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MASS COMMUNICATION

Upon opening this book, I'm going to assume you are either beginning to think about your college major and potential career or beginning to think about your postgraduate career. Understanding the concepts and how industries you have spent years learning about conduct business is essential in choosing the best fit for you. You have likely encountered some course or lesson on mass communication, or perhaps you spent your entire collegiate career studying the field. However, since multiple definitions exist, it is worth discussing the most accepted and dominant view as well as briefly reviewing the history of the field and popular theories of mass communication. Then we can begin to discuss relevant skills and career opportunities.

WHAT IS MASS COMMUNICATION?

There are three scholars who each define *mass communication* slightly differently. DeFleur and Dennis (1993) define it as “a process in which professional communicators use media to disseminate messages widely, rapidly and continuously to arouse intended meanings in large and diverse audiences in attempts to influence them in a variety of ways.” Orlik (1992) says, “Mass communication is the process of rapidly conveying identical information, assertions and attitudes to potentially large, dispersed and diversified audiences via mechanisms capable of achieving that task.” Finally, Berger (1995) argues that mass communication “involves the use of print and electronic media such as newspapers, magazines, film, radio or TV to communicate to the large number of people who are located in various places often scattered all over the country or world.”

What do these three definitions have in common? They all focus on message dissemination to a large audience, through various channels, to accomplish some type of goal. However, these definitions focus on how mass media is studied, not necessarily how it is practiced. Mass communication is the study of how people and entities relay information through the mass media. Mass *media* is the practice of using media technologies to reach a large audience through mass communication. Therefore, the two are interdependent upon one another.

Mass communication and mass media encompass a variety of industries including, but not limited to, publishing (newspapers, magazines, and books); radio, TV, and film; advertising; social media; and public relations (PR). Mass media also influence how business is conducted and how people communicate within public and private sectors and within nonprofit organizations (NPOs). A main differentiating factor between mass communication and other forms of communication (such as nonverbal or interpersonal) is that mass media focus on one source transmitting information to a large number of receivers. The main focus of study, then, is how that communication can influence the behavior of others, a key component for effective business operations.

THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

If you studied mass communication throughout college, these theories should not be foreign to you. If you have not encountered mass communication theory yet, that is okay. Theory does not disappear when you graduate. In fact, theory helps guide our practice of mass communications and engage with mass media strategically. Theory is also essential in understanding human behaviors and responses, a key in campaign planning and evaluation. A brief overview of four foundational and commonly used theories follows. Your understanding of these theories and how they relate to practicing mass communications will help you choose an industry that is the best fit.

Cultivation Theory

This is one of the most popular and widely used mass communication research theories. Cultivation theory argues that television viewing can change a person's perception of reality over time. For example, exposure to television has influenced how people learn about and practice traditional roles and behaviors within society, such as gender roles (Gerbner, 1998). Cultivation theory operates with three main assumptions, focusing on the medium, the audience, and thirdly, the functionality of the medium on the audience (Gerbner, 1998). In less abstract terms, television is a unique medium and shapes the way people think and relate to each other, but the effects are limited. Cultivation theory has primarily been studied with regard to violence on television but has also been used to examine music videos; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues; and children's health. An understanding of cultivation theory would be especially useful for pursuing a career in a television-related industry, such as production or advertising.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory is a relatively simple theory that can be useful for those working mass communication industries. The theory examines why and

how people seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs (Ruggiero, 2000). For example, if someone wanted to know about an upcoming public event, where would they look for that information and why? This theory is unique because it takes an audience-centered approach to understanding mass communication. The theory implies that media compete with each other for the attention of the viewer. Therefore, mass communication professionals need to understand how to best position themselves within the media marketplace in order to reach their target audiences. Uses and gratifications research has provided insight into the different reasons why people use their mobile phones, the Internet, social media websites, online gaming platforms, and entertainment media.

Agenda Setting Theory

Although media cannot tell us what to think, they can tell us what to think about. This is called agenda setting. Agenda setting theory has two main assumptions: The first assumption is that the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it. The second assumption is that media concentration on a few issues leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While this theory was originally applied to political contexts, it has been applied to a variety of industries including business, advertising, and crime as well as interpersonal and international communication.

