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The Necessary Evolution of Mass Communication Research in a Fragmenting Media Landscape

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Abstract

With the ongoing evolution of media channels, debates over the concept of mass communication have been reignited. When we live in a society of filter bubbles and AI-generated content, the very notion of a large uniform audience has been undermined. Indeed, the process of mass communication looks different today than in the early days of the field, which naturally affects how to define and measure media effects. In this forum, leading communication scholars provide arguments as to whether we should keep using the term “mass communication,” adapt its definition, or develop entirely new concepts that better reflect our fragmenting media environment.

Keywords

mass communication, media effects, artificial intelligence, social media, algorithms

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This *JMCQ* invited forum “The Necessary Evolution of Mass Communication Research in a Fragmenting Media Landscape” serves to spark a much-needed discussion about the relevance and future of the term “mass communication” in a time with undeniable media fragmentation, audience segmentation, digitization, algorithmization, and sooner-or-later AI-zation. Conferences and special issues are rapidly filled with these subjects—and with that, the concept of mass communication seemingly disappears into the background. Is this transgression inherent to the passing of time? Has *mass communication* become irrelevant in an age of smartphones and social media? Or, are there simply more urgent subjects to study today?

Notwithstanding these developments, mass communication is still highly visible within the field of Communication and Media Studies (CMS, see Demeter, 2019); think of academic journals, including *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* or *Mass Communication and Society*; university departments, such as the *School of Journalism and Mass Communication* at University of Wisconsin–Madison; ICA’s Mass Communication Division (once one of the association’s largest divisions); or the foundational courses that we offer to our students. The first book that I read during my undergraduate studies was McQuail’s (2005) *Mass Communication Theory*, which is still one of the few books I occasionally consult in my daily work. Browsing through this book, I have been worrying whether we are not *throwing the baby out with the bathwater*: What do we actually lose if we forget about the history, the original topics, and the theoretical foundations that originated from mass communication once the term becomes less visible and fades to the margins?

Following the #ICA25 conference, this forum brings together scholars that have pondered about the question how CMS as a discipline should move forward with mass communication—either in terms of the subjects we study, the way we define or label this (sub)field, or the theoretical perspectives that are still missing. All of these, as a recent *JMCQ* article points out (Singer et al., 2023), ultimately revolve around what should be understood as “mass” in mass communication: does it refer to the (mass) media that send the message or does it refer to the (mass) audience that is on the receiving end?

Media fragmentation has been taking place, at least, since the introduction of cable TV—going from a handful of national TV stations, radio channels, and newspapers to a wider but still limited array of channels that could cater to their own niches (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Prior, 2007; Singer et al., 2023). With the rise of the Internet and social media, the options to self-select one’s personal media diet have become unlimited; and so, one may question whether mass communication with mass media targeting a general audience is still relevant. If one intends to only refer to those few radio/TV channels or newspapers that once made up the media landscape, then the term mass communication would be inappropriate, and the term *legacy media* may be more applicable. The Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines legacy as “something transmitted by or received from an ancestor or predecessor or from the past.” Indeed, if the messages from those legacy media were at the core of mass communication, this would be just a dead field walking.

Does this mean that mass communication does not exist anymore? Perhaps not in the traditional (i.e., legacy) sense of the word, but there are still major channels or

(mediated) personas that leave their mark on this world—or rather leave a stain (in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt). Even more than the legacy media that once captured a national audience, there are currently mediated personas that reach and influence a *massive* global audience. For example, MrBeast is a U.S. YouTuber with more than 440 million subscribers, who easily hits 100 million views with a single video: If that is not mass communication, then what is it? His tweet, “If we lower the age to run for president I’ll jump in the race” received more than 37 million views. Or Andrew Tate; his online appearance strongly contributed to the “manosphere” and the promotion of misogynistic ideologies with an influence that extends far beyond national borders.

From this perspective, one must conclude that a *mass influence of media* still exists; perhaps even more massively than ever before. And where algorithms are often held accountable for creating filter bubbles or echo chambers (i.e., breaking up the mass audience into a plurality of fragmented public spheres; Gitlin, 2002)—they simultaneously expose similar groups to the same kinds of messages. Thus, rather than simply fragmenting the audience, algorithms still funnel the public to a few dominant messages. As Metzger (in this forum) convincingly argues, this requires a revision of existing theories that have long structured scholarship in CMS.

One example is Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) *Spiral of Silence*, which predicts that when the media present one ideology or thought to be dominant, this will lead to a homogeneously perceived opinion climate—where others would fear speaking out, which further reinforces the perceived dominant opinion. With algorithmic media selection (or rather: media provision) that tailors to every niche’s existing preference, a set of reverse spirals of silence—one could perhaps coin this as *Spirals of Amplification*—may occur: People may feel that their ideas are shared—even when these are marginal—because they repeatedly see it reflected in their timelines and, therefore, they dare to speak out their opinions even if they are a minority. When being confronted with a rebuttal of their opinions, they may not be silenced but rather voice their opinions even louder and argue that the “mainstream media” is not willing to present their (perceived) dominant perspective. Hence, the field has to consider which theories still remain up-to-date and which require adaptation to the current contexts.

Even if it is not one and the same mediated message that reaches a large audience, it may be many similar messages spread across various channels that can have a homogenous influence on a large part of the audience. As Bucy and McDevitt showcase in their contribution to this forum, even when one misinformation message may have small reach by itself, it may still circulate in many different variations and thereby create a sense of mass confusion in the society.

