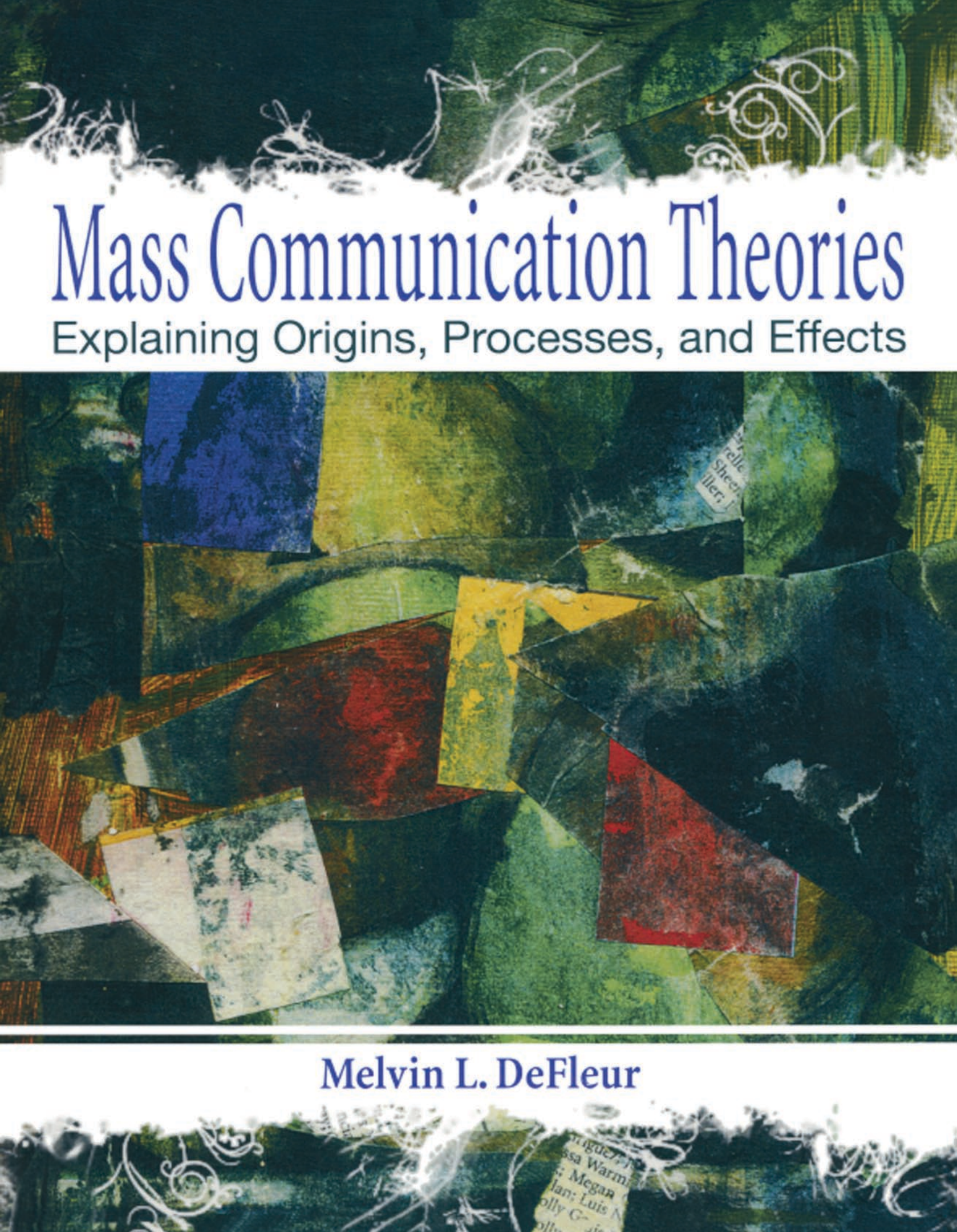


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# Mass Communication Theories

Explaining Origins, Processes, and Effects

Melvin L. DeFleur

# MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

EXPLAINING ORIGINS, PROCESSES, AND EFFECTS

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EXPLAINING ORIGINS, PROCESSES, AND EFFECTS

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# FOREWORD

## TO STUDENTS USING THIS BOOK

This book has four objectives: (1) It will set forth the background of each theory, explaining where it came from; (2) It will discuss and clarify the basic ideas of each of the theories presented; (3) It will describe and explain four new theories that have been developed specifically for this book; And (4) it will provide a “formalization” of each of the theories presented as a set of simplified statements of their basic assumptions and predictions.

Thus, the first objective is to *explain for you the origins* of each of the various theories discussed in the included chapters. As will be made clear in the text, some theories emerged from specific research studies that encouraged their authors to develop a new explanation of the processes or the effects of the mass media that were available at the time. The nature of those founding studies will be explained in detail in each such case.

Other theories included in the book were based on conceptions and beliefs about *the nature of the American society*—the way in which it is organized and the manner in which people relate to and communicate with each other. These conceptions have changed over time with the continuing development of the social sciences. At earlier times such conceptions included the belief that people in modern societies were made up of a mix of unlike people—that is, people who had few ties to each other. Thus, it was thought that they lacked interpersonal channels of communication and were essentially a “lonely crowd” of unlike individuals. This conception implied that each individual could be influenced in similar and powerful ways by the existing mass media. Later, as the social and behavioral sciences developed, research in those fields showed that this conception was naive. It became clear that people in modern societies communicated regularly and interpersonally with friends, neighbors, and relatives. That process limited the influence of the media. In other words, these different interpretations of society at various points in history influenced thinking about the process and effects of mass communication. These issues will be made clear in the chapters that follow.

Previous scholarly understanding about the *nature of human psychological organization and cognitive functioning* also influenced the development of several mass communication theories discussed in the text. Such psychological issues as the nature of perception, as well as the processes of individual learning and remembering played a part in the ways in which scholars viewed the nature and influences of mass communications. These issues will also be clarified.

In more recent times, a (relatively) new academic discipline has emerged. The field of media communication is composed of scholars who specialize in the study of the mass media that exist today—print, broadcasting, film, and digital systems. These scholars have made profound contributions to our current understanding of mass communication. Every year, they continue to provide a substantial flow of research findings concerning how the media function, the nature of their audiences and the influences that mass communications have on individuals, their societies, and their cultures. The background understandings about human nature have influenced the theories that contemporary media scholars have produced and that are discussed in the chapters that follow.

The second objective of the book is to clarify for you in detail *the basic ideas of each of the theories discussed*. These are complex issues, and the aim of the book is to make each theory understandable without making use of elaborate or technical jargon. The author hopes that the ways in which they have been set forth will enable each student to grasp where the theory came from, what issues it addresses, and how it explains some process or effect of the various media to which it applies.

The third objective is to describe and explain *the basic ideas of each of the theories discussed*. Obviously, since they are new, these have yet to be tested by media scholars. They are offered, however, in an effort to advance knowledge about the processes and effects of mass communication. Presumably, they will be studied in relevant future research efforts to determine if they have validity. These theories are discussed in the following chapters: [Chapter 15](#), “Media Information Utility Theory”, which discusses the ways in which the media offer practical information to their audiences—such as where to locate an apartment to rent, where to buy a car, where needed products are on sale, and so on. [Chapter 17](#), “Social Expectations Theory,”

explains how audiences can learn and understand what they or other participants will be expected to do in many situations. For example, here they can learn the roles and procedures followed in a criminal court trial, even though they have never personally been involved in such an event. [Chapter 20](#), “The Creeping Cycle of Desensitization Theory,” explains how the mass media, constantly under pressure to increase the size of their audiences so as to be profitable, press forward the boundaries of social acceptability of violence and sexual depictions, which at first may arouse audience criticism but which eventually come to be accepted. Then they press the boundaries even further, and the cycle goes on.

