Chapter 1

“Understanding Media in the Digital Age”

Comm 336 Mass Media Malaise Course
Understanding the big ideas that explain all forms of communication is essential to truly knowing the most advanced new media.

Not understanding the basic building blocks of communication - the concepts, history, and voices of experience - is a ticket to ignorance.

Our textbook will help us consider and discover how deeply embedded the media are in modern life.

We will consider how media content influences us both individually and collectively and whether the influences of mass communication are beneficial, harmless, or hazardous.

As a student of communication, you need to have a broad context, or the conceptual map, into which media fit.

This involves knowing and understanding the role of politics and culture, economics, technology, and the legal-regulatory climate that have influenced media development in the past, present...and future.
Human Communication Timeline

- Development of Speech and Language
  - 90,000-35,000 B.C.

- Invention of Writing
  - Starting around 2500 B.C.

- Invention of the Printing Press
  - 1455

- Beginnings of Mass Newspapers
  - Early 1830s

- Invention of the Electric Telegraph
  - 1844

- Introduction of Films
  - Around 1900

- Beginnings of Home Radio
  - 1920s

- Wide Adoption of Television
  - 1950s

- Development of the Internet
  - 1980s-1990s

- Invention of Smart Phones
  - Early 2000s
Elements of Communication Theory

- Theories help explain the processes and effects of communication
- Theories are statements that describe and explain what events or factors bring about, result in, or cause certain consequences
- Theories come about through systematic research, and rely too on:
  - Historical perspective - how were and are media shaped by the events, policies, and characteristics of society?
  - Voices of experience - much of what we need to know and understand about communication is in the voice of the communicators, the people who have invented, led, and operated various media, as well as understanding the individuals (citizens and consumers) who make up the audience
Interpersonal Communication Fundamentals

Terms and concepts to know about communication that takes place between human beings at the interpersonal level (person-to-person)

- Mediated Communication - when interpersonal communication is aided by media technology that “conquers both time and space.” Examples?

- Media - devices that bring messages quickly from communicators to the multitudes, rather than to just a single person. Examples?

- Language - a learned system, shared by members of a culture, of verbal and nonverbal symbols that have accumulated and grown increasingly complex over time

- Culture - a set of shared beliefs, values and customs transmitted from generation to generation among communities

- Symbol - a word, action, or object that “stands for” standardized internal meanings in people within a given language community (be careful that positive symbols in one culture can be negative in another...)
Communicating accurately is usually a desired goal of interpersonal and mass communication.

Obstacles to accuracy can include:

- Noise - can happen when the sender and receiver do not share the same cultural rules for the use of language, a common problem in multicultural societies.
- Semantics - words, symbols and gestures can have different meanings in different cultures and countries.

Feedback and Role Taking can enhance successful communication:

- Feedback - a receiver’s communication, through comments, questions, facial expressions (or lack of) can cue the sender to whether the message is really getting through.
- Role Taking - is when the sender puts himself in the receiver’s shoes; the sender is trying, mentally, to be the receiver in order to understand how she is likely to react to the message being transmitted; can also be defined as the sender’s use of feedback to judge which words and nonverbal cues will work best to arouse the intended meanings in the receiver.

What? Huh? Say again?
Six Basic Stages of Mass Communications:

Mass communication begins with senders who are “professional communicators” who decide the nature and goals of a message to be presented to an audience via their particular medium. Message can be: News report, movie, an ad, podcast, etc.

The intended meanings are “encoded” by production specialists, such as a news team, film company, magazine staff, or digital team.

Encoding means that the sender chooses specific words, spoken or written, with conventionalized interpretations that the receiver will presumably understand.

The message is “transmitted” as information through the use of specialized media technologies to disseminate it, either as widely as possible or to a specialized segment of a general audience.

Large and diverse mass “audiences” of individual receivers take in the information, “decoding” it into a message of conventionalized verbal and nonverbal symbols.

Individual receivers selectively construct interpretations of the message in such a way that they experience subjective “meanings” that are, to at least some degree, parallel to those intended by the professional communicators.

As a result of experiencing these meanings, receivers are “influenced” in some way in their feelings, thoughts, or actions- that is, the communication has some effect.
Mass Communication is a process in which professional communicators design and use media to disseminate messages widely, rapidly, and continually in order to arouse intended meaning in large, diverse, and selectively attending audiences, in attempts to influence in a variety of ways.

A More Concise Definition
Defining the “Mass” in Mass Media

- Defining what are and are not mass media sets boundaries on what needs to be studied under the general heading of “mass communications”

- “Household penetration” has traditionally been one determining measure

- Typically a medium is regarded as especially important when it reaches 50 percent of households

- What is not mass communication (remember the formal definition):
  - Talking on the phone or sending IM or text messages - the audience is not large and diverse; usually there is only one person at each end of the communication; and is not initiated by “professional communicators”
  
  - A place such as a museum or theater would not be considered mass media because it does not disseminate messages over a distance (though it may have a website); it is a form of direct communication to audiences
  
  - “News media” is a form of content produced by media organizations that present their products to the public the same way drama, music and sports are brought to the public
The Major Mass Media

- Publishing - including books, magazines, and newspapers
- Film - mainly commercial motion pictures
- Electronic Media - mainly radio and television but also several forms such as cable television and the recording industry
- Are the Internet, social media, digital communications considered “mass media” by our definition?
- These have somewhat blurred the definition - some are considered mass media, some are not
- Chapter 2 will examine this in detail
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Technology</th>
<th>Years to Reach 50%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Color Television</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Computer</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compact Disc Player</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCR</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>AM Radio</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black and White TV</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>4</td>
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Reaching 50 million users is another mass media standard.
Mass Media Limitations

- Lack of immediate feedback - because it’s mediated, machine-assisted and impersonal mass media does not get the immediate interpersonal response from audience members to help determine if its message is being accepted and/or understood in the desired way.

- Inability to engage in effective role taking - Lack of face-to-face nature inhibits the mass communicator from making adjustments “on the fly” or putting himself in the shoes of the receiver to make the message better understood and accepted.

- Loss of accuracy - because of the above limitations, there is greater chance of loss of message accuracy.
  - The use of a medium reduces the richness of feedback
  - Mutual understanding is reduced
  - The probability that message will influence receivers is also reduced.
The term “aggregated audiences” refers to large and diverse media audiences mass communicators try to reach, whether to inform, persuade or entertain.

The mass communicator has to tailor messages to “average citizens” in many cases or assume there are common tastes or interests in specialized category messages - football fans, cooking enthusiasts, for example.

Assumptions many professional communicators have about the majority of their audiences:
- Audience has a limited attention span
- Prefers to be entertained rather than enlightened
- Quickly loses interest in any subject that makes intellectual demands

With this in mind, profit-driven U.S. mass media strive to reach large numbers of intellectually undemanding receivers whose aggregate purchasing power is immense.

This is a system that encourages media content that is high in entertainment value and low in intellectual demand.

The many ways society has shaped our media is addressed throughout our book. To be continued....