Also, without accounting for algorithms and social media platforms, a mass media audience does still exist. Think of the messages transmitted in pop music or blockbuster movies. Leonhard, in this forum, points out that the long-term impact of mediated entertainment is not yet fully understood—and, in many aspects, is still in its infancy. Whereas the (mass) news media and their potential effects have been researched widely, entertainment formats that succeed in capturing a large(r) audience—often without necessarily being transmitted via the legacy media—leave a more lasting impact with great(er) societal relevance and, therefore, deserve more scholarly attention. Think of *House of Cards*

(2013–2018), which pioneered the binge-watching model via streaming, and must have influenced perceptions of the U.S. political landscape. *Squid Game*, notably a non-Anglo show, which addressed the theme of social and economic inequality globally. Or, recently, the series *Adolescence* (2025) sparked discussions in media and politics about the complexities faced by today's youth.

As the contributions to this forum put forward, there are currently a multitude of (mass) media phenomena that influence a large part of the public. Yet, what has changed is that these media are not just found at regular intervals (daily newspapers, weekly shows) or regular places (Channel 2 on the TV's remote control or 103.3 FM on the radio dial). Instead, the media with the largest reach today are fragmented across algorithmically curated social media profiles, streaming platforms, or clipped fragments from legacy media that are shared and reframed across platforms. Mass communication, in a literal sense, has thus become more episodic. And, it has become difficult to predict which media will lead to mass communication.

Similar to mass communication that brings together a large audience via or in media (Deuze, 2023), the academic domain of mass communication has the potential to unite scholars in CMS that would otherwise operate in their own topical and epistemological silos; political communication scholars mainly interacting with PolCom researchers, health communication scholars with HealthCom scholars, etc. Having a shared space—whether at conferences, in journals, departments, or handbooks—where scholars from across the CMS spectrum share their works, allows for an indispensable synergy in the field, where one can learn from each other's theoretical models or methodological innovations and, thereby, accommodate scientific progress.

Yet, the unresolved question remains whether “mass communication” is still the right umbrella term to study these phenomena. Arguably, the term has an outdated connotation among large parts of the academic community; a connotation that is intertwined with research about the legacy mass media. Whether this is the right impression of what mass communication is, does not matter per se; it is this widely shared perception of being an outdated concept that hampers its bridging function to unite scholars with diverse topical interests. Therefore, a better label is much-needed; one that raises fewer questions and has a clearer profile for the study of mediated phenomena with a wide reach and great societal impact. Valuable insights in that regard are offered by Schmierbach, Holbert, and Rasheed in this forum.

Having myself severely doubted the future relevance of “mass communication” as a term—ever since taking up a leadership role within the ICA's Mass Communication division—editing this forum has convinced me of the enduring relevance of mass communication; or a more compelling, comprehensive, and appealing replacement of this term. It is my hope that this forum will highlight the continued relevance of the phenomena that are understood as mass communication, and that it eventually may support a sustainable progression of common spheres where scholars with diverse backgrounds gather and exchange their latest knowledge across topical barriers.

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The End of Mass Communication? 25 Years Later

A quarter century ago, Chaffee and Metzger (2001) published the article titled “*The End of Mass Communication?*” The purpose of this essay was to take stock of mass communication at a time of rapid technological evolution that portended profound changes in media institutions, content, and audiences. We began by distilling the defining features of mass communication as they had been conceived up to that point in time: The “massification” of communication by enabling *one-to-many messaging*, and the attendant rise of a handful of powerful mass *media institutions* that limited the dissemination of media content to only a *small number of available channels* intended for consumption by large *undifferentiated audiences*. Additionally, these features also signaled a *lack of audience control* over content production and gatekeeping.

We then (n.b. in the early 2000s) argued that digital technologies were cracking the foundations of the conception of mass communication because—due to the increasing availability of channels and formats for audiences to consume media content—they were “demassifying” mass communication, resulting in audience fragmentation, a shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting, the decline of legacy media institutions, and the rise of user-generated content for large-scale consumption. This prompted us to pose the question that served as the title of our article.

While ultimately our answer was that mass communication would endure, we argued that changes to the field’s conceptualization of mass communication were needed, as well as changes to mass communication theory and mass communication research. New technological realities, we argued, necessitated a new nomenclature (i.e., “media communication”) for, and new approaches to, the study of mass communication (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 365).

A similarly profound technological transformation is again underway now, this time brought on by advances in artificial intelligence (AI). The AI revolution thus once again begs the question; will new technological advances mean the end of mass communication as we know it? Just as a quarter century ago, it is once again useful to examine mass communication in terms of potential shifts in media institutions, content, and audiences.

From a media institutions’ standpoint, AI is likely to amplify the already profound disappearance of news outlets via increasing market competition and declining ad revenue. Furthermore, human journalists and news anchors may also increasingly disappear from news organizations. While AI-written or AI-assisted news is now fairly common (Diakopoulos et al., 2024), recent market entries such as *NewsGPT.ai*, whose tagline is “The Unhuman Truth,” and Channel 1 (<https://www.channel1.ai/>), which bills itself as the world’s first entirely AI-generated news channel, can effectively eliminate humans from all aspects of news production and delivery.

In the mass media entertainment industry, job losses may be staggering as AI-generated media scripts, images, graphics, music composition, and digital games undermine the need for writers, production teams, actors, game developers, cinematographers, and makeup artists. Extreme examples of what might be called “ChatGPT-TV,” such as Showrunner (<https://www.showrunner.xyz/>), illustrate the

potential of AI to create entire TV shows or movies based on user prompts, which allow audiences to “just think it, then watch it.” Such tools have the potential to eliminate studio gatekeepers—the traditional arbiters of media content—from media production altogether.

Alongside AI-based media content *creation* is AI-based content *curation*. In the 20th century, a major concern was that a few big media firms would control the content people saw, thereby serving as content curators. Now algorithms do this work, seamlessly and automatically. Consider, for instance, how quickly the Instagram algorithm changes what content users are exposed to, based on a cocktail of previous views, recent queries and attention cues, location-based information, and the behaviors of those in one’s social network. Such content curation undercuts the premises of a host of classic mass communication theories, such as selective exposure, uses and gratifications, agenda-setting, framing, and cultivation theory.