Two-Step Flow Theory

The two-step flow theory argues that most people form their opinions from opinion leaders who are influenced by mass media. It is two steps because the information flows from media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to a broader audience (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders are often seen as more trustworthy and less biased than media sources. Therefore, they can have greater influence on large groups of people. In today's society, opinion leaders can be found on national news outlets, in publications, and used by businesses to promote and advertise products online. Bloggers have become especially influential opinion leaders and demonstrate the practicality and prevalence of the two-step flow theory in business practices.

MASS COMMUNICATION METHODS

As a professional in mass communication, you will undoubtedly undertake the execution and evaluation of a communication campaign. Understanding the most relevant and commonly used methods will give you a head start in the workplace. Additionally, being able to show value to senior management requires data and evaluation. The methods presented can help you plan and evaluate mass

communication efforts in various industries. The first two methods are quantitative, while the last two are qualitative research methods.

Survey

Survey research, in broad terms, aims to generate data used to make generalizations about large groups of people. Within the field of mass communication, surveys can be helpful for copy testing, evaluating products or campaigns, customer service, and environmental scanning. Surveys can also be helpful in gathering demographic data on specific groups for more targeted communication tactics. Organizations can conduct surveys online, over the phone, through the mail, or even in person, like market research for instance. Surveys are valuable because they can help assess thoughts, opinions, and feelings from a desired audience, making pre- and posttesting of campaigns or products through surveys a commonly used method. Surveys can contain open- or closed-ended answer choices, but surveyors should be aware of respondent bias while answering. Oftentimes, respondents will select the more appropriate answer, regardless of whether or not that answer is honest. Although surveys are a fast and cost-effective method for organizations, the pros and cons of survey research should be weighed before implementation.

Content Analysis

Content analysis, sometimes called textual analysis, is the process of identifying categories from a specific type of communication to see what the content of that communication typically includes. There are five different sources of text that can be used in content analysis: (1) written; (2) oral; (3) iconic (drawings, paintings, icons); (4) audiovisual (AV; television programs, movies); and (5) hypertexts, which are online texts. Content analysis is a popular method in mass communication to understand “who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?” (Lasswell, 1942). This can help identify a media slant or bias about particular issues and showcase trends that will influence future communications. Content analysis is especially popular in PR to help measure the success of a campaign. This method can demonstrate the frequency, length, and valence (positive or negative) of communication, which is valuable information for clients.

Focus Groups

This form of qualitative research brings a group of people together to discuss their thoughts and opinions toward something. For instance, an advertising company could hold a focus group to determine which advertisement is more effective and why, using the opinions expressed from the group. The interactive

nature of focus groups sets them apart from other research methods. A discussion guide is created in advance to facilitate organized conversation among the participants and maintain the integrity of the method. The researcher or group moderator should take careful notes and/or record the audio of the focus group for later playback and evaluation. Focus groups are used heavily within marketing during the product development stages to help determine the direction of marketing initiatives. Focus groups are typically less expensive than other forms of market research but can be time consuming. Participants must be chosen carefully based on demographics, psychographics, attitudes, and behaviors (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Observation

Often used as a preliminary method to help gather a starting point for additional research, observation is a systematic data collection approach whereby researchers engage their senses to examine people in natural settings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Observation is best utilized for answering “how” or “what” type of questions when the topic is relatively unexplored and when it is important to understand a phenomenon in a natural setting. For example, think back to when the iPhone first came out. This revolutionized the way people engaged with their mobile phones. Observation helps us understand that people can no longer stand in elevators, ride in cabs, or even check in for flights without using their mobile phones. Although participant observation is the most commonly practiced form, observation can also occur using video or audio recordings. It is imperative that any person conducting observation research takes field notes that record their thoughts and preliminary analysis. Observation is an essential part of understanding naturalistic settings and can provide the foundation for theory and hypothesis development (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

MASS COMMUNICATION IN SOCIETY

Mass communication plays four main roles within society: surveillance, interpretation, socialization, and entertainment. Surveillance refers to how mass communication relays news and information to the public and, in today’s society, how we also use media to monitor people and issues. This function of mass communication is important in establishing a connection between organizations and people (Bradley, 2016). People feel connected and informed by using online communication tools. For example, in times of natural disasters, war, or health scares, the media create awareness and keep us updated through surveillance of the situation.

Interpretation refers to how people form and express their opinions (Lasswell, 1948). The mass media set a context for new information and provide

commentary about the significance and meaning of issues. Agenda setting is a theory used to help explain this function of mass communication. The media's selection of news and portrayal of issues affects how society understands and responds. For example, the media's reporting can often change the mind-sets of society depending on how and what they report.

