Chapter 1

Communication: Mass and Other Forms

This chapter will prepare students to:

• recognize the elements of the communication process
• understand the different types of communication settings
• identify the function of gatekeepers
• describe how the Internet has changed mass communication
• explain the various types of mass media convergence
• understand the technological, economic, and social forces that are transforming mass media.

Chapter main points:

1. The elements in the communication process are a source, encoding process, message, channel, decoding process, receiver, feedback, and noise.
2. The three types of noise are semantic, environmental, and mechanical.
3. The three main settings for communication are interpersonal, machine-assisted interpersonal, and mass communication.
4. Each element in the communication process may vary according to setting.
5. Mass communication refers to the process by which a complex organization, with the aid of one or more machines, produces public messages that are aimed at large, heterogeneous, and scattered audiences.
6. Traditionally, a mass communicator was identified by its formal organization, gatekeepers, expensive operating costs, profit motive, and competitiveness. The Internet has created exceptions to these characteristics.
7. New models have been developed to illustrate Internet mass communication.
8. Communication content has become more specialized in the past 40 years, but the channels of mass communication still have the potential to reach vast audiences.
9. Seven trends that characterize modern mass communication are audience segmentation, convergence, user-generated content, increased audience control, multiple platform, more mobility, and social media.
THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Transmitting the Message

The Source. The source, or sender, initiates the communication process by having a thought or an idea that he or she wishes to transmit to some other entity. Sources can be individuals, groups, or organizations.

Encoding the message. Encoding refers to all the activities that a source goes through to translate thoughts and ideas into a form that can be perceived by the senses. It can take place one or more times in any given communication event. In a face-to-face conversation, the speaker encodes thoughts into words; if a telephone is used, it subsequently encodes sound waves into electrical energy.

Message. The message is the actual physical product that the source encodes which may range from the short, simple and inexpensive to the long, complex and costly. Humans usually have a large number and wide range of messages at their disposal that they can choose to send. Messages can be directed to an individual or to millions.

Channels. Channels refer to the ways in which the message travels to the receiver. These include sound waves, light waves, air currents, and touch. Some messages may go through multiple channels.

Receiving the Message

Decoding the message. The decoding process is the opposite of the encoding process. It's the process by which a message is translated into a form the receiver can understand. Both people and machines can be message decoders. Some messages can involve many decoding stages.

Receiver. The receiver is the target of the message. The target can be an individual, a group, or an anonymous collection of people. Receivers can be targeted for a message (a phone call) or they can self-select themselves (choosing which TV show to watch). Receivers and senders can be in immediate contact or they can be separated by space and time.

Feedback. Feedback refers to responses from the receiver that shape and alter the subsequent messages from the source. Feedback represents the reversal of the communication flow (source becomes receiver; receiver becomes source). It answers the source’s unstated question, “How am I doing?”

- *positive feedback* encourages the current communication behavior
- *negative feedback* tries to change the communication or even terminate it
- feedback can be *immediate* or *delayed*

Noise. Noise is anything that interferes with the delivery of the message. Three types of noise are:
• *semantic noise* occurs when people have different meanings for words or phrases
• *mechanical noise* occurs when there is a problem with a machine being used to assist communication
• *environmental noise* occurs when noise external to the communication process interferes with communication

As noise increases, *message fidelity* (how closely the message sent resembles the message received) goes down; the more immediate and better the feedback, the more chance a source has to reduce or eliminate noise interfering with the message.
COMMUNICATION SETTINGS

Three common communication settings include interpersonal, machine assisted and mass communication.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is the least complicated of the communication settings or situations presented here. It involves one person (or group) interacting with another person (or group) without the aid of a mechanical device. The source and receiver are in the immediate physical presence of one another. Characteristics of interpersonal communication include:

- source and receiver can be individuals or groups
- encoding is usually a one-step process
- a variety of channels are usually available for use
- messages are relatively difficult for the receiver to terminate
- produced at little or no expense
- messages can be private or public
- message can pinpoint highly specific targets
- decoding is usually a one-step process
- feedback is immediate
- noise can be semantic or environmental

Machine-Assisted Interpersonal Communication

Machine-assisted interpersonal communication (or technology-assisted communication) involves one or more people communicating by means of a mechanical device or devices with one or more receivers. It combines characteristics of interpersonal and mass communication situations and blurs the line between the two types of communication, especially when involving the Internet and World Wide Web.

