



Zoom became an almost essential platform for communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, with everything from education and business to public relations and news reports relying on it to connect with others while in isolation.

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MEDIA BASICS: MODELS AND THEORIES

INTRODUCTION

1. *How well do you feel you communicate with others through a platform like Zoom? Does it improve your interaction with others or limit you in certain ways?*
2. *As you see when someone on Zoom turns off their camera or uses a different name, certain forms of communication allow you more or less anonymity. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks associated with anonymity in communication efforts?*
3. *How much do you rely on mass media platforms like this one to connect with people in your life?*

Media platforms like Zoom play a vital role in our lives, as they inform, entertain, and connect us in ways that continue to grow and expand, thanks to innovation and technology. This chapter will explore how communication has evolved from early oral traditions to digital media platforms. It will also outline basic communication models, explaining how they work and which ones work best in different situations. In addition, it will examine media theories that can help us understand the ways in which media affect our lives.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe the concept of media and the ways in which it developed over time.
2. Illustrate the basic communication models and analyze the models' key components.
3. Assess the role of each media theory in understanding mass media.
4. Understand the value of media in terms of employment opportunities.

WHAT IS MEDIA?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 1: Describe the concept of media and the ways in which it developed over time.

The definition of **media** can be tricky to understand because the word itself covers several basic concepts. The term “media” can include:

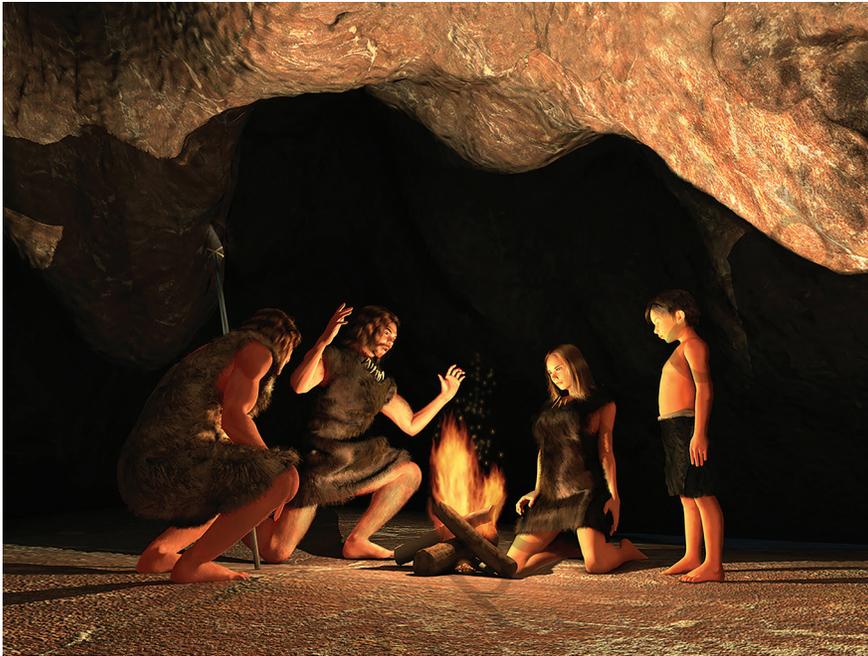
- The *content* we receive through various devices, like a class meeting on Zoom or an episode of *The Bachelor* we stream.
- The *platform* on which the material is delivered, such as a printed newspaper or a vinyl album that rotates on a record player.
- The *information* we receive, whether we read it on a smartphone, hear it on a podcast, or see it in a thirty-second video.
- Some combination of content, platform, and information.

Regardless of how you want to think about media, at the core of this concept is an inherent desire to communicate with other people. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, as well as the rest of this book, we will look at two fundamental questions to help better explain the presence, relevance, and usefulness of media itself:

1. What do we do with media and what does media do to us?
2. What value does media have for us as a society and as individuals?

The Evolution of Storytelling

Before we can begin to understand today's media world, it's worth taking a look back at how communication evolved from the simple sounds humans relied on hundreds of thousands of years ago to the complex digital media transmissions we use today. Although communication and media have changed radically over the millennia, at the heart of it all is our basic need to tell people who matter to us something we want them to know.



Oral communication goes back to the days of cavemen, telling stories around the fire.

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In short, it's all about storytelling.

Long before there was mass media, human beings had a strong desire to communicate with one another. The forms of communication they used are thought to have developed in three stages (see Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1 ■ Three Forms of Communication

Oral Communication	Visual Communication	Written Communication
Originated between 500,000 and 200,000 BC	Originated between 60,000 and 40,000 BC	Originated around 4000 BC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Began with humans mimicking sounds they heard in nature • Grew to the development of languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals drew images that represented important objects in their environments • Used to permanently retain information for future generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans used marks and images to record information • Began with reeds pressed into clay tablets before evolving to include materials like papyrus and parchment marked with ink quills and paint brushes

In the earliest days of communication, writers and artists often produced only a single piece that could be shared among audience members in a limited geographic area. It required a great deal of effort and time to make copies of these original items. What helped communication and media grow was the arrival of technology that allowed messages to be copied more easily and spread across larger geographic areas.



Early written communication, like this cuneiform tablet, took a great deal of time to create and could not be widely distributed.

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A Leap into Mass Communication

The arrival of **mass communication**, a technique of disseminating information from one source to many receivers, applied technology to communication, allowing content to reach a much wider audience. **Oral**, **written**, and **visual communication** remained the core ways in which stories passed from sender to receiver, but new technologies made it easier for more people to receive this content more quickly than ever before (see Table 1.2).

For much of the twentieth century, mass media was defined as consisting of primarily print (books, magazines, newspapers), recorded (records, movies), and broadcast (radio, television) media. The **platform**—or the *way* the media was shared—was foremost, with the content or information that was being shared molded to fit each format. This would all change with the introduction of a revolutionary new technology: the World Wide Web.

