

COMMUNICATION

JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION OF THE PACIFIC

VOLUME II, NUMBER 1, JUNE 1973

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PUBLISHED BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF SPEECH
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII
HONOLULU, HAWAII

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The Process and Effects of Mass Communication

by Donald W. Klopff and James C. McCroskey*

If you are a typical American, you watch television for roughly six hours each day. If you live to your normal life expectancy, you will spend almost eighteen years in front of the television set. You will be assaulted by eighty minutes of commercials each day. That works out to 1,400 minutes a week, 6,000 minutes a month, 73,000 minutes a year, and 4,891,000 minutes in a lifetime--if you are male. If you are fortunate enough to be female, you will live a bit longer on the average and can look forward to 5,423,900 minutes of commercial viewing. And the amount of time devoted to television watching is but a small portion of the total exposure to mass communication.

In addition to the six hours devoted to television, the typical American spends approximately one hour reading each day. Another hour is devoted either to listening to the radio, listening to records, or to viewing films. Surprisingly, we spend more time involved with mass communication than we spend sleeping or working. Even though our exposure to mass communication is great, few people know much about the process or effects of mass communication. This paper proposes to review the process and effects of mass communication.

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THE NEED FOR MASS COMMUNICATION

Our society is made up of more than 200 million people who live in a very large country. Mass communication plays a major role in permitting such a large social group to function smoothly. Viewed in the broadest sense, our "society" consists of the entire world. Mass communication also plays a major role in fostering understanding between national groups. In fact, mass communication has actually brought into existence what some have called a "global village." Let us examine in some detail the indispensable function of mass communication in our own national life.

Information. A primary function of mass communication is the dissemination or dispersing of the information which people need in their daily lives. The United States has one of the best informed citizenry in the history of the world. Today it is literally possible for us to almost instantaneously find out about almost anything that happens in almost any part of the world. Protected by the guarantee of freedom expressed in the First Amendment to the Constitution, the various mass media are free to broadcast and publish the news from all corners of the earth. As Thomas Jefferson once said, "A nation that expects to be both ignorant and free expects what never was and never will be." If, as Jefferson suggested, information is the cornerstone of freedom, there is little reason to fear that Americans will lose their freedom.

The major problem today is that there is really an overabundance of information. We really find ourselves immersed

in information. The problem is not in getting information. The problem is really one of getting at the information we need, in distinguishing between the vital and important on the one hand and the transient and unimportant on the other.

Influence. An equally important function of mass communication is the influence which it exerts to alter people's ideas and behaviors. This function of mass communication involves very real dangers. In some ways, we expect to be influenced. We know, for example, that a commercial advertiser hopes to convince us to buy his product or to try his service. We expect him to say the very best things he can about what it is he has for sale. We do not expect him to say flattering things about his competitors or to provide time for their messages. We approach a political message in the same way. We know the candidate is looking for our vote. We expect him to emphasize his programs and ideas and to attempt to discredit his opponent. We do not approach a political message expecting objectivity.

When it comes to the spreading of basic information like news, the mass media also influence us. They exert a positive influence when they present vital information on issues of national and local importance in as objective a manner as possible. In this area, we have a right to expect the factual reporting of events. On issues where there are two or more sides, we have a right to expect a balanced airing of the various points of view. If we get the kind of objectivity we have a right to expect, we are influenced in the sense that we have adequate information to take an informed position on a particular issue.

We are influenced negatively when we are offered only one point of view or when we are provided with only part of a story or a selected segment of a news item.

As an agency of influence, the mass media are really indispensable. There is simply no other way to get one's message across to so many people so efficiently. We might sometimes complain about the number of commercial messages that we are exposed to on television. But try looking at it from the advertiser's point of view. For a Sunday afternoon football game, the advertiser knows that he has a potential audience of millions. He is quite willing to spend a great deal for a relatively small segment of time. But in what other way could he reach so many potential customers?

Entertainment. A third function of mass communication is to provide entertainment for people. While this function may not be as important to society as the spreading of information and influence, it is one that few people would like to give up. Although specific media have been criticized for the sameness of what they offer as entertainment, a great variety is actually available. It includes such forms as variety shows, situation comedies, sporting events, musical comedies, serious dramas, and news documentaries on television. Motion pictures provide a variety of offerings, ranging from light comedy, through melodrama, to films of artistic insight. The newspapers offer entertainment in the form of feature articles, human interest stories, and crossword puzzles.

These three functions of mass communication rarely appear

in isolation. While one of these three functions may predominate in a given instance, a specific piece of mass communication can serve two functions and even all three. A news item, for example, can both inform and entertain, especially if the subject matter is light or humorous. A dramatic movie can both entertain and inform. It can entertain because it discloses an important aspect of human relations. If its subject has something to do with historical reality, it can clearly inform. If its message is especially compelling, it can even influence.