A fourth objective is to set forth *a set of interrelated propositions*. These simplified statements of the basic assumptions and predictions of each of the theories will be found at the end of each corresponding chapter. Not only does the presentation of theories in this manner help clarify them, but it also aims to “formalize” them in a manner similar to how theories are presented in other scientific disciplines. As research continues to accumulate in mass communication studies, aimed at testing these various theories, some of these formalized versions will undoubtedly need to be revised.

In some cases, a limited number of the studies aimed at testing or verifying a particular theory in the book will be discussed. New studies related to the assessment of specific mass communication theories are published regularly by media researchers and scholars—and they accumulate rapidly month by month. If an attempt were made in this type of book to present a full and up-to-date summary of what these studies have shown, it would be outdated and incomplete within a very short time thus a limited selection is provided for student use and application.

The best source for understanding what contemporary media scholars have found when assessing these theories by conducting mass communication research are the various refereed journals in which mass communication scholars regularly publish their results. Your instructor or your librarian can provide guidance concerning the nature and focus of these journals and how to access them in your local library.

As a final note, it will be evident that the author chose not to discuss the Internet or the World Wide Web as “mass media.” These technologies are obviously large-scale and complex systems by which large numbers of people communicate. The same can be said of the U.S. mail, large audiences to cultural events, the telephone, or other forms of communication by which large numbers of people communicate. However, such systems do not meet the criteria by which “mass communication” is defined. Essentially, the mass media in the U.S. are private enterprises that are operated for profit. Their content is developed and transmitted by professional communicators using print, broadcasting, and film while other forms of communication, such as email, telephone conversations, and the exchange of letters, are used mainly by individuals communicating with other persons. In that sense they are clearly different from the traditional media. In other words, sheer numbers is not the essential feature that defines mass communication. A formal definition of “mass communication” is provided in [Chapter 2](#).

Finally, I truly enjoyed writing this book. It was such a pleasure to prepare what I think will provide useful knowledge for students who take a course in mass communication theory. I would like to thank the reviewers who helped with the development of this project including, Eric A. Abbott, Idaho State University; Michael W. Barberich, University at Albany, SUNY; Frederick W. Busselle, Washington State University; Glenn Cummins, Texas Tech University; Barna W. Donovan, St. Peter's College; George A. Gladney, University of Wyoming; Beverly Kelley, California Lutheran University; Kevin C. Lee, Western Carolina University; Mark A. Nordstrom, Lincoln University; Elizabeth M. Perse, University of Delaware; Patricia Prijatel, Drake University; Robert Scott, Monmouth University; Tracy R. Worrell, Emerson College. I hope that the book serves you well.

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# MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

EXPLAINING ORIGINS, PROCESSES, AND EFFECTS

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# CHAPTER 1

## Shaping the American Mass Media: A Brief Overview

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To understand the origins of both our contemporary mass media as well as the theories that explain their processes and their influences on their audiences, it is necessary to look back at *where they came from and how they developed*. It does not take any great flight of imagination to realize that the mass communication system we have today is quite different from what we have had in the past. Similarly, it is obvious that our system will continue to develop, and what we have in the future will not be the same as what we now have. For that reason, we begin with a historical overview of how our mass communication system developed within an ever-changing society to produce what we have today.

The American society essentially began in September of 1620, when 101 passengers, along with 48 crew members and a number of chickens and pigs, left Plymouth, England, on the *Mayflower*. Nearly two months later, they landed on Cape Cod, where they spent another eight weeks before moving to the mainland. There they quickly laid out a road up from the shore and began constructing shelters. Within two years they had a small village of simple homes that they named New Plymouth. The houses they built were small and compactly arranged close together on each side of the road, each with its own garden plot.

The people in the new community worked hard all day, tending gardens and animals, but had very little to do after sunset, other than talk with their families and friends. There were religious services on the Sabbath and daily family prayers, but the strict codes of the Pilgrims did not permit frivolous activities. Aside from the family Bible, there was nothing to read in most of the houses. Even if there had been, the majority could neither read nor write. Even for the few who could, it was difficult. After dark, tallow candles, crude lamps, and the fireplace provided barely enough light to move around inside. Thus, by comparison with today, the citizens of New Plymouth led a life almost free of any form of communication other than talking.<sup>1</sup>

The contrast between the availability of mass communications to the people of New Plymouth in the early 1600s and their counterparts in any community in the United States in the 2000s is startling, to say the least. Today, any of us can select from an almost bewildering set of choices among media. Information and news, entertainment, and other content can be delivered instantly to homes via copper wire, optic cable, microwaves, and even satellite transmissions from space. A typical citizen has available, twenty-four hours a day, virtually any form of communication content from gangsta rap and spectator sports to classical music and serious political analysis. He or she can read a book or a magazine, peruse the newspaper, listen to the radio, go to the movies, view a rented film on the home DVD player, check out a sitcom or game show on television, view TV on a cell phone, play games on a computer, log on to the Internet, or exchange text messages with strangers from all parts of the world. Thus, an almost incredible spectrum of mass communication content is instantly available from intensely competing media.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

The American system of mass communication today—its media, those who pay its costs, and the audiences it serves—are embedded in a larger context. They are part of the American society as a whole. That society, as is perfectly obvious, has constantly *undergone change*. Nowhere is this change more obvious and visible than in the case of our means of communicating. As our opening section indicated, the earliest English colonists in our New World society had virtually nothing we would classify as mass communication. In contrast, today we live in a sea of mediated messages.

This incredible change from *what we were* to *what we are* raises a critical question for anyone wanting to understand our contemporary system of mass communications in the United States: *How did we get here from there?* That is, why do we have the kind of mass communication systems that we do—the most complex in the world? What social and cultural factors within the society shaped their nature? How did they come to be based on such market concepts as *free enterprise*, *competition*, the *profit motive*, and *private ownership*? Moreover, why is it that our government has such *limited control* over the content of the media? Other societies do not have identical mass communication systems. Some are similar, but many are very different indeed.

The answer, of course, is that each society's mass communication system is a *product of its history* and has been *shaped by the culture* developed by its people over many generations. To be sure, each system at any point in time has been influenced in important ways by existing *technologies*. However, these technologies are essentially the *same* from one society to the next. For example, printing presses or television sets operating in, say, China, Cuba, Iceland, Iran, or the United States all use the similar physical principles. The *differences* between those mass media systems and the one in the United States have come about because each nation has developed uses and controls over the process of mass communication in different ways—within its own set of values, political system, economic institution, and other cultural factors. Therefore, to gain a clear understanding of a specific society's media system, just knowing the technology is not enough. It is essential to understand the social, political, economic, and cultural context within which each nation's media developed and now functions.

Essentially, the critical factors that have most influenced the media in the United States have been the country's *basic cultural values*. It is these values that have shaped its *political* and *economic* systems along with its *moral norms* and *laws*. These values are products of our past, and they continue to define our contemporary way of life—including the nature of our mass communication system. In the future these values will continue to determine the characteristics of the system's content, controls, operations, patterns of use, and influences on audiences. For that reason it is essential to understand them, including where they came from. Our system

of mass communication will influence your work, your leisure, your ideas, and even your children in the decades ahead.

The basic values of a society are, in turn, a product of its collective historical experience. Clearly, the events of our past, such as the founding of the original colonies, the American Revolution, expansion of the frontier, the Industrial Revolution, population growth, complex patterns of immigration, various wars, legislation, and the development of technology have all had significant influences on each new medium as it was introduced and widely adopted. In a very real sense, then, the development of mass communication in the U.S. has been profoundly influenced by what took place in the American society in years past.

