

**COMMUNICATION MODELS FOR THE STUDY
OF MASS COMMUNICATION**

by Denis McQuail & Sven Windahl

Second Edition, Reprinted, Bucuresti: comunicare.ro, 2010

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The term “mass communication” describes a phenomenon that has occurred in the early twentieth century: modernization. Modernization's foundation is represented by industrialization, urbanization and popular democracy. Modern society is depicted as the society in which the individual is detached from popular and mystical beliefs, from the environmental conditionalities and from the organic links with other members of society. Mass-media, inextricably linked to the phrase mass communication, refers to the organized means of communication in a short period of time. Early media (newspapers, magazines, radio and cinema) and the television that rises in the mid-twentieth century experienced a rapid development to forms known today. How we understood mass communication, for example, in 1950 is the same we understood today, in the most general sense: a source (usually an organization) that use as channels of communication different forms of technology to send messages to a large heterogeneous and dispersed audience. Mass communication is a public and open phenomenon that describes a relatively asymmetric and impersonal relationship between sender and receiver.

The number and diversity of theoretical approaches to mass communication are having a geometric growth. These approaches had emerged more or less as an independent body within the social-political literature, and also humanities. Classical theoretical approaches are the raw material for current theoretical developments in the context of an unprecedented technological change.

Denis McQuail's and Sven Windahl's book *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communication* has, as the authors state the introductory chapter, a dual purpose. “On one hand, it seeks to summarize and present [...] many of the models developed to describe or explain the process of mass communication. On the other hand, it seeks to portray the main lines of thought in the field of mass communication [...]” (p. 9) Right from the title the authors stress the use of models to achieve a “deliberately simplified description” (p. 10) of major elements of mass communication. Moreover, McQuail and Windahl assumes the distinction between a *model* (identification and description of major elements of a phenomenon) and a *theory* (the detailed explanation of a phenomenon). They were considering that the

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models respond better to the purpose of this book. “Communication is always a dynamic phenomenon, a process that is changing and evolving” (p. 10), and “functional” models describe this phenomenon from a “dynamic perspective, the forces inside [the phenomenon], between the parties and overall influence on the development of these relations” (p. 10).

This book does not provide a concise and definitive definition of the concept of communication. However, due to various conceptual delimitations provided by the models from the book, is suggested an inclusive approach on mass communication, valuable in systematic efforts. Moreover, the authors are excluding the “likelihood and desirability of a single, comprehensive model of communication”.

The models presented by McQuail and Windhal capture almost half a century of mass communication research, from the first attempts of theoretical systematization to the mid 90's*. The systematic study of mass communication has its origins in the postwar period and was started in the U.S. Selected models are those which, according to the authors, have stood the test of time and still have not used their full creative potential of new theoretical developments.

The second chapter presents a set of basic models. The first linear and mechanistic models experienced rapid amendments, stressing the importance of the existence of interference and feedback. Also, here are presented models that emphasize the dynamic and cumulative nature of the communication or ritual models focusing on communication. This chapter provides an analysis of Lasswell's formula, the model of Shannon and Weaver, Osgood and Schramm, Dance, Gerbner, the Newcomb's ABX model or the model developed by Westley and MacLean's and the of Maletzke's model.

The third chapter analyzes theories of diffusion and short-term effects of mass communication on individuals. Strong and immediate effects of the stimulus-response model are placed in front of the limited effects of the two-step flow model or in front of a more psychological approach regarding the effects on individual behavior. Moreover, in this section are presented different models regarding the news flows and, also, models that describe the understanding, processing and recalling the news.

Chapter four examines the effects of media on culture and society from a procedural model of individual awareness and the cultivation process, to the dependence model, the spiral of silence or agenda settings models. The models described in this chapter foreshadows the audience focused models presented in chapter five that analyzes choices and assessments made by the audience, encoding and decoding messages, or different models of cultural and informational gratifications.

* Romanian edition is published by comunicare.ro in 2010 and is a translation made by Alina Bârgăoanu and Paul Dobrescu after the Longman Publishing Group second edition reprinted in 1995

The sixth chapter presents aspects related to the media organizations and issues regarding the selection and production processes of specific information. This chapter is developed, on the one hand, in chapter seven, focusing the planned communication, and, on the other hand, in chapter nine, focusing a dimension which was in the early stages in 90's, nowadays being full developed: communication in international environment.

Chapter Eight, which examines new media and the information society, in fact anticipates the tangible reality from the beginning of the XXI century. Facilitated access to means of communication in the last decade has caused a radical change in the use of communication technologies. We believe that at this moment it is required a conceptual distinction: depending on the degree of involvement and the control capacity of the actors we can describe a communication continuum: the interpersonal communication (communication conducted by two people, face to face), the mediated communication (communication occurs between one or more people simultaneously through technology) and mass communication (an organized source send technologically mediated messages to large and undifferentiated audiences). For example, a telephone conversation between two persons describes a mediated communication process very closed to the interpersonal level. Communication takes place between two persons with the help of technology (phone), and the persons involved have full control over the content of communication. At the other pole of mediated communications is television. The communication process involves an organization (Media Company) which transmits a technological mediated message to a broad and heterogeneous audience. The audience possibility of response to the message transmitted by the television is relatively limited.

New media is located on this communication continuum between mediated communication and mass communication. Anyone can post a video content on YouTube, for example, and become a "mini-television". However, this equivalence is limited, in most cases, only to the form of message (video). More specifically, the fact that today a person can, with relative ease, send an e-mail to five thousand or ten thousand recipients does not describe a process of mass communication. First, the source is a person and not an organization. Secondly, the receiver can answer is, in most cases, with a equal intensity and power as the source's message. And this is not the normal case of mass communication. A second situation, centered on the receiver, refers to receiving personalized messages. The receiving of a personalized message does not describe a mass communication process, even if the same source sent messages with the same content to a large number of receptors. Basically, in this case, we do not have a broad and "non-customized" audience, but we have, instead, a "one audience".

However, current realities indicate that traditional media continues to play a central role in the political, economic, social and cultural worldwide environment.