In the early 1990s, the internet emerged as a viable way of communicating, and media outlets saw the benefit of having a presence on the World Wide Web. This new information platform had mass media outlets looking for ways to reach more people with improved content in ways they hadn't initially thought of before. What emerged from these efforts to improve storytelling and take advantage of different storytelling tools was a concept called convergence (see Figure 1.1).

Convergence saw print, broadcast, and online resources coming together as collective entities instead of separate media outlets. News broadcasters relied on print reporters to provide them tips on key stories, while broadcast journalists provided video clips for web distribution. Online

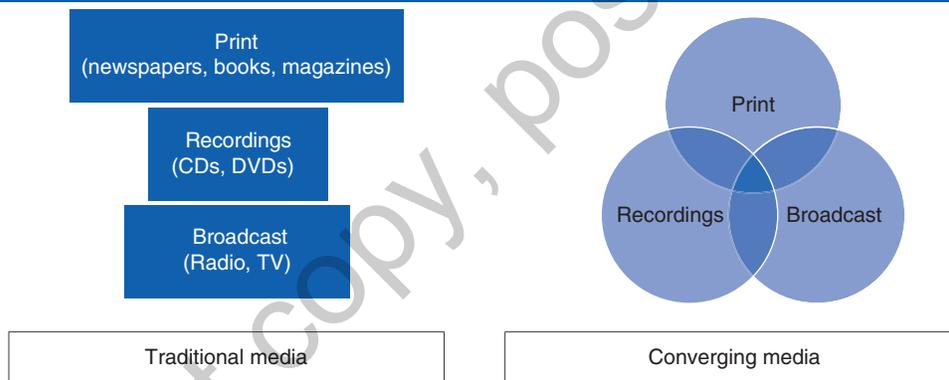


The printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg, signalled the beginning of the mass communication era.

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TABLE 1.2 ■ Mass Communication's New Technologies

Printing Press	Telegraph	Phonograph	Radio	Television
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invented in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg Allowed the mass production of printed material, instead of relying on hand-copying content Improved access for all people to printed material and helped boost mass literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invented in 1836 by David Alter and popularized by Samuel Morse in 1837 Allowed messages to be sent through physical communication lines across great distances Improved the speed at which information was shared 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invented in 1877 by Thomas Edison and improved upon by Alexander Graham Bell in the 1880s Allowed the recording of words and music for sharing and preservation Improved access to music and speech, similar to how the printing press helped share text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invented and patented in 1896 by Guglielmo Marconi Allowed the transmission of messages across great distances without the use of wires Improved opportunities to share content with a wider audience across a greater physical distance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An all-electric version was invented in 1927 by Philo Farnsworth Allowed sound and pictures to be transmitted across the airwaves Improved on the radio model by adding visuals

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Traditional Versus Converging Media

outlets posted print stories before they hit the press, giving newspaper reporters the opportunity to “scoop” the competition.

Critics of convergence have noted that the continued concentration of ownership prevents a wide array of voices from being heard, homogenizes content for the sake of profit, and has led to the dumbing down of information. Those who favor this approach note that giving owners the ability to operate multiple types of media allows them to provide more content across more platforms in shorter times and with better audience satisfaction.

The Digital Media Age

As the internet grew in terms of available content and ease of use, people began to see huge benefits to working with information that wasn't anchored to one place, one device, or one point in time. The ability to access the web through wireless internet, the growth of mobile devices that relied on apps to provide content to users, and the explosion of options to both send and receive content worked together to create the **digital media** era.

When media was still viewed as being defined by its physical format—such as newspapers or movies—users had to consider three key elements when consuming it:

1. **Geography:** The location of the market a media outlet served, such as the circulation area of a newspaper or the reach of a radio station's signal.
2. **Time:** The period when content was available, such as the hour a television program would air or the week when a movie would be available in a theater.
3. **Scarcity:** The limitation of available media, such as the number of copies of a book the library keeps or the number of copies of a magazine available at a bookstore.

These elements placed limitations on access for users, thus forcing them to make decisions regarding where they physically could go to get information, what information was available to them, and how long they could access that information before it was gone. When digital media arrived, it eliminated those concerns and limitations, as media practitioners applied technology and provided content in a way that allowed more people to access a greater volume of material.

Today's digital media realm provides content creators and users the ability to share information with anyone and everyone. It allows people to send and receive information that can be used, modified, and reshared across multiple platforms for the benefit of its audience members. The content is transferred electronically, and it can be easily replicated without a loss of quality. It can also be reconstructed, repurposed, and shared with a whole new audience for a purpose entirely different from that of its original creator.

As digital media continued to gain prominence, most traditional media organizations looked for ways to take advantage of it. Newspapers invested more in a digital-first mentality, posting breaking news content online prior to its running in the next day's print edition. Broadcast journalists relied on social media to provide live video of unfolding stories and to alert viewers about important stories. Book publishers sought ways to make their volumes more accessible on e-readers and other digital devices. Television and movie producers shifted away from traditional distribution approaches and standard episodic-delivery models. This opened the door for improved innovation and enhanced content-consumption opportunities as media users embraced **platform neutrality**: the concept of placing more value on the content than the device on which it is delivered.

A DEEPER LOOK: DIGITAL MEDIA AND PLATFORM NEUTRALITY

Digital media relies on several important tenets of traditional mass media, such as expanding the reach of the content, serving the needs of an audience, and providing content more quickly than was previously possible. However, the key distinction between traditional mass media and digital media is in the concept of platform neutrality.

Platform neutrality helps us focus on the primacy of information, meaning that the content we consume is more important than the way we consume it. For most of the twentieth century, information was conveyed through physical objects. If you found a funny cartoon in your local newspaper and wanted to share it with a friend, you'd have to physically cut it out and send it through the mail. If you wanted to send it to multiple people, you needed to photocopy it and then mail the copies out. When digital media emerged, computers made it easier to store, share, and replicate content without having to rely on tangible products. Now, with the click of a mouse or a touch on your screen, you could copy the information, save it to your device, and ship it off to hundreds or thousands of people in an instant.