Indeed, algorithmic media content selection may mean a return to more passive exposure, as it takes a good deal of control over content exposure away from audiences, while also aggressively driving audiences toward homogenous content. In 2001, we predicted that de-massified content would cultivate individuals to highly personalized media worlds. This personalization is now less conscious and swifter than ever as AI algorithms wrest control from content consumers. A terrifying example is a recent study that created fake *TikTok* and *YouTube* accounts registered to teenage boys to determine how quickly misogynistic content and videos show up in their feeds (Baker et al., 2024): In addition to a control group, one group of accounts searched for neutral terms like “sports,” “gaming,” or “gym tips,” while another group put in keywords such as “manosphere,” “Andrew Tate,” or “anti-feminist.” Regardless of the search terms used, *all* of the accounts were fed toxic content within the first 23 minutes of the experiment, and some in as little as 2 minutes. This sort of funneling toward specific content signals a shift from *selective exposure*, where individuals actively self-select attitudinally consistent content at the expense of other viewpoints, toward *selected exposure*, where content is passively thrust upon them, at the expense of alternative perspectives.

In fact, AI-powered audience analytics and content delivery allow for even *more* personalized content than we predicted in 2001. AI can deliver maximum audience fragmentation and optimize engagement through hyper-targeting, allowing for individual-level algorithmic agenda-setting and customization of media frames, which may serve to exacerbate beliefs shaped via filter bubbles and the confirmation bias. With so much personalized and niche content, future audiences will be even less unified as people consume individualized media content, often unaware that the messages others are receiving may differ from the ones that they see.

Capitalizing on the capacity to tailor content to individuals, AI chatbots and user-behavior feedback loops used by social media platforms also shift communication from broadcasting to more “conversational” interactions. Indeed, Internet-based tools now routinely offer several capabilities and features that disrupt the core distinctions that initially distinguished mass from interpersonal communication, increasingly marking their union (Flanagin, 2017). The use of tailored content using real-time data is leveraged by companies, politicians, and others to create dynamic messaging based

on behavior, preferences, and context which, in turn, opens new possibilities for persuasive adaptation, attitude reinforcement, and heightened affective response.

A critical result of AI's transformation of mass communication is that media effects theories must evolve, since AI disrupts traditional assumptions about centralized messaging and undifferentiated audiences that undergird many of our field's foundational perspectives, including uses and gratifications, agenda-setting, cultivation, spiral of silence, and framing, as well as critical and cultural media studies perspectives. Table 1 summarizes some specific changes in media effects theories needed for the AI era.

Changes are also necessary for mass communication research methods. By leveraging AI for media analysis, researchers can more easily detect patterns, trends, and correlations within media content. Sentiment analysis algorithms, for instance, can be used to discern public opinion and emotions expressed in social media posts, news articles, and online comments in real-time, providing novel ways to uncover audience preferences, media biases, and reactions to media messages. Additionally, AI-powered image and video recognition can automatically categorize visual content. These are only a few of the more obvious ways in which AI can augment the process of analyzing large media datasets and conducting content analyses. Overall, methodological shifts like these are consistent with an emphasis on the means of communication (i.e., "media" communication) versus the communication audience (i.e., "mass" communication), much as Chaffee and Metzger (2001) argued 25 years ago.

In short, AI is forcing researchers to reevaluate extant concepts, models, and methods of mass communication once again. As an apposite exercise, I asked ChatGPT v.3.5 for a media effects framework for the AI era. The results are instructive: It suggested the *Algorithmic Media Effects (AME) Model* (shown in Figure 1), consisting of five "layers" that must be considered by media researchers in the AI era.

While the AME raises daunting ethical and professional academic implications (e.g., the end of mass communication *theorists?*), it can perhaps usefully serve as a muse for human mass communication scholars to begin modifying and extending current models—or reconceptualizing and replacing them altogether—to better explain how and why media are likely to influence media audiences and industries in the future. At the very least, the AME prompts media theorists to shift from assumptions of broadcast, homogeneity, and human-centered decisions toward frameworks that incorporate algorithmic influence, dynamic personalization, and data-driven media ecosystems.

So, does the saturation of the media environment with AI-based tools mean the end of mass communication? The answer now, as 25 years ago, is likely still no: Demand for popular-appeal news and entertainment narratives, as well as for shared media experiences, will continue to fuel mass media industries, production, and audience content consumption. Thus, mass communication will endure as long as it remains economically and socially viable. That said, to remain compelling, relevant, and useful, media researchers' understanding of mass communication must evolve alongside the tools designed to produce and deliver mass media messages, in order that we continue to offer insight and understanding of the complex messages spawned from, and consumed within, an AI-guided reality.

Table I. Potential Changes to Media Effects Theories.

Potential change	Old assumption	New reality	Implied theoretical shift
From Mass Exposure to Algorithmic Curation	Everyone sees roughly the same content	AI curates personalized content feeds (TikTok, YouTube, Netflix, etc.)	<i>Media effects theories</i> must account for algorithmic gatekeeping—how AI platforms influence what gets seen, by whom, and when. Theories like <i>agenda-setting theory</i> must integrate platform-level agenda-setting where algorithms—not editors—determine salience.
From Passive to Predictively Modeled Audiences	Audiences are passive media message recipients	AI systems predict and shape user behavior through real-time feedback loops (e.g., engagement optimization)	<i>Uses and gratifications theory</i> must evolve to consider machine-driven gratification, where the system provides content before users even know they want it. New models must consider reinforcement and persuasive adaptation based on real-time data.
From One-to-Many to Many-to-One Communication	Messages flow from a few senders to many receivers	AI enables hyper-targeted, dynamic messaging that is often invisible to others	<i>Framing theory</i> needs to consider the individual-level customization of frames. <i>Spiral of silence</i> must be re-evaluated in a context where people's perceived public opinion is algorithmically constructed.
From Long-Term Exposure to Instant, Iterative Nudges	Media changes attitudes or behaviors slowly, over time	AI delivers real-time micro-influence through adaptive content (ads, notifications, prompts)	New models of real-time behavioral influence are required, inspired by <i>nudge theory</i> , persuasive technology, and behavioral economics. Effects may be short-term but cumulative, and more difficult to detect in the aggregate.
From Media Literacy to AI Literacy	Media effects depend on users' critical media skills	AI systems make invisible decisions that shape media exposure	Theories should integrate AI system transparency, explainability, and user agency. A new area to study is <i>algorithmic literacy</i> —how well people understand and can counteract automated influence.