THE FORMS OF MASS COMMUNICATION

When most people hear the term "mass communication," they think of the various mass media, such as television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and books. There are, however, other forms of mass communication which are at least as important. The term "mass communication" simply means "a source communicating with a large number of receivers." This type of communication may be accomplished in many ways. We will examine the various forms briefly.

Interpersonal Mass Communication. At first glance, the name for this form of mass communication might appear to be contradictory since "interpersonal" means "between two people." But in this form of mass communication, that is exactly what happens. A single source speaks directly with each member of a group. Taken together, all the individual listeners form the mass.

This is an ideal form of mass communication because the speaker is able "to get to everyone." However, when the group

to be reached is beyond a certain size, this technique cannot be used. It is possible that a candidate with 1,500 voters in his district and a great deal of energy and time could communicate with each person. He could go from house to house and engage each person in conversation. This would, however, be unusual even if it could be done. In most situations requiring mass communication, there are simply too many receivers for such a method to be used. Nevertheless, this form of mass communication is the preferred form for it enables a speaker to establish personal contact with each receiver.

Group Mass Communication. While it may be impractical to attempt to talk personally with each individual in a group, it is often possible to gather the group in one place and to speak to them at the same time. This is what is normally referred to as public speaking. Business concerns employ this method frequently. The firm gathers its salesmen or a group of customers in one central location and presents sales information or a sales pitch. This type of mass communication is rather expensive, since the company must underwrite the travel and maintenance charges involved. However, the practical benefits derived should more than justify the expense involved.

All forms of group mass communication are, of course, not as expensive as those sponsored by commercial concerns. In other situations, public speaking can be an inexpensive as well as an effective form of mass communication. A local politician, for example, may not be able to talk to each of his constituents personally. But he is able to contact many

people by giving speeches at meetings of various community groups or by securing a hall and scheduling periodic campaign appearances. This type of public speaking is frequently most efficient and effective.

Multi-Step Mass Communication. In some instances, it is neither important nor desirable that a source contacts directly every receiver that he would like to reach. Instead, he may choose to contact a limited number of people who, in turn, will communicate the necessary ideas or information to others. Drug companies commonly choose this form of mass communication. A new drug is developed and information concerning it is communicated to a number of physicians. The physicians then pass the information (perhaps accompanied by samples) to their patients. The communication is multi-step in the sense that it proceeds from producer to physician to patient.

In multi-step mass communication, the number of steps involved is not important. There could, in fact, be a number of steps or intermediaries. The important ingredient is that the source does not have to communicate directly with the ultimate receivers. If the source is reasonably certain that the middleman or middlemen will transmit his message with reasonable accuracy, he may find the multiphase form of group communication to be quite satisfactory and efficient. It does limit the number of people he must communicate with directly.

Mediated Mass Communication. By far the most common type of mass communication is the sort that involves some sort of

mechanical or electronic "go between" or "mediator" between the source and the receiver. Print and electronic media are the most common types. The printed page and the electrical components of the television or radio set are true mediators. They stand between the communicator and the receiver in much the same way as John stands between Mary and Joan when he hands Mary's note to Joan. Mary can't reach Joan without John's help. So also the author or the broadcaster can't reach the reader or the viewer-listener without the printed page and the electronic circuitry.

The primary forms of print media are books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, and letters. The primary forms of electronic media are television, radio, films, and records. As far as the process goes, print and electronic media are identical to both public speaking and interpersonal mass communication. The difference consists of the form they take as a result of mediation. Mediated communication is directed to either large groups at the same time or to individual receivers on a one-to-one basis. But the function is the same. Mediated communication, like the other forms of mass communication, enable a source to communicate with receivers.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN MEDIATED MASS COMMUNICATION

In mediated mass communication, the source and the receiver are not within view of each other. A vacuum tube or a printed page and a substantial number of miles stand between them. The nature of the mediator and the impersonal

nature of the communication transaction create special problems.

The Entry Problem. While everyone is a receiver of mediated mass communication, only a relatively small number of people find it easy or possible to become sources. If an individual has an unlimited supply of money and time, of course, she or he can become sources. But most people have neither the time nor the money. As a result, the mass media are not available to everyone. Getting on the mass media is like getting through a tollbooth. There is a tollcollector at every tollbooth. You must pay him to get by. In the case of the mass media, you must either pay for the time or convince those in control that your message is of sufficient interest to merit publication or broadcast.

In reality, the entry to the media must be controlled in someway. If freedom of entry were available, chaos would result. If television stations made their equipment available to one and all, the general public would spend hour after hour watching all kinds of special interest groups present their complaints and suggestions. We would probably have to watch individuals discuss neighborhood and even street problems. We would stare blankly at local lovers singing songs to their beloved. We would have a screenful of amateur tap dancers and zither players. No one could or would watch anything. Similarly, if printing presses were free, we would soon be buried in a blizzard of tracts, harrangues, and horribly written books. There would scarcely be a tree left in the world.

