

# JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION: THE MAKING OF MEANING

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## Summary

We are seeing emergent forms of communication at the beginning of the twenty-first century whose implications are not yet clear. We have inklings of the wider transformations of which the new communication forms are a part, and also the transformations they will help to create. Some of the trends taking shape include the convergence of old and new media, greater democratization of media and yet greater control of media by large corporations, the fragmentation of media audiences, and a greater presence of media and popular culture in the lives of more people throughout the world than has ever been experienced before. The proliferation of means of communication has been heralded for its potential in creating a “global village,” and feared for its potential for deepening divisions and differences, and for fragmenting people into isolated “islands.”

This article charts a particular history of journalism and mass communication, taking into account the various contributions of different cultures to this history, and also the interrelations between old and new forms of communication. Some of the central trends in communication and some of the larger cultural forces driving these trends are examined, paying special attention to contradictions and competing tensions. Toward the end of the article, the role that journalism and mass communication can play in relation to sustainable development is considered, defining sustainable development broadly and keeping the elimination of poverty, oppression, and inequalities at the center of any long-term agenda for sustainable development.

## 1. Introduction

The world has to be made to mean.  
(Stuart Hall)

Journalism and mass communication are part and parcel of the human need and capacity to imbue the world with meaning. From ancient sculptures and frescoes in the caves of Ajantha-Ellora to the use of complex drum rhythms in Africa and elsewhere, to spreading news by the electronic pulses conveying massive quantities of information instantaneously throughout the world, we have examples of humans using symbols to understand themselves, each other, and the larger world, and to communicate this understanding. From the very beginnings of communication to the present day, the making of meaning has been influenced by such factors as the technological means available, and the cultural, political, and economic environment within which the process occurs. These factors, and the resultant forms and uses of communication, have created great potential for bringing peoples of the world together, but they have also served to divide them in many ways. Journalism and mass communication have been agents of both war and peace, of upliftment and degradation, of understanding and obfuscation. They have developed in such a way as to reproduce unequal relations of power globally, nationally, and locally. And yet they continue to hold the promise to challenge inequalities and serve democratization.

As the world changes physically, it is also changing economically, politically, and culturally. An enduring question in the cultural area has been the possibility of viable public spheres where people can come together to discuss the important issues of the day, and together enunciate solutions to the urgent problems that are facing us. Journalism and mass communication are central to the fostering or strengthening of such potential public spheres or counterspheres. And yet the extent to which the media can facilitate the creation of robust public spheres will depend crucially on the forces playing upon them. Both government and corporate control of journalistic and entertainment media shrink the possibilities in terms of the creation of autonomous public spheres. Power imbalances both within and outside media create pressures that lead to the continued amplification of certain voices, of the already wealthy and powerful, and to the continued marginalization of other voices, of the already poor and disadvantaged. On the other hand, the centralization and corporatization of media continue to be challenged at all levels, very importantly by alternative media that keep

alive marginal voices and worldviews. This article examines the tensions within which journalism and communication are situated, and the contradictions that emerge as a result.

## **2. The Evolution of Journalism and Mass Communication**

Certain principles can be identified in tracing the evolution of journalism and mass communication. One is that most technologies of communication developed as a result of the ideas and knowledge contributed over a period of time by various people from different cultures. Another is that the social context was very important in determining when particular technologies developed, what form they took, and how they were used. Part of this social context was the defense of territory and acquisition and maintenance of empire. Although each new communication technology created new modalities, and new relationships to space and time, the new means of communication often incorporated and absorbed earlier means as well. Moreover, any given society normally evidenced the easy coexistence of older and newer means, unevenly spread within societies to mirror already existing inequalities. These trends continue apace, with some without access to a telephone and others connected to the World Wide Web, sometimes within a mile of each other. Each of these aspects will be taken up separately below.

The evolution of mass communication has had some ironic results. The publishing industry is highly concentrated in wealthy Western countries. Thus, the history of mass communication has been written mainly by Western scholars who have privileged Eurocentric and individualistic accounts. That is, these accounts give primacy to the contributions of individual inventors from the Western world. Standard accounts have also incorporated the paradigm of modernization, assuming that progress constitutes a linear progression from the oral tradition to the manuscript era, to print, to electronic transmission, and finally to the digital era. This progression is also seen as a logical corollary, and an enabling component, of the economic, political, and social advancement of all peoples, particularly those in the “Third World,” or the part of the world that is considered backward in economic terms. This section takes an approach that has developed more recently in an attempt to acknowledge the collective and multicultural aspects of the history of communication. The section also interrogates the modernization approach rather than incorporating its assumptions.