Machines can give communication permanence and/or extend its range. The source and receiver can be separated by time and space. A great deal of modern communication falls into this category. Characteristics of machine-assisted interpersonal communication include:

- source may be an individual or group; may or may not be easy to identify
- source may or may not have first-hand knowledge of the receiver
- the encoding process can be simple or complex, but always involves at least two distinct stages:
  (1) source translates his/her thoughts into words or other symbols
one or more machines encode the message for transmission or storage

- channel options are more restricted than in interpersonal communication settings
- message customizability varies; messages can be private or public
- messages are relatively inexpensive to send
- decoding requires one or more stages depending upon the encoding process
- receiver may be an individual or group; may be in sight of the source or out of view
- receivers can be selected by the source for a message or they can self-select into the audience
- feedback can be immediate or delayed; may be difficult or limited to one channel
- noise can be semantic, environmental, or mechanical
- use of mechanical-assisted interpersonal communication will become more important and the differences between machine-assisted communication and mass communication will continue to blur

**Mass Communication**

Mass Communication is the process by which a complex organization, with the aid of one or more machines, produces and transmits public messages directed at large, heterogeneous and scattered audiences. The differences between machine-assisted interpersonal and mass communication aren’t that clear, especially when considering the Internet and the Web.

**The Source.** The source can be a group of individuals who usually act within the predetermined roles of an organizational setting; however, since the advent of the Internet, one person can become a mass communicator. The source usually has little detailed information about particular audiences.

**Encoding/Sending.** Encoding is always a multistage process. Mass media channels are characterized by the imposition of at least one and usually more than one machine in the process of sending the message. Channel options are more restricted than in interpersonal communication settings.

**Decoding/Receiving.** Messages are public, and the same message is sent to all receivers. Message termination is easiest in the mass communication setting. Multiple decoding is typically required before the message is received.

**Receiver.** Prime distinguishing characteristics of mass communication are that the audience is large, heterogeneous, and geographically dispersed. Audience members are anonymous to one another and are almost always self-defined.

**Feedback.** Typically, message flow is one-way, from source to receiver. Feedback is usually harder to initiate than in interpersonal communication, but the Internet is changing that.

**Noise.** Noise can be semantic, environmental, or mechanical.
Defining Mass Media

A medium is the channel through which a message travels from source to receiver ("medium" is singular; "media" is plural). Mass media are the channels used for mass communication and include not only the mechanical devices that transmit messages, but also the institutions that use these devices. A **media vehicle** is a single component of the mass media, such as a newspaper, radio station, or magazine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Machine-assisted interpersonal</th>
<th>Mass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Single person; has knowledge of receiver</td>
<td>Single person or group; great deal of knowledge or no knowledge of receiver</td>
<td>Organizations or single person; little knowledge of receivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encoding</td>
<td>Single stage</td>
<td>Single or multiple stage</td>
<td>Multiple stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Private or public; cheap; hard to terminate; altered to fit receivers</td>
<td>Private or public; low to moderate expense; relatively easy to terminate; can be altered to fit receivers in some situations</td>
<td>Public; can be expensive; easily terminated; same message to everybody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel</td>
<td>Potential for many; no machines interposed</td>
<td>Restricted to one or two; at least one machine interposed</td>
<td>Restricted to one or two; usually more than one machine interposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decoding</td>
<td>Single stage</td>
<td>Single or multiple stage</td>
<td>Multiple stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiver</td>
<td>One or a relatively small number; in physical presence of source; selected by source</td>
<td>One person or a small or large group; within or outside physical presence of source; selected by source or self-defined</td>
<td>Large numbers; out of physical presence of source; self-selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Plentiful; immediate</td>
<td>Somewhat limited; immediate or delayed</td>
<td>Highly limited; usually delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>Semantic; environmental</td>
<td>Semantic; environmental; mechanical</td>
<td>Semantic; environmental; mechanical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MASS MEDIA IN TRANSITION**
Technological, economic, and social factors have made some traditional media systems obsolete. Other traditional media systems will go through significant changes in the future.

