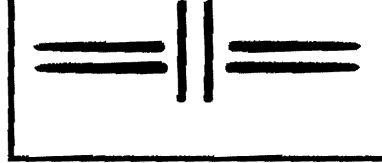


# MEDIATED COMMUNICATION



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## KEY TERMS

agenda setting  
bullet theory  
cultivation theory  
cultural studies  
cumulative effects theory  
desensitization  
diffusion of innovations theory  
flow theories  
gatekeepers  
gender analysis  
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mass communication  
media  
mediated communication  
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medium  
multistep flow  
opinion leaders  
political-economic analysis  
social learning theory  
two-step flow  
uses and gratifications theory

sages will be constructed, and when they will be delivered. Sponsors, editors, producers, reporters, and executives all have the power to influence mass messages.

Because of these and other unique characteristics, the study of mass communication raises special issues and deserves special treatment.

### CULTURAL IDIOM

**fuzzier:** less clear

## Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Although the nature of mass communication is reasonably easy to understand, the characteristics of communication media aren't quite so easy to grasp. The first step is to define two terms. A communication **medium** is any device that conveys a message. For example, radio is a communication medium, because technology is used to bridge the distance between the sender and receivers. **Mediated communication**, then, is any type of communication in which messages are conveyed via some medium, rather than face to face. Because **media** is the plural form of medium, we refer to the "print media" of books, magazines, and newspapers, the "broadcast media" of television and radio, the "entertainment media" of movies and recordings, and so on. In everyday use, the term *media* has taken on a second meaning, referring to the gatekeepers and decision makers in the mass media who determine what information will be conveyed to mass audiences and how it will be presented. For instance, in popular use we talk about how "the media" treat public figures such as politicians and celebrities and how "the media" address social issues like sex or violence.

Mediated communication, however, doesn't involve just mass messages. Today, much *interpersonal* communication is also mediated. We speak to friends over the telephone; we e-mail friends and business contacts across the nation and around the world; we might even send a videotape to far-off relatives. **Mediated interpersonal communication** does not involve face-to-face contact (in a teleconference, you're talking to only a facsimile of that other face), but it can possess all of the qualities of personal interaction described in Chapter 6.

There are differences between mediated interpersonal communication and mass communication. In the interpersonal variety, a message doesn't go out to a large audience, it isn't produced by professionals, and it allows a considerable amount of interaction and feedback.

## Converging Communication Media

The distinction between mass and personal communication is much fuzzier today than in the past. In some respects, the World Wide Web resembles other forms of mass media. Both individuals and organizations can create Web sites that have the potential to reach thousands, or even millions of computer users. Also, many Web sites are created by professionals and are quite elaborate in nature, including the "portals" of major corporations such as Microsoft, AOL-Time Warner, and Yahoo!, which are part home page, part search engine, and part news service.

On the other hand, the Web also possesses characteristics of personal communication. Unlike most forms of mass communication, the Internet is a truly democratic medium: Anyone can set up a Web site and "broadcast" his or her opinions. Also, Web sites often invite visitors to submit queries and offer feedback via e-mail—just like a more personal medium.

Newsgroups offer another example of how the Internet blends mass and personal communication. These groups are organized by and for people with a specific interest. There are literally thousands of such groups, which address an astonishing range of topics, from antique cash registers to Lithuanian literature to hip-hop music. After joining a newsgroup, members can post their own messages and read the messages of others. An e-group or listserv with a large number of members certainly has some qualities of mass communication, but it also has much of the feel of more personal interaction.

## THEORIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS

The media—whether mass, interpersonal, or convergent—are powerful forces in society. Interestingly enough, the average person will say that society is certainly affected by the media but that he or she, personally, is not. Still, most people remain extremely interested in media effects and equally confused about them. Do violent television and film cause violence in society? Does Internet use make us depressed? Do print media contribute to the moral decline in society? The best answer to these and most other media effects questions is, “It depends.” Several researchers have pointed out that this answer is not as ambiguous as it might sound:

The answer “it depends” should not be met with despair and a throwing up of the hands, however. The answer “it depends” does not mean that we do not know what is going on. In contrast to what we knew 40 or 50 years ago, we now have some more definite ideas of what “it” depends on.<sup>1</sup>

A quick look at some key theories will help explain the effects that media have both on societies and the people who compose those societies. Although these theories were all originally posed as theories of mass communication, they have been increasingly applied to interpersonal and converging media in recent research.<sup>2</sup>

### Flow Theories

Some of the earliest theories of media effects, **flow theories**, dealt mainly with the way effects traveled, or “flowed,” from the mass media to their audiences.

**BULLET THEORY** Early mass media researchers, those who worked between the first and the second world wars, developed an approach later termed **bullet theory**, which implied that the media had direct, powerful effects—like a bullet.<sup>3</sup> According to bullet theory, people who watched violent movies, for example, would become violent, and those who read “immoral” comic books would become immoral. The problem was that these direct, powerful effects were very difficult to prove, especially over the long term. Eventually, a different theoretical model evolved.

**TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY** Research during and after World War II suggested that media effects occurred in a **two-step flow**, meaning that media effects occurred mostly in interaction with interpersonal communication. Researchers characterized two-step flow like this: People would hear a message over the radio, perhaps a speech by a political candidate or a commercial message for a

new type of laundry soap. Rather than immediately pledging their support for the candidate or buying the soap, they would discuss it with **opinion leaders**—people they knew whom they viewed as credible sources of information on a particular topic. If the opinion leaders were positive about the candidate or product, the people who heard the original message might become supporters of it.

**MULTISTEP FLOW** The researchers who devised the two-step flow theory were moving in the correct direction—they just hadn't gone far enough. Today's researchers recognize a **multistep flow**, which implies that media effects are part of a complex interaction.<sup>4</sup> In that interaction, opinion leaders have opinion leaders, who in turn have their own opinion leaders. You might be your friend's opinion leader about what sort of computer to buy, for example, but that friend probably formed his or her own opinions from other people.

Besides demonstrating how theories become more sophisticated as they are explored over time, flow theories demonstrate the importance of interpersonal communication in the effects of mass communication. They show that the mass media don't operate on us in a vacuum: Rather, their effects are tempered by the way people react to them and communicate their reactions to one another. Also, even though the bullet theory is largely discredited today, we still have daily examples of some types of mediated messages having the direct, powerful effects that early researchers predicted. Many products become overnight successes through television advertising, without enough time passing to give interpersonal communication much time to operate. A new blockbuster movie, for example, can earn tens of millions of dollars in box office receipts in its first weekend, based purely on advertising and reviews that appeared in the mass media. But for the great majority of mediated messages, effects depend largely on how they interact with interpersonal communication. After the first weekend that a movie is in the theaters, its box office is determined largely by "word of mouth" communication.

## Social Learning Theory

Flow theories aren't the only approach to studying media effects. **Social learning theory** is based on the assumption that people learn how to behave by observing others—often others portrayed in the mass media. The theory gained prominence from the experiments of Albert Bandura in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> In Bandura's most famous studies, preschool children watched films in which an adult encountered Bobo, a three-foot-tall pop-up clown. One group of preschoolers saw a version in which the adult beat up Bobo and was then rewarded for being a "strong champion." Another group saw a version in which the adult assailant was scolded for being a bully and was spanked with a rolled-up magazine. After watching the films, the children themselves then had a chance to "play" with Bobo. Bandura discovered that the children who saw the adult model's aggression being rewarded treated the Bobo doll more violently than did those who saw the adult model punished.