Figure 1. The Algorithmic Media Effects model produced by ChatGPT 3.5.

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Losing Mass: Why Mass Communication Was Never the Right Term for the Field

Hand-wringing over the proper term for the field of mass communication[s] has driven debate since before there was a field of mass communication. Embrace of the term occurred for reasons both philosophical and strategic (Eadie, 2011; Simonson et al., 2019). Mid-century American scholars hoped for a more scientific study of the media professions and their influences; however, departments and scholarly organizations were also eager to find ways to keep lucrative majors, such as advertising and public relations, under their roof. Mergers that created large colleges of communication further encouraged a shared vocabulary with mass communication understood to be a variant of the broad study of communication as a whole. Concerns about the end of mass communication have a similarly long legacy; Chaffee and Metzger's (2001) essay appeared in the journal I have been privileged to edit more recently: *Mass Communication and Society*. They had already acknowledged that calls for a change in vocabulary could be traced back over the prior two decades, even at that point. By the time *Journalism Quarterly* had added "*and Mass Communication*" to its title, people were already asking if that term was outdated (Eadie, 2011).

My impression, after years of grappling with where the line between mass and non-mass communication might fall, is that the mistake has not been in holding on to the term for too long but in adopting it in the first place. Had mass communication scholarship evolved a few decades later, the field might have realized that the mass audience is a relatively small portion of the phenomenon researchers seek to address. What's more, by defining the object of study as exclusively mass in nature, scholars have missed the opportunity to effectively explore whether mass communication is a meaningful or useful concept. To borrow a term from Lang (2013), the nature of communication "lost its variability" precisely in the area where variation would have been most interesting. That is, because mass communication scholars are only interested in those platforms that can properly be called *mass* media, the question of whether the mass nature of the message matters was largely ignored. Without a point of comparison, we cannot say whether the traits of the thing we study are essential to the nature of that thing.

One suggested solution, which I embrace, is to focus on *mediated* communication more broadly. Rather than trying to make judgments about whether a given platform may be adequately mass in nature, we can consider the role of technology in affecting how we communicate as properly within the domain of our discipline. To be sure, this still leaves conceptual ambiguity. In particular, communication remains a poorly defined idea. We might define it broadly as any process of conveying meaning from person to person. But we should also acknowledge that the ambition of laying claim to the whole of communication as a field of study has always been suspected. Why should our group of upstart scholars seize this central act of human behavior from the psychologists and sociologists, or the political scientists and marketers? Focusing on the ways that communication technology modifies this process gives us a clearer mission, among other benefits.

However, communication technology (or *media*) is a fraught term as well. Does communication between humans and machines count as mediated communication? This is an important question for research now and will only grow in importance moving forward, as large language models amplify our existing tendency to treat computers as human actors (Gambino et al., 2020; Nass et al., 1994). Embracing the term mediated communication would not end debates over terminology, but it certainly could help both scholars and students better understand the range of disciplinary questions.

By itself, though, this will not solve the lack-of-variableness problem: Scholars still risk focusing on single platforms and ignoring differences between them. Indeed, Lang (2013) was not writing of mass communication per se, but of media effects, an area whose common label has matched my preferred term for decades. If we think of media as merely delineating what we study, we fail to make it a topic of constructive theorizing. Rather, we should think of the *variables* that define the range of media technology as the objects of interest. What matters is not so much what unites mediated communication but what differentiates it. Here, we would do well to look to the scholarship of affordances, which has become prominent in work on social media and computer-mediated communication, but is less used by scholars of more “traditional” media forms and platforms. Evans et al. (2017) offered a useful explication of the affordance concept. They broadly concluded that affordances should be understood—not as features of technology per se and not as outcomes that we directly use technology to accomplish, but rather—as uses that technological features permit.

With this in mind, we can consider the affordances that media technologies make possible within the broader communication process. It is important to remember that users of these technologies involve both message creators and message consumers. Many of the most important affordances in traditional mass communication platforms were relevant to the people who owned the press or held the broadcast license, while newer technologies have added many more opportunities to craft and respond to messages for audiences. The central point is that the “content” of the message here is relatively inconsequential, except to the extent that the form a message takes is likely contingent upon the tools available to construct, transmit, and consume it. In this way, an affordance-based approach mirrors the idea of the “mix of attributes” model put forward by Eveland (2003). By considering differences both within and between technological platforms, we can understand whether media matter.

Of course, we cannot forget that interpersonal, face-to-face communication has its own affordances. There are things that evolution or culture have made basic features of human conversation that we cannot simply recreate with technology. Scholars of computer-mediated communication long considered these limitations as barriers for users to overcome; only as technology advanced did the focus become more on what additional options were available through technology versus what needs might be frustrated or denied. It remains important to think of variation in media attributes or affordances, both in terms of what some media allow versus others and where all media may still be limiting. Future technology is almost certain to

add affordances that permit us to do things we can already do without technology, given the ease with which people can embrace those instinctive actions.