The entry problem arises when a group or an individual is

prohibited from gaining exposure when the message is of legitimate and vital interest. Essentially, we put great trust and responsibility in the hands of those who hold the broadcast rights and those who publish our books and newspapers. For the most part, these people discharge their responsibilities with a high degree of professionalism. Television broadcasters try to cater to the entertainment needs of a broad section of their audience. They make a deliberate effort to report the news fairly and objectively. Newspaper editors try as hard as they humanly can to keep opinion out of their news columns. Nevertheless, receivers must remember that the possibility (and certainly the opportunity) for bias and slanting does exist. Therein lies the problem.

The Time and Space Problem. On any television and radio station, there are only a limited number of hours and minutes in any broadcast day. By the same token, a newspaper or magazine has only a certain amount of space available. What is communicated and how much is communicated is in large part controlled by these basic considerations.

Think for a moment of the problem that faces a television news director. He and his staff are deluged each day by a flood of information fed to them by their own correspondents and by national and international wire services. All of this information must be sifted through and evaluated. Whatever is selected must be skillfully condensed to fill two, three, or four half-hour time slots throughout the day. The newspaper

editor has a similar problem. By the time space is reserved for standard features and advertising, he has but a relatively limited amount of space left over for news and editorial copy. He too is fed a tremendous amount of information by his own reporters and standard wire service sources. In addition, the problems of both the television news director and the newspaper editor are compounded by the necessity of making sometimes split-second decisions about what stories to feature and what items to eliminate.

The time and space problem is ultimately connected with money. Both the television station and the daily newspaper must at least cover their costs and preferably make a profit in order to survive. In both cases, the operating costs are tremendously high. Television equipment and printing presses are not exactly inexpensive. Neither are the salaries of the hundreds and thousands of people engaged in these enterprises. One could, of course, argue that such vital communication facilities ought to be provided by the government. But government control has obvious dangers. An administration in political control would be sorely tempted to present only what it wished to present.

The Cost Problem. No one really has to rely on others to provide mass communication--provided he or she has the necessary funds to purchase the needed television time or the necessary newspaper space. But both time and space are extraordinarily expensive. This is especially true of television time. A

minute's worth in "prime time" with a nationwide audience can easily run \$20,000. This price tag puts television time effectively out of reach for all but a wealthy few. Newspaper space--depending upon the paper--is considerably cheaper. Private individuals from time to time do purchase space for the purpose of communicating messages that are of interest to them. For the most part, however, these messages tend to be buried in the depths of the newspaper and exert very little effect.

The cost of mediated mass communication is not established as a deliberate attempt to keep private individuals away from the mass media. As has been pointed out above, the mass media are expensive by their very nature. As a result, entrance to them is more or less limited to major corporations, whose advertising hopes can justify the costs involved. However, groups and associations of individuals who share a common goal and have a common goal and have a common message frequently band together to purchase television time or newspaper space. In addition, the mass media increasingly devote free time and space to messages which are judged to be "in the public interest."

The Censorship Problem. Although the Constitution of the United States guarantees to the people freedom of speech and press, there will always be those who attempt to censor what is broadcast or written. Those who attempt to censor are usually well-meaning and motivated by a genuine concern to

protect people from what they feel is "dangerous" or "misleading." The entire censorship question is admittedly difficult. Freedom of expression on the one hand must be somehow balanced with responsibility on the other. In some areas, it is not difficult to deal with the problem. Attempts to censor news reports, for example, are clearly intolerable under our system and must be guarded against and prevented. On the other hand, attempts to censor "mature" or "adult" movies present a somewhat different problem. Most would agree that mature material is quite inappropriate and possibly quite dangerous for immature minds. In this area, we have reached a somewhat efficient compromise. The nationally adopted rating code for movies is an example of the compromise in action.

National radio and television are under constant and considerable pressure to be objective. Newspapers and many magazines, on the other hand, commonly hold strong political and social views. Ideally, these views are limited to the editorial page and to columns expressing personal opinions. Yet reality teaches that a newspaper with a liberal political viewpoint tends to attract liberal editors and reporters, just as a conservative publication will usually attract reporters and editors with a conservative bent. Objectivity in news stories is therefore not an easy thing. (It is not easy for you, after all, to view your friends with complete objectivity. We tend to concentrate on their good qualities

while overlooking their less than desirable traits.) As a practical matter, it is rather difficult to compare a news story in a "liberal" newspaper with the same news story in a "conservative" newspaper. But we can keep in mind the particular papers' ideological impulses as we read. We can remember that there is perhaps "more to say."

The Fairness Problem. The Federal Communication Commission, the governmental agency which licenses and supervises radio and television stations, requires its licensees to adhere to what is called the "fairness doctrine." According to this doctrine, a radio or television station which permits a political candidate or party to make a campaign statement free of charge must make a similar amount of time available to opposition candidates and parties. If, for example, a Democratic candidate for Congress is given a half-hour of time for a speech, his Republican opponent must be given a similar period of time for a speech in support of his candidacy. Similarly, other candidates for the same office must also be given the same amount of free time. If there are eight candidates for an office and one is given a free time segment, the other seven--even if they represent small, splinter parties--must be provided with the same amount of time.