But there is another side to the coin. While the mass media in the United States have been shaped by social and cultural factors, they have, in turn, had a powerful influence on all of us, both individually and socially. There is little doubt that the numbers of people who receive, and are influenced in some way by, mass-communicated information on a daily basis are simply staggering. In fact, the recipients and users of media-provided information include virtually every American, excluding only those too young, too old, or too ill to attend. Their purchasing decisions are shaped in significant ways by a vast advertising industry that supports the media financially. Those decisions, in turn, shape what the manufacturing and service industries can successfully produce and market. In a very real sense, then, the work that Americans perform and the health of their economy are intimately linked to mass communications. Moreover, most forms of recreation enjoyed by citizens are linked to print, film, broadcasting, or computer media in some way. The same is true of political participation. Patterns of voting are shaped to a considerable degree by mass-communicated news and mediated political campaigns. Therefore, the relationship between media and society is a very complex and reciprocal one.

The bottom line is that understanding our contemporary mass media, and how they came to be shaped into their present form, is no idle academic enterprise. It is a key to understanding life in our time and how it will undoubtedly be shaped in the future. Against the background provided by the present chapter, additional ones will provide summaries of various theories that have been advanced to explain their *origins, as well as the processes and effects of mass communications as they influence both individuals and society*. Without first understanding this background, however, there is no way in which their nature can truly be appreciated.

The purpose of the remainder of the present chapter, then, is to summarize very briefly, and in a general way, the circumstances that shaped our mass communication system into its present form during a span of nearly four hundred years. The chapter not only provides an answer to the question of *how we got here from there*, but also it provides a foundation for understanding basic aspects of the structure and functioning of our contemporary mass media today and how they are likely to develop in the future. Thus, the overview that follows focuses less on specific media than on features of the American experience that have had consequences for our entire media system. The more detailed events and circumstances that shaped each specific medium will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

## THE LEGACY OF THE EARLY PERIOD: THE 1600S

Few media scholars write about the influence of the earliest settlements in North America on our mass communication systems today. In many ways that connection may seem remote. Nevertheless, there is a relationship between the shared values and beliefs that developed in the earliest American colonies and the nature of our contemporary mass communication system. The unique lifestyle that quickly came to characterize those early communities provided the beginnings of the *general American culture* that we know now. It was within the limits of that culture, as it was developed over succeeding generations, that our present mass media came into existence. Therefore, it is important to understand the origins of the central features of American shared beliefs and values that are relevant to understanding how our modern mass communications systems developed.

The first task in looking briefly at the American colonial experience is to understand the underlying values of our *economic system*. The second will be to examine the *political values* that came to characterize Americans as they moved toward a separation from England. A third is to understand the very early role played by newspapers and other forms of print in the *process of achieving independence*.

### Mercantilism: The Importance of Private Enterprise

The early 1600s were an age of *mercantilism*—a concept that is still with us. It is based on the idea of *trade*—the ancient idea of buying and selling goods and products to make a profit. A related idea is *industrialization*—using machines to *produce* goods to sell. That would come later, beginning about the end of the 1700s. More recently, providing *services for fees* has also become increasingly important. Together they are the basis of modern *capitalism*. Thus, capitalism refers to an economic system designed to make profits for those who invest in the means by which goods and services are produced and distributed—or by which some resource is “exploited” (used to produce products to sell).

While traders have been a part of human life for many centuries, the era of mercantilism began to expand and mature about the time of Columbus. European merchants had begun routinely to send ships to foreign lands (mainly India and China) to buy goods that they could sell for a profit when they returned. They bought products that were in high demand, such as spices and silk, that they could easily sell to European markets. Thus, exploration of routes to places where such goods could be bought was critical. Thus, the profit motive was a major factor that motivated Columbus and other early explorers to set sail for the New World.

During the 1600s, after sea routes to the New World were better understood, came an *era of colonization* of the Americas by a number of European nations. The initial purpose of these settlements was (again) to make profits for those who bankrolled each project. A secondary purpose was to establish global political claims by the monarchies of the time. In North America these were mainly the English, the French, and the Dutch.

At first, the English, like the Spanish farther South, sought *gold*. They paid lip service to converting the Indians to Christianity. However, the English were about a century late in getting established in the Americas. The only area left that was open to them for settlement was along the Atlantic seaboard north of St. Augustine (in Florida) and to the south of what is now Newfoundland. It soon became apparent that there was little gold to be had in that part of the New World, so investors had to try to make their profits in other ways.

The first successful English settlement in the New World was in Bermuda. It was followed in 1607 by a colony at Jamestown, in what is now Virginia. A third was the one established in 1620 at New Plymouth, in what later became Massachusetts. Within a decade, a number of others were authorized and settled in both Massachusetts and Maryland. By the middle of the 1600s, English settlements were in place all up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Thus, by the end of the seventeenth century, with substantial immigration from England, these became the thirteen original colonies.

As noted, each of the thirteen English colonies started as a commercial undertaking. Groups of “merchant adventurers” sold shares in the enterprise and recruited people to establish a new “plantation.” They obtained a charter from a supervising government agency to locate a community in a particular area approved by the Crown. The goal of such a settlement (“plantation”) was to exploit some sort of local resource in order to ship products back to England to be sold at a profit. These commodities could be crops, such as tobacco or grain, or whatever was available. In more northern areas, dried and salted fish were particularly profitable. Thus, the practice of risking capital in private enterprises for potential gain was very much a part of our cultural inheritance from England.

Today, we live in a society characterized by *controlled capitalism*. It is not the totally unfettered, sink-or-swim capitalism first described in 1776 by Adam Smith in his famous book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. It has long been one in which both local and national governments—whether British or American—have played parts in regulating economic activities. An important lesson is that, from the very beginning, economic considerations have been a primary factor in the movement of populations from the old world to the new. Another important lesson is that the main values underlying our contemporary American economic system began to be set into place with the very first settlements in our part of the New World.

### A Commitment to Local and Autonomous Government

Shifting from economic considerations to political factors, it is important to note that a critical early development that would influence our media was the establishment of *local systems of laws* to provide stable government within each new plantation. It is not difficult to see this situation as laying the foundation for resentment of outside controls. That would develop at a later

date—resentment of the faraway government of England. For example, the *Mayflower* colonists designed their own system of local self-government even before they sighted land. They were supposed to have landed much farther south and be bound by the prior agreements of the Virginia colony. However, during their voyage, ocean currents swept them north to Cape Cod. To avoid anarchy, they decided to design their own rules for living together, and they drafted the *Mayflower Compact* while still at sea. It set forth rules for orderly collective living.

As early as 1639, three small communities in Massachusetts banded together and prepared a document of *Fundamental Orders*, which served as a constitution for a *Public State or Commonwealth*.<sup>2</sup> It made no reference to England whatsoever, and it incorporated almost all of the provisions that would eventually become part of the U.S. Constitution. Thus, the idea of local autonomy, and freedom from big government that was far away, became a part of the colonial culture very early. Later, that idea would play a critical role in shaping our nation's press.

## Separating Church and State

While the plantations were funded and organized for a return on investment, those that were initially established in the Massachusetts area had a second important purpose for their members. Those who came to New Plymouth on the *Mayflower* called themselves “Pilgrims”—which even today means “people who journey to alien lands in search of truth.” They saw themselves as seeking *religious truth*. From the standpoint of the Crown, however, they were little more than troublesome religious radicals. The Crown saw them as “separatists” who had split from the official (Anglican) Church of England. Like many religious sects today, the Pilgrims had rejected the established Church in favor of their own sectarian beliefs. Indeed, because of religious persecution in England, they had fled to Holland earlier and then on to the New World. Many in England said “good riddance.”

Others, who were also religious dissidents, but still living in England, soon followed to establish a second settlement—the Massachusetts Bay Colony (now Boston). These settlers believed themselves to be “Puritans” because they were intent upon “purifying” the beliefs of the Anglican Church. A main point is that these early New England colonists were determined to be free from religious interference by the state. This concept—the separation of church and state—of course prevailed through subsequent generations and became a critical part of the political culture of the new nation that would emerge.