The implications of social modeling are obvious. It's easy to imagine how a thirteen-year-old who has just seen one of the *Lethal Weapon* or *Terminator* movies might be inspired to lash out at one of his friends the first time a disagreement arises. However, the theory also suggests that viewing prosocial models can teach constructive behavior. The same thirteen-year-old, if he had just

### CULTURAL IDIOM

**operate . . . in a**

**vacuum:** function as if there were no other individuals or influences

**to lash out at:** to react angrily

watched *Friends*, might be inspired to use one of those characters' nonviolent, communicative approaches to problem solving rather than using his fists.

Social learning theory makes sense, and the original laboratory studies produced impressive results. But in everyday life the theory doesn't hold up quite so well.<sup>6</sup> After all, behavior that is modeled from the media might not be successful in the real world. For example, thirteen-year-olds who try out their martial arts skills on the playground might be punched in the nose by tougher adversaries. The pain of that punch might do more in determining those children's attitude toward violence than all the television viewing they will ever do.

Besides the power of real-life rewards and punishments, all individuals are different, and that plays a role in determining how people are influenced by media. For example, boys seem to be more influenced by violent media than girls are, whereas girls seem to be more influenced by the "body image" of their media models—they often try to be as slim as fashion models, an influence that generally escapes boys. Observations such as these led to the development of the individual differences theory.

### Individual Differences Theory

As its name suggests, **individual differences theory** looks at how media users with different characteristics are affected in different ways by the mass media.<sup>7</sup> Some types of users are more susceptible to some types of media messages than are others. For example, a viewer with a high level of education might be more susceptible to a message that includes logical appeals. Besides level of education, individual differences that help determine how the media affect individuals include age, sex, region, intellectual level, socioeconomic class, level of violence in the home, and a wealth of other characteristics that were referred to as demographics in Chapter 10.

There are also more subtle psychological characteristics that distinguish media users. **Diffusion of innovations theory**, for example, explains that there are five types of people who have different levels of willingness to accept new ideas from the media.<sup>8</sup> These types also predict who will be first to use and become competent in new media.<sup>9</sup>

1. **Innovators**—These are venturesome people who are eager to try new ideas. They tend to be extroverts and politically liberal. They are the first to try out and become competent in new media like the World Wide Web and new computer applications.
2. **Early adopters**—Less venturesome than innovators, these people still make a relatively quick but informed choice. This tendency makes them important opinion leaders within their social groups.
3. **Early majority**—These people make careful, deliberate choices after frequent interaction with their peers and with their opinion leaders. They seldom act as opinion leaders themselves, however.
4. **Late majority**—These people tend to be skeptical and accept innovations less often. When they do adopt an innovation, they often do so out of economic necessity or increasing peer pressure.
5. **Laggards**—These people tend to be conservative, traditional, and the most resistant to any type of change. Their point of reference tends to be the past,

and they tend to be socially isolated. Today, these are the people who are mystified by the World Wide Web and might not even own a computer.

## Cultivation Theory

According to **cultivation theory**, the media shape how we view the world.<sup>10</sup> Cultivation theory therefore works hand in hand with the facets of perception discussed in Chapter 2. This theory helps explain how a person's perceptions of the world are shaped and sometimes distorted by media.

Cultivation theory was advanced by George Gerbner and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania. This theory predicts that media will teach a common worldview, common roles, and common values. Over time, media "cultivates" a particular view of the world within users. For example, Gerbner's research found that heavy television viewers had a markedly different view of reality than did light viewers. Heavy viewers overestimated their chances of being involved in some type of violence, overestimated the percentage of Americans who have jobs in law enforcement, and found people, in general, to be less trustworthy than did light viewers.

Cultivation theory suggests that the primary effect of television, therefore, is to give heavy viewers a perception that the world is less safe and trustworthy, and more violent, than it really is. Gerbner's findings help explain why society seems to be becoming more tolerant of violence, a process that is known as **desensitization**. Researchers suspect that desensitization has a profound effect on interpersonal communication by making people less caring about the feelings and reactions of other people.

