

1. Mass communication (1e1)

Imagine you are attending a party where a politician is mingling and conversing with guests. About an hour later the party ends and you join a few thousand people in an auditorium to hear the politician deliver a major address.

Stop and ask yourself whether mass communication was taking place either at the party or in the auditorium where a large number of people were present.

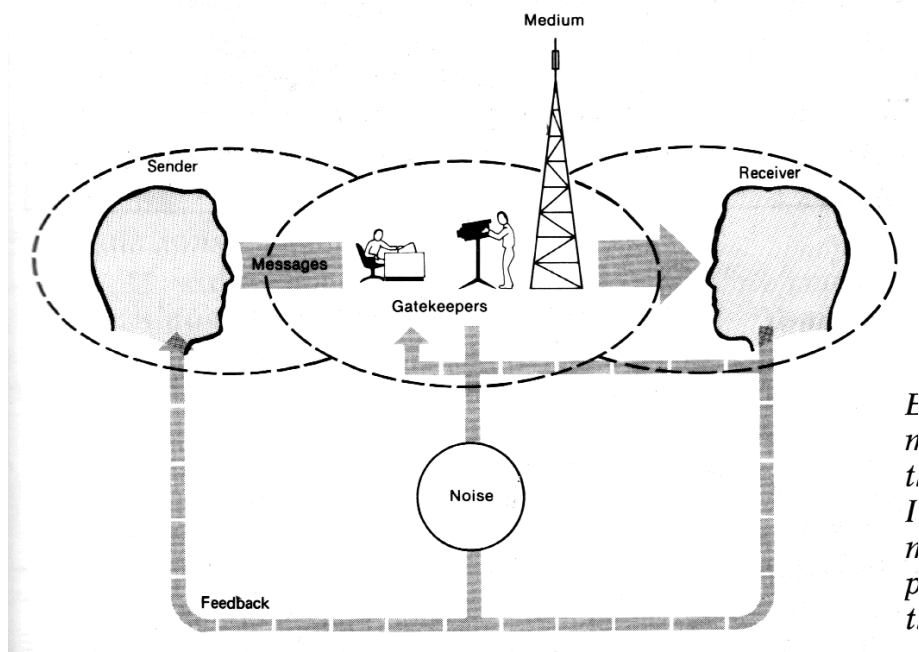
The answer is no!.

For mass communication to exist, we need an intermediate transmitter of information, a mass medium such as newspapers, magazines, film, radio, television, book, internet, or combinations of these. The politician who delivered a major address without the aid of the mass media would be forfeiting his or her chance to reach thousands, even millions of people not physically present. Essentially, then, mass communication is messages communicated through a mass medium to a large number of people.

(From: J.R. Bittner, Mass Communication – an introduction, 1986)

Tasks:

1. Explain this diagram. How does the message reach the receiver? Who are the „gatekeepers“ and what do they do? In what way is „feedback“ different in mass communication and in interpersonal communication? What do you think is meant by „noise“?



2. Defining terms:

- What two elements must be present for mass communication to exist?
- Which of these two elements is only vaguely defined? Explain.
- Which of the media listed in the text do you think are most important? Why?
- Can you think of any other media? Discuss whether they belong to mass media or not

Neil Postman: We are amusing ourselves to death - foreword

We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another – slightly older, slightly well less known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's „Brave New World“. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no *Big Brother* is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. He feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies*, the orgy porgy*, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy*.

As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists, who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny, „failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distraction.“ In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. [...]

My argument has its origins in observations made 2,300 years ago by Plato. It is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture.

I use the word „conversation“ metaphorically to refer not only to speech but to all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages. In this sense all culture is conversation or, more precisely, a corporation of conversations, conducted in a variety of symbolic modes. Our attention here is on how forms of public discourse regulate and even dictate what kind of content can issue from such forms.

To take a simple example of what that means: As I suggested earlier, it is impossible to imagine that anyone like our 27th President, the multi-chinned, 300-pound W.H. Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today's world. The shape of a man's body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing the public in writing or on the radio. But it is quite relevant on television, for on television, discourse is largely conducted through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us conversation in images, not words. Today you cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content.

To give still another example: The information, the content that makes up what is called „the news of the day“ did not exist – could not exist – in a world that lacked the media to give it expression. I do not mean that things like fires, wars, murders and love affairs did not, ever and always, happen in places all over the world. I mean that lacking a technology to advertise them, people could not attend to them, could not include them in daily business. Such information simply could not exist as part of the content of culture. This idea – that there is a content called „news of the day“ was entirely created by the telegraph (and since amplified by newer media). The news of the day is quite precisely a media event.

Cultures without speed-of-light media do not have news of the day. Without a medium to create its form, the news of the day does not exist.

To say it, then, as plainly as I can, this book is an inquiry into the most significant American cultural fact of the 2nd half of the 20th century: the decline of the age of typography and the ascent of the age of television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religions, business, education, and everything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television.

