

# EVOLUTION OF MASS COMMUNICATION: MASS COMMUNICATION AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

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## Summary

The development of mass communication technologies and their resulting applications has been driven by the complexities of the human condition and the imperative to communicate. All advances in mass communication technology and practice are built upon foundations established by prior technologies and practices. Communication has been central to human survival. It is the force that activates human culture and advances civilization. Mass communication is also an influential global industry, requiring complex organizational systems. The invention and diffusion of mass communication technologies have accelerated over the past century with great consequences for human civilization.

The evolution of mass communication has made evident two impulses in human culture.

The first is the impulse to use tools and other technologies to expand communication capability. These include speech, writing, printing, telegraphy, broadcasting and the Internet. Each invention and its diffusion have increased dialogue, thus the possibilities for sharing information and knowledge. The second impulse is that of using communication tools and technologies to dominate others. Among the many examples of this is Nazi Germany's systematic use of mass communication resources to promote hate and genocide.

Nevertheless, new communication technologies, such as the Internet, are facilitating global interaction. This development offers the possibility for human solidarity. More and more we are recognizing our interdependence and the fragility of our environment. Through the new digital communication technologies and the earth-girding system of distribution, we are better prepared than ever before to mobilize our material and intellectual resources to address the task of creating a just, equitable and sustainable future. Our imaginations are our only limitations.

## **1. Introduction**

Mass communication is typically recognized as the process of producing and distributing information, ideas, opinions, values and entertainment from a single, but invariably complex, organization or source, through print or electronic channels, to large numbers of people. Mass communication channels or media include newspapers, magazines, books, radio, television, film, sound recordings and the Internet. Over the past four centuries mass communication has gained in importance and influence. It is an essential building block in the construction of human culture and civilization. This chapter explores the consequences of mass communication and its role in the construction of a sustainable future.

Communication is essential for nourishing and transmitting culture, sharing knowledge, entertaining, envisioning futures, and motivating action. From the emergence of our earliest ancestor *Australopithecus Africanus* about five million years ago in Africa, the human species has used its ability to communicate to survive in harsh environments and populate planet Earth. The ability to communicate facilitated the sharing of information on food sources, contributed to the security of the species, and provided tools for articulating relationships between and among different groups of humans. Archeologists and anthropologists have concluded that the development of signs, signals and speech among proto-humans and early humans was in response to the need to store memory and distribute knowledge – a prerequisite for the survival of the species. Communication is essential to social and political organization, and it is influential in the construction of individual and collective identities. These attributes, which have been evident from the earliest forms of human communication, have been amplified by the mass communication channels and the associated processes.

The print and electronic channels of mass communication are central to contemporary human civilization. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet are influential forces in the social, cultural, economic and political life of all human societies. The new distribution technologies such as communication satellites and the Internet have given mass communication earth-girding capacity. These advances in

human communication capacity, like those of the past, have twin dimensions – the positive and emancipatory, and the negative and dominating. The challenge of constructing a sustainable future for humanity demands that efforts be made to optimize the positive and the emancipatory capacity of mass communication. (See *Journalism and Mass Communication: The Making of Meaning*; and *Mass Communication and Sustainable Development*, EOLSS on-line, 2002)

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At the start of the twenty-first century, the term ‘sustainable development’ is used to articulate the core elements of a sustainable future for humanity. Sustainable development is holistic in perspective and has four key dimensions:

(1) Sustainable livelihoods, people’s participation, and mainstreaming of gender and population issues; (2) Agrarian transformation and institutional reform; (3) Research, extension, education and communication; (4) Natural resource monitoring and management.

Among the recommendations of the 1980 report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems -- or the McBride Commission -- was the recommendation that “All forms of co-operation among the media, the professionals and their associations, which contribute to the better knowledge of other nations and cultures, should be encouraged and promoted.”