## Individualism: The Frontier Mentality

Other factors shaped the emerging fundamental cultural values of the colonists. For one thing, they were by no means environmentalists! In front of them was a sea rich with resources and at their backs was a vast continent with unlimited land, forests, minerals, and wild animals. Almost immediately they set about to exploit those assets. They set up fishing and whaling industries. Acre by acre they hacked their way into the forests. They killed the deer and sent the skins to England, along with the furs of other animals that they could trap or obtain in trade from Native Americans. They mined small deposits of iron for export. They burned down the trees to clear fields on which to grow crops. When these lands were exhausted, they simply moved farther inland. It was an economy of exploitation.

More and more people arrived from England. Indeed, the population doubled every generation right up until the time of the American Revolution. As this happened, the pace of destructive activities increased. By the time the United States was established as a new nation with its own Constitution (1787), the deer, furs, and fish from the rivers and streams were greatly diminished in most of the areas east of the Mississippi. As the population had moved westward, the land was denuded. By the mid-1800s, just before the Civil War, there was little virgin forest left from the Atlantic clear to the Missouri River.

This economic system, based on exploitable resources, land exhaustion, and relocation, produced a set of shared cultural beliefs that has often been called a *frontier mentality*. It was a set of shared beliefs that saw “rugged individuals” pitted against nature—with a justifiable right to subjugate the environment for their own uses. Such individuals not only saw no need for controls by a powerful government, but also they resented attempts by rulers far away to regulate any aspect of their lives. In other societies, the activities of the individual remained under collective control. But in the emerging America, an emphasis on *individuality*, *personal responsibility*, and *freedom from government interference* became an important part of the national culture from the

beginning. Such values continue to shape the thinking of many Americans, and they clearly played a part in shaping our contemporary mass communication system as it developed.

Another feature of life in the American colonies was that it lacked the aristocratic system that prevailed in Europe. That was particularly true in the North. In the southern colonies, large land holdings, along with abundant cheap labor, were needed by plantation owners to grow such crops as rice, cotton, and tobacco. Slaves provided the agricultural labor in such settings and a kind of unofficial aristocracy developed based on ownership of both land and slaves. Even so, the majority of the population in southern colonies were poor subsistence farmers who worked the land themselves. In New England, and later elsewhere, most people established small farms or ranches and worked them as a family team.

Generally, then, in the New World, there was more democracy and fewer social distinctions between haves and have nots. There were social class levels, of course, but the rigid and inherited class structure that characterized England never took root in the colonies. This yielded the shared belief that each citizen was just as good as the next—except for black people—and each should have the same rights as the next. These beliefs provided a strong foundation for a sense of *equality* that would shape the nation's political values during the centuries ahead.

### Overview of the Influences of the Early Period

From the above, the influences from the 1600s that would eventually shape our contemporary mass media can be summarized briefly: The conditions of life that the colonists established in the New World were not the same as those that prevailed in the mother country. They brought with them an economic structure that emphasized private ownership, profits, and an almost complete dependence on extracting natural resources. Eventually, this would produce a kind of frontier mentality emphasizing rugged individualism and a distaste for government interference. Life in the new settlements was much less bound by class and social distinctions than was the case in England, leading to greater feelings of political equality. Moreover, there were far more opportunities for poor people to move up the social ladder—mainly by acquiring land. The early settlers placed great importance on autonomous local government, as opposed to rule by powerful people far away. These were important foundations for a change from *monarchy* to *democracy*. Those in the New England area, in particular, insisted on a total separation between church and state, because religion, and the right to worship in their own way, was an important part of their lives.

In many ways, these emphases from the period of early settlement still define some of the most basic values of Americans. We continue to believe in the importance of individual responsibility, political equality, limited government, and local autonomy. Americans still approve of private ownership, the legitimacy of a pursuit of profits, and a separation between government and religion. It was on this cultural foundation that the mass communication system of the nation would eventually develop, and it continues to shape its contemporary nature in important ways.

### INFLUENCES OF THE LATER COLONIAL ERA: THE 1700S

Between the end of the 1600s and the late 1700s, the settlements and inhabited areas along the eastern seaboard developed rapidly into thirteen prosperous and successful English colonies with specific geographical boundaries. While there were many similarities among the colonies in their separate governments, there was no overall federation—no central assembly or national legislature that brought the separate colonies together into a single political system. That concept would develop during the 1700s.

Basically, during the 1700s, each colony was politically controlled by the English king and Parliament through a governor. This administrator was sometimes locally elected but always had to be confirmed by the king. Each colony had a local legislative body whose members were chosen by the “freemen.” Local towns (townships) elected “selectmen”—which they still do today in many communities in New England. Those allowed to vote were white male property owners. In some cases, they also had to be of the right religion. Those who were elected sometimes appointed other officials, such as assistants to the governor as well as judges. Thus, the basic three-part form of government, *executive*, *legislative*, and *judicial*, was in some respects already a familiar idea by the time that a refined version would be built into the U. S. Constitution of 1787.

By the mid-1700s, the American colonies had become of critical economic importance to England. The British Empire was being established all over the world, and the pattern was much

the same in each colonial area. Each was required to send back to England whatever products they could produce for their merchants to sell. In return, English craftsmen and merchants supplied the colonies with processed goods, such as cloth, shoes, tools, or whatever was being produced in the home country. For many years it was a system within which each party prospered. The abundant resources of the American colonies yielded wealth for many locals, while the processed goods from England sold into the colonial market created wealth for the English entrepreneurs. In addition, the colonies benefitted because the powerful English navy and armed forces kept out potential invaders.

### Deep Distrust of Big Government

As the 1700s wore on, however, many dissatisfactions with the system developed. Great Britain continued rigidly to control the pattern of commerce between its colonies and the homeland. By the 1760s, a number of serious problems became evident. For one thing, there was a substantial *negative balance of trade* between England and the colonies. In some ways it was just like our current relationship with countries like Japan and China. The colonists bought goods from England, costing far more in total value than what was earned from the products they sold to the mother country. This created a lopsided flow of money from the colonies to England. This began to produce economic difficulties and great resentment in the colonies. However, England would not change the rules. It came to be widely believed among the colonists that the far-distant government in London was not sensitive to their needs, was exploiting them economically, and was ruling them with a heavy hand. A particularly sensitive issue was “representation.” There were no elected representatives from the colonies in the English Parliament.

### Growing Dissatisfaction with England's Controls

As dissatisfaction grew, a number of men joined political groups with names like the Sons of Liberty, or quasi-military militia such as the Minute Men (who pledged to be ready to fight with a minute's notice). These militias thought of themselves as patriots and felt that some day it might be necessary to resist the English government by force of arms. They stockpiled arms and ammunition—which was against the law. Their members met regularly in taverns and other places to discuss ways to resist the government, and they developed networks of spies and messengers to keep themselves informed about the activities of the British armed forces.

The single most galling issue was *taxes*. England had been almost constantly at war with other European countries—especially with France. These protracted conflicts drained the English treasury, and great debts piled up. Ways had to be found to pay them off. King George and the English Parliament decided that money should be raised by taxing the people in the American colonies. After all, they had protected the colonies for many decades. Thus, a Stamp Act was passed in 1765, requiring a small fee (about a nickel in current terms) for a little imprinted stamp on every official document produced in the colonies. The colonials were outraged, not so much by the size of the fee, but by the principle. It was “taxation without representation.” Because of the outcry, the Stamp Act was repealed by the British a year later.

Meanwhile, in 1765 the first step was taken that would lead to a *federation of colonies*. Nine colonies sent representatives to the American Union—a group that met in New York. There the participants drew up resolutions concerning such issues as *inalienable rights*, *personal liberties*, and *freedom from taxation* (by Britain) without having elected representatives in Parliament. The Parliament back in England, however, insisted that *it* was in total control and then went on to impose a new series of *import taxes* on the colonies. One such tax was levied on *tea*. Hotheads in the colonies—especially in Boston—saw these impositions as a total outrage (again, taxation without representation). Dressed like Native Americans, a small band boarded and burned several ships and threw 26,000 pounds of tea packaged in lead boxes into the bay.