As such, we can conceive of a model of mediated communication as a coherent intellectual field. Scholars in this area would focus on understanding how technological affordances (both present and absent) moderate the natural human process of communication. This research should by no means limit itself to a narrow focus on micro-level influences on message recipients. The practice of message creation is transformed by the tools available to package and disseminate that message, as well as assumptions about how the audience will engage with it. The nature of institutions, as varied as government or sports leagues, is built around the need to adapt to the new ways people communicate through technology. Media use does not happen in isolation, and new technologies afford new connections with others that foster further communication as well as alter how we receive existing messages.

But what becomes of the audience in all this? Simonson et al. (2019) argued that the use of *mass* was not merely a signal of a large audience; it also conveyed a sense of inclusiveness—a representation of the broader public instead of the elite. We should consider how the assumed and actual audience can be understood from an affordance-based perspective. For content creators such as journalists, technology offers the opportunity to project a message to a large audience. Increasingly, it also offers ways to engage with and gather information about that audience. Even so, messages are crafted in part with an imagined audience in mind, and both the size and nature of that audience likely affect many choices made by those doing the crafting. Audiences too consider the likely recipient of a message when processing it. Consider for example the literature on the *influence of presumed influence*, whereby beliefs about how a message will affect others change our own assessment of the content and our subsequent behavior (Gunther & Storey, 2003). We can and should continue to consider how the idea of the mass audience and mass communication process affect the ways mediated communication plays out.

The race to create a field of mass communication and then impose that label on an array of scholarship was likely a mistake. A better way to think about the specific scholarship we practice is to consider mediated communication, and to focus on the role of communication technology and its attendant affordances. We must consider variables in media, rather than including only certain platforms and being unable to determine if the platform actually matters. We can retain an interest in audiences and media professions while crafting theories that better facilitate hypotheses about emerging technologies rather than descriptions of existing ones. And we can carve out a clearer identity for scholars of media that does not extend to all human interaction. We do not need an end to the era of mass communication. Rather, we need a reset that recognizes we have been media scholars all along.

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Out With Mass Communication, In With MEDIA Communication

Communication researchers should embrace the realization that the mediated information environment they are seeking to better understand has shifted into a post-mass communication age. The goal of this essay is to provide sufficient fodder to cajole the subfield of mass communication to use new terminology to describe its area of study. The proposed shift does *not* signal that media researchers need to start from scratch in terms of developing new theories, methods, or analytical procedures (cf., Lang, 2013). What this stance does indicate is a desire for the subfield to describe itself in a manner that better reflects the types of questions it is asking about today's mediated communication dynamics.

While a case is being made for discarding the use of the term "mass," it is equally important to note that it is essential for "communication" to be retained. A wide range of scholars may utilize and/or assess media to address research questions that are best nested in psychology, sociology, information, political science, or computer science (to name just a few alternative fields of study). A *communication* question "seeks to understand the production, processing, and effects of symbol and signal systems" (Berger & Chaffee, 1987, p. 17). Given that not all research endeavors involving some aspects of media are driven by *communication* questions, the term "communication" must remain for the new concept to be bounded appropriately.

Now that clear positions have been offered concerning what is to be retained and what is to be discarded, focus can be given to *why* the term "mass" needs to be replaced. Lang and Lang (2009) offer a quality review of the origins and history of "mass" as a concept. While giving LeBon (1896/1926) proper recognition in the popular construction of the concept, Lang and Lang singled out Tarde (1898/1969) as someone not to be overlooked. They summarize Tarde's key question concerning the concept of the "mass" as follows: "What is the nature of the social bond that unites a multitude of individuals who "do not come in contact, do not meet or hear each other; [but] are all sitting in their own homes scattered over a vast territory, reading the same newspaper?" (p. 1005). Well, in today's media environment, the people who make up this multitude of individuals can have contact with and meet (most often virtually, but also in person) one another. In addition, sitting in one's living room no longer means being detached from those individuals who exist outside one's domicile. In fact, a person sitting in a living room scrolling through *YouTube* shorts while on a smartphone remains connected to a variety of social networks while consuming media.

Moving on from Tarde, Lang and Lang presented the following reflection on the concept of the "mass" provided almost 100 years ago by Herbert Blumler (1935, p. 122):

"It [the mass] consists of individuals with the most heterogeneous background — differences in families, in communities, in local cultures, and in class affiliations. This mass [like every other mass] has no form or organization. It has no program, no rules, no tradition, and no culture. It has no group consciousness, no we-feeling, no bonds of loyalty. In it, the individuals are anonymous, have no social positions, no designated functions."

Are today's researchers studying the communication processes of audiences that lack organization, consciousness, rules, traditions, and culture? We would argue that Blumer's "mass" is a far cry from the social bonds that undergird the media-centric communication dynamics that have been studied for at least the past 25 years (if not longer). Today's media researchers are not only studying what could be described as "traditional" media use, content, and effects, but also the communication dynamics that exist within audiences that give various media-generated collectives organization, consciousness, rules, traditions, and culture. Similar assessments have been made by other scholars who have provided insights concerning how today's mediated environment brings together mass and interpersonal communication dynamics (e.g., Flanagin, 2017; Walther, 2017). As a result, it is finally time to make a switch to a new terminology to describe this area of communication.

Two works by Denis McQuail serve to reinforce this position. McQuail (2016) offered ten features that define mass communication. Some of the key characteristics of the age of mass communication include "complex, formal organizations" driving communication processes that reflect a "predominantly one-way flow", "standardized content", and "effective supervision, monitoring, and control" (p. 4). Conversely, McQuail (2013) indicated the hallmarks of the modern digital age as being a "lack of central control", an "interactivity and exchange of messages, meanings, and roles", "negligible transmission costs", and "unlimited capacity" (p. 218). In short, the former and the latter media environments are sufficiently distinct to create important changes in "[w]ho says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect" (Lasswell, 1948, p. 216). The result is that the concept of the "mass" no longer reflects the assumptions the subfield is making, the questions it is asking, or the knowledge it is generating.