The shift to digital media made platform distinctions and barriers less important and thus changed people's thinking to focus more on content than on devices. We now saw the benefit of the information itself and sought media outlets and distributors who could best meet our needs with regard to when and how we wanted this information. This not only gave rise to more media

organizations and platforms that vied for our attention, but it also pushed traditional mass media practitioners to take advantage of digital options.

In a digital realm, the audience is free to consume content how, when, and where they want. For example, in the pre-internet world, a film was shown to a large audience at specific show times during a limited theater run, or an episode of a TV show was presented on a certain day or at a certain time. You had to physically travel to the theater or sit by your TV set at the specific time to watch. Today, we binge-watch shows through streaming services, record our favorite shows to a cloud-based DVR, and download episodes of long-canceled programs from Amazon or iTunes. Even more, we watch these shows and films on TVs, computers, tablets, and mobile devices in almost every public or private place imaginable. We can pause, save, rewatch, and stash content however we choose. The ability to platform-hop and time-shift has made content king in a way that wasn't possible for prior generations.

HOW DO WE USE MEDIA TO INTERACT?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 2: Illustrate the basic communication models and analyze the models' key components.

Thousands of times each day, we communicate using a wide variety of means without even thinking about it. A quick “snap” to a friend could help set up a study meeting or simply brighten their mood with a laugh. A discussion with your family at the dinner table could help them learn all about your day. A quick handwave could tell another driver who just arrived at a four-way intersection that you want them to go first.

These interactions contain several key components researchers have identified in most basic communication. Let's take a look at those components and several basic communication models to see how they explain what we do instinctively every day.

Communication Components

Defining the basic components of communication is one of the more difficult aspects of understanding these media models. Communication is something you have done for your entire life without giving much thought to it, so trying to explain it might seem awkward. It's like describing how to tie your shoes to a little kid: you've done it so often, it's essentially muscle memory. When you have to explain how to hold the laces at the beginning or how tight to pull the bow, it can feel strange.

To help explain how communication works, several theorists developed models to describe this process. Table 1.3 outlines the basic process through which a message is sent to a receiver.

All media models retain some form of these basic elements, even though the more complex models rely on different approaches and alternative terms to explain how the communication occurs.

Linear Model of Communication

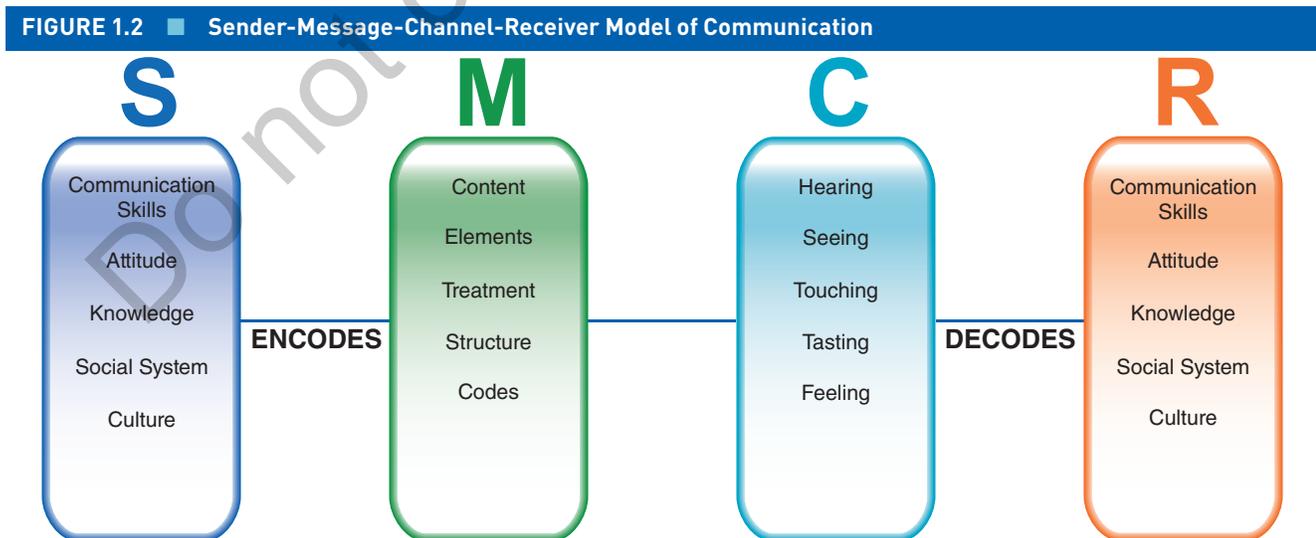
Initial models of communication sought to explain how information started at Point A and reached Point B. As the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, scholars sought to explain communication using a **linear model**.

In the late 1940s, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver developed the initial linear model of communication based on a mathematical approach to understanding how radio and television waves travelled most efficiently.¹ These researchers stated that a message starts with a **source**, travels along a **medium** of some form, and then reaches a **receiver** at the other end. This approach to communication is often referred to as a **transmission model**, because it described how a message is sent, or transmitted, from a source to a receiver.

TABLE 1.3 ■ Communication Models			
Component	What It Is	Also Known As	Examples
Sender	The source of a message or its starting point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source • Communicator • Encoder • Originator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A teacher delivering a lecture • A television station sending out a nightly news broadcast • A baby crying in its crib
Message	The information that is being communicated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Information • Transmission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A story in a newspaper • A push alert on your phone • A statement a friend makes • A “thumbs up” gesture
Channel	The format that you use to send the message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media • Platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smartphone • TV set • Newspaper
Receivers	The end point of a message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicators • Decoders • Recipients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A crowd at a rally • A waiter taking your order • A student in a class
Noise	Anything that interferes with the sender’s message reaching the receiver		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising meant to negate the sender’s message • Other messages competing for the receiver’s attention • Literal noise (such as a lawn mower drowning out speech)

The model eventually expanded to consider additional elements, such as the influence of outside interference, which is often referred to as **noise**. From a technological standpoint, noise included any elements that could block signals, such as a mountain range limiting access to radio signals.