By 1774, a group of self-appointed colonial leaders would form the Continental Congress. That group would unite and guide the colonies through the eight years of war that would soon start. On July 4, 1776, that Congress formally and publically announced political separation from England with the Declaration of Independence. It was a critical step, and the newspapers of the time played a key role in making the document known to the public.

## The Role of Newspapers in the Independence Movement

The importance of these various developments for shaping our current media system was that *distrust of powerful government* became an important element in shaping the role of the press in the American society. It laid the foundation for the role of contemporary journalists as the “watchdogs” of society—calling attention to the transgressions of those in positions of power. Many of the early newspapers publishers risked going to jail by speaking out against the Crown. As England tightened its grip to make sure that the colonies remained under its control, a number of very able writers prepared public statements advocating separation from England, and they did go to jail! It is important to understand that the colonial press became the medium that carried those messages to an increasingly enthusiastic audience. Using not only newspapers but also other printed tracts and pamphlets, those who spoke out strongly made a convincing case for *total independence* from England. Their essays and other appeals were widely read. These media played an important part in shaping the thinking of those who saw English rule as repressive. The print media of the time, then, *were an important factor* in shaping the popular support for political separation from the mother country.

## Overview of Influences of the Colonial Era

In summary, the colonial period, before the time of the Revolution, saw the beginnings of the American press. A number of important traditions and features that are retained today, not only by newspapers but also by later media, were established during the period. Clearly, newspapers helped shape and clarify opinion during the time when the colonies were moving toward separation from England. Many provided the means by which important views on various sides of the issue were made available to the population.

Another important tradition was defining the role of the press as the “watchdog” of society. Those who published newspapers saw themselves as totally independent of, and even antagonistic to, government. They saw their mission as keeping an eye on politicians and officials, and their policies, to make sure that power was not being misused. When such abuses were detected, it was the duty of the newspaper, according to this conception, to call public attention to what was going on. Through such disclosures, it was believed, government excesses could be held in check. Today, *investigative journalism*—which is now an important feature not only of newspapers but also of other media—remains a strong tradition in the American media system.

Newspapers also provided a great deal of useful information of a nonpolitical nature. They published notices of ship arrivals, accounts of events that had occurred in their area, and even some foreign news. This was the beginning of the critical *information function* that the press (all news media) serves today. During the 1700s, newspapers even provided a certain amount of lighter fare. Often, they contained poems, essays on manners, and other material that was neither news nor political commentary. While these efforts were limited, they foreshadowed the *entertainment function* of the media that has also become a central feature today.

Overall, then, the 1700s saw not only the remarkable American Revolution and the establishment of the United States as a new and independent nation but also the beginnings of a mass communication system that was a product of the emerging American culture. These features of the mass media of the time were added on to the accepted concept of private ownership and the emphasis on the profit motive that were brought forward from the previous century.

## MASS MEDIA IN AN EXPANDING NATION: THE 1800S

By any measure the 1600s and the 1700s were periods of slow but steady change, punctuated with dramatic events, such as American struggle for independence. In contrast, the 1800s saw constant and often rapid change. The term “Industrial Revolution” is used to characterize the transformations of society that began early in the 1800s. However, the people of the time did not realize how rapidly their way of life was being altered. We think of the last half of the 1900s and the early years of the 2000s as a period of social and technological change. Indeed, that is the case, but in many ways the first half of the 1800s was even more dramatic.<sup>3</sup>

As the 1800s began, travel was still a matter of either walking, riding a horse, or bumping along in a wagon or carriage pulled by horses or mules. Sending a message to a loved one, or for business purposes, took weeks or even months—depending on the distance the letter had to be carried. Just five decades later, by mid-century, people were riding on trains that could get up to

the astonishing speed of 45 miles an hour. Messages sent by telegraph, along copper wires that connected many distant towns and cities, traveled at a mind-boggling 186,000 miles per second!

Early in the nineteenth century, the boundaries of what is now the United States (mainland) were greatly expanded by acquisition of vast territories from the French as well as from Mexico. Other areas were acquired as well by various means to establish the boundaries of what is now the continental United States. For the most part, those areas were occupied by a few Europeans and by scattered tribes of native people. These Native Americans, in particular, were seen mainly as troublesome barriers to the advance of civilization. Consequently, they were systematically killed off, rounded up, or moved to be confined to reservations.

American leaders of the time developed policies favoring *immigration*, especially from Europe. The new country needed people—and they came in great waves. To protect against potential foreign incursion, the huge middle and the far western reaches of the country had to have people. It was a land of great natural resources—minerals, forests, and farmland. Continuing the frontier mentality of the first two centuries, the shared belief was that the wilderness had to be tamed and its resources brought under control for economic gain.

## The Industrial Revolution and Its Consequences

It was a combination of a new source of brute power, the inventive genius of vigorous people, and the prospect of great economic rewards that drove the ever-increasing pace of the Industrial Revolution. It had begun when the steam engine became a reality.

**STEAM AS A NEW SOURCE OF POWER.** It is difficult today to understand fully what took place after the steam engine arrived. Until that happened, power was something obtained from wind, water, or muscles—human or animal. Steam engines came into the picture early in the 1800s. By the 1830s, steam was driving early railroads, ships, river boats, and machinery in factories. Some parts of the country made the change more quickly than others. In New England, with poor and rocky soil, a steam-based factory economy came as a blessing. In the South and in the West, where much of the land had yet to be settled, the industrial society developed much more slowly.

Coupling a steam engine to a printing press was only one of many such applications, but it revolutionized the business of publication. It had a profound effect on the nature of newspapers. By 1830, a cylinder-type press became available. It had two big rotors about three feet long and a foot and a half in diameter (rather like a giant version of an old-fashioned washing machine ringer). The rotors were turned by the steam engine. A cast lead “stereotype” was placed over the roller. It contained all the letters and characters for the passages that were to be printed on single big sheets of paper. Such sheets were fed into the rollers. Several pages of a book or magazine could be printed at one time, to be folded and cut after printing.

The power press was a godsend for book publishing, but it was also quickly adapted for newspapers. By 1834, a new kind of newspaper—the “penny” press—would come into existence in New York City. It was the forerunner of the modern mass newspaper. It would never have been possible without the advertising brought by the Industrial Revolution, the power of the steam engine, and the efficiency of the rotary press. As will be made clear, the financial format and content of the penny press was quickly and widely adopted in communities throughout the United States. Within a very short time, the “daily newspaper” became a very different type of publication than those of the colonial press that had preceded it.

**LITERACY.** Another factor that would make it possible for newspapers to serve much larger audiences was a historic change in *public education* that began during the early 1800s. Horace Mann, an educator and politician in Massachusetts, persuaded the Commonwealth’s legislature to establish an innovative system of compulsory (and tax-based) education to ensure that children would be able to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. These skills were seen as important in a democracy and in a part of the nation in which industrial work was becoming more and more important. As public schools became common, increasing levels of literacy greatly expanded the potential market for newspapers.

**ADVERTISING.** In addition, as industrialization continued, the flow of goods produced in factories produced a growing need for *advertising*. Newspapers were able to take advantage of steadily increasing revenues from both advertising and subscriptions, which increased their profitability. All of these

factors worked together, and the result was a surge of growth in both the number of daily papers being published and the proportion of the population that was able to subscribe to and read them. In fact, as the nation continued to expand, both in terms of territory and population, both the number of newspapers and the size of their audiences increased rapidly.

**REVOLUTIONS IN TRANSPORTATION.** Railroads would not be widely established until the 1840s, and it would be 1874 before the two coasts were linked by rail. Meanwhile, another form of transportation played a key role in the developing nation, and it had a very clear effect on the mass communication industries that would come in the future. At a time before steam, *canals* were a relatively efficient way to move goods and even people. Because no roads linked regions, boats on rivers and other waterways were the most efficient and most comfortable way to travel. However, rivers and lakes were not conveniently located in places where they were needed, so canals linking them had to be dug to serve as an alternative.