### **2.1. The Precursors of Modern Mass Communication**

What have been roughly termed the “oral traditions,” existing from well before 4000 B.C., actually encompass a vast variety of complex systems of expression and communication that have continuously adapted and changed over time, and that still have enormous significance in large parts of the world. These systems include town criers and bards, theater traditions as varied as the *jatra* and shadow puppetry from South Asia, the *Noh* from Japan, and the *Ta'ziyeh* from Iran, and dances and musical forms from every continent. These dynamic traditions have survived centuries of cross-pollination and sometimes conquest. The *bharat natyam* and *ramalila* of India, as well as its classical music forms, are cases in point. Many of these forms of communication have religious roots, and this may help to explain their enduring significance. The power of the oral tradition is so great that when it is incorporated into newer media of

communication, the newer media are forced to attempt to recreate the original structure of feeling in order to create mass appeal. When the epic *Ramayana* was televised in India, for example, the producers geared the use of camera techniques, sound and lighting to recreate the mental images and the feeling of devotion associated with the epic that had long been experienced by the audience through *ramalila* (community theater), *kathas* and *akhand paaths* (communal readings of the *Ramayana*), and more recently through poster art.

In the postmodern era, there has been a renewed interest in and recognition of the value of oral traditions. Their potential to connect us with each other in community, to reconnect us with nature, and to preserve crucial lessons and insights gained over centuries is being recognized. For example the peoples in the fourth world, aboriginal people such as the Samek in Norway and Sweden, are using theater to revive and express storytelling and singing traditions that were in danger of being lost altogether. These traditions are now being creatively syncretized with Aristotelian dramaturgy to express a unique sensibility, and sometimes to broach political issues such as the environmental degradation of Samek lands. Other continuities with the oral tradition are evident in the use of street theater by grass-roots movements in many countries. One such example is its use by women's movements in India to raise consciousness about issues such as female foeticide and dowry deaths.

Within modern mass media, the persistence of the oral traditions is also apparent in many ways. Inuits in Canada use community television, the Mapuches in Chile use community radio, and African-American communities in the United States use gospel radio as a way to retain expressive space, a space to elaborate alternative ideologies and to speak a distinct language, both in actual and metaphorical terms. The wide popularity of storytelling genres such as telenovelas and soap operas in the entertainment domain, and talk shows in the informational domain, attest to the power of the spoken word. The newer media continue to borrow from dynamic oral traditions in many ways.

## **2.2. The Manuscript and Print Eras**

Several factors had to be present for the birth of journalism, as Kathleen Endres delineates in her article "Evolution of journalism and mass communications" (see EOLSS on-line, 2002). The same can be said for the start of the manuscript culture, and later the use of printing to create books. Technological factors included the invention of writing and the creation of papyrus, then parchment, and finally paper. Social factors included the inculcation of literacy among the elite. A form of writing was developed in Sumeria around 3000 B.C., and possibly in the Indus Valley around 4000 B.C.. The Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Chinese also developed a written alphabet at about the same time as the Sumerians. Papyrus was used as early as 2700 B.C. by the Egyptians, and the Chinese began making book-like objects from strips of wood and bamboo around 1000 B.C., later inventing paper in A.D. 105. The Chinese were also the ones to invent block printing around A.D. 800, and the first movable type around A.D. 1000.

The necessary conditions for the birth of early journalism coalesced in Rome around 59 B.C., when the *Acta Diurna* began to be circulated to the elite in the empire, with each issue being posted in public places. It lasted two centuries. Chinese *ti-pao*, or news

sheets began to be circulated among government officials in the far reaches of the Chinese empire in A.D. 618. These early forms of journalism were spawned in the most technologically advanced cultures of that time in both the East and the West. Both civilizations had a literate elite who had time to read and felt the need for information. It would take a few more centuries for paper-making and movable type to develop in Europe and for other conditions to exist for the establishment of journalism. (See also “Newsletters, newspapers, and pamphlets,” EOLSS on-line, 2002.)