## Agenda-Setting Theory

Another important approach to media effects was posited by two researchers, Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs, in the 1970s. Studying the way political campaigns were covered in the media, Shaw and McCombs found the main effect of media to be **agenda setting**: The media tell people not what to think, but rather what to think *about*. In other words, the amount of attention given to an issue in the media affects the level of importance assigned to that issue by consumers of mass media. Shaw and McCombs explained their findings as follows:

Perhaps more than any other aspect of our environment, the political arena—all those issues and persons about whom we hold opinions and knowledge—is second-hand reality. Especially in national politics, we have little personal or direct contact. Our knowledge comes primarily from the mass media. For the most part, we know only those aspects of national politics considered newsworthy enough for transmission through the mass media.<sup>11</sup>

The main thrust of agenda-setting theory is that the media might not change your point of view about a particular issue, but they will change your perception of what's important.<sup>12</sup> Although Shaw and McCombs concentrated on political issues and the news media, the idea of agenda setting can easily be expanded to all issues and to all the media. For many people, if a social problem is not on television, in the newspapers, or on a Web site, it may not exist—at least in the minds of media users. For today's researchers, the important point to make

about agenda setting is that after issues get attention from the public they have a tendency to influence government policy.<sup>13</sup>

### Cumulative Effects Theory

Not everyone agrees with the agenda-setting theory. Some point out that the media do, indeed, tell us *what* to think, but they do it slowly, over time. This has come to be called **cumulative effects theory**, which states that media messages are driven home through redundancy and have profound effects over time.

According to this theory, the media latch on to certain themes and messages and build them up over time. There is a bandwagon effect as various newspapers, magazines, television and radio networks, and other media take up the themes. Because the media are omnipresent and such a common part of most people's lives, the media view becomes the widely accepted one within society.

According to this theory, a "spiral of silence" occurs when individuals with divergent views become reluctant to challenge the consensus offered by the media. People form unconscious perceptions of the distribution of public opinion. If they feel that they are in the minority, they are less likely to express their opinions. People who hold majority viewpoints tend to speak out confidently. For example, in times of war some people might become concerned about civilian casualties inflicted on the other side, but they don't speak out about this issue if they feel that most people disagree.

## CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACHES

All the theories we have discussed so far stress the media's effect on individuals; but these same media appear to have significant long-term effects on entire cultures. The role that the media play in changing us as a society is difficult to measure. Rather than rely on statistical analyses and controlled experiments, **cultural studies** rely on "close reading" of messages from the mass media. Media critics examine the meanings of these messages, both surface and hidden, and then use logic and insight to come to certain conclusions about the effect those messages might have on their audiences. Cultural studies examine the role that media play in reflecting and shaping society's most widely and deeply held values in areas such as class, race, and gender.

Cultural theorists explore the invisible ideology, or belief system, that is embodied in media programming and use. They ask questions about the nature of masculinity, femininity, individualism, capitalist economics, and education, among other topics. Does a television program affirm a particular lifestyle as natural? Does a movie advance a preferred way of viewing the world? Does an ad campaign make a statement about social roles? If a particular worldview is being advanced, who is being served by this view? In short, what *meanings* does this mediated message present? Some cultural theorists abandon the goal of impartiality that characterizes the social sciences, criticizing some social practices and suggesting what they believe are better alternatives.

There is a wide range of cultural approaches, including (but not limited to) political-economic analysis and gender analysis.

## Gender Analysis

**Gender analysis** examines how the media construct and perpetuate gender roles.<sup>13</sup> Our culture's assumptions about how males and females should think, act, and speak are continually presented in our mediated messages. The potential influence of these gender portrayals on our sense of who we are and who we should be is the gender critic's realm of consideration. These studies are concerned with the ways that gender stereotypes are confirmed and contradicted and with the way media legitimate the language we use to describe gender and sex roles.