One of the most remarkable construction projects ever undertaken in the early 1800s was the Erie Canal. It was a 363-mile system of ditches and locks, connecting several lakes and rivers, between Albany on the Hudson River on the eastern border of New York and Buffalo and Lake Erie at the western end. Long barges pulled slowly by horses or mules walking on a path beside the waterways could float heavy cargoes and passengers across the entire state. Its importance was that it connected much of what is now the Midwest with New York City and the Atlantic Ocean.

This great new waterway opened the entire Great Lakes area to commerce and settlement. Agricultural products came across the state by canal and then down the Hudson to be shipped from the docks of New York City to foreign markets. Many kinds of finished goods were taken back up the waterways to supply the new communities in the new states surrounding the Great Lakes. Because of the canal, the entire Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota) became a kind of vast “inland empire,” producing products that were sold world wide. New York City became the economic beneficiary of this bounty, and New York State came to call itself the “empire state.” (Later, the Empire State Building would be constructed in New York City.) Because of its economic dominance and its large population, New York City became the center of America’s emerging media industries.

**NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES.** In 1844, Samuel F. B. Morse sent a telegraph message from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore (a distance of about thirty-five miles). The message moved at the speed of lightening—an astounding 186,000 miles per second. Actually, Morse did not “invent” the telegraph. Other working systems were already in use in Great Britain. However, they were cumbersome and rather unreliable. Morse’s system was simple, reliable, and quite easy to use. He also developed a code that remains in use even today. The telegraph was so practical and effective that by the time of the Civil War, an underseas cable was being laid across the Atlantic Ocean. Regular telegraph service with England began in 1866. It was the first step toward a high-speed global communication system.

The telegraph and the transatlantic cable truly opened a new era in communication. Within a few years, newspapers and press associations would establish *wire services* that would bring reports of important events in both Europe and the United States to many of the nation’s newspapers within a much shorter time than had ever before been possible. Other cables soon linked additional continents and countries. By 1874 the telephone would follow, increasing once again the speed at which people could communicate over distance.

In 1839, five years before Morse demonstrated his telegraph, Louis Daguerre and Joseph Niepce showed the world the first *photograph*. The science of chemistry had advanced to a point where it was possible to make photographs on shining plates of metal with a process that came to be called the “daguerreotype.” Although photography did not find its way into newspapers and magazines for several decades, the daguerreotype provided the initial foundation upon which both photojournalism and eventually a great movie industry would be built.

## Territorial Expansion

The nation had begun to expand even before the Revolution. Daniel Boone had explored the Kentucky and Tennessee areas as early as 1769, leading a group of settlers from Virginia through the Cumberland Gap (a pass between mountains). He lived to see a million people pour into the new territory. After the nation was founded, other migrants went still farther and

took up lands in the Northwest Territory (around the Great Lakes), and new states in the region quickly came into the union.

The nation's new boundaries were growing at an astonishing rate. In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte was having trouble financing his wars in Europe. Short of cash, he decided to sell off "Le Louisianne"—vast territories in North America (about a third of the territory in the middle of current U.S. boundaries). This land was claimed and loosely controlled by France. He felt that the land was a drag on his budget and had no future in any case. Little was known about what was there. Some even claimed that prehistoric animals roamed the area. The Americans had proposed to buy only an area around New Orleans (as a means of controlling access to the Mississippi River). But Napoleon said "Take the whole territory or nothing." The result was one of the most spectacular real estate deals in history. The United States paid \$ 15 million for Louisiana—a huge triangular area that stretched west of the Mississippi clear to the Rocky Mountains and north from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. It cost just under three cents per acre.

A short time later, disputes between Mexico and the United States brought about a war (in 1846). At the time, Mexico was a formidable foe, with an army twice as big as that of the Americans. Nevertheless, the leaders in Washington wanted to take over much of the northern tier of Mexican territories and add them to what is now the continental United States. As a result, President James Polk sent American troops under General Zachary Taylor into Mexico and a force under General Winfield Scott to California. Scott had two young officers with him—Captain Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant.

The war did not last long. In 1847, U.S. Marines entered Mexico City (The "Halls of Montezuma"), and negotiations were commenced. The conflict was formally concluded in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and a payment of \$ 15 million to Mexico. The United States then took over what is now California, New Mexico, and Utah; parts of Arizona, Texas, and Colorado; plus smaller sections of other states. Again, vast territories came under the American flag for about three cents per acre. The continental United States was now an enormous land mass that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Rio Grande on the south to the long border with Canada to the north.

The Mexican war had a strong influence on American newspapers for two reasons. One was that a huge new area eventually came to be settled, and many newspapers were established to serve their growing populations. Another was in the way news was gathered at the scene of an event and a report sent back to editors. Understandably, the American public was deeply concerned about the battles in Mexico. Many papers had sent correspondents (reporters) into the area to write about the engagements and their outcomes. These reports were taken as quickly as possible to New Orleans, where the copper "lightening lines" were used to transmit the stories by telegraph directly to newsrooms in most of the major cities in the northeast. It was from this arrangement that the *Associated Press*, the first national wire service, was developed.

## Influence of the Civil War

The Civil War began on April 12, 1861, when Confederate cannons bombarded and all but destroyed Fort Sumpter—which was located on a small island in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. Although there was only one death (due to an accident), it was a momentous act, touching off a great conflict. The war raged on for four years, until April 9, 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. More than 2.3 million men fought, and more than 600,000 (one out of every four) were killed or died of their wounds or diseases. It remains the greatest number of war deaths ever experienced by the nation in any conflict.

The Civil War understandably created a great demand for news. The papers of the time were able to supply it. The great technological advances in steam-powered printing, electric communication, and swift distribution brought about by the Industrial Revolution had made it possible for virtually every major city to have one or more daily papers. Newspaper readership had increased greatly. During the war years, about four families out of every ten in the nation subscribed to a daily paper. Almost all of the larger papers had one or more reporters observing each battle. News from the conflict was sent via telegraph wire to editors back home, and reports of the victories and losses were provided to the public on a timely basis. Of special interest were the casualty lists for families waiting anxiously at home to hear whether their loved ones had been killed or wounded.

### Increased Pace of Urbanization

An important change in the society was the growth of towns and cities. As the 1800s began, the United States was a nation mainly of farmers and ranchers. Only a small proportion of the population lived in cities and towns. However, factories and their related jobs began to draw more and more people to urban communities. That process increased sharply in the upper Midwest as great deposits of iron ore and coal were discovered and exploited to establish iron and steel industries. As the century wore on, the nation was slowly transforming itself into a great industrial power. Large parts of the country remained rural, and agriculture was their major industry. However, more and more people were moving to towns and cities to find employment in the developing manufacturing industries.

The movement of people from farms to cities is called *urbanization*. This was a constant and accelerating process all during the last half of the 1800s. Rural families moved to the city, and many of the foreigners who arrived from abroad also settled there. Urbanization was important for the development of mass communications because it was far easier for a newspaper or magazine to serve a population concentrated in a city than one thinly scattered on farms.

### Consequences of Population Increases and Migrations

Of major significance for the development of newspapers and magazines were massive population movements into and within the United States. As noted, immigration from abroad was encouraged in order to settle the huge land masses acquired from France and Mexico. The pace of immigration increased beginning in the late 1840s, when waves of migrants arrived from Ireland to escape the great potato famine. A factor that greatly encouraged additional immigration was the first Homestead Act. President Lincoln signed the legislation in 1862. It providing for 180 acres of *free land* for any American citizen—or even a person who declared his or her *intention* of becoming a citizen—who would agree to establish a farm. This was a remarkable opportunity for many Europeans. No country had ever given away free land! Large numbers of Northern Europeans came to take up farming in the Midwest and on the great plains. Later, millions would arrive from southern and eastern Europe to labor in the new industries. They hoped to escape political turmoil, religious persecution, or grinding poverty in their mother lands.