The use of writing in the manuscript era made possible a written record of history in a more accessible and retrievable form than before, and by doing so changed the relations between humans and time. Printing deepened this process, and changed the relationship to space and time in a more fundamental way. It became possible to communicate a particular message to large numbers of people separated by greater distances in a significantly shorter amount of time. Reproduction of printed material such as the *Diamond Sutra* by Wang Shieh in China in A.D. 868 and Gutenberg’s Bible in Germany in 1456 also made possible a shared experience for people who would earlier have considered each other as complete strangers. In doing so, it expanded the sense of community beyond the immediate, greatly enhancing the possibility of imagined communities beyond one’s kin, tribe, or immediate locality. Although the first Bible was printed in Latin, in the early 1500s Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* became the first book to be printed in English. Books were only affordable by the elite, but gradually less expensive paper and advancements in printing made it possible to produce cheaper versions accessible to a larger population. Even with the beginnings of mass communication, then, it is possible to see the tensions between democratization and centralization, between the greater accessibility of previously elite works and the deepening of class and other divisions. Although books were becoming more accessible, clearly not everyone could own a printing press.

The printing press also introduced an important new dimension in communication with its ability to reproduce large numbers of the original, a characteristic that electronic media shares with print media. Walter Benjamin spoke of the ways in which mechanical reproduction of art and photography changed the essential character of human sense perception. His comments apply to print with equal force, as a very important case of the introduction of reproducibility on a large scale. Benjamin wrote in 1970 that technical reproduction “enables the original to meet the beholder halfway,” so that an orchestra performance can be enjoyed in the living room. Benjamin felt that reproducibility reduced the aura of the original. He also pointed out that mechanical reproduction is more independent of the original than manual reproduction, so that an airbrushed photograph has a reality independent of the person or scene it captures. Digitalization has taken this process much further, with the idea of the original in the end becoming irrelevant, as Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto points out.

Printed communication today includes a wide variety of media, including newspapers and magazines of all stripes, newsletters, brochures, books, journals, maps, and directories. The most widely circulated, such as magazines, books, and newspapers, have seen a steady growth in corporate ownership, and increased concentration of ownership in fewer hands over time. For example, in the United States, by the mid-1990s chains controlled nearly 80 percent of all daily newspapers, and by 1999 the top

seven chains circulated more than one-third of all daily papers in the country. Ten major magazine chains own the magazines with the largest distribution worldwide. Seven of these are based in the United States, one is based in Germany, one in Paris, and one in London. Chain ownership is also on the increase in the book industry, although it remains more open to entry and more diverse than the magazine and newspaper industries. Magazines are the most sophisticated among print media in terms of catering to narrow audience segments, and they are also among the most visually sophisticated of the print media.

With the advent of printed media, the power of mass communication was unleashed. Perhaps in recognition of this power, forms of censorship developed early on, and remain a serious concern today. The struggle over freedom of expression has been most evident in the context of the print media. In the twentieth century, journalists all over the world continued to risk their lives to impart information to reading publics. From 1995 through 1998, for example, 128 reporters were killed in various parts of the world, and at least another 300 were imprisoned. Two prominent cases from recent history illustrate the influence of political, religious, and economic forces in censorship. Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* was banned and he was ordered to be killed by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran in 1989. In 1998, Harper Collins was directed by parent company News Corp. to cancel publication of *East and West* by Chris Patten, former governor of Hong Kong. Chinese officials had expressed deep concern over the criticism of the Chinese government contained in the book, and publishing the book would have hurt News Corp.'s significant business interests in China.

The newspaper industry is undergoing a transition in some of the highly industrialized countries. Circulations are declining as a result of competing media: at one time television and now the Internet. For example, in the United States circulations have been declining since the 1930s, and they have flattened out since the mid-1960s. Although in the developing world, newspaper readerships are not declining, their reach is limited to the literate population. This translates into uneven access, with adult literacy rates in some countries being very low. Sierra Leone, for example, had an adult literacy rate in 1990 of 38 percent, with the adult female literacy rate at 26 percent.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Dr Rashmi Luthra** is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Her research interests include women's movements and media, gender and international communication, and media and diaspora. She has published in various journals including *Gazette: International Journal of Mass Communication Studies*; *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization*; *Feminist Issues*; *Women's Studies in Communication*; and *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, and in various anthologies including *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women*, *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media: Global Diversities*, and *Religion and Popular Culture: Studies on the Interaction of Worldviews*, and *Women Faculty of Color in the White College Classroom*. She teaches courses in International Communication, Critical Media Studies, Communication Research Methods, and Women's Studies. She received her Ph.D. in Mass Communication from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.