The "fairness doctrine" is a very important one. Under its provisions, individual citizens can function as sources in mediated mass communication. If, for example, a local radio or television station presents an editorial opinion on

a matter of local or national interest, spokesmen for another point of view have a right to respond to the station's position on the air. Since many radio and television stations have recently decided to take editorial positions, you have probably seen the doctrine of fairness in action. Typically, the station management will reserve a three-minute segment for their editorial view. The statement will be clearly prefaced with an announcement that the following position will be an expression of the station management's point of view. After the statement, an announcement is made to the effect that the station will provide equal time to "responsible" spokesmen of opposing views. Frequently, someone comes forward and his statement is broadcast a few days after the station's position has been broadcast. If no opposing voice is heard, it simply means that no listener cared enough to challenge the station's position.

The "fairness doctrine" exists simply because the airways are owned by the public, not by the television and radio networks. A television or radio station owns the equipment that is necessary for broadcasting, but it does not own the individual broadcast band or channel that it uses. A station is licensed by the government to use that band or channel exclusively. This license must be renewed from time to time. Such license renewal applications have been increasingly challenged in recent years by groups of citizens who maintain that a license holder has not provided a sufficient amount of

air time for public service broadcasting. As a result, radio and television stations have become increasingly concerned about the amount of time that they devote to airing issues of concern to the public at large.

Feedback: The Big Problem. The most pervasive problem in mediated mass communication is the lack of available feedback. Feedback is an extremely important part of the speech communication process. Feedback permits the source to evaluate his success or lack of success in communicating to his or her receivers. Feedback enables a source to modify the message in order to achieve maximum effectiveness. As receivers, feedback lets us tell the source that we do not understand his message, that the message is not getting through. Feedback enables a receiver to influence the communication situation.

Whatever feedback exists in mediated mass communication is very delayed. It does not occur during or immediately after the communication. Only interpersonal mass communication and public speaking mass communication include feedback. The very nature of mediated mass communication prevents it. As a result, mediated mass communication is often highly unsuccessful. The source develops a message and believes it is appropriate for the receivers. But is it? What guarantees its success? How is the success or lack of it monitored? By the time a source learns something about how successful or unsuccessful the message was, it is too late. The time or space has been used. The money has been spent.

Feedback--even if it is very much delayed--is of course possible. In response to an editorial opinion in a newspaper, one can write a letter to the editor agreeing or disagreeing with the paper's position. One can also write to register one's dissatisfaction with the way a particular story was handled. In like manner, one can also write to a radio or television station, registering a complaint of one kind or another. The broadcasting media are, in fact, quite sensitive to this kind of audience feedback. When CBS initially announced the cancellation of "Gunsmoke," a popular Western series, so many viewers registered their dissatisfaction that the network decided to keep the series on the air. Rather more drastically, irate football fans deprived by time limitations of the last two minutes of an important game, called the network in such numbers that the overload succeeded in overloading and melting the telephone switching equipment. Nevertheless, in all cases, the feedback which mediated mass communication receives comes "after the fact." But it is not completely useless nor is it ever ignored.

THE MASS MEDIA--SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

The form of mediated mass communication which receives the most blame or credit for affecting our society is television. Article after article has been written describing in great detail the massive impact of this communication instrument. The two things for which television has been most often criticized are the effects of its commercials on the purchasing

behavior of Americans and the effects of its entertainment programs featuring violence on American children. The evidence seems to indicate that both of these effects have been grossly distorted.

Consider first the effects of television commercials. Without doubt, television commercials can increase the sales of a given product. This appears to be particularly true when the product is new to the market. The so-called "enzyme pre-soak"--a type of laundry detergent--offers a case in point. First developed in the late 1960's, these products were heavily advertised on television. Designed to make the product known to the public, the various campaigns for the different brands appeared to be very successful. Sales soared into millions of units with a few weeks.

But the enzyme pre-soakers' sales performance is far from typical. Prior to the federal regulation that prohibited the television advertising of cigarettes, for example, many who fought for such legislation apparently believed that it would help to decrease cigarette smoking in the United States. However, after cigarette advertising was banned from television, the sales of cigarettes actually increased. While one cannot say that the removal of cigarette advertising produced more smoking, one can reliably conclude that it had no effect whatsoever.

It is interesting to note that many new products which were widely advertised on television failed miserably. A case

in point is the ill-fated Edsel motor car. When the vehicle was first introduced in 1958, the Ford Motor Company established a sizable television budget for its initial promotion. But a brief two and a half years later production of the Edsel was halted. Today it is a collector's item. Heavy exposure did not make the Edsel a success.