**Technology**

The Internet has created a new channel for mass communication, which has affected traditional media

- print newspaper and magazine circulation has decreased
- Web sites have replaced functions formerly served by traditional media, e.g., Craigslist instead of classified ads
- Web sites have created new functions to capture audiences, e.g., Facebook
- more competition as the Internet brings costs down since anyone can start a Web site

**Economics**

The economic downturn during the past few years caused several media organizations to go out of business or change formats.

**Social Trends**

Social use of the media changes as consumers:

- become accustomed to receiving information and entertainment on the Internet for free
- replace media exposure with active participation, e.g., Facebook
- obtain music through file sharing rather than purchasing CDs
- start creating their own media content

**MEDIA ORGANIZATION CHARACTERISTICS**

Mass media organizations share general characteristics, although Internet sites are generally more varied than the traditional media. Internet sites may fit all or some of these characteristics, or be better defined as media assisted-interpersonal communication. These characteristics became less distinct as the Internet became popular.

Defining characteristics of traditional mass communicators include the following:

- complex and formal organizations
- multiple gatekeepers
- need large amount of money to operate
- exist to make a profit
• highly competitive

**Formal Organizational Structure**

Media vehicles typically have a well-defined organizational structure characterized by specialization, division of labor, and focused areas of responsibility. Traditional mass communication is generally the product of a bureaucracy. Thus, decisions are made at multiple levels of management and channels of communication within the organization are often highly formalized (group decisions and committees, for example).

Web organizations may use a complex organizational structure similar to traditional media organizations that employ hundreds of employees, or may use a simpler structure with merely one individual or a handful of employees.

**Gatekeepers**

A gatekeeper is any person (or group) who has control over what material eventually reaches the public; the more complex the organization, the more gatekeepers will be found. During poor economic times, there are fewer gatekeepers.

Gatekeeping is not a principle feature of many Internet sites as it is in traditional media; on the Web, often audience members do the gatekeeping. Creativity reigns (although there is, conversely, little guarantee that what is “published” is tasteful, worthwhile, or even accurate).

**Large Operating Expenses**

It often costs millions of dollars to buy and maintain a traditional mass media organization, which is one reason for the current trend towards media consolidation of ownership. Web operations may not have the same operating expenses that traditional media has and are often characterized by low start up and maintenance costs, though they do need cash to grow and prosper.

**Competition for Profits**

Most media organizations in the United States exist to make a profit; if they don’t they will soon go out of business. Profit is usually made by selling audiences to advertisers, hence media organizations compete with one another to attract audiences. Commercially sponsored Web sites may compete for audiences, but many other Web sites do not.
THE INTERNET: MASS AND INTERPERSONAL CHANNEL

The Internet fosters both mass and machine-assisted communication at the same time. Although the Internet is considered one of the mass media, many of the most successful Web operations, such as e-mail and Wikipedia resemble machine-assisted interpersonal communication.

Experts predict that in the future, more traditional media content will be distributed over the Internet, making it the single most important channel of mass communication. A danger of the Internet becoming all-encompassing is that it relies on technology that can be disabled in a disaster.

MODELS FOR STUDYING MASS COMMUNICATION

The traditional model of mass communication was a “one-to-many” model. It suggested that information from the environment was filtered through a media organization that then encoded representations of that environment and reproduced them many times over and sent them through the appropriate channel. Under the traditional model, there is little direct interaction between sources and receivers.

In contrast, an Internet model of mass communication presents a new arrangement, allowing multiple levels of communication:

- one-to-one (email)
- one-to-many (CNN.com)
- few-to-few (chat rooms, blogs)
- many-to-many (eBay)

The internet model of mass communication is not a one-way or left-to-right model; communication flows inward. In this model, content can be provided by organizations and by individuals. There are no organizational gatekeepers. One person decodes, interprets, and encodes the content. The receiver may in fact initiate the process, choosing the time and manner of the interaction.