For example, Caren Deming and Mercilee Jenkins examined the gender roles that were advanced in the classic television sitcom *Cheers*.<sup>14</sup> Their method was a close reading of just one episode of the series, which happened to be the premiere. These researchers found that the show contradicted certain gender stereotypes through dialogue and visual imagery. Their study showed how the character Diane Chambers (played by Shelley Long) used humor as a tool of resistance and succeeded in asserting her individuality in the face of attempted domination. Deming and Jenkins demonstrated how a sitcom like *Cheers* can refute the rules that subjugate people and therefore have a liberating effect on its audience.

Several other gender theorists have looked at the effects of media. Cheri Kramarae proposes a "Muted Group" theory, which she explains as follows:

The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men.<sup>15</sup>

Kramarae examines the media to see how language is "man-made" and how it "aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women."<sup>16</sup> Another feminist scholar, Carol Gilligan, presents a theory that men and women speak in different ethical voices.<sup>17</sup> Her "Different Voice" theory posits that men define moral maturity in terms of justice, whereas women define it in terms of caring. Researchers who follow Gilligan's thinking look at mediated messages to see how those messages encourage these different voices.<sup>18</sup>

## Political-Economic Analysis

Much of today's political-economic analysis is based on the work of the philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883). To Marxist media critics, Marx was a humanist whose argument was essentially a moral one. Marx believed that the economic system of a nation (in the case of the United States, capitalism) influences the values of the entire culture (in our case, encouraging materialism, which is the craving for money and what it can buy). **Political-economic analysis** is a critical technique that focuses on the media's role in this influence. It looks at how media become the means by which the haves of society gain the willing support of the have-nots to maintain the status quo.

Marxist critics believe that media help create a "false consciousness" within the working/consuming class that enables the wealthy, who benefit most from the social arrangements in a capitalist country, to manipulate and exploit the working/consuming class. One expert on this type of analysis summed it up in this way:



The most frequent theme in Marxist cultural criticism is the way the prevalent mode of production and ideology of the ruling class in any society dominate every phase of culture, and at present, the way capitalist production and ideology dominate American culture, along with that of the rest of the world that American business and culture have colonized.<sup>19</sup>

According to Marxist theory, workers in a capitalist society are kept in a constant state of dissatisfaction. To escape from this dissatisfaction (which they do not recognize as a condition, but the symptoms of which they feel), they engage in various forms of consumption, all of which cost money, so that they are forced to work increasingly hard to escape from the effects of their work. The dissatisfaction generated by a capitalist system is therefore functional, because it encourages the impulsive consumption that enables capitalism to thrive.

In a Marxist analysis, the mass media perform the function of distracting people from the realities of their society (poverty, racism, sexism, and so on) by “clouding their minds” with the ideas that powerful commercial forces want them to have, ideas like “I feel better when I buy something.” By doing so, the media perform the function of maintaining the dominance of those already in positions of power.

Marxist theory has led to many interesting insights about mass media. For example, two researchers looking at Muzak, the type of instrumental music we hear in elevators and department stores, pointed out that this type of “functional music,” which was originally used in factories to control and regulate work, is now used in stores and malls to control and regulate consumption.<sup>20</sup>

One of the best-known political-economic critics is Stuart Hall. Hall’s work attacks “the unknowing acquiescence to the dominant ideology of the culture”<sup>21</sup> and urges resistance to that acquiescence. He seeks to raise consciousness about the media’s role. Hall does not claim a widespread establishment conspiracy to oppress the poor and the powerless; he accepts this oppression as a seldom-recognized part of the economic system of both the country and the media. In recent years, his work has sought to bring together various forms of cultural criticism, saying that gender, semiotics, and political economy are all part of the “representations” of the media, and that those representations are what produce the media’s overall effect.<sup>22</sup>

## HOW WE USE MEDIA

All of the theories we have explored so far have characterized media consumers as passive, being acted upon by various types of media, their content, and their creators. But instead of analyzing media effects, another group of scholars has developed **uses and gratifications theory**: the study of ways in which media consumers actively choose and use media to meet their own needs.<sup>23</sup> Uses and gratifications research doesn’t regard consumers as passive creatures whose behaviors are controlled by the media industry. Instead, it regards them as decision makers who choose—sometimes consciously and sometimes less consciously—which media to use and how to use them.