Nevertheless, the task of changing how a subfield defines itself is not a simple undertaking. McQuail (2016) noted "It [new mediated environment] cannot be said to offer a clear alternative to the former age of "mass communication" because of the diversity of applications and uses and the settings in which it is placed" (p. 10). While traditional mass communication processes were sufficiently homogenized (i.e., "centralized, standardized, market-driven, and advertising-sponsored" content production, Shanahan and Morgan [1999], p. 5) to allow for relative ease of definition, the complexities of the new mediated information environment result in scholars finding it difficult to construct a new means of describing what they are studying. Given that a quality alternative to "mass communication" has yet to be provided, the old terminology remains in place well past its shelf life. We wish to meet this challenge head on by offering an improved means of description.

Mass communication should be replaced with MEDIA communication. We are not the first scholars to recommend the use of "media" as an alternative to mass communication (e.g., Chaffee & Metzger, 2001; Turow, 1992). While past calls for a change of this kind have not garnered sufficient traction across the subfield, the current offering presents MEDIA in all caps to signal the creation of an acronym. An acronym is needed because no single term can represent, as described by McQuail, the "diversity of applications and uses and the settings in which it [the current media environment] is placed." We contend that MEDIA communication research asks *communication* questions applicable to audiences (A) that are mediated (M), engaged (E), diverse (D),

and integrated (I). *Mediated* in the sense that there is some medium through which individuals encounter, consume, or react to content. *Engaged* reflects the notion that media audience members are not only choosing and consuming media (which has been the focus of traditional mass communication research) but are also creating and offering feedback on mediated messages. *Diverse* entails an understanding that demassification has created a media audience that is segmented, and that a multitude of smaller audiences are defined by a wide range of lifestyles, worldviews, and orientations. The diversity of media enclaves will only expand as the media system allows for even more economical, efficient, and effective means of creating greater audience specificity. *Integrated* signals that audience members are connected to one another communicatively in a variety of ways within media environments.

Overall, the concept of *MEDIA Communication* encompasses the rich landscape of research offerings accepted by the mass communication divisions of the field's foremost scholarly associations, as well as what scholarship lands in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Mass Communication & Society*, or any other journals that signal "mass communication" being an area of study that falls within their scopes of inquiry. Media scholars value concept validity, and it is time for the subfield to shift to using *MEDIA Communication* to better reflect the phenomena it is studying.

The decision to advocate for discarding the term "mass" does not come lightly, given the lead author's own University of Wisconsin-Madison doctoral diploma reads having completed the requirements for a degree in *Mass Communication*. As dissonance-inducing as this change may be, the verdict is clear that we are no longer living in an era where we are drawn to study media because it "tells most of the stories to most of the people, most of the time" (Morgan, 2012, pp. 3–4). This quote was used to describe the core motivation behind George Gerbner's study of television and is the quintessential encapsulation of a *mass* communication research agenda. Unlike the Gerbner era, researchers are now drawn to study media that tell most of the stories to *specific groups of people* most of the time. These stories can take the shape of any host of entertainment, news, or commercial (i.e., advertising) offerings. It is our hope that this latest attempt to shift the subfield to the use of a new means of defining itself will begin to take hold within and outside the field.

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Mass Comm Is Dead, Long Live Mass Comm? Reflections on the Need to Better Understand Mass Communication's Long-Term Impacts

Research and theorizing on the effects and impacts associated with media use are closely tied to the concept of mass media, whose origins and use date back to the 1920s (see Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019). In early conceptualizations, the term “mass media” not only referred to the size of the audience but also implied uniform use and effects; both of which are no longer plausible assumptions in today’s high-choice and fragmented media environments (Oliver & Raney, 2023). Paralleling the diversification in media environments and usage behaviors, the scientific study of media effects has broadened over time, and this diversification not only relates to the objects of research but also to the approaches and concepts communication researchers use to investigate them (Potter, 2012; Oliver & Raney, 2023; Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019). Nevertheless, a considerable part of communication research still centers around mass communication. Researchers in that sub-field are concerned with the differential impact of messages transmitted by various mass media. Developing theory on and examining the processes and effects of mass communication are substantial characteristics of this sub-field.

In light of the differentiation tendencies described above, the question of whether a sub-field focusing on (a) mass communication and (b) the processes and effects of media use is still necessary has been raised increasingly in recent years. Other contributors in this forum cover that first aspect by asking what “mass communication” actually means in today’s media environment and whether a different label might be more appropriate. In this piece, I focus on the second aspect, arguing that theorizing on the processes and impacts of mass communication is as important as ever.

Let’s start with the distinction between media *effects* and *impacts*. This distinction is a conscious one, based on the argument that the notion of *effect* is only one possible perspective of looking at the impacts of media use. The notion of *experience* is another one that has been theoretically neglected so far and that I roughly outline below. To begin with, I would like you to reflect on whether you have ever had an experience with media that changed something in your life and that stuck with you—whether thinking more deeply about a certain topic, aiming to be a certain type of person, or rethinking and changing behavior, such as changing your diet. If the answer is yes, keep that in mind; we will come back to it later.

While there is no comprehensive consensus in the field as to what actually defines a media effect (Potter, 2012; Valkenburg & Oliver, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2016), most existing approaches draw on the notion of *effects*. Accordingly, media effects are the (more or less) linear result of (repeated) exposure. Another dominating perspective is that in most conceptualizations, media effects materialize only in the immediate context or aftermath of reception, generally leaving long-term impacts of media out of account. Exceptions are approaches, such as cultivation, where long-term effects are considered,

but again require repeated exposure. Long-term impacts of singular, clearly definable media use are rarely focused on; however, exemplary branches of research demonstrate their relevance. For example, there are studies addressing the influence of watching specialized television shows on career aspiration and choice (Gehrau et al., 2016; Kinast, 2023; Van den Bulck & Beullens, 2007; Weyer et al., 2016). As Kinast (2023) shows, broadcasting of the legal series *Suits* was followed by an increase in applications for law school at a major German university. The author also controlled for social influence variables (such as the influence of parents, friends, or teachers), but surprisingly, none of those turned out to be as influential as watching the series. This finding points towards significant behavioral long-term consequences of a single, clearly defined media use.

