



introduction for the student Communicating in a Media World

We live in a media world.

Consider Howard's day as a sophomore in college. He wakes in the morning to a clock radio playing the cheerful chatter of a host who gives frequent weather and traffic updates. After turning off the radio, he engages in a brief discussion with himself as to whether it's worth getting out of bed to face the day. Howard decides that he's unlikely to pass his courses if he sleeps in, so he gets out of bed. He then takes a bagel and a cup of coffee to his computer, where he logs on to the Internet to check his personalized news page while MTV's *Video Wake-Up* show plays on the television. He drives to campus with his roommate Zach, and on the way they discuss what they have to do during the day. Arriving on campus, Howard pulls out an MP3 player so he can listen to music he downloaded from the Web the night before as he walks to class. Waiting for class to start, Howard uses his cell phone to call several friends and make plans for dinner while he pages through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Before long it's time for lunch, during which Howard reads a few pages of the latest Stephen King novel. After class, Howard's off to dinner with his friends before they head to a movie. At the restaurant, one television is showing an ESPN basketball game while CNN is playing on another set with the sound turned off. After the movie, it's back home and off to sleep with some ambient music from Windham Hill playing softly in the background on the CD player.

From the moment he wakes up until he goes to sleep, Howard is almost constantly engaging in communication at one level or another, much of it supplied by the mass media. Is this example an exaggeration? Not really. A survey of 1,000 adults conducted by Fairfield Research in 1998 found that American adults spend an average of 3.7 hours a day watching broadcast or cable television, 1.6 hours watching movies or videos, 2.2 hours listening to the radio, 2.3 hours reading printed material, and 2 hours with interactive media. That adds up to nearly 12 hours of media consumption a day, or about 70 percent of a person's waking hours.¹ Keep in mind, however, that many

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people are multitaskers, watching television while online or listening to the radio while reading.

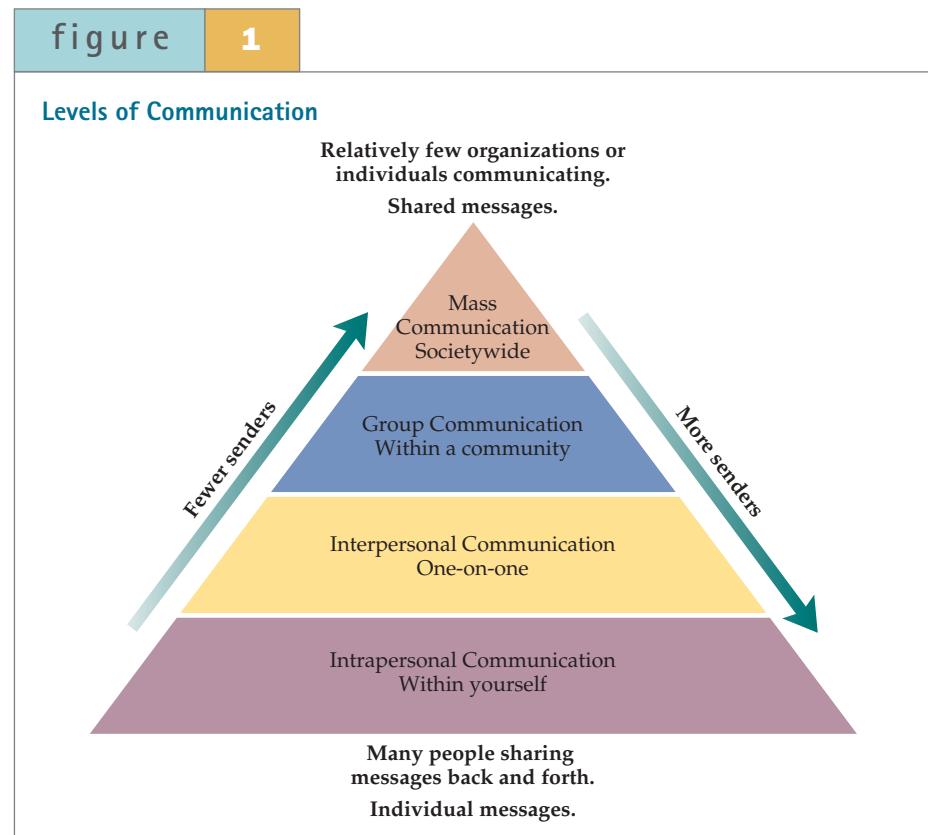
Although this book focuses on mass communication and the mass media, we cannot ignore the other levels of communication. Why? Because mass communication does not exist in isolation. It is one element within a broad communication environment that ranges from conversations within one's own mind all the way to messages broadcast to substantial portions of the world. In fact, many common misunderstandings about how the media affect all of us stem from the failure to see mass communication as just one part of our communication environment.

LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION

communication
Social interaction
through messages.