In the 1960s, David Berlo’s theories helped shift the linear approach to focus more on human orientation. His **Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) model**² considered various contributing factors in each stage of communication that would either enhance or diminish the likelihood of its success (see Figure 1.2).



David Berlo’s model of communication helps outline the ways in which information is shared between people. Although it is criticized for its simplicity, it was one of the first models to clearly capture the interpersonal communication process.

Here's how the model works:

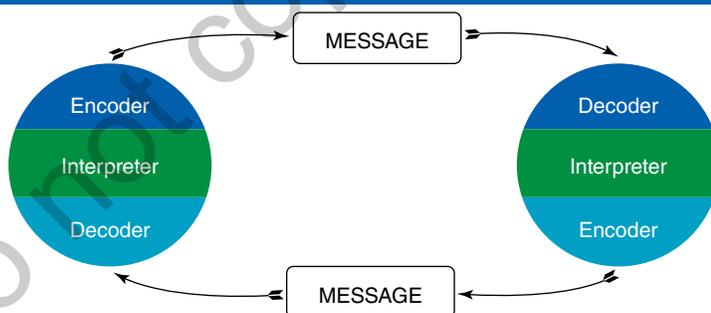
- The sender begins the process with the intent of sharing a message. The sender's level of communication skill and attitude can enhance or limit potential success. In addition, the sender's knowledge of the topic, the message, and the receiver can play an important role in this communication process.
- The message is sent, having been encoded by the sender with elements that can improve or detract from its quality. The content itself plays a vital role in the message's success, but other elements, like nonverbal gestures and the tone of the speaker, matter as well. How the message is packaged and structured also matter as do coding elements, such as language usage.
- The message is sent through a channel, such as a magazine, a website, or a computer. The channel must be able to reach the person through one of the five senses humans rely on for sensory perception.
- The receiver gets the message and decodes it using their communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social system, and culture. The more the sender and receiver share similar traits in these areas, the more likely the communication effort will be successful.

Berlo's critics noted that the simplicity of his approach fails to consider the way in which interpersonal communication actually functions. People rarely serve as only senders or receivers. In addition, the quality of the communication can wax and wane according to a variety of interactions that occur between sender and receiver, as well as additional outside forces. The linear model adequately represents the technical process Shannon and Weaver had described, but it clearly lacks the nuances experienced in human interactions.

Interactive Model of Communication

To deal with the shortcomings of the linear model, Wilbur Schramm and his research colleagues began to look at communication as a shared process between participants. Communication became less of a straight line from a single sender to a single receiver but rather a circular movement of shared engagement between participants. This **interactive model** also is known as the **Osgood-Schramm model** (see Figure 1.3):

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Osgood-Schramm Model of Communication



The Osgood-Schramm model of communication was one of the earliest attempts to explain how communication was more interactive and less unidirectional.

- Communication begins with a message the sender **encodes** with meaning and value, indicating a sense of purpose within the communication.³
- The sender then puts the message into some form that will be sent through a channel, with the intention of reaching the receiver.
- The receiver then takes the message and **decodes** it, attempting to understand the content of the message, as well as the source's meaning.

- As that occurs, the receiver becomes the sender of a secondary message, known as **feedback**, which will determine how successful the original sender has been.
- Between the sender and receiver, forces that are not tied directly to the message can increase or decrease the likelihood of the message's success.

If you think about your last interaction with a professor, you could see this model playing out something like this:

You: I'm confused about my midterm paper assignment. What am I supposed to do?

Professor: Well, you need to be able to discuss media communication theory by referring to the many different approaches that we've discussed in class.

You (Looking puzzled): I know that, but I'm not sure how to begin...

Professor: Do you mean you don't know how to describe these theories or don't know which theories to discuss?

You: I don't know which ones to discuss.

Professor: Well, choose one that you think is particularly important. You can briefly mention how it relates to the others at the end of your paper.

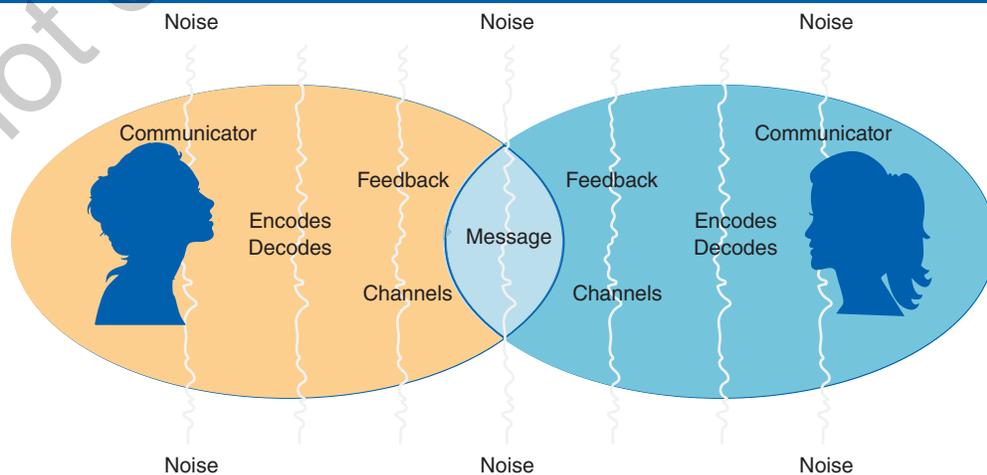
You: Thanks!

In this model, communication is a dynamic process that views individuals as simultaneously being senders and receivers. It also allows participants to succeed or fail based on misunderstandings or other problems occurring within the interaction. External "noise" issues, proposed in the earlier linear model, remain possible here, but this model also accounts for additional interpersonal and psychological factors, such as shared experiences, contextual clues, and emotional elements. Thus, what you might consider to be a simple request to your roommates to turn down the music could be construed as a passive-aggressive complaint about how they live their lives.