(Neil Postman: We are amusing ourselves to death, 1985)

** In „Brave New World“ people are encouraged by the state to take a drug, Soma (effects could be compared to Ecstasy), to „get away from it all“ – basically most people are on Soma all the time; „feelies“ refers to a technology which enables people to not only watch e.g. movies, but also feel what happens in the movie; orgy-porgy is nothing but a compulsory sex orgy that people in „Brave New World“ have to attend regularly (being on Soma), „bumblepuppy“ is a children’s game mentioned in Brave New World*

Tasks:

- 1) Compare Huxley’s „Brave new World“ and Orwell’s „1984“ as presented by Neil Postman
- 2) Work out Postman’s basic ideas about communication and the media

Questions to think about:

- 1) Is Postman’s analysis only confined to TV or is it also true for newer types of media (internet)
- 2) Try and analyse social media (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) using Postman’s theory
- 3) What basic functions should modern mass media have, and which do they really exercise?
- 4) Where do you get your information from? Have you ever thought about the relevance and validity of the information you try to get every day?
- 5) How do we know what we know?

Typographic America

As America moved into the 19th century, it did so as a fully print-based culture. And although the reading of novels was not considered an altogether reputable use of time, Americans devoured them. Of Walter Scott's novels, published between 1814 and 1832, Samuel Goodrich wrote: „The appearance of a new novel from his pen cause a greater sensation in the US than did some of the battles of Napoleon ... Everybody reads these works: everybody – the refined and the simple.“

When Charles Dickens visited America in 1842, his reception equaled the adulation we offer today to television stars, quarterbacks, and Michael Jackson. „I can give you no conception of my welcome“, Dickens wrote to a friend. „There never was a King or Emperor upon earth so cheered and followed by the crowds, and entertained at splendid balls and dinners and waited upon by public bodies of all kinds. If I go out in a carriage, the crowd surrounds it and escorts me home.“

Harriet Beecher-Stowe's „Uncle Tom's Cabin“ sold 305,000 copies in its first year, the equivalent of 4 million in today's America. During the 19th century scores of Englishmen came to America to see for themselves what had become of the Colonies. All were impressed with the high level of literacy and in particular its extension to all classes.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind, and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content. American public discourse, being rooted in the printed word, was serious, inclined toward rational argument and presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content.

To understand the role of the printed word, one must keep in view that the act of reading in those days had an entirely different quality to it than today. For one thing, the printed word had a monopoly on both attention and intellect, there being no other means, besides the oral tradition, to have access to public knowledge. Public figures were known largely by their written words, not by their looks. It is quite likely that most of the first 15 presidents of the US would not have been recognized had they passed the average citizen in the street. This would have been the case as well of the great lawyers and scientists of that era. To think about those men was to think about what they had written, to judge them by their public positions, their arguments, their knowledge as expressed in the printed word. You may get some idea of how we are separated from this kind of consciousness by thinking about any of our recent presidents. Think of George W. Bush or Bill Clinton, or even Albert Einstein, and what will come to your mind is an image, a picture of a face, most likely a face on a TV screen. Of words, almost nothing will come to mind.

It is also a difference between living in a culture that provides little opportunity for leisure, and one that provides much. The farm boy following the plow with a book in hand, the mother reading aloud to her family on a Sunday afternoon, the merchant reading announcements of the latest clipper arrivals – these were different kinds of readers from those today. There would have been little casual reading, for there wasn't enough time for that. Reading would have had a sacred element in it, or if not that, would have at least occurred as a daily or weekly ritual filled with special meaning.

As far as we know, there did not exist such a thing as a „reading problem“, except for those who could not attend school. To attend school meant to learn to read, for without that capacity one could not participate in the culture’s conversations. But most people could read (literacy in America amounted to ca. 90% even in the 18th century). To these people reading was both their connection to and their model of the world. The printed page revealed the world, line by line, page by page, to be a serious, coherent place, capable of management by reason, and of improvement by logical and relevant criticism.

Almost all of the characteristics we associate with mature discourse were amplified by print: a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response. Toward the end of the 19th century, that age began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.

(from: Neil Postman, Amusing ourselves to death, chapters III and IV)

I. Tasks:

- 1) Read the text, look up unknown words, add those to your vocab, and: understand the text
- 2) What were the effects that the dominance of the printed word had on people, culture and society in the US in the 18th and 19th century?
- 3) In how far does this excerpt serve as proof that „the form of transmission of information regulates its content.“?
4. Compare print media and electronic media and find 5 advantages and disadvantages of each of them.

II. Experiment:

- ❖ Live one day without using any of the modern electronic media (no TV, radio, cell phone, iPod, computer, internet, mp3 player etc.). Write down how you experienced this experiment in about 200 words.

III. Further thinking:

- ❖ „The media give the people what they want“ – „eat shit, 100 billion flies can’t be wrong“ ... 2 sides of the same coin?