### Media Consumers as Active Agents

The difference between a uses and gratifications perspective and the other perspectives we have explored so far becomes clearer when we look at how each might explore a media phenomenon such as professional wrestling. Millions of

people are devoted followers of this pseudosport. Media effects researchers concerned with violent behavior might study the relationship between watching wrestling and being aggressive. For example, they might study whether wrestling fans get in more fistfights or whether they are more likely to act violently toward their spouses or children. If researchers did discover a link between watching wrestling and perpetrating physical violence, they would try to sort out the causal relationship between the two phenomena: whether for example wrestling causes people to behave more violently, or whether people with violent personalities are attracted to wrestling. Cultural studies scholars might analyze how wrestling perpetuates violence in culture, how the wrestlers and their fans are exploited by corporate interests, or how the sport contributes to a male-dominated society.

By contrast, a uses and gratifications approach to wrestling would not concern itself with the effects of viewing the sport. Instead it would explore what motivates fans to watch wrestling in the first place and what needs wrestling fans are satisfying by watching matches. A uses and gratifications approach underscores the active role of media consumers. It regards them as decision makers rather than puppets who are driven by unconscious forces or manipulated by media producers.

Unless you are a wrestling fan yourself, you might wonder why anyone *would* watch more than a few minutes of this obviously phony “sport.” A uses and gratifications perspective offers some answers to this question. Depending on their interests and attitudes, viewers might tune in to a match for a number of reasons. One reason might be *excitement*: Gullible viewers might find excitement, wondering which valiant combatant will win the contest. A second reason might be *amusement*: More sophisticated fans might watch the over-the-top costumes, names, and mock aggression as a joke instead of a genuine athletic event. A third might be *catharsis*: Watching muscular brutes slam one another to the canvas might be a better way of letting off steam than yelling at the family or kicking the cat. A fourth reason might be *escape*: For some fans, a wrestling match might be just the way to forget about the problems and challenges of the real world.

If you smugly dismissed the thought of watching phony wrestling for *any* reason, consider the fact that you probably consume other types of media for the same sorts of motives. Do you read novels? Surf the Web? Listen to sporting events on the radio or watch them on TV? Tune in to dramas or comedies? Watch films? If so, a little reflection will probably reveal that your reasons for consuming each type of media probably resemble some of the ones in the preceding list about wrestling.

Our brief look at professional wrestling should help you see the difference between the questions asked by media effects researchers and those asked by scholars who study uses and gratifications. The first group asks, “What effects do media have *on* people?” whereas the latter group asks “What do people do *with* media?”

## Types of Uses and Gratifications

The uses and gratifications approach suggests several ways in which people use media:

**SURVEILLANCE** Scholars use the word *surveillance* to describe our need to keep informed about the world. In earlier, simpler times surveillance needs could be

### CULTURAL IDIOM

**over-the-top**: bizarre

**letting off steam**:

releasing tension

met mostly through person-to-person contacts. But at the dawn of the twenty-first century, our fates are linked to people and forces that we cannot understand through direct personal experience. In this postindustrial world, mass media are an important tool in helping us understand what is going on around the world, as well as closer to home.

Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet provide a variety of ways to meet surveillance needs: What are the latest developments in the Mideast? What will the weather be like tomorrow? How is the stock market doing? Does daylight saving time begin *this weekend* or next? What's the cost of an airline ticket to Mexico City? Media provide quick and easy ways to answer questions like these.

**DIVERSION** Sometimes we use the media to *escape* from the pressures of the real world. Escape sometimes comes from *relaxation*. You might, for example, tune in to your favorite FM radio station seeking music that helps you calm down after a stressful day. At other times, we seek diversion by *excitement*, such as watching a suspenseful movie. Diversion also comes in the form of *amusement*, in forms such as television sitcoms.