It is important to realize that most television advertising falls into the "defensive" category. One company must advertise simply because its competitor advertises. When both advertise, the competing campaigns probably neutralize each other. But if one organization campaigns probably the other might achieve some real advantage because its name would be before the public more often. In any event, it is rather difficult to "prove" that a particular advertising campaign results in significantly improved sales.

From time to time during the last two decades, critics have charged that television violence has had a harmful effect upon children. Serious research, however, has indicated that television violence has had little or no effect upon children. In fact, some of the findings point to an entirely different conclusion. Some researchers maintain that those who watch violence on television tend to get violence out of their systems and are less likely to engage in violence themselves. Whether television violence does have some affect upon children but not others, however, is still an open question. Television violence may have some effect, but it certainly does not appear

to exert the serious effect that many critics have charged.

The whole television as contributor to violence issue closely resembles the "comic book controversy" of the 1950's. Many critics in those days leveled the same charges against comic books that are now leveled against television, perhaps because at that time comic books were one of the main forms of recreation for children. A number of research studies were designed to measure their bad effects. For the most part, the studies pointed to no effect whatsoever.

Television, of course, has not been the only form of mass media singled out for blame and criticism. Books, magazines, and movies have been charged from time to time with various offenses. In fact, the mass media have been held responsible for various ills since shortly after the printing press was invented. Without going into detail, it is sufficient to point out that in general the alleged evil effects of the mass media appear to be consistently and grossly overstated.

The mass media, of course, have also been much praised for various good effects. In our society, the mass media are consistently praised for their collective ability to disseminate information to the American public. Indeed, the American public is the best informed citizenry in the world. In no other country are so many forms of media so plentiful and universally available. But this does not mean that every American finds out about everything. In fact, it is rather

surprising that even when the mass media provide in-depth coverage of an event, some people do not appear to find out about it. Research has indicated that between five and ten percent of the American public never find out about an important news event within two weeks of the event. Even with such an important and nationally distressing event as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, research disclosed that two weeks after the event, one percent of the American public was unaware that it had taken place. Even though every major newspaper, news magazine, radio station, and television station constantly featured the assassination for several days, a large number of people remained unaware of it.

It certainly seems strange that anyone in today's society could remain unaware of any important event. But it is indeed possible and not at all that unusual. Health, business, and personal reasons can all keep an individual from learning about an important event. On any given day, thousands of Americans are simply too ill to read newspapers or listen to broadcasts. Thousands of others are so busy with personal pursuits that they have no time for the media. Of course, in all of these cases the media are not at fault. The information was being distributed. For various reasons, some people did not avail themselves of the information. But the point is that the media are not all-pervasive. Some are simply not reached.

As far as the spreading of basic information goes, the media

can do no more. It is then up to the receiver. It is rather amazing how out of touch some people can let themselves become. An interesting and admittedly extreme example was uncovered during a voter opinion survey conducted before the 1972 national election. An interviewer contacted a man in rural West Virginia to ask his views on the Nixon-McGovern campaign. To the interviewer's surprise, the man did not know who Nixon and McGovern were. Even more surprising, the man asked the interviewer whatever happened to President Roosevelt.

REAL EFFECTS OF THE MASS MEDIA

Side Effects. As far as the mass media are concerned, side effects are those effects which are observable because of the presence of the mass media but are not specifically intended by anyone in the mass media. They come about, in other words, but are not deliberately intended. Interestingly enough, the side effects turn out to be the most important effects of the mass media. There are numerous examples of side effects, and we will consider a few of them.

Educators have consistently reported one of the most significant side effects of mass media. Young people, they maintain, are much more aware of the world they live in and have a much more extensive vocabulary when they begin their formal schooling than children two decades ago. While such purposefully educational programs as Sesame Street are specifically designed to enhance this effect, the effect itself was observable before Sesame Street was begun. The

mere fact that pre-school children watch television for a number of hours each day exposes these children to the world at large. While children twenty years ago could barely imagine what Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America looked like, pre-school children today know exactly what these locations look like. This kind of exposure helps to put today's children educationally far ahead of those who preceded them.

On a less important level, television exposure has significantly increased the popularity of professional football in the United States. Today there is hardly a single person in the United States who has not seen a professional football game on television. This is a side effect that has no doubt added to the financial health of the owners of football franchises.

According to many people, the most important side effect of the mass media--and particularly of radio and television--has been the homogenization of the American people. By homogenization we mean the tendency of individual Americans to be very much like other Americans. It is rather clear that this effect has occurred. It is particularly noticeable in the patterns and habits of language and in the styles of clothing. While regional differences in American English persist, these are neither as pronounced nor as widespread as they were before the arrival of radio and television. The pronunciation standards of the networks, for example, tend to become the most widely imitated standards. Increasingly more people from areas that once employed variations are now adhering to these

nationally heard norms. By the same token, people tend to accept the clothing and dress standards which they repeatedly see on television. While at one time it would take months and perhaps years for a dress style to travel from New York to Iowa, today the new styles are adopted almost simultaneously across the country.

