What is Mass Communication?

Inquire: Use of Mass Communication

Overview

How often do you check social media? Read a newspaper? Watch the news? All of these are forms of mass communication. By the end of this lesson, you will be able to define mass communication, identify its uses, and explain the good and bad that comes with an increase in mass communication.

Big Question: Does mass communication do more harm or good in the modern era?

Watch: Mass Communication Today

Mass communication is any message that is sent to a large number of people. Often, some sort of technology is used to send these messages, but it doesn’t have to be a cell phone. In fact, one of the first forms of mass communication was books. Being able to send a message — the same message — to so many people without having to physically be there is one of the biggest benefits of mass communication. Forms of mass communication have steadily evolved over time. As new technologies develop, the fundamental purpose of mass communication remains the same: a reliable way to spread a uniform message to a large audience.

There are many tools used to send mediated, or technology assisted, messages through mass communication: social media, emails, television, newspapers, and movies, to name a few. These forms of mediated mass communication have become increasingly important in today’s society. Think of the uses for social media or a cell phone more generally. Think about the last time you couldn’t just google something or get the latest news and updates within a few moments of needing them. This interconnectivity allows for mass communication to take on a new level of importance in our daily lives like it never has before. With this reliance comes danger of over-reliance or manipulation. This problem is one American culture is currently wrestling with in our political discourse. Knowing what mass media is, how it affects us, and how to identify its influence are some of the most important skills we can develop in this age of increased mass communication.

What uses of mass communication do you have in your life? Has it changed how you live your life in any way?

As mass communication becomes more prevalent, these questions become more and more important. What are the negative aspects of mass communication? How do we address them?

These questions will be addressed in this lesson, and the answers to them will be exceptionally important to society at large as mass communication gains prominence in our daily lives.
Read: What is Mass Communication?

Overview
Technology serves to make many parts of our lives easier. As technology advances, so does our understanding and availability of communication. This has given rise to an increased use and availability of mass communication. In this lesson, we will explore what mass communication is, what impact it has, what its benefits are, and what downsides it can bring about.

What is Mass Communication?
Communication is often thought of as one-on-one conversations, but with the rise of a 24-hour news cycle, social media, and cell phones, mass communication is increasingly important to understand. Mass communication is the large-scale sending of a message, often through media or technology, to a large number of receivers. This means that a speaker with a megaphone reaching 100 people in a stadium is mass communication, the same as a celebrity tweeting their morning thoughts. The thing about mass communication that sets it apart from other forms of communication is that it is intended for a large amount of receivers, rather than one person, two people, or a small group. Because these messages are intended for a wider audience, the considerations of what to say and how to say it to effectively reach as many receivers as possible are much different than one-on-one communication.

Often times, mass communication is mediated through some sort of channel called media. Media, the plural form of medium, is simply the channel that is used to share a message. A mediated medium is any channel that is assisted by technology to share a message. So a teacher’s voice is a medium, and a tweet is a medium, but the tweet is a mediated message while a voice is not on its own. Mass communication takes advantage of mediated channels of communication to reach wide audiences. This often leads mass communication to be conflated with The Media, or with mediated communication, but there is a difference.

What are the Uses of Mass Communication?
Mass communication has many uses, all of which revolve around sending and receiving information from a large number of people. Communication happens two ways, with participants sending and receiving information simultaneously. This does not change with mass communication. This back-and-forth information sharing is one of the uses mass communication serves. Be it a twitter poll asking followers what someone should have for dinner, or search and rescue units informing people of unsafe areas and receiving information of where people are stranded, mass communication’s primary use is to send and receive large amounts of information in a short amount of time.

Other uses of mass communication are entertainment, such as movies, television shows, or stand-up routines; sensationalization, putting forward the most captivating information to try to excite receivers; and mobilization, organizing large groups of people during times of crisis or need.

What are the Benefits of Mass Communication?
With all of these uses, there come certain benefits from mass communication. One of the biggest benefits is uniformity of message. Because one person, or a network of people, are able to send a message to so many receivers, naturally, that message received is going to be the same, or similar, between receivers. Think of a workplace interaction where you were doing things differently than a coworker. Now imagine a situation where mass communication was used to tell workers how they should be completing a task. By
having everyone on the same page, you can maximize efficiency in the workplace, and that’s brought by the uniformity of message.