Messages flowing through the model are not identical, nor are they linear. Receivers can customize the information they receive. Some writers have characterized the traditional mass communication model as a “push” model (wherein the source pushes the information to the receiver) whereas the Internet model is a “pull” model (wherein the receiver pulls only the information that he or she wants to receive).
In this model, individuals and organizations are linked in a computer-mediated environment. This makes interaction and feedback easier, and supports totally new forms of interaction.

**An Internet Model of Mass Communication**
Trends in media evolution are: audience segmentation, convergence, increased audience control, multiple platforms, user-generated content, mobile media, social media.

**Audience Segmentation: The End of Mass Communication as We Know It?**

Mass communication has become less mass and more selective over the past few decades. This process is called **fractionalization** or **segmentation** of the mass media audience. The audience for any single media vehicle is reduced for a variety of reasons:

- an increase in one-parent families and a decrease in discretionary personal time, meaning that less time is devoted to media and that there is more demand for special-interest content
- an increase in the number of media from which to choose (from three TV networks to hundreds of channels, DVDs, videogames, and YouTube)
- advertisers are turning from mass-marketing to target-marketing

Despite these changes, the definition of mass communication given earlier still applies: Complex organizations use machines to transmit public messages aimed at large, heterogeneous and scattered audiences.

The channels of mass communications remain the same, though more mass media are using those channels to reach more selective audiences. Messages have become more specialized and aimed at audience niches, but the potential for reaching a mass audience still exists.

**Convergence**

Convergence means coming together or uniting in a common theme or focus. It has become common in discussions of media trends. There are several levels of convergence.

**Corporate convergence.** Originally referred to in the 1980s as "synergy," corporate convergence occurs when companies acquire assets that extended the range of their activities. For example, content providers acquired distribution channels.

**Operational convergence.** Occurs when owners of several media properties in one market combine their operations. For example, a newspaper, a Web site, and a local cable news channel might operate a joint (converged) news department. Currently, about 50 instances of this kind of convergence are operating. Critics worry whether this will result in fewer independent and diverse forms of journalism.

**Device convergence.** One mechanism contains the functions of two or more devices. Examples include video game platforms that play DVDs and cell phones with digital video cameras or...
navigation systems. Device convergence is also evident as media seem to be converging on the Internet as a major channel of distribution.

**Increased Audience Control**

Audience members are able to control what they want to see/hear, and when. Technological advances such as the VCR, remote control, digital video recorders, video on demand, and the like, have given more power to the consumer.

If people aren’t satisfied with what is offered on traditional news media, they can go to other outlets including blogs. People don’t need to buy an entire album; they can download only the songs they want. The receiver is increasingly powerful in the mass communication process.

**Multiple Platforms**

Using multiple platforms is a strategy involving making content available via a number of different delivery methods to a number of different receiving devices. Music videos started on cable/satellite networks such as MTV, then began to be streamed on Web sites, and have moved on to video iPods, cell phones, and tablet computers. Television programs are available on Hulu.com. Networks are trying to make their content available on as many screens as possible. Other media, such as newspapers and magazines, are repackaging their content and delivering it to smart phones and tablet computers.

**User-Generated Content**

User-generated content, or peer production, was recently a hot trend, but the trend has slowed down. Examples include YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia, Twitter and Facebook. Many news organizations accept content sent in by citizen journalists. On the other hand, magazine and book publishing, motion picture, radio, sound recording and entertainment TV make relatively little use of user-generated content.

**Mobile Media**

The emergence of small-screen media devices such as tablet computers, e-readers, cell phones, and iPods, indicates that the mass media have become increasingly mobile. Movies and books can be viewed on tablet computers and cell phones. This trend is a significant milestone in the development of communication.

**Social Media**

Social media are online communications that involve participation, conversation, sharing, collaboration and linkage. Examples of social media include Facebook and YouTube, along with traditional media that incorporate techniques of social media, such as newspapers that allow readers to make comments online.

-- End of Chapter 1 --