Information and Influence. Many people assume that the mass media are the best choice for those who wish to communicate with thousands or millions of people. Research on the effects of the mass media provides some support for that assumption. But the research also indicates that the effectiveness of the mass media depends upon the communicator's purpose. If one's goal is to merely inform people, the mass media appear to be most effective. However, if one wishes to influence people, the research suggests that the media are not very effective. Let us first examine the impact of the mass media on the spreading of basic information.

Early research seemed to indicate that the mass media had only minimal impact on the dissemination of information. One researcher, for example, found that ninety-nine percent of the population of the United States learned of the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt within one and a half hours of his passing. However, eighty-seven percent of those informed had received their information through face-to-face contact with other people. Later research, however, disclosed that this was indeed an unusual circumstance. Eighty-eight percent

of the population, for example, learned of the flight of Explorer I, President Eisenhower's first stroke, and Alaska's admission to statehood through the mass media. One should also keep in mind that President Roosevelt's death occurred before television was widely available in the nation's living rooms.

We do not, of course, gain all of our information through the mass media. Much of the information that we obtain is not even made available by the mass media because it is not considered important enough to be broadcast or printed. But if something is broadcasted or printed by the mass media, it is in the mass media that people learn about it. This is true in other highly developed countries as well as in the United States. Naturally, in countries which have higher illiteracy rates and are less developed technologically, the mass media have a significantly more limited effect.

In general, we can predict the effect of the mass media on the dissemination of information on the basis of the "news value" of that information. The most extremely newsworthy event--such as the death of a President--is initially spread by the mass media. A few people learn of the event from the mass media and immediately begin discussing it with their friends and neighbors. The mass media are indirectly responsible for everyone learning about the event, but only a small percentage may learn about it directly from the mass media. On moderately important news items--such as the

admission of a state to the union, a space flight, or a major sports story--most people who learn about the event learn about it from the mass media directly. We should remember, however, that many people will never learn about such events. This is probably because they did not happen to watch, listen to, or read the mass media during the period in which the event was reported and because the event is not important enough for their friends to talk to them about. At the other end of the scale, events that have very low news value are learned about exclusively from interpersonal contact. The reason for this is simple: the event is not reported at all in the mass media.

As far as the spreading of basic information goes, we can conclude that items of extremely high news value are learned about primarily through interpersonal contact. Items of virtually no general news value--Sally across the street is getting married--are also learned about through interpersonal contact. Events of moderate news value appear to be learned about almost exclusively from the mass media.

The effects of the mass media on influencing attitudes and behavior can be summarized very briefly. All of the available research on the subject points to the fact that there is little direct effect. In each major study, researchers have found that changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of people come about primarily through interpersonal, face-to-face communication rather than through mediated communication.

The Role of the Opinion Leader. People to whom other people turn for advice may be called opinion leaders. All of us have opinion leaders to whom we turn. At the same time, most of us serve as opinion leaders for others. The function of the opinion leader is simply to provide information and guidance to those who consult him. If we wish some advice in the area of dental health, for example, we would normally consult a dentist. We expect him to have the information we need, and we will normally follow whatever advice he gives us about the care of our teeth. But opinion leaders do not have to be professional people like dentists and doctors. Even in an area like dental care, we might have a friend who has exceptionally beautiful teeth. We might, therefore, consult that individual. We might ask him or her what he or she does to keep their teeth in beautiful shape.

If you think about it for a moment, you ought to be able to identify a number of opinion leaders whom you consult for a variety of information. Parents frequently serve in such a role in a number of areas. Relatives, friends, and acquaintances are commonly consulted, depending upon how we judge their expertise in a particular area of knowledge. If a woman of our acquaintance has phenomenal success with gardening, we would probably seek her advice before we put any seeds into the ground. But unless she was also a committed baseball fan, you would probably not check with her on a particular team's prospects for the season. Instead, you would probably go to

someone who has a reputation for following the game closely.

As far as the interpersonal aspect of mass communication is concerned, the opinion leader is the most important variable. And the opinion leader is a variable because there is really no way of determining the extent of his or her knowledge. Opinion leaders are turned to for a variety of reasons. The problem is that some are obviously not reliable transmitters of information. Many individuals serve as opinion leaders who should not hold such a position for one fault or another. Yet--sometimes for "personal magnetism" perhaps--they are perceived as opinion leaders and consulted as such.

The Two-Step Flow of Communication. The so-called two-step flow of communication is a name given to the process which begins with the communication of information by the mass media or by direct interpersonal means to those who serve as opinion leaders. The second step in the process is the communication of the information received by the opinion leaders to those who consult them. A toothpaste manufacturer, for example, wants to inform dentists of the existence and virtues of a new dentrifice. The manufacturer advertises the new product in professional magazines read by dentists. In addition, the manufacturer sends samples of his new product to dentists along with explanatory material. The individual dentist examines the manufacturer's information. If the dentist feels the product has merit, he passes this information along to his patients with the recommendation that they give the product

a try.