Additionally, there are studies addressing long-term impacts of mass communication in the lives of children and adolescents (Greenwood & Long, 2015; Hoekstra et al., 1999; Lippman & Greenwood, 2012). In these studies, the question of individual meaningfulness becomes important. For example, when investigating the role of memorable movies for emerging adults, Greenwood and Long (2015) showed that the adolescents reported on movies that taught them life lessons or that were influential for them in developing their own identity and building social relationships. Remarkably, over half of the adolescents stated that the respective movie continued to affect them to that day (Greenwood & Long, 2015, p. 633). However, there is little *theoretical examination* of such long-term impacts of single media usage situations.

When trying to explain individually meaningful impacts of a single media use (e.g., watching a specific movie or TV series) that are not limited to the more-or-less immediate context of reception, but rather unfold and evolve over time, theoretical conceptualizations of media effects described earlier soon reach their limits. So far, none of the approaches in the highly differentiated field of research on processes and effects of mass communication comprehensively incorporates individual relevance, processing over time, and impacts of single, outstanding experiences that can lead to profound emotional, cognitive, or behavioral consequences.

Taking a bird's-eye view, the notion of *experience* appears to be a useful theoretical supplement to that of linear and rather small-scale media effects in the immediate context of reception. The necessity of such a complementary way of conceptualizing impacts of media use is reflected in existing concepts that address meaningfulness and already have the term "experience" in their name (e.g., eudaimonic entertainment experiences, Bartsch & Oliver, 2016; self-transcendent media experiences, Oliver et al., 2018). These concepts provide important empirical insights into the kinds of media impact that are not adequately covered by the notion of effects. However, they do not sufficiently engage with the notion of experience in a theoretical manner.

To do so, borrowing from disciplines like philosophy or ethnology is helpful, where there has been an extensive engagement with the notion of experience. Turner (1986, p. 35) describes an *experience* as standing out "from the evenness of passing hours and

years [. . .]. Each of us has had certain ‘experiences’ which have been formative and transformative, that is, distinguishable, isolable sequences of external events and internal responses to them”. According to that, an experience begins with “shocks of pain or pleasure” that result in the need to “find meaning in what has disconcerted us, whether by pain or pleasure, and thereby convert mere experience into *an* experience” (Turner, 1986, p. 36). Furthermore, what distinguishes an experience from mere experience is its strong and lasting impression. An experience is an individually experienced fragment of the world, to which the individual attributes meaning in an ongoing process afterwards. Ultimately, the mind consists of the structured sum of such experiences.

Applying these considerations to the individually meaningful, long-term impacts of media use described before leads to a conceptualization of media experiences as individual, rare experiences with media that stand out from average usage as unique sequences. In their nature as an experience, such sequences come with a pleasant or unpleasant disruption of one’s usual, general experience and result in the need to find meaning—an ongoing process that can last for a lifetime. People having had such formative media experiences talk about life-changing impacts, such as having watched a documentary on animal farming and quitting to eat meat; having watched a medical drama series that led to studying medicine or training to become a physiotherapist; or having stumbled upon a movie that inspired them to try to become a better person or remain faithful to one’s goals (Leonhard, 2025). All these exemplary experiences are highly individual and subjective, and all of them arise from exposure to mass communication.

Coming back to when I asked you to reflect on whether you have ever had an experience with media that changed something in your life, and that stuck with you: Such long-lasting, formative media experiences can take innumerable different forms and can occur with any type of media content. So, how does all this speak to the question of whether it is still necessary to think about the differential impact of messages transmitted by various mass media and to engage in developing theory, examination of the processes, and effects of mass communication?

Mass communication, as a subfield that deals with the theorizing and examination of processes and impacts associated with media use, is as relevant as ever. Especially in light of an increasingly diversified media landscape, it is necessary to keep track of approaches and conceptualizations of processes and impacts of media use. Not the least because this allows for finding common ground between loose ends and systematizing existing approaches, but also for identifying blind spots and blank spaces of the empirical reality of mass communication. The conceptualization of media experiences is such an example that draws on existing approaches and extends their theorizing. In conclusion, we have still not reached a point where the range of impacts of mass communication is comprehensively theorized or empirically investigated. It will be critical to examine the processes and impacts associated with media use from a bird’s-eye view as our field evolves.

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From Shared Culture to Shared Confusion: Mass Communication in an Era of Democratic Backsliding

During the heyday of mass communication, the transmission of culture was assumed to rely on common exposure to news and forms of entertainment that imparted a sense of shared experience and national identity. The rise of the Cold War and the division of the geopolitical axis into two contending superpowers was further thought to build a cultural and political consensus in juxtaposition to a common enemy and opposing way of life. Until the development of digital platforms and new distribution technologies that facilitated a content and choice explosion, the media system was accurately described as a low-choice environment, governed by regulations and agreed-upon principles, that together kept society, more or less, on the same page.

Fast forward to today, where the development of digital platforms, social media, user-generated content, and online influencers with followings that rival (or exceed) legacy networks has fragmented the audience into a mass of atomized shards that have retreated into silos of political and identity-based tribes. In such a milieu, the notion of shared experience seems nostalgic and the very idea of mass communication *passé*; a relic long since obsolesced by the new forms of emergent media.

In this short essay, we argue to the contrary, that shared experience is alive and well—and very much part of daily life. But the script has shifted. Instead of the social coordination and *shared culture* that mass media traditionally enabled, the contemporary media ecology promotes a sense of *shared confusion*, with competing voices drowning each other out, political actors winning adherents by trafficking in divisive falsehoods, and outside actors infiltrating porous platforms. Unfortunately, as we explain below, shared confusion is a binding property of mass communication in the contemporary moment that enables authoritarian politics.