In all of these areas, communities were established. Some were economic centers for agriculture. Others served mining or industrial economies. Some that were located at points where transportation brought rapidly increasing commerce grew and became cities. In each of these communities, *daily and weekly newspapers were needed*. The American population was growing rapidly. Free and mandatory public education had been widely adopted, and an increasing number of people could read and write. Conditions were very favorable, in other words, for a considerable growth in newspaper and magazine readership. In 1870, five years after the end of the Civil War, three out of every ten households in the United States subscribed to a *daily* newspaper. By the end of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Census reported that (on average) there was one newspaper subscription *for every household*. Saturation had been achieved.

Immigration from abroad was not the only factor promoting growth in newspapers. There was a great movement of population from *east to west* all during the last half of the 1800s. Even during the 1840s, wagon trains streamed across the prairie, bound for the Oregon Territory. Many families stopped along the way and established farms and communities in the Dakotas or in other parts of what are now the mountain states. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, more than 250,000 people (mainly men) descended on Northern California within a few months.

Meanwhile, as the century was coming to an end, the pace of immigration picked up. Millions of people passed through the great immigration station at Ellis Island. Many stayed in the cities along the eastern seaboard, but others traveled on to join relatives or earlier migrants in the Midwest and elsewhere. At about the same time, in a real sense, the frontier came to an end. Most of our states had already been admitted to the union. However, additional territories and populations came under American control just as the century was ending. In a war with Spain that lasted only ten weeks, Puerto Rico and the Philippines became American overseas possessions. Hawaii and Alaska were taken over at about the same time.

### Overview of the Influences of the Nineteenth Century

As the foregoing indicates, the changes that took place during the Nineteenth century are truly remarkable. As the period began, the United States was an insignificant country with a population of

just over five million people in fifteen states located mainly east of the Mississippi and south of the Ohio. By the end of the century it was a vast country of forty-eight states and other territories, with a population of seventy-six million, many of whom were immigrants from other countries. Its population had begun shifting from farming to urban life. It had impressive industries concentrated in the Northeast, a huge agricultural base in the South, and millions of fertile acres under production in the Midwest. Great advances in technology directly and indirectly related to communication had been achieved at an ever-increasing pace.

As the 1900s were about to begin, people could travel relatively swiftly from the Atlantic to the Pacific by rail or take a swift steam-driven vessel from San Francisco to New York. They could send messages along thousands of miles of telegraph lines and even across the oceans to other countries. They could call on the telephone for business and social reasons, and they could use a small “Kodak” to record family scenes and other activities in still photos. In addition, scientific discoveries had been made, and practical inventions developed, that within two decades would bring totally new and remarkable mass media—home radio and the motion picture. These media, like magazines and newspapers before them, would also be shaped by the economic, political, and cultural factors that had been brought forward from earlier times.

## NEW MEDIA IN AN URBAN-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY: THE 1900S

The 1900s saw the rise of new media that could not possibly have been imagined by people in the 1600s. All were products of the continuing Industrial Revolution and its scientific counterpart. Black-and-white silent movies, along with home radio, came early in the century. Just after mid-century, television was available in virtually every American home. It was soon followed by the VCR, the DVD, cable systems, direct broadcast satellites, cellular phones, fax, and the computer-based Internet.

As the twentieth century came to a close, the pace of change in new mass communication technologies became almost frantic. Some media were shrinking; others were expanding. Still others were converging. The pace was so fast that it became difficult to predict in a detailed way what people would have available in the early decades of the twenty-first century or, in some cases, even the next month. In spite of this pace, however, the new mass media to come, like what came earlier, will be shaped by the same factors that have operated in the past.

### The United States Becomes a Mass Communication Society

One of the first major mass media developments of the 1900s was the rise of a new kind of journalism within the magazine industry. Starting in 1900, an almost endless number of articles were prepared to expose political, economic, and social problems in American life. President Theodore Roosevelt called these writers “muckrakers.” He did so because they concentrated on corruption in American politics, ruthlessness in business, and the plight of the poor—rather than championing the remarkable achievements of the American society. However, by the time of World War I, the public was tired of such exposures, and the muckraker era came to an end. Nevertheless, its lasting influence was to ensure the place of investigative journalism in the American press.

**THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE PRINT MEDIA.** The first World War was of great significance to the ninety-two million people in the United States when it broke out in 1914. However, America did not enter the war actively until 1917. Before it ended, in November of 1918, more than two million young men and a few hundred women went to France. Of the young men who served in the trenches, or in ships in the Atlantic, 130,000 lost their lives. Understandably, the public was horrified—but eager to follow the war news from France. During the period, subscriptions to daily newspapers rose to a historic high. Newspapers were literally in a “golden age”—one that they would never see again. On average, American families subscribed to more than 1.3 daily newspapers. Many families had both a morning and evening paper delivered to their doors, or they bought them from street vendors. The newspaper had a total monopoly on the news because it had no rivals.

Magazines also came into a kind of golden age during the first several decades of the 1900s and especially between 1920 and 1950. Beautifully printed general magazines with slick paper and huge circulations rose to great prominence. They prospered because they were an ideal vehicle for delivering advertising of nationally mass-marketed products. For that purpose, they too had no serious rivals. Millions of subscribers in all parts of the country received their magazines by mail.

Such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers*, or *Cosmopolitan* also served the entertainment function by providing collections of short stories, serialized novels, simple analyses of public affairs, recipes, and humor.

**AMERICAN MOVIES COME TO DOMINATE THE WORLD MARKET.** One of the major consequences of World War I for our contemporary media system had to do with global markets for American entertainment products. With France, Germany, and Britain locked in the Great War, motion picture production facilities in Europe were essentially shut down after 1914. American film makers rushed to supply the world market. The silent black-and-white movies of the time used subtitles to tell the ongoing story. Almost any language could be used. Thus, the movies were a flexible product that sold well in every country that had even primitive movie theaters. People in those countries, especially the young, adored them. American films established a world dominance by this means, and they retain that dominance even to this day. Those global distribution systems have now been greatly expanded, and American movies, TV programs, music, video cassettes, and other entertainment products are both loved and hated all over the world. (The consequences of this global exportation will be explained in [Chapter 24](#).)

The motion picture industry matured greatly between the two World Wars. Going to the movies became the recreation of choice for millions of American families as well as for audiences in almost all other countries. The experience was cheap, wholesome, available, and fun. The movies were ideal for dating couples. American kids of the time loved the Saturday matinees with cowboys, comics, and serialized adventures. Many movies attracted the whole family. Mom, pop, and the kids all went together. Attendance in the U.S. rose to record heights between 1930 and 1950, when more than two tickets were sold per family every week. However, that golden age would soon go into serious decline as television became the dominant medium.

**RADIO AS A NEW MASS COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY.** By the beginnings of the 1920s, radio was transformed from a wireless dot-dash telegraph used for commercial, navigational, and governmental purposes into a home medium. Regularly scheduled broadcasts of music, drama, and comedians began early in the 1920s, and in the U.S. the medium quickly turned to advertising as a means of financial support. That had been the solution taken by the popular newspapers nearly a century earlier and by magazines as they developed during the last half of the 1800s. It was the American way—*private ownership, profit-oriented, and minimal governmental interference* in terms of content. Radio did require certain technical regulation to avoid signal interference, but (except for dirty words) the system essentially retained the freedom of speech that was a deep-seated cultural value.

**TELEVISION CHALLENGES OTHER MASS MEDIA.** Television was about to become a mass medium in the United States when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Little was done to develop the medium during the war years. However, when the conflict was over, a number of stations quickly went on the air, and wherever there was a signal to receive, television sets were snapped up by a waiting public. The Federal Communications Commission restrained growth of the medium for four years while developing a plan to avoid signal overlap. Even so, the public could not get enough of television broadcasts.