**IDLE TIME** On some occasions, we use media to fill idle time. Consider the way you browse through magazines while waiting in the doctor's or dentist's reception room: You probably aren't looking for news or diversion as much as filling the minutes until your appointment. Likewise, think about the times you use the radio in your car or at home to fill in time while you are commuting or doing chores.

**SOCIAL INTEGRATION** In an age of Internet chat rooms and online romances, it shouldn't be a surprise that computer-mediated communication has the potential to bring people closer together. On the other hand, it might seem paradoxical or even downright wrong to suggest that watching the tube, listening to a CD, or reading a book promotes involvement with others. Uses and gratifications scholars suggest that the media can help us connect with others in several ways.

At the most obvious level, shared knowledge in media programming and publications provides what researchers have called an immediate "agenda for talk." Swapping news and opinions about current events can provide a useful way to develop relationships with strangers and to maintain them with acquaintances.

The ability of the media to provide conversational currency helps explain why movies are such a common first date. They provide an activity where two people who barely know one another can spend several hours together while minimizing the risk of running out of things to say. The first part of the date is spent in close proximity without the need to speak at all, and the second part of the date can be spent discussing the film.

Some research even indicates that television can be a tool for promoting family unity. For example, research suggests that TV viewing can bring family members together when they otherwise would have been apart.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, television has the potential to reduce family conflict by providing a shared enjoyable experience ("Hey, we're all laughing together!"), by diverting attention from contentious issues, and by providing a neutral topic to discuss.

**IDENTITY MANAGEMENT** Along with all their other functions, the media provide a tool for creating and managing our identities.<sup>25</sup> From an early age, children get

a sense of who they are from the media. “Am I rich or poor, attractive or ugly, intelligent or not, similar to or different from others?” Questions like these are answered in part by consuming media that give children—and adults, too—a sense of how they fit into the world.

What we do with media also helps us define how we want to be seen by others. People often choose media to support a public identity. Imagine, for instance, how the choice of music you play when hosting company at home makes a statement about who you are. Perhaps you can recall how, as a young adolescent, you deliberately chose music, films, or television programming that would set you apart from your family and make the statement: “I’m my own person.”

## DIFFERENT THEORIES, DIFFERENT OBSERVATIONS

Different theories of media effects would explain changes in society in different ways. The way language is used, for example, has certainly changed in recent years. Terms that were once considered obscene have become commonplace. Most experts believe that the media have played a role in this transformation. Years ago, the media encouraged the use of only “proper” language. For many years, the word *pregnant* was not uttered on television, even by Lucille Ball, whose character on *I Love Lucy* was obviously in that condition. Today, words that used to be considered bad enough to get a kid kicked out of school—words such as *sucks*, *bites*, and *blows*, used as verbs of criticism—can be heard routinely on Saturday morning cartoons.

How would the various theories explain the media’s role in the way language has changed?

- The findings from social learning research would suggest that these changes in language usage occurred as people imitated the language they heard in movies and on TV.
- Individual differences theory would suggest that the same language will affect different people in different ways and that perhaps only segments of the population who are predisposed to it would adopt the new language use.
- Cultivation theory would suggest that media language use slowly changes individuals’ worldviews, perhaps convincing them that society in general has become more coarse and that such language use is therefore acceptable.
- Agenda-setting theory would suggest that news coverage of matters, such as President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky, Lorena Bobbitt’s attack on her husband in which his penis was severed, and the trial of sportscaster Marv Albert on sexual assault charges, made sexual affairs part of the national agenda and therefore grist for everyday conversation.
- Cumulative effects theory would suggest that language changed when those who believed in using only socially acceptable terms became silent in the face of the continual mediated use of obscenity.
- Uses and gratifications theory would suggest that people have attended to media messages with this type of language because it performs some function for them, perhaps freeing them from societal restraints that they found repressive.
- Gender analysts might see these changes in language use as a way for women to seek equality with men or perhaps as a form of oppression against women.
- Political-economic analysts might regard the new language use as a successful assault on the repressive status quo.