Transactional Model of Communication

The **transactional model** of communication presents the most dynamic approach to communication. Instead of either a linear or circular pattern of information sharing, this model looks at individuals as sharing space within a communication zone, allowing them to serve as both senders and receivers at various points and times within the process. The communication that results occurs as part of a cooperative action that leads to a mutually beneficial result (see Figure 1.4).⁴

FIGURE 1.4 ■ The Transactional Model of Communication



The transactional model incorporates more real-world elements, including individual experiences, the presence of noise, and the lack of "turn-taking" in communication.

Source: Guerrero and McEwan, *Interpersonal Encounters*, 1e, Sage Publishing, 2022.

As is the case with the interactive model, outside “noise” can limit the success of the communication, and the communication has an overall goal couched in purposeful contact between the individuals. However, unlike the interactive model, this approach acknowledges that the “turn-taking” associated with messages and feedback tends to oversimplify the communication process. In addition, this model requires individuals to have a shared understanding when they engage with each other. This could be as simple as both sharing a common language or as complex as a long-term relationship in which preexisting knowledge and understanding are essentially baked into every communication effort.

This best represents what many of us do every day, whether it’s engaging in a group chat with friends or working together around a table on a group project. The shared space and understanding allows us to react to how others are presenting information as well as how they present themselves as communicators to the group. You might choose to speak a lot because others are silent, or you might become silent when it is clear you are annoying other people with your chatter. You might show deference to one member of the group who is older or smarter, or you might take over the conversation because you are the only person who knows what’s going on. This model considers all these potential elements—and much more.

WHAT DOES MEDIA DO TO US?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 3: Assess the role of each media theory in understanding mass media.

Even as the media landscape continues to radically shift in this new digital world, the concept of how media affects us as individuals is crucial. Given how much media we consume, the wide array of choices available to us, and the potential outcomes that result from media consumption, we all need a working understanding of media theories. The reason theories matter is that they provide us with a set of shared expectations of what is likely to occur in a given situation, based on what researchers found has happened consistently in similar situations in the past. Table 1.4 outlines some of those theories, with basic explanations of how they are supposed to work. Let’s dig into these ideas more deeply.

TABLE 1.4 ■ Media Theories

Theory	Basic Explanation	Example
Magic bullet/“hypodermic needle”	Media messages are simple and direct, penetrating the minds of consumers and creating specified actions.	You see an ad for Diet Coke and you go out and buy one.
Gatekeeping	Media messages pass through a series of decision points that determine if they get to the audience.	A newspaper editor decides there isn’t enough room to run a story on a high school basketball game, so no one in the community knows who won.
Agenda setting	Media establishes the key topics in our day-to-day lives. However, it doesn’t necessarily change our opinions about those events.	The media’s coverage of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan keeps that story on your mind, but it doesn’t change whether you support or oppose the withdrawal.
Framing	Media practitioners place emphases on specific aspects of a topic, thus coloring the way in which consumers view it.	The construction of a new apartment complex is framed as “bad for the environment,” focusing our attention on ecological issues.
Spiral of silence	The more a person’s opinion is in the majority, the more likely that person is to speak out. The less a person’s opinion is in the majority, the quieter they remain about the issue.	A group of your friends support Bill Smith for homecoming court. You don’t like Bill, but you keep that to yourself.
Third-person effect	People drastically overestimate the influence messages have on other people while underestimating the impact the messages have on themselves.	Your roommate says the violent video games he plays online never bother him, but he worries about “all those weirdos I play against.”

The Magic-Bullet Theory

One of the earliest media effects theories to gain traction was also one of the most frightening in terms of the potential damage media could do. The **magic-bullet theory**, which is often called the **hypodermic-needle model**, saw media messages as both direct and impactful. In this model, a message was essentially “injected” into the heads of the people who saw it, thus allowing it to penetrate their minds and create specified outcomes. Although he didn't use these terms specifically, researcher Harold Lasswell outlined this theory in his 1927 book *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, which essentially said that a propagandist could force people to bend to the will of the propagandist through proper media messaging.⁵

The idea that media owners could essentially shoot messages into audience members' minds and leave them helpless but to obey sounded terrifying at the time, even if it seems laughable today. In an attempt to poke holes in the theory, researcher Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues conducted research on the 1940 presidential election. The study, which looked at voting patterns and exposure to media messages created by Franklin D. Roosevelt's campaign, determined that the campaign didn't turn people into mindless zombies who did as they were told.⁶ Instead, Lazarsfeld found that people can choose which messages affect them and which ones don't, thus starting a research path known as the **limited-effects model**. (All of the theories we will discuss in this chapter fall into this category.)

By the mid-1950s, the magic-bullet theory had fallen out of favor with researchers, who found that interpersonal relationships and social norms had much more influence over people than direct media messages. However, a few researchers continue to study the idea of a direct cause-and-effect connection between media use and personal actions.⁷

Gatekeeping

To understand what media can do to us, it is important to understand how information gets to us, which is explained by **gatekeeping**: how media professionals decide what content the public gets to see. Although many changes have occurred since the theory came into play more than seventy years ago, gatekeeping retains an important role in helping us understand information flow.

In 1950, David Manning White published a study that examined the ways in which editors and newsroom routines and processes influenced what people saw in their daily newspapers.⁸ He followed the actions of a single editor, dubbed “Mr. Gates,” who would make decisions about what made it into the publication. At the end of the week, only about 10 percent of the material Mr. Gates examined got published. The 90 percent that was rejected, White found, came as a result of the editor's own personal definition of what mattered and what didn't, as opposed to a clear set of rules and regulations within the newsroom. This study helped solidify the concept of gatekeeping, which explains the ways in which content makes it through a series of checkpoints before the public gets access to it through a media outlet.

The originator of gatekeeping theory was social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who developed it while studying the grocery-shopping habits of Midwestern housewives during World War II.⁹ He noted that the women had a wide array of choices at the market, but only so many things would make it into their carts and thus become part of their families' meals. In studying this, Lewin found that individual choices made it possible for food to get into the cart or to be kept out.