## **2. Theory of Transitions**

The evolution of mass communication is best understood by exploring its antecedents and appreciating its emerging progeny. In the mid-1980s American mass communication theorists Melvin DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach introduced the theory of transitions in the development of media dependency theory. Media dependency theory described and explained mass communication’s ability to influence the way humans felt, thought and acted in contemporary society. The theorists contended that the more dependent individuals and communities were on the mass media for information and education, especially during the periods of ambiguity associated with crisis and with change, the more influence the mass media had on

individuals' thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

The theory of transitions stressed that the human species moved through several ages of communication before arriving at the age of mass communication and the emerging digital age – the age of convergence. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach asserted that each age shapes the subsequent age. Hence, to appreciate the evolution of mass communication, we must put it in the context of the age of the signs and signals, the age of speech, the age of writing, the age of print and its successor, the digital-based age of convergence. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach observed that each age of communication compounds, rather than replaces, the previous age because human communication practices are cumulative. Let us turn our attention to each of these “ages” as we construct this narrative of the evolution of mass communication.

### **2.1. The Age of Signs and Signals**

The age of signs and signals is associated with the human evolutionary process, particularly the movement from “pre-hominid to early proto-human life.” In this age emerged the standardization of gestures, sounds, and other signals that were used to indicate “danger, the presence of food, availability for mating, and coordinated hunting.” Many of these signs and signals are still in the human communication repertoire. Terms such as kinesics, proxemics, haptics, vocalics, chronemics, artifacts, and physical appearance have been used in describing and categorizing these forms of nonverbal communication.

Ray Birdwhistel, who is associated with the founding of the study of kinesics or body language, has argued that the human body movements are patterned and express meaning. He refers to patterned movements such as the shrugging of shoulders, fluttering of eyelids, and hand gestures as “kines.” For him, kines are the building blocks of meaning. These meanings are cultural and vary between cultural communities. However, some of these nonverbal gestures, such as threats and emotional displays, may have universal meaning.

According to Edward Hall, proxemics refers to the ways humans manage space. For him, proxemics includes the distance between individuals in the “conduct of daily transactions,” the way how [replace “how” with “that”] space is organized in homes, buildings, and in communities. For Hall and other anthropologists, space has cultural meaning. Space considerations - how close you get to some one in a conversation or other transaction - are crucial in daily interactions, especially in a world of increased cross-cultural communication.

Haptics, vocalics, chronemics, artifacts and physical appearance are other important dimensions to human nonverbal communication whose origins are associated with our pre-hominid and proto-human past. Haptics refers to touching. The stroke of a cheek, or the patting of the back, all have meanings. Vocalics refers to the use of the voice. The grunts and shrieks of our distant past used to signal alarm, fear or joy are examples of vocalics. Chronemics refers to the use of time. The term ‘artifacts’ refers to material objects used in regular and ceremonial life. The objects we use and the way we use them all generate meaning. The waving of a club can signal anger. Contemporary humans still

draw upon this repertoire of nonverbal communication to make meaning.

## **2.2. The Age of Speech**

Developments in human physiology, especially the vocal apparatus, which allowed speech and the increasingly complex social organization of human life, contributed to the development of the age of speech and language about 35,000 years ago. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach concluded that language enabled humans to cope with their physical and social environment in ways that were not possible during the age of signs and signals. Language, according to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, provided humans with the capacity to “classify, abstract, analyze, synthesize and speculate.” As a result, they were able to store and exchange messages of greater length, complexity and subtlety.

Voluntary and involuntary migration contributed to the spread of languages. Languages facilitated trade. Language has been used as a tool of domination and language has been used as a tool of resistance. Language is an important determinant of cultural difference and a marker of identity.

## **2.3 The Age of Writing**

The Age of Writing emerged about 5,000 years ago in various regions of the world. The story of this technology “is one of moving from pictographic representation to phonetic systems, from representing complex ideas with pictures or stylized drawings to using simple letters to imply specific sounds.” Associated with the development of writing were also advances in writing media – a progressive shift from static stone to lighter and more portable media such as papyrus. Harold Innis reported that the move from stone to papyrus resulted in significant changes to Egyptian civilization, including a shift from absolute monarchy to a more democratic organization." This is clearly a demonstration of mass communication’s emancipating capacity. The ability to read and write still confers power and social status in human society. The role of the scribe in the storage and distribution of knowledge is recognized and valued in human society.

For DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, the development of writing freed humans from the “burdensome task of having to remember entire cultures and reproduce them in the minds and memories of every new generation.” The age of writing was followed by the age of print. In this transition, we can see an example of one communication technology stimulating the development of a more complex one. In this case, it was the invention of the printing press and movable type.

## **2.4. The Age of Print**

Humans have had some form of printing technology since at least 800 A.D. However, modern printing technology is associated with Johann Gutenberg’s invention of movable type in Mainz, Germany, in 1455. This facilitated an increase in literacy, the development of mass media such as newspapers, greater participation in political processes, and changes in the thinking of individuals. In 1909, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley used two words, *enlargement* and *animation*, to describe the changes that had taken place in American society as a result of newspapers. For him,

newspapers had extended the scope of the readers' consciousness by bringing to the reader news and information from beyond his or her local community. In addition, the newspaper was changing the readers' sense of time as it was bringing news and information at a faster pace. According to Cooley, this expansion in space and acceleration in time had psychological consequences, as the individual "is broadened by coming into relation with a larger and more various life, and is kept stirred up, sometimes to excess, by the multitude of changing suggestions which life brings to him."

The age of writing and its print manifestations, such as newspapers and magazines, presaged the age of mass communication. By the turn of the twentieth century the print media were significant channels of influence in American society. The print media were not peripheral to the nation's political, economic, foreign policy and social discourses. The newspaper editorial influenced governance. Politicians were aware that endorsement by a popular newspaper or new magazine translated into votes. Through advertising, manufacturers and marketers paid for access to the growing number of consumers in the increasingly important multiethnic urban sector of American society.

Between 1860 and 1914 more than 20 million immigrants, the majority from Eastern and Southern Europe, immigrated to the United States and settled in urban areas, creating ethnic enclaves. The newspaper and the magazine became the primary mass media for native-born Americans and immigrant enclaves in urban America. Mainstream - general audience - newspapers and magazines served many functions, including providing news, information and relaxation. The immigrant newspapers did a bit more. They provided what the mainstream publications did not offer - contact with the "old country," opportunity to use the languages of their native lands, the opportunity to learn English, and advertisements for goods and services not provided by mainstream society.

Robert Park, who studied immigrant newspapers in the United States during the early 1920s, reported that, in the city of New York, thirty-one ethnic groups had printing presses and published "some sort of periodical." He concluded the ethnic press served a dual role. He used the words "brake" and "accelerator" to describe this duality. He contended that ethnic newspapers that helped immigrants to maintain their languages and native cultures were performing a brake function. These periodicals, he argued, were causing immigrants to remain outside of American life and thus unable to benefit from the American dream. Park's interpretation was flavored by the influential "melting pot" perspective.

In the 1920s, the term "melting pot" was the metaphor that guided relationships between native-born Americans and immigrants. The general expectation was that immigrants to the United States were expected to lose their ethnicity in the melting pot and emerge as Americans - those who adhered to the Anglo values that were the foundations of American society. When ethnic newspapers moved immigrants in the direction of becoming Americanized, they were performing the functions of an accelerator. The age of print stimulated dependency on the mass media for news, information and relaxation. This dependency was later amplified by the electric and electronic technologies that would dominate the age of mass communication.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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Dr. Cambridge has more than ten publications on his research themes. His book chapter “Milestones in Communication and Developments” in Yaha Kamilipour’s (ed.) *Transnational Media and Global Communication in the Information Age Revolution* was published by Greenwood Press in 2002. His work on broadcasting in the Commonwealth Caribbean was in the 1996 Greenwood Press publication *International Afro Mass Media*. In 1993, he was awarded the Eighth Annual Carlos and Guillermo Vigil Prize for “Radio soap operas: The Jamaican experience 1962–1989” - the best article to appear in Volume 11, 1992 of *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*. In September 2000, he received an award from the Netherlands Entertainment-Education Foundation (NEEF) for his service to the field of entertainment-education research and practice.