All of these theories provide insights into media effects. They might be different insights, but taken as a whole and mixed with logic, they begin to help make sense out of the question of how media affect behavior.

This variety of theories also demonstrates that it is usually ill advised to make blanket criticisms and blanket statements about media uses and effects. It is an oversimplification to say, "Watching television is a waste of time." It is not completely accurate to say, "Violent television causes violence in society" or "Skinny models encourage girls to be anorexic" without qualifying that statement with some form of "it depends." Each of the theories discussed in these pages (as well as many others) has revealed that the uses and the effects of media are many and complex. The study of mediated communication is in its relative infancy, and a growing body of scholarship will help us understand more about how we use the media and how it shapes us.

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## SUMMARY

Mediated communication is the sharing of messages that are conveyed through any type of device or medium. Mediated communication includes mass communication (such as television programming), mediated interpersonal communication (such as talking on the telephone), and communication through converged media that are both mass and interpersonal in nature (such as the various ways we use the Internet). Mass communication is transmitted to large audiences, usually by professional gatekeepers, and results in a lack of interaction and restricted feedback between source and receivers. Mediated interpersonal communication occurs through a medium, but the source and receiver still treat one another as unique individuals. In mediated interpersonal communication, feedback—at least the nonverbal kind—is still restricted. Converged media are combinations of mass and interpersonal media, such as we find on the World Wide Web, where either individuals or professionals can create Web sites, where portals can reach millions but friends can communicate one on one through e-mail, chat rooms, and instant messages.

A variety of theories helps explain the complex nature of media effects. An early theory now known as the bullet theory predicted that the media would have direct, powerful effects. Although this is true in some cases, in far more cases the media's effects are caused by a combination of mediated and interpersonal messages, especially interpersonal messages from those we consider to be opinion leaders on a particular topic. This explana-

tion of media effects has come to be known as the multistep flow theory. Another influential theory, social learning theory, is based on the assumption that people learn how to behave by observing others, particularly role models in the media. The predictions that derive from social learning theory make the most sense when you also consider individual differences theory, which states that media users with different characteristics are affected in different ways by the mass media. A similar theory, diffusion of innovations, explains that different types of people will have different levels of willingness to accept new ideas from the media.

One of the more sophisticated theories of media effects, cultivation theory, states that the media shape our view of the world more than our behavior. Heavy viewers of television, for example, tend to see the world as less trustworthy than do light viewers. This theory helps explain why some people seem to be becoming more tolerant of violence within society, a process that is known as desensitization. Agenda setting is a theoretical approach that suggests that the main effect of the media is that they tell us what to think *about*; therefore, the amount of attention given to an issue in the press affects the level of importance assigned to that issue by consumers of mass media. Cumulative effects theory suggests that media have profound effects over time.

Cultural studies approaches look at the long-term effects of media on society in general. They are critical studies that rely on a close analysis of mediated messages rather than statistical studies.

There is a wide range of cultural studies, including (but not limited to) gender analysis and political-economic analysis. Gender analysis examines how the media construct and perpetuate gender roles. It looks at the way males and females think, act, and speak in mediated messages. Political-economic analysis provides studies into how media affect the relationship between the economic system of a nation and the values that the nation holds. It looks at how media become the means by which the haves of society gain the willing support of the have-nots to maintain the status quo.

Uses and gratifications theory looks at the ways media consumers actively choose and use media to

meet their own needs. These needs include surveillance (keeping informed about the world), diversion (escaping from the pressures of the real world), passing time (filling idle moments), social integration (bringing people closer together), and identity management (creating and managing our sense of who we are).

All of these theories, when taken together, provide a broad understanding of the many different effects of media on the lives of individuals and on society overall. An understanding of these theories explains why the most accurate answer to the question of media effects is often "It depends."