The example illustrates the two-step flow. In the first step, the manufacturer employs the mass media--magazines and printed material in a direct mailing--to reach the opinion leader--the dentist. In the second step, the dentist transmits the necessary communication to each of his patients. Taken together, these patients constitute the group.

The Two-Cycle, Two-Step Flow of Communication. The second explanation for the flow of communication is also dependent on the opinion leader but in a slightly different way. In the two-cycle, two-step flow, the process begins with the mass media. In the first step, information is communicated via the mass media to a group. The opinion leader as a member of the group receives the information at the same time as the others. In the second step, the individual turns to the opinion leader for more information or for guidance on how the individual should act on the information received. In the two-step flow, the opinion leader obtains the information for those who consult with him and then intentionally passes the information along to them. In the two-cycle, two-step flow, everyone receives the information at the same time and the follower actively and deliberately seeks out the opinion leader to provide additional guidance.

To concretely illustrate the two-cycle, two-step flow, let us return to our dental example. In the two-cycle, two-step flow, the toothpaste manufacturer widely advertises his

product on television and in popular magazines. An important feature of the campaign might be the invitation to check with a dentist on the reliability of the product. In the second step, those impressed by the claims ask their dentists about the product.

The Importance of Similarity. The key to whether or not communication will occur between an opinion leader and those who consult with him has a great deal to do with the presence or absence of similarity between the two people involved. One of the most important concepts in communication asserts that the more similar two individuals are, the better the chances that they will communicate together effectively.

In assessing the presence or absence of similarity, we must focus upon certain attributes which people possess. Educational level is an important attribute. People are somewhat reluctant to enter into communication situations where there is a wide disparity between educational backgrounds. For much the same reason, the social status of the people involved is also important. So is the professional or occupational status. The sex of the people is also most important. Finally, the attitudes, beliefs, and values which each hold also exert a powerful influence. If in all or most of these respects the two people are similar, the chances are excellent that meaningful communication will take place. Interestingly enough, if two people are perfectly similar as far as all attributes are concerned, they are not likely to communicate at

all. There will simply be nothing to communicate about. Fortunately, such perfect similarity seldom if ever exists.

Opinion leaders tend for the most part to be very much like those who consult with them. However, they are recognized by their followers to have some special talent or capacity which is relevant to the area in which their direction is sought. For example, in a developing country, the village chief or leader usually serves as opinion leader for all of the people as far as agricultural matters are concerned. He is very much like the other villagers except that he gets the best information from the government concerning agricultural developments. While there are experts in the central government who know much more about agriculture than the chief, these people are too dissimilar from the villagers to obtain their trust and belief.

People who are engaged in mass communication have understood the importance of similarity for quite some time. These people are in the business of changing attitudes. They might, for example, want to alter the purchasing habits of a group. Or they might want to bring about a social change of some sort. At the same time, these people are keenly aware of the fact that they are not very similar to the masses of people whom they want to influence. The problem is obvious. The people who most want to communicate are the least likely to communicate. An attempt is then made to communicate directly with these opinion leaders.

In some cases, it is necessary to develop opinion leaders where no ready-made types are available. This can sometimes be done by training people in a particular area of expertise, provided that they already possess the other attributes which are similar to the characteristics of the group to be reached. In some professional groups, for example, aides have become rather popular in recent years. There are nurses' aides, teachers' aides, dental aides, etc. Part of the idea behind these occupational groups is related to effective communication. The idea is that the patient or student will view these people in a somewhat different light than those whom the aides support. They might be more willing, in other words, to accept advice or instruction from the aides.

Once opinion leaders have been identified--or created--the process of mass communication can operate quite smoothly. The basic job is to communicate with the opinion leaders and to win their approval of the idea which one wishes to get across to the ultimate receivers. But there are two things which can cause communication to break down at this point. One problem is that those who do the selecting might choose opinion leaders who are more similar to themselves than to the group that they want to reach. A second problem could arise even if opinion leaders have been wisely chosen. The person who has a message to communicate could accidentally destroy the effectiveness of even a wisely chosen opinion leader. When the effectiveness of an otherwise well chosen opinion leader

is accidentally destroyed, communication people refer to the effect as the "dhoti effect."

Here is an example of the "dhoti effect." An agricultural project in Pakistan was producing substantial change in the rural agricultural villages which ringed the major cities. At the outset, village chiefs had been wisely chosen as the opinion leaders. Once a week, the chiefs were brought into the city for a discussion of agricultural innovations. When they returned to their villages, they communicated these ideas to their inhabitants. For several months, mass communication was extremely effective and many innovations were adopted.