Another benefit of mass communication is fact checking. Because potentially thousands of people receive a message, if the information in the message is flawed, it can be fact checked by the audience and quickly fixed by the original sender. This happens often in the news. A channel or paper will report one thing, then run a retraction explaining what went wrong and presenting the correct information. By using mass communication, they can not only get out the correct information, but they can also allow for the message to be shaped and corrected by the members of an audience.

What are the Downsides of Mass Communication?

Mass communication is not without its downsides, however. The spread of fake news, or biased information that has not been vetted for factual accuracy, is aided immensely by mass communication. With no way to police who has access to mass communication, especially in a world of social media, it allows for anyone to say anything without bothering to find the truth, rather than just finding the hottest take.

Another downside of mass communication comes from the back-and-forth exchange of information. When a sender sends a message and receives a response, it brings an opportunity for surveillance of the receiver-turned-sender. Again, this is especially true of mediated communication where technology can be used to track where from someone sent a message, or to track what kind of information a person is looking into. While some level of surveillance might be good or inevitable, the explosion of mass communication has certainly made the amount of surveillance increase around the globe.

Reflect: A Force for Good, or Evil?

Poll

What impact does mass communication have on corporate images?

Think of corporate social media accounts when deciding on your answer.

- More harm
- About the same
- More good

Expand: Combating Fake News

Overview

One of the worst uses of mass communication is the spreading of fake news. In this section, we will discuss ways to be aware of what is or is not fake news in an ever growing world of mass communication. Knowing how to tell what is real and what isn’t takes away one of the biggest dangers of mass communication and turns a valuable tool into something even greater.

How to Spot the Fake

Five easy steps can help you identify fake news from the real stuff: check the source, check the content, check the date, figure out if its satire, and consult experts.
First up, check the source. Figuring out the source of the information is a great way to tell if it is real or not. Is it a blog? It might not be that reliable. Is it a news agency? That’s a little better! Figuring out who is publishing the article is the best first step to take. As you read more and more, you get a feel for what sources are trustworthy and what sources tend to embellish too much. Once you know the source, check the author! Who wrote it? Are they qualified in the field to be talking about something? Is it someone writing about something that happened on the other side of the country or were they there? These details are helpful in finding out the most truthful account of information.

Second, check the content. Read an article, understand what it is saying, and figure out how it supports what it is saying. Does it have interviews with people that were at an event? Does it have statistics or other forms of data to support what it says? If it is just someone’s opinion, or a statement with no support, it is best to take that information with a grain of salt until you can confirm or deny the contents of the article.

Third, check the date. Information changes! Things change! People make groundbreaking discoveries that change what we know about the world around us. If you find an article, check when it was written. Just because something was true one, five, ten, or 30 years ago does not mean it is still true. Do your best to figure out the date of the news so that you can figure out if it’s talking about current events or things in the past.

Fourth, check for a joke. There are a host of funny “news” sites that write articles making fun of current events. The Onion does not report on facts. It is a satire source, and there are several others like it! Make sure the place you get your news is actually a news site, not a joke site making fun of situations as they happen.

Finally, trust and consult the experts. If you don’t know about something, seek out information from someone who does. There are several fact-checking websites (snopes, politifact, fact checker) that pay staffers to prove or disprove claims made in the news. Trust that those people are supporting their arguments well, and see what they conclude about an issue if you can’t tell on your own.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Mass Communication : What is Mass Communication?
- A short video explaining what mass communication is and how it has been developed through the ages
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7bVp3xfCkg

Mass Communication : Types of Mass Communication
- A short video explaining specific types of mass communication
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBHQZbCvc00

Mass Communication : Issues & Effects of Mass Communication
- A short video explaining issues presented by mass communication, as well as the effects it has in daily life
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Q0FoBuOdR8
Lesson Glossary

**mass communication**: the large-scale sending of a message, often through media or technology, to a large number of receivers

**media**: the channel that is used to share a message; the plural form of medium

**mediated medium**: any channel that is assisted by technology to share a message

**sensationalization**: putting forward the most captivating information to try to excite receivers

**mobilization**: organizing large groups of people during times of crisis or need

Check Your Knowledge

1. Surveillance is a harmful effect of mass communication.
   - A. True
   - B. False

2. Mass media often uses technology to reach a wider audience.
   - A. True
   - B. False

3. Fact checking is a benefit of mass communication.
   - A. True
   - B. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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