Television created significant displacements among the other media. It quickly attracted advertising dollars from print and radio, and it took audiences away from the movies. TV inherited radio's financial structure, its relationship with the Federal Communication Commission, much of its programming, and most of its audience. In addition, its advantages as an advertising medium drew dollars away from the general magazines, many of which went out of business. Television's advertising and its news services made inroads into the financial health of newspapers.

### **New Technologies and Changing Mass Media Systems**

After the middle of the twentieth century, the American mass communication system was deeply established in essentially its present form (but without the Internet, which came later). There have been recent changes and additions, but by the late 1950s, television had already become the medium to which most Americans paid close attention. Books retained their niche as a specialized medium for information, education, and entertainment. Movies remained popular, but the numbers paying at the box office were clearly declining. Newspapers were losing readers steadily,

and many papers were either going bankrupt or being absorbed into chains to reduce costs. Magazines were hard hit at first but rebounded by becoming increasingly specialized. Few of the older, general, large-circulation magazines survived, and niche publishing had become the predominant mode. Radio rebounded by turning to music, news, and talk-show programming after being nearly put out of business by TV. However, still further changes were coming. They would be based on both satellites and the digital technology of the computer.

**THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF COMPUTERS.** No one quite foresaw the truly remarkable role that computers would play in the media industries. At first, the huge electronic computers, like the ENIAC (more than one hundred feet long) developed for the military during and just after World War II, were seen by the public as scientific curiosities. They were seen as little more than “electronic brains,” used by the military and operated by geeky scientists with thick glasses and nerd packs in the pockets of their white coats.

By comparison with today’s computers, the early machines were not only huge but very slow. Moreover, they seemed to have little or no significance for ordinary citizens. However, by the mid-1950s it became clear to businesses and government agencies that computers could be used for a great many practical purposes. The card-programmed, mainframe computers of the time were soon in use in every large corporation, educational institution, and government agency. Because of their efficiency, they soon helped to move the United States into the *information age*.<sup>4</sup> What that means is that, after the middle of the century, more people were manipulating numbers and words than were producing objects with hands and machines. By 1960, the age of the digital, electronic computer had truly arrived, and it would soon change the lives of almost everyone.

**THE CONSTANT INVENTION AND REPLACEMENT OF MEDIA.** During the 1960s and ’70s, using a large mainframe computer was accomplished only by highly trained specialists using arcane commands and programming “languages.” Early in the 1980s, however, the small “desktop” machines came onto the market. They were quickly adopted and pressed into use for thousands of different applications. Within a decade, the computer had literally transformed the ways in which business was conducted in almost every walk of life. By 2000, a computer could be found in about four out of every ten American homes, and the rate of adoption was rising rapidly. Currently, millions of people are subscribers to such online services as America Online. The numbers continue to increase every month.

### Overview of Factors Influencing Mass Media Development in the 1900s

The above review indicates that, as the twentieth century began, people could subscribe to a sophisticated morning and afternoon daily newspaper or receive many kinds of magazines in the mail. The more affluent could call friends on the telephone (but long-distance was not well developed). People could also send a telegram. However, there were no movie theaters to attend, no radio to hear, and no television to view. Computer networks could not even be imagined. The population of the United States continued to expand rapidly in the early decades (slowing in more recent times) and educational levels increased greatly. These trends provided a larger and more literate market for print media. As a result, the early part of the century was the “golden age” of print.

The change from agriculture to industry gave people more expendable income on average and more scheduled free time. The result was a corresponding interest and need for diversion and amusement. Entertainment-oriented media developed to meet these needs—the movies, radio, television, and its related systems—and more recently the Internet. By the mid nineteenth century, and in more recent times, the newer media were growing while the older traditional print media began a slow decline in audience share. Among them, only books resisted the trend.

The pace of scientific and technological development was spurred by the increase in the standard of living, brought by the advance of the industrial revolution. The 1900s brought not only dramatic increases in the accomplishments of science but also growth in average family income. People could afford the new gadgets and amusements that were being produced. In addition, two World Wars spurred technology of many kinds. In particular, World War II and the following Cold War stimulated the development of computers. Digital technology, now at the heart of the almost daily media modifications and advances we read about, will bring great changes in our media systems in the twenty-first century.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Digital technology, the foundation of computer operations, will continue to bring us new forms of information, advertising, and entertainment. We now enjoy new systems for delivering clearer television signals to our home sets. While all are not technically mass media, constant innovations are bringing Americans and others many kinds of information, services, and entertainment on the Internet and its World Wide Web as well as on hand-held devices, such as cell phones and iPods.

The basic principle that will prevail is that, in a technological society, there is a constant invention, obsolescence, and replacement of media. In an economic system based on capitalism, new products capable of earning profits are constantly being invented, tried, and developed. Many displace older systems that lose profitability. It is a pattern as old as the Industrial Revolution. To illustrate, in the early 1900s a strong ice industry thrived in New England. Big blocks of ice were sawn from frozen lakes to be shipped in the insulated holds of vessels all over the world. When ice-making machines were invented, that industry collapsed, and factories in the area began making and shipping the new machines. Then, the home refrigerator came on the market. Few commercial ice-making machines were needed, and the “iceman” who delivered to homes lost his job.

The same invention/replacement pattern can be seen in media technology. An example is the VCR, which began life as a machine the size of a small piano. At first, it was used by television broadcasters to record and replay their shows. After refinement and standardization, the video-cassette tape came into use in the majority of American households for watching movies. It is now almost fully replaced by movies on small discs, which use digital technology and are much more durable and easier to store. At some point, it is likely that our now familiar DVDs will also become obsolete. And so it goes. New technologies come, are widely adopted, and then fall into obsolescence as more effective ones are developed.

It is difficult to specify the exact form of new mass communication systems that will exist in the years ahead. The pace of invention is very fast. Also, the plans and ownership patterns among the major corporations developing such systems undergo change and modification every day. Generally, however, the following seem likely:

1. More and more homes will have large, flat-panel, very clear television screens. high-definition television (HDTV), based on digital technology, has now become the standard. As the 1900s came to an end, it was forecast to quickly replace conventional-format TV, but adaptations to this new technology slowed somewhat as conventional TV pictures got better. Now, however it is clear that digital HDTV broadcasts have arrived. By mid-2009, TV signals received in homes were all in this format, and older TV sets required special “boxes” to transform the signals.
2. Far more channels will be available on our home TV receivers, including the World Wide Web. New ways of delivering digital signals to small satellite dishes and home receivers have rapidly been developed and adopted. Older systems for delivering information by wires and cables may decline. Television and computer reception will converge, allowing Internet communication to use the TV screen.
3. Interactive menus on our TV screens have become the norm, where we click with a pointer and get information similar to the manner in which we can now “jump” from a “button” on a computer screen to another screen. That will continue. The remote control has changed advertising from “in your face” (whether you want it or not) to more voluntary exposure selected by the viewer.
4. There will be a continuing slow decline in the proportion of families who subscribe to traditional print media (newspapers and magazines). However, these will not disappear because they will combine with online delivery of news and other information.
5. The current slow decline in the proportion of people who pay at the box office to go to the movies will continue. The availability of motion pictures on television and computer screens will correspondingly increase. However, financial health and vigor of the movie production (as opposed to the exhibition) industry will increase because of a growing demand for entertainment products, both in the U.S. and abroad, for existing and new media.
6. There will be a continued production and use of traditional printed books. This venerable medium remains vital in the fields of entertainment, education, and many other uses. Contrary to predictions that they would be replaced by computer-based readers that receive text online, this does not appear to be taking place in any real sense. However, electronic forms of books may become more common as the new technologies become cheaper and easier to use.

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## Notes and References

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