Mass communication helps people learn socialization and cultural norms. Mass media transmits values within a society that help people learn appropriate behavior and attitudes. Television programs tend to reflect the societal norms of the area in which they are broadcast. This helps promote cultural understanding and socialization. Children's programming is a great example of this. Shows such as *Sesame Street* showcase good behavior and help instill moral standards in children who watch the show.

Finally, mass communication is a form of entertainment. We often turn to media outlets when we want to relax or escape everyday life. Mass media can also help us experience things that we would not otherwise be able to, like sporting events or award shows. We can use mass media to play games, communicate with others, form and maintain relationships, and relieve stress. Uses and gratifications theory research is especially helpful in understanding how people use mass media for entertainment.

TRENDS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

Technology has changed how we transmit, interpret, and receive information. Within the field of mass communication, technology is the driving force behind the three biggest trends: (1) social media, (2) digital news, and (3) mobile communication. We use technology for all four of the functions previously discussed—and so do organizations. In a society where a constant connection is expected and valued, technology has changed how we communicate and, thus, changed how information is shared with publics.

Currently, there are roughly three billion Internet users and over two million social media users (Smith, 2016). It then stands to reason that 91% of retail brands actively use social media channels to communicate with their stakeholders (Kemp, 2016). Given the way that social media has infiltrated our lives, mass communication organizations such as those that will be discussed in this book are forced to integrate social media into their business plans. In fact, 80% of businesses now have a dedicated social media team (Holmes, 2015). Social media is not going anywhere, so an understanding of how to leverage social media for business communications is required. Some businesses are now using their employees as online ambassadors (Holmes, 2015), and advertising on social media sites continues to rise in effort and impact year after year (Holmes, 2015). Social media has also helped everyday people become activists and helped notable faces communicate without gatekeepers and fabricated agendas, a blessing and a curse

for PR practitioners. Finally, social media is revolutionizing how information is shared through mediums like video. Some companies even report video as their most effective marketing tool (Holmes, 2015). Considering how you personally use social media to share and receive information is important and is blurring the lines for how businesses share and receive information.

Advances and adoption of social media channels have changed how people consume news. Digital news is now more popular with most audiences than traditional news. Since the majority of U.S. adults now get their news online, publishers are forced to enter this realm and find creative ways to share news online (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). While television still reigns supreme for news consumption, digital news sources are a close second place (Lu & Holcomb, 2016). Especially with regard to political news like elections, digital news sources are preferred by most people (Lu & Holcomb, 2016). Newspapers, radio programs, and television programs now integrate social media tactics into their programming through encouraging their audiences to tweet with them or follow them on Facebook to help boost their audience and online engagement. Podcasts and e-mail newsletters are two new takes on traditional media where publishers have taken proven communication techniques and updated them for the digital world. A majority of news websites offer online newsletters since a newsletter is a better way for the reader to digest the content. Similarly, podcasts can help better capture specific audiences to share information (Lu & Holcomb, 2016).

Smartphones, much like social media, have also changed our lives and our communication. Mobile communication no longer refers to calling someone and chatting. It now encompasses texting, sending high-resolution photos and videos, using FaceTime, social networking, gaming, and conducting business. Our phones essentially act as small computers, and we expect compatibility across platforms. Mobile communication presents an interesting opportunity and challenge for organizations. For example, among the 50 highest circulating daily newspapers, more than half of their traffic comes from mobile phone users (Lu & Holcomb, 2016). Businesses now have to ensure that their websites and content are mobile user-friendly, and some businesses have created specialized and customizable apps to further engage their mobile audience. In the next couple of years, be on the lookout for increased mobile communication platforms and further integration between organizations and their mobile audiences.

SKILLS

Although each industry and job requires a unique skill set, there are some basic skills that cut across industries and bode well for success in any field of mass communication. For example, being able to articulate your thoughts and the thoughts of others to a variety of different audiences, using multiple channels,

is essential regardless of whether you work in news or nonprofits. Within each industry chapter, specific skills will be discussed. However, here are some of the absolutely necessary skills to acquire and sharpen for mass communication careers.

Analysis/evaluation

Business acumen

Cultural norms

Desire to learn

Editing

Human behavior

Production/design

Research

Writing

Do not copy, post, or distribute