursors of twentieth-century media texts. Parades offered an essential form of public communication, and their organization also reflected social status and power relations. For instance, parades celebrating civic occasions were often organized by those in the upper classes, such as up-and-coming industrialists, wealthy merchants, and skilled artisans. The excessive pageantry of these parades was meant not only as a celebration but also as a display of social power and an attempt to legitimize the existing social hierarchy. Parades from those of the lower classes, such as the Mummers or striking workers, typically lacked such excessive displays of wealth and formal organization and were meant as a challenge to the existing social order.

This observation reminds us that the processes of production involve an attempt, whether implicit or explicit, to construct meaning. Audience members' relations to such spectacles often depended on the meanings implicit in each particular parade, and their responses often depended on their position in the social hierarchy. One of Davis's most interesting findings is that the role of the audience varied according to the parade itself. Excessive pageantry, garish displays of wealth, and quasi-militaristic order worked to keep audience members from participating, instead relegating them to the sidelines while visions of the legitimate social order promoted by the dominant class flowed past. Working-class parades, on the other hand, tended to have far less formal organization and at times actively encouraged parade watchers to march and otherwise participate in the event. This observation leads us again to consider the institutional limitations of the production process. Audience members exist not only in relation to the media text itself but are also constituted out of the entire set of social relations.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The chapter concludes by discussing how important challenges to the *mass* in mass communications are having,

and will likely continue to have, a significant influence on the direction of research in the field. The means of mass communications have always held the potential to break down the mass, enabling many to actively communicate. In the early days of each wave of new media, this has typically been the case. Radio developed from the work of many amateurs whose home-based "stations" led many to believe that genuine two-way wireless communication was at hand. But eventually, large commercial interests and governments dashed these opportunities by taking the scarce frequencies that amateurs used (McChesney 1994). Nevertheless, the hope remained to establish more democratic means of communication, realizing what Bertolt Brecht held out as the potential for every receiver to also serve as a transmitter. While it is true that each new technology makes this promise and that there is little especially new in the promises made by advocates of digital media, there are some signs that new media can turn audiences into full-fledged communicators or at least give them greater control than what they enjoyed in the era of passive mass communications (Mosco 2004). We are now beginning to see this in television, with the massive expansion in the number of channels available along with technologies such as TiVo, which allow viewers to record programs for later playback. The opportunity to control the program schedule and eliminate commercials is upsetting the economic and structural control that large broadcasters once enjoyed. This alone requires scholars to rethink the nature of the mass in this area of mass communications.

Questioning the mass is even more central with the arrival of the Internet and more generally of network-based modes of social interaction and communication (Castells 2001). Widespread access to high-speed services provides people with greater choice of information and entertainment sources and enables them to produce more of their own communication. This has already eroded the circulation of the traditional daily newspaper and is cutting into the amount of time spent viewing television. The rapid spread of online publishing, from personal diaries and news accounts included in blogs and podcasts to longer audio and video productions, raises more questions about a potential shift from mass to networked, community-based, or even individualized communication systems. These developments provide fresh challenges to scholars who might need to rethink the fundamental categories of mass and audience and to consider the extent to which this heralds the arrival of more genuinely democratic communication.

Traditional communicators acknowledge these challenges, and scholars who might be prone to seeing revolutionary transformations in the arrival of a digital world need to pay increasing attention to their attempts to retain commercial advantage. One way for media conglomerates to maintain and perhaps even to strengthen their power is to expand across the range of mass communications products and leverage each against the other to fend off more localized competition. Specifically, ownership of newspapers, magazines, and book-publishing firms provides conglomerates with massive amounts of material for online information products. Ownership of entertainment companies offers similar opportunities. All of this is substantially enhanced by the nature of the product, digital communication, because of the ease with which it can be reproduced, reconstituted, and distributed internationally. Furthermore, information technology-based flexible systems of production allow big companies to operate with less labor and to draw from a global workforce. One of the vital areas for scholarly attention in this attempt to retain key elements of the traditional mass communications system is the ability of firms to expand their control over intellectual property (Lessig 2004).

The ability to turn communication into a marketable commodity has always been a challenge because so much of communication is freely circulated. The question of whether communication is a commodity or a public good has been a fundamental challenge for scholars and policymakers (Starr 2004). On the one hand, computer-based systems facilitate the process of commodification by making it easier to measure and to monitor, to package and repackage communication products in a marketable form. But they also make it easier for people to communicate and to freely circulate what companies would like to market commercially. The conflicts over intellectual property, including primarily copyright and patent and trademark issues, will occupy scholars and policymakers for some time. Policymakers are often torn between the pressure to support commercial use of intellectual property and the need to promote access to information. The former recognizes that communication and information are now engines of economic growth, the latter that they are essential for advancing democracy. Overly restrictive intellectual property laws in the name of economic growth can shrink access and stifle the diversity of sources and content necessary to promote widespread participation in the political process. But the absence of protections for the creators of intellectual property can erode the incentive to invest in new forms of communication and information content.

These issues have already moved from the national to the international stage because they are connected with the aspirations of societies, including less-developed ones, to develop their own communication and information systems and to use them for economic and social development (Zhao 2001). One of the central policy issues of our time is how to extend the call, first heard in the 1950s, for a new international economic order, to the communication and information arena. Specifically, this means providing access to the means of communication to the less-developed world, a majority of whose citizens have yet to make a telephone call. Indeed, current policy discussions, most recently carried on in a series of international policy meetings called the World Summit on the Information Society, have examined ways of implementing the right to
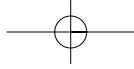
communicate as a basic human right. Again, global companies and some governments in the developed world balk at the prospect of renewed government regulation, but supporters of the right to communicate maintain that international regulation, perhaps, including a role for the United Nations through UNESCO and the International Telecommunications Union, is essential for extending access to the less-developed world. How these issues are resolved will go a long way in setting the pattern for evolving systems of global and local communication, including whether the term *mass communications* remains essential to the work of sociology.