But then something happened. In the section of Pakistan where the project was under way, the weather is extremely warm. As a result, the wearing apparel of the natives is sensibly abbreviated. Men wear a diaper-like piece of clothing called a dhoti. People who hold non-menial jobs tend to wear their dhotis long. Those who perceive their status as being among the elite wear the garment knee-length. The peasants, however, wear this article of clothing very short. If they didn't the dhoti would interfere with their work in the fields. In the Pakistan project, the opinion leaders gradually but persistently lowered their dhotis.

Eventually, the people who directed the Pakistani project noticed that progressively fewer innovations were being implemented in the fields. The cause emerged later. It became clear that the opinion leaders had gradually become more and more like the people who wanted to bring about change. As they gradually lowered their dhotis, they set themselves

more apart from the people with whom they were supposed to communicate. They had set themselves apart from the villagers and had seriously impaired their effectiveness in the mass communication process.

The important principle that we can draw from the dhoti example is simply this. Communication with those who wish to bring about change can make the opinion leader too much like those whom he represents. At the same time that the opinion leader becomes less like his followers, he becomes less effective in bringing about change. He destroys his credibility among those with whom he is supposed to work.

THE PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL MASS COMMUNICATION

Communication researchers have developed a number of principles which explain how mass communication is facilitated among opinion leaders and their followers. Here we will review the various principles.

1. Communication tends to flourish between people who are similar. People are more likely to communicate with others with whom they share basic characteristics. As a general rule, young people communicate with young people. Farmers communicate with farmers. The poor communicate with the poor, the rich with the rich. Said simply, similar people have things to say to each other. They share the same problems and the same aspirations.
2. More effective communication occurs when the source and the receiver are similar.

Communication is most effective when both the source and the receiver are likely to share basic meanings. Similar people, of course, already have a basic vocabulary in common. If a mechanic is talking to another mechanic, there's a lot that he doesn't have to stop to explain. Both use the language of their trade daily. The same holds true of two people of the same age and sex. They readily understand each other. They share a common vocabulary.

3. Effective communication between source and receiver leads to greater similarity in knowledge, beliefs, and behavior.

Similarity produces effective communication, and effective communication creates similarity. It is really impossible to ask which comes first. Each depends upon the other. The more you talk to another person your own age, for example, the more likely you will be to share knowledge and opinions. If the communication is truly effective, the more alike you will eventually act.

4. Moderate differences in subject matter competence lead to change. When both source and receiver possess almost the same degree of subject matter competence, little change can be expected in either person. But moderate differences in competence are ideal. Such differences are substantial enough for a receiver to accept the competence of a source. Yet they are sufficiently minor to prevent suspicious reactions or difficulty in understanding. If you talk to a person similar to yourself, who, you both realize, knows a bit less than you

do about movies, you are more likely to alter his attitude about movies in general or a specific film. The differences are great enough so that the other person yields to your superior knowledge. At the same time, they are minor enough to have him feel that you are not lording it over him. They are minor enough to have him feel that he is a participant in the extension of his knowledge.

5. Communication between dissimilar people is likely to be more possible if the source has a high degree of empathy with the receiver. Empathy describes the ability that one person has to see himself in the shoes of another. If the source has empathy for the receiver, he is better able to select the kinds of messages that will have the desired effect on the receiver. He can do this simply because he will have a deeper understanding of the receiver. If you are a junior who is trying to get a freshman to join a club, you are likely to be much more effective if you are able to visualize yourself in the freshman's position. The better able you are to relate to his or her natural reluctance and surprise at being asked, the better your chances of gaining a member will be.

6. If a source lacks information about his receiver and the receivers are dissimilar to him, the source naturally assumes that they are similar or should be. When a source believes that dissimilar receivers are similar, communication is ineffective. We all see the world through the eyes of our own beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Without information

to the contrary, we automatically believe that our own attitudes are shared by others. But such assumptions lead to non-communication when our receivers are actually not at all like us. The well-worn saying "Don't judge everyone by yourself" has considerable merit. When you are not certain, it is far wiser to assume that the other person is very different from you. You can easily adjust your view as you learn more about your receiver.

7. Communication between dissimilar people is more effective when the source pays close attention to the feedback he receives.

Feedback builds empathy. If feedback is ignored or unavailable, communication between dissimilar people becomes ineffective. One of the most common causes of communication failure in business organizations, for example, occurs when feedback from lower-level employees is either ignored or discouraged by higher-level employees. Both groups are, of course, dissimilar. But those in charge could better communicate their wishes and desires if they took the time to properly evaluate the feedback which reaches them from below.

In summation, mass communication is a complex process which often depends upon both the mass media and interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication is much more important to mass communication than most people popularly believe. Anyone who wishes to understand mass communication must begin by studying the inter-relationships which exist between it and interpersonal communication. Stated as simply

as possible, the mass media provide information both directly to the ultimate mass audience and to accepted opinion leaders. The eventual interaction between opinion leaders and their followers produces a recognizable change in attitude and behavior.