To begin with, we need to define what communication is. Media scholar George Gerbner provides a simple definition: **Communication** is "social interaction through messages."² Communication is how we interact with our entire world, whether it be through spoken words, written words, gestures, music, paintings, photographs, or dance. The important point is that communication is a *process*, an interaction that allows individuals, groups, and institutions to share ideas.

Media scholar and theorist Denis McQuail suggests that the various levels of communication can be viewed as a pyramid with a large base, in which many people are sharing messages back and forth with many people, building up to a peak of mass communication, at which a relatively small number of organizations or individuals are actually engaging in the communication (see Figure 1).³



Intrapersonal Communication

Communication at its most basic level is **intrapersonal communication**, which means communication within the self. This is how we think, how we assign meaning to all the messages and events that surround our lives.⁴ It ranges from the simple act of smiling in response to the smell of a favorite food coming from the kitchen to the complex reaction one might make to an unexpected proposal of marriage. Feedback, or response from the person receiving the message, is constant because we are always reflecting on what we have done and how we will react. When Howard was debating with himself as to whether he should get out of bed, he was engaging in intrapersonal communication.

intrapersonal communication

Communication within the self.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is how we communicate one-on-one; it is “the intentional or accidental transmission of information through verbal or nonverbal message systems to another human being.”⁵ It can take the form of a conversation with a friend or of a hug that tells your mother you love her. Like communication with the self, interpersonal communication is continual when others are around because we constantly send out messages, even if they consist of nothing more than body language indicating that we want to be left alone.

Interpersonal communication provides many opportunities for feedback. Your friend nods, raises an eyebrow, touches you on the arm, or simply answers. Not all interpersonal communication is done face-to-face, however. A telephone conversation, an instant message, an e-mail, even a greeting card can be interpersonal communication, though at a somewhat greater emotional distance than in a face-to-face conversation. When Howard was talking with his roommate in the car, making a phone call, or sending e-mail, he was engaging in interpersonal communication.

interpersonal communication

The intentional or accidental transmission of information through verbal or non-verbal message systems to another human being.

Group Communication

With **group communication** we have reached a level of unequal communication in which one person is communicating with an audience of two or more people. Group communication often has a leader and is more public than interpersonal communication. In a small group—say, a family at the dinner table or a coach with a basketball team—each individual has an opportunity to respond to the leader and is likely to do so. In a large group—like a 200-student lecture section of a university class—each individual still has an opportunity to respond but is unlikely to do so. There are also situations that test the boundaries of group communication, such as a rock concert at a stadium. With the amplifiers and multiple video screens, there is a high level of communication technology and limited possibilities for audience members to provide direct feedback to the performers, but there is still interaction between the performer and the audience. Howard engaged in group communication with his friends at dinner and by participating in his classes.

group communication

A level of unequal communication in which one person is communicating with an audience of two or more people.

Mass Communication

Mass communication is a societywide communication process in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large mixed audience, most of whose members are not known to the sender. This is

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fundamentally different from the forms of communication described previously because the sender is separated in space, and possibly in time, from the receiver. Also, the audience is not really known to the communicator. When a communicator appears on television or writes an article for a newspaper, he or she doesn't know who will be listening or reading. What is more, the audience is a mixture of many types of people. It might contain a young man in prison, an old woman in a nursing home, a child eating her Cheerios for breakfast, or Howard getting ready to go to school. The message is communicated to all these people and to thousands or millions of others.⁶

Traditionally, mass communication has allowed only limited opportunities for feedback because the channels of communication are largely one-way—although, as we will see, the opportunities for feedback are expanding rapidly with the development of interactive communication networks. Howard has consumed a wide range of mass communication during his day, including the Web pages he viewed, the music he listened to, the book he read, the television he half-watched, and the movie he attended.

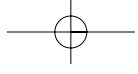
A Mix of Levels

The distinctions among the various levels of communication are useful, but don't assume that every instance of communication can automatically be placed in one category or another. In reality, there are frequent crossovers in the levels of communication. Consider the Internet: You can share information with a friend via e-mail. Through a Web-based journal, you can share your thoughts and interact with friends. With a listserv, an employer can communicate with employees throughout the world. And through websites and webcasts, messages can go out to the entire world. The same is true of a newspaper, in which a classified ad can carry a proposal of marriage, a notice of a group meeting, or a political manifesto. When Howard went to dinner with friends, they cheered when the basketball game being shown on the television got exciting and also talked about the game with each other, thus engaging in mass and group communication at the same time.

The purpose of this textbook is to help you better understand mass communication and the mass media. In the 15 chapters of this book we will look at

- The institutions that make up the media and how they function in our society.
- Who owns and controls the media business.
- The media themselves, including books, magazines, newspapers, radio, recorded music, movies, television, and the Internet.
- The industries that support the media, including advertising and public relations.
- The laws and ethics that regulate and control the media.
- The role of the media in the political system, both in the United States and in the rest of the world.

By the time you are finished, you will better understand what the media are, why they function as they do, and what roles they play in your life.



Key Terms

communication 2
intrapersonal communication 3
interpersonal communication 3

group communication 3
mass communication 3