Whether it was food in a grocery cart or copy across an editor's desk, this decision-making process made sense in a traditional media platform that had limited space or time, such as newspapers or radio broadcasts. Editors were under pressure to find ways to limit content, because not all of it could “fit in.” In addition, the number of media outlets available to the public were limited, because even the largest cities had relatively fewer newspapers or radio stations compared with the sources we now have in the digital era.

The concept of gatekeeping can seem dated in a digital age, with the idea that only a few people can hold sway over whether information gets out to the public. However, scholars note that gatekeeping still exists, in large part due to the very technology that supposedly eliminates it. Information still begins at a source and ends up in the hands of the audience, even though the amount of content and the

processes for moving it along have shifted. In White's day, the gatekeepers were humans; today, they are algorithms and selection tools.

In addition, when we consume and share media, we act as gatekeepers for our family, friends, and colleagues. A study published in 2021 showed that people who share content via social media platforms with people they know have essentially taken on the role of gatekeeper that once belonged only to editors like Mr. Gates.¹⁰ Instead of relying on a newspaper editor to choose what we see or read, we now rely on what our friends post, retweet, or up-vote on a variety of platforms.

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting means that the media tends to focus on a small number of current events or issues, which thus become important to the public. Max McCombs and Donald Shaw began studying how the media can shape public attitudes through a series of studies in the late 1960s. Their work on the 1968 presidential election revealed a strong correlation between what the news media in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, heavily reported on and what residents of that area saw as important.¹¹ Although the media did not persuade people to think about the issues in a specific way, it did highlight and draw attention to those topics, thus leading the authors to note its agenda-setting function.

The concept of agenda-setting theory is based on one of McCombs's key influences, Bernard Cohen. Cohen famously noted that the media isn't successful about telling the people what to think, "but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."¹² To that end, media outlets select areas they see as mattering a great deal and cover them vigorously. This puts the issues front and center for media consumers, who then decide for themselves how they feel about the topics.

For example, the 2020 presidential election tended to focus on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the way in which U.S. officials handled it.¹³ While President Donald Trump touted his successes in fast-tracking a vaccine, challenger Joe Biden noted the slow response Trump's administration initially had to the outbreak. The degree to which voters reading about the topic agreed with either man varied, but the fact remains that COVID-19 stayed front and center in election discussions.

Framing

Similar to agenda-setting theory, the concept of **framing** suggests that media practitioners emphasize certain topics or ideas while ignoring others, thus eliciting specific responses from consumers. Erving Goffman discussed the concept of framing at length in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis*, in which he explained the way in which frames can exist for us and how they shape our understanding of what we see. For the sake of our discussion here, let's consider the ideas of physical frames and social frames.

A physical frame expands or limits our ability to physically observe something. For example, a peephole in a hotel door frames what we can see outside of our room, presenting an extremely restricted visual corridor. Conversely, a picture window in an oceanside home widens the field of vision and allows us to take in a wide array of elements outside of the house.

Physical frames can shift the way in which we consume content in the media and thus change how we think about what we have seen. For example, during the 2017 inauguration of President Donald Trump, the media and the White House argued vehemently about the size of the crowd and how it was photographed. Images taken from the back of the National Mall less than an hour before the ceremony showed large swaths of open space and few people milling around the area. Images taken from the same vantage point at approximately the same point in time during President Barack Obama's 2009 ceremony showed a mall flooded with people.¹⁴ In the days that followed Trump's inauguration, the White House tried to "reframe" this by releasing photos of the event that were significantly cropped, making it seem like the crowd filled the whole frame and thus packed the Mall.¹⁵

Social framing relates to how people, organizations, and the media draw attention to certain events, focus on specific aspects of them, or portray them for the public at large. To do this, these individuals and groups apply social constructs to specific actions as a way of translating content for the audience. This translation relies on a number of things, including the experiences of the sender, the expectations of the receiver, and the goals associated with the communication.¹⁶



Several media organizations published side-by-side comparisons of the crowds at the first inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009 versus the crowd at President Donald Trump's inauguration.

Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo

Let's look at a simple example that might help this make more sense. Your university wants to buy five houses near campus so it can knock them down and build a science center for its students. The people who own those houses have lived there for decades and do not want to move. When the school initially pitched this idea, the state's environmental protection agency stated that the proposed new science building would create high levels of ecological damage to the area, with a limited benefit. Finally, the city's historical society noted that three of the five homes feature a form of architecture that is rare and irreplaceable if lost.

The various organizations involved could frame the situation in different ways.

- The university could say that the new science building offers opportunity for growth and educational advancement.
- The homeowners could frame it as the big, bad university pushing around a few elderly people who can't fight back.
- The environmental agency could frame this as an issue of growth versus environment, arguing a need for balance.
- The historical society could frame it as an issue of progress destroying history.

The local media could pick up on any one of these themes or any one of a dozen others in its portrayal of this situation. In short, the message that the audience receives will be in some way influenced by the frame itself. Therefore, the framing of the issue will go a long way toward how people will come to support or reject this proposal.

If you stop and think about it, we see this almost everywhere in media coverage, particularly when it comes to political issues or topics of social conflict. Immigrants trying to escape war and poverty by coming to the United States can be framed as a "flood of illegal immigrants"¹⁷ or as migrants who "bravely risk their lives and safety...sustained only by the hope that somehow they might find a better life."¹⁸ Gun laws can be framed as an issue of constitutional freedoms or as an issue of public safety. Even how we see sporting events can come down to framing: Did your team have a miraculous comeback, or did the other team choke at end of the game? It depends on how you want to see it and how people in the media portray it. This is why framing can be a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and personal ideology.

Spiral of Silence

If you walked into a classroom and found four or five of your classmates loudly discussing support for a political candidate whom you despise, would you enter the discussion and voice your opinion? What if it was twenty people? The whole class? If you can understand the tension between your desire to speak and your fear of being in the minority opinion, you will start to understand how the **spiral of silence** works.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann discussed this concept in detail back in 1974 to explain when people decide to voice their opinion on important topics.¹⁹ She believed that people generally fear social isolation, so they constantly try to remain aware of the majority's opinions. (Noelle-Neumann referred to this ability to feel the mood of the people around them as a “quasi-statistical sense” of public opinion.) The more people feel that their opinions on a given topic are in the majority, the more likely they are to speak out about it. Conversely, people who feel they are in the minority will resist the urge to express their opinions for fear of social rejection. This leads to fewer and fewer opinions' emerging, thus creating a spiral of silence toward one dominant view.