This may not be the sensible cacophony envisioned by Milton when he eloquently defended freedom of speech in the *Areopagitica* (see Blasi, 1996), with the best ideas rather than the loudest voices carrying the day. But the algorithmic media landscape of the current moment is heavily biased in favor of negative information that dominates in a *laissez-faire* attention economy, with few guardrails in place to ensure factuality. The epistemic playing field is heavily biased towards narratives that garner clicks, amplify lies, and reinforce existing prejudices rather than dispelling them (Hayes, 2025), as a more evidence-based media system and consensus-oriented political culture strived for in calmer times. These traditions are in retreat. Not only are audiences confused, but they are also more polarized, cynical, and distrusting than at any point in the modern era (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2025). And perhaps with little wonder—a confused electorate and weakened media system provided opportunities for authoritarian voices to unravel democratic values and norms (Applebaum, 2020; Rauch, 2021).

Misinformation as a feature of public and *mass* communication seems to have materialized out of thin air for some, but its presence in democratic discourse had been noted since the rise of social media (Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). With the tumultuous U.S. presidential election of 2016, the evidence for mass confusion became inescapable, as the volume of misinformation skyrocketed with accusations of “fake news” routinely used to mislead and confuse the public while criticizing mainstream media outlets (Kalb,

2018; Koliska & Assmann, 2021).¹ In the wake of that fateful election, a poll by the *Pew Center* found that 64% of Americans reported feeling “a great deal of confusion” about the basic facts of current events caused by completely made-up news (Barthel et al., 2016). By the end of the first Trump presidency, the *Washington Post* Fact-Checker desk documented over 20,000 false or misleading claims the president made while in office (Aratani, 2020). And now, with the introduction of AI into the political messaging maelstrom, the rate of false information production has only accelerated (Sadeghi, 2025).

Contributing to the dilution of the mass media ecosystem at a time of expansion and fragmenting offerings is the exemption of digital platforms and cable news stations, at least in the United States, from meaningful regulation. Recent reductions in platform self-moderation have created further opportunities for political actors to “flood the zone” with distortions and outright fabrications. As empirical studies have found (e.g., Guess et al., 2020), politicians are the “super spreaders” of misinformation because they can directly benefit from it and, other than being shamed by fact-checking, there is no real consequence in politics for routine misleading, retweeting a sensationalized meme, or even lying. The compromised state of the electronic public sphere has placed an undue burden on the individual news consumer, who has neither the editorial training nor the motivation to sort fact from fiction when confronted with a constant stream of suspect content (Bucy & Newhagen, 2019).

For mass communication, the crisis of facticity that confronts citizenship raises questions harkening back to user motivations for seeking out news in the first place. Traditionally, two primary motives have been surveillance of the information environment, to learn about the day’s important events, and entertainment gratifications, to derive enjoyment from media consumption (Reinhard, 2009). With the growth of social media, a set of socially oriented motivations has been identified, including connection, coordination, and social influence (Dhir et al., 2017). But now, with misinformation on the rise, the veracity of the information space has become a paramount concern. Thus, motives for fact-checking should move into the foreground. In studies to date, most respondents opt to not fact-check questionable story headlines, even when given the opportunity (see Bucy et al., 2024).

Collective confusion is constitutive of mass communication rather than evidence that the basis for mass communication has been undermined by uncertainty and disorientation. This pattern is perhaps most visible in the socio-technical developments that enable democratic backsliding and that empower authoritarian actors. The collective aspect of confusion is binding in establishing support for a political order that promises deliverance. Demassification of audiences creates conditions favorable to populist appeals to “the people” as a profoundly alienated sector that longs for unity and order. This dynamism suggests an interplay of a centrifugal pulling apart in ever splintering media and a centripetal drawing together in the security promised by authoritarianism.

The relevance of mass communication in fragmented media is increasingly apparent in this moment of democratic backsliding, the incremental process in which the quality of a state’s democracy is undermined. While political science generally focuses on state-led debilitation, mass communication can explain the demand side of backsliding—why illiberalism is popular in many parts of the world (McDevitt et al., 2022). Populist communication constitutes “the people” as unified and aggrieved

against elites. Authoritarian actors and aligned media amplify discontent, which can culminate in the founding of elections of autocrats. Constitutional democracy is thereby undermined in the age of algorithmic logics that promote fear of outgroups and populist narratives that resonate across platforms. Citizens encounter each other as adversaries in a healthy democracy, but as enemies during democratic backsliding.

Frosh and Pinchevski's (2018) conception of "eventness" in contemporary media captures how mass communication is emergent—rather than dissolved—in dispersed networks; witnessing of events spreads across "feeds, streams, posts, tweets, images, and so on, which as such constitute the event both as a duration and as an aggregation" (p. 137). The nature of mass communication can be understood, then, as no longer a matter of top-down, intentional direction from elites confined to specific channels that ensures uniform reception (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). To be sure, direction and control of messaging is a key element of authoritarian communication, but the dispersion of contemporary media requires the active complicity of followers in the free flow of memes, tropes, and resonant frames. The distinctive epistemology of authoritarianism is borne out by its self-reinforcing simplicity (Snyder, 2017). Mass communication theory illuminates the self-reinforcing epistemologies and emotions such as anger, resentment, and fear triggered by actual or manufactured threats suggesting that damaged democracies are unlikely to recover any time soon — and that mass communication is at the very core of backsliding.

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Notes

1. The term *lügenpresse*, or “lying press,” was used by the Nazi regime before and during World War II to similarly discredit the news media, including the foreign press, and undermine public trust in objective facts (Koliska & Assmann, 2021).
2. Author order is alphabetical. Erik P. Bucy and Michael McDevitt contributed equally to this article.

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