Media outlets play a crucial role in how people come to understand whether they are in the majority or minority on an issue. Polls can demonstrate that a topic is gaining ground as the dominant ideology. Stories about a topic can drive a point of view. Advertising that appears on billboards all over town or in social media feeds can reinforce the idea that everyone is talking about a certain topic in a certain way. This leads people who might normally express themselves to remain quiet.

Noelle-Neumann's theory has met with resistance over the years because researchers have had difficulty consistently replicating it. Even more, recent research has taken issue with how much influence the larger public has on people in this hypersegmented society. More often than not, other social groupings, such as close friends and family members, hold higher levels of sway over people than the general public.²⁰ Also, research into digital communication and social media has had a mixed bag of results, with some people feeling more empowered than in face-to-face communications, while others report a tendency toward self-censorship.²¹ However, the premise behind the theory, that of individuals' willingly censoring themselves in the face of withering public support, remains a vital one to understand in this digital media age.

Third-Person Effect

People generally understand that messages spread through the media can create influence, shape opinions, and drive actions. They also tend to think that those effects happen only to other people, not them. This overestimation of the impact media has on “those people” while feeling like the media can't influence “me personally” is the core of what is called the **third-person effect**.

W. Phillips Davison coined this term in a 1983 research article that laid out the basic tenets of the theory.²² He conducted four small experiments in which he analyzed the degree to which people felt that a message could influence them as opposed to the general public. His findings revealed that participants felt “others with ‘more impressionable minds’...will be affected” rather than themselves. People who have studied this phenomenon have found that it applies in everything from social media use²³ to the viewing of direct-to-consumer advertising.²⁴

A 2023 study revealed that heavy users of social media were not only likely to blame others for perpetuating fake news content but also more likely to overestimate their own abilities to separate fact from fiction on social media compared with people they saw as not being like them.²⁵ This supports findings in numerous other studies, including one by the Pew Research Center, which revealed that more than 80 percent of people felt confident in their ability to differentiate fake news from factual information. However, 64 percent of those surveyed stated that fake news causes “a great deal of confusion about basic facts of current issues and events.”²⁶ In other words, the participants feel that they personally could figure out what is and isn't true, even as most of them thought the general public is confused by these fake stories.

The third-person effect has been used as a rationale for censoring even real information.²⁷ For example, researchers have found that people who report larger gaps between the level of impact

messages have on themselves and others are more likely to support the censorship of television violence and pornography.²⁸ Their rationale is that it's clear that the general public (namely, you people out there who aren't me) will become violent porn addicts if "we" let them see this kind of material, and thus we have to put up some sort of barrier between it and them. It's basically for their own good.

Each of these theories falls into the category of what researchers call "effects theories," because they examine the effect that media use has on us. In Chapter 2, we will discuss a theory that looks at what we do with media itself and the ways in which all of these theories can help us be smarter and better media consumers.

MEDIA LITERACY MOMENT: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Media theories can appear to have little personal relevance when you read about them in a book like this. The benefit of understanding media theories is that you can better appreciate how you and others can be influenced by the content you consume. In addition, you can apply these theories to the behaviors you see in society and analyze your own behavior as well.

For example, during the coronavirus pandemic, some areas of the United States implemented mandates that required people to wear masks in certain environments. Some people viewed this as a necessary first step toward preventing the spread of the virus, while others saw it as a pointless infringement on their personal freedom.

If you read the news stories or watch television reports on this topic, you can see how framing theory applies here. News outlets that presented the story in a "personal freedom" frame were more likely to feature individual citizens who resented the mandates, providing personal anecdotes about problems with the masks. News outlets that presented it with a "health care" frame were more likely to interview scientists and doctors to present data and research findings to support their position. Understanding these frames can help you understand how people will perceive the issue and which sources they gravitate toward in this debate.

The third-person effect can also be applied to our everyday media experiences. People in a city or town often protest when someone wants to open a business there that has negative social connotations to it, such as a marijuana dispensary or a strip club. News stories will often quote people who say things like, "We can't have this around our children" or "We don't know what kinds of people will come here to frequent this establishment." Nobody ever tells a reporter, "If they open this strip club so close to my house, I'm probably going to spend my entire paycheck one dollar at a time on a dancer named Delight," or "With such easy access to weed, I'm probably going to get stoned more often than I should." In other words, the protesters believe they will be fine but others will sustain significant damage.

These theories can help you understand media in a more meaningful fashion as you closely study what media outlets do when they disseminate content, as well as how and why people react to information in the way that they do.

THE NEXT STEP: Find a news article or news broadcast story on a topic that matters to you. Review the theories listed in this section and find one you think you can best use to analyze that story. Explain how the story fits within the parameters of that theory as well as how understanding this theory helped you better assess the material. Write a short essay that sums up your findings.

FROM MEDIA CONSUMER TO MEDIA CREATOR

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 4: Understand the value of media in terms of employment opportunities.

The importance of understanding what we consume as media users and what it does to us matters a great deal in understanding the vital role this field plays in society. Understanding the history of communication, the theories that govern it, and the practical application of communication in the real

world all have value and merit. However, real people create the content you consume every day in a wide array of jobs that might be of interest to you, so it is important to give you a look at that element of mass communication as well.

The media field is not only rich with employment opportunities for writers, editors, photographers, videographers, and digital producers, but it is continuing to widen in terms of the variety of jobs that require the skills media professionals garner in their education. Being able to understand both the long-view aspects of the field as well as the opportunity for hands-on employment could give you a leg up in this field, if you are interested.

Let's take a look at a couple ways in which you could shift from media consumer to a media creator:

Traditional Media Jobs

Media fields offer graduates a wide array of potential career options, with many areas in those fields showing expansive growth. News fields are showing declines in traditional positions, like newspapers and broadcast television, but digital jobs that rely on skills common in those fields are continuing to grow. Filmmaking, sound engineering, and other technical fields in media are showing significant growth, as are the fields of advertising, public relations, and technical writing.

These jobs offer people the opportunity to produce content for a wide array of audiences through the use of their writing, audio, video, and social media skills. Table 1.5 offers a handy overview of some of the most common positions open today. We will dig into each of these areas, as well as a number of specific jobs within each of them, in later chapters of the book.

TABLE 1.5 ■ Expected Growth in Media Jobs Over the Next Decade.

Field	Expected Growth/Decline by 2029
Advertising and marketing	+6 percent
Public relations	+7 percent
Broadcast news	-11 percent
Print news	-7 percent
Digital news	+3 percent
Film making	+10 percent
Videography	+18 percent
Radio and sound engineering	+9 percent
Technical writing	+7 percent
Book publishing	+2 percent

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Valuable Skills for Other Careers

Even if you don't plan to spend your life as a film producer, a news reporter, or an advertising executive, the media-related tools you can pick up during your time in school will make a huge difference in becoming a viable member of the workforce. The rise in digital media, coupled with the growth of digital natives who are consuming it, makes it crucial for employers to seek people who can understand how media works.

For example, social media growth within the United States continues to explode and diversify, with more than 246 million users taking part at some level in 2023. That number represents approximately three-fourths of the country's population and a 20-million-user increase since 2017.²⁹ To connect with these people, employers are consistently seeking applicants who can use social media to connect with

potential audience members in an effective fashion. The ability to use these platforms, as well as video, audio, and photo tools for capturing and editing content, is at a premium across all industries.

Beyond technological acumen, employers are looking for people who can think critically and write well. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 73 percent of hiring managers want their employees to have strong writing skills. Experts note that the ability to write well demonstrates both effective communication abilities and clear-thinking skills. Other surveys of employers showed that critical thinking and problem solving were among other necessary skills for successful employees.³⁰ Education in this field can provide you with these attributes and make you a sought-after applicant in many fields.

CHAPTER REVIEW

- LO1 Describe the concept of media and the ways in which it developed over time.**
- Media encompasses the tools, platforms, and content we use to communicate thoughts, ideas, and information from one individual or group to another.
 - Oral (spoken), visual (images), and written (text) communication evolved over a long period of time as the need developed for new media to communicate more efficiently.
 - Mass communication began around 1450 with the development of the printing press and expanded with other technological advances that made it easier to copy and share media.
 - Digital media relies on technological devices and methods to send and receive information that can be used, modified, and reshared across multiple platforms.
 - Information primacy and platform neutrality helped give rise to the digital media era. The development and sharing of content took precedence over the physical platform that was used to deliver it.
- LO2 Illustrate the basic communication models and analyze the models' key components.**
- Most communication models contain a source, a message, a channel, and a receiver.
 - The linear communication model describes how information moves from Point A (sender) to Point B (receiver). An example of this would be a radio signal being broadcast from a station to a radio receiver in someone's car.
 - The interactive communication model focuses on how participants share roles as senders and receivers. This "turn-taking" approach includes the encoding of information by the sender and the decoding of information by the receiver. The receiver, in turn, provides feedback to the initial sender. An example of this would be a question-and-answer session between a professor and a student.
 - The transactional model serves as a less structured approach to communicating in which individuals share space within a communication zone. This model allows the participants to act as both senders and receivers at various points in the process without fixed roles. An example of this would be a group chat on your phone with your friends.
- LO3 Assess the role of each media theory in understanding mass media.**
- The magic-bullet theory suggests that mass media messages are essentially "shot" into the minds of consumers, who then act on those messages. This theory has fallen out of favor as being too simplistic and easily disprovable.
 - Gatekeeping examines the ways that media professionals determine what content reaches the public. Only about 10 percent of all potential content is published for public consumption. Each media's rationale for what should see the light of day helps explain how information moves within a media system.
 - Agenda-setting theory proposes that the media isn't good at telling people *what* to think, but it can be valuable in telling what people should think *about*.
 - Framing examines the way in which the media presents content for public discussion, placing emphasis on certain elements of a topic and deemphasizing others.

- The spiral-of-silence theory addresses why people choose to speak or not speak publicly about a specific topic. People who feel that their opinion is in the majority will speak out, while those in the minority will keep their thoughts to themselves.
- Third-person effect states that people drastically overestimate their own ability to resist the influence of mass communication messages compared with the general public.

LO4 Understand the value of media in terms of employment opportunities.

- Media can provide you with vast opportunities for employment, including radio, television, film, publishing, newspapers, magazines, and video games.
- Even people who lack an interest in media careers can benefit from improving their critical thinking and writing skills through the study of media.

KEY TERMS

Agenda setting	Originator
Decode	Oral communication
Digital media	Osgood-Schramm Model
Encode	Platform
Feedback	Platform neutrality
Framing	Receiver
Gatekeeping	Recipient
Hypodermic-needle model	Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver model
Interactive model	Spiral of silence
Limited-effects model	Source
Linear model	Third-person effect
Magic-bullet theory	Transactional model
Mass communication	Transmission model
Media	Visual communication
Medium	Written communication
Noise	

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you think of your media use, how much do you think of it in terms of the devices you use, and how much do you think of it as the content you consume? In other words, if you say, “I want to watch a TV show,” do you think of it being related to the television or other screen on which it is showing, or do you think of it as the story you are viewing, regardless of where you’re seeing it?
2. Given the many models outlined, do you think is important to understand how communication functions in order to be successful at it? Can people who don’t understand the components of these models or the way in which information flows between senders and receivers effectively communicate?
3. Which of the communication theories outlined in the chapter do you think makes the most sense in relation to your own use of media? Which elements are most pertinent to you, and which do you think are either outdated or problematic?
4. How varied is your media diet, and what do you think it does to your point of view on important issues? Do you think an improved effort toward media literacy will benefit you in any meaningful way? Why or why not?