

Breaking “News”: Majority Can’t Define Mass Communication

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Abstract

Current communication textbooks proffer conflicting, vague, or incomplete definitions of the core concepts of “mass communication” and “news,” contributing to confusion among students, and subsequently in the public sphere, of what experts in the field mean when discussing news and mass media. The analysis in this article disentangles a clear definition of mass communication from the related concepts of mass media and mediated communication, as well as clearly differentiating the concept of “news” from the adjacent concepts of journalism and entertainment. Discussion concludes with implications for communication education and improved public understanding of the field.

Keywords

mass communication, mass media, mediated communication, newsworthiness

An updated report on *Difficult Conversations* from the Harvard Negotiation Project suggested that, rather than assigning or accepting *blame* for the painful status of an ongoing interpersonal conflict, a party to it aim to articulate his or her *contribution* to the problem or impasse. In short, abandon the idea of blame, and instead map the contribution system (Stone, Patton, and Heen, 2010). In this spirit, I suggest here how some of us in the sibling disciplines of mass communication and journalism education might have contributed to current misapprehensions and disagreements among users of mediated content in the early 21st-century mediasphere.

Our contribution lies in conceiving, writing, publishing, and teaching imprecise or conflated definitions of core ideas in mass communication and journalism such that

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some course instructors (and in consequence, more than a few graduates) find themselves slow or unable to provide succinct “elevator talks” delineating some key concepts in our fields such as “news” or even “mass communication” itself. This leaves many nonexpert citizens (including some schoolteachers and broadcasters) out to sea in sincere efforts to organize a welter of cultural and social communication practices through manifold discrete or converged media channels.

This discussion will address the frequent use of inconsistent definitions of core concepts first in mass communication education and second in journalism instruction, and provide precise solutions to the problems identified. Readers of the following section will be able to distinguish, by simple sentence definitions and by example, among mass communication, mass media, mass audience, and mediated communication without recourse to misleading attributes such as audience size or electricity. The analysis in the subsequent section reveals why students, consumers, and citizens might conflate the spongy concept of “news” with the clearer concepts of journalism and entertainment.

Majority Can’t Define Mass Communication

To cite authors defining mass communication as “communication to a mass audience” would entail picking on a handful of probably decent folks at random and naming them because a Google algorithm brought them to light the fastest. This idea remains the commonsense perception of a genuine mass audience, one about as pervasive as the notion that “body language” = “communicating without speaking.” Many introductory communication texts perpetuate this simple error in classifying communication according to potential audience size (usually called “levels,” from self to planetary), for a given “message” from a “sender.” This scheme works well enough for face-to-face communication, almost universally (but usefully) ranked as intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public (e.g., daydreams, conversations, meetings, lectures).

How to classify organizational and mass communication, however, varies from text to text. A few writers sensibly set both to one side as situations or environments in which communication at all levels might take place. Some list “mass” at the end because it must be the biggest one of all, as though a jazz trio performance aired on a Chicago cable access channel will draw a vaster audience than a rock concert down the street at Wrigley Field. Such authors may also insert “organizational” on the “level” above or below public communication.

If audience size determines communication type, one cannot think clearly about technically feasible but utterly failed attempts to reach a mass audience. Very brief case study: A talented guitarist and singer-songwriter in a former undergraduate communication research methods course of mine decided that if a young, unsigned Justin Bieber could rack up millions of hits on YouTube, he could certainly approach that number during the semester. Approach it he did, with 17 hits by the time his final research report was due. Was this an instance of mass communication?

If unsure, you join a mass audience of students, as well as a few educators, not all outside this discipline. If you say No, you concur with M. L. DeFleur, recently

memorialized at the 2017 AEJMC conference for his stellar contributions to our field. And you are wrong.

Consider (in isolation from an esteemed body of work, not as exemplar of it) DeFleur's (2010) definition of mass communication as "a linear process by which [profit motivated] professional communicators use media to design and disseminate [meaning-encoded] messages widely, rapidly, and continually {over distance} to arouse intended [decoded] meanings in large, diverse, and selectively attending audiences in attempts to influence them in a variety of ways" (p. 32). My bracketed insertions derive from a more formal 6-point definition from which the one-sentence definition is condensed. The braces indicate an insertion of DeFleur and his coauthors when reiterating this definition in a more recent text (DeFleur, Kearney, Plax, & DeFleur, 2014, p. 383).

"With this rather complex definition in mind," DeFleur (2010, p. 33) sifts through about 20 communicative activities to clarify his definition by example. He excludes faxes and phone calls "because the audience is not large and diverse" and "users usually are not 'professional communicators'" (p. 33), confusing an attribute of a means of communication with an attribute of its audience, while dismissing professional communicators who might use a phone or fax.

He also excludes museums, which do not "provide 'rapid dissemination' with 'media'" (p. 33). Now, museum installation designers will dispute the assertion they do not use media. But do they use "media"? If one requires scare (or air) quotes to qualify a term, one might preferably opt for a clearer term. A rock concert is ruled out, too, "because it does not disseminate messages 'over distance'" (p. 33; a phrase likely intended for inclusion in the 2010 definition). DeFleur adds, "Similarly, no situation in which live performers and an audience can see each other directly . . . is an example of mediated communication" (p. 33). Indisputably correct, but "mediated communication" introduces a third concept presumably synonymous with the already conflated mass media and mass communication.

After eliminating direct mail advertising, which "might qualify—except that it is not really 'continual,'" DeFleur (2010, p. 33) later includes books, motion pictures, "VCRs and DVDs", all apparently disseminated "continually over distance" (p. 33) in a way a mass mailing of flyers is not. He does not mention the Internet, but he and his coauthors clarify later (DeFleur, Kearney, Plax, & DeFleur, 2014) that print, film, and broadcasting are mass media, while excluding "a long list of point-to-point media, such as the telephone," and calling the Internet "a special mixed case" (p. 384). "Thus," in conclusion, "our definition turns out to be relatively rigorous. It enables us to set definite boundaries on what can be included and studied as a medium and process of mass communication" (DeFleur, 2010, p. 33).

A definition only *relatively* rigorous cannot set definite boundaries, and this definition does not, as amply demonstrated by the array of inconsistent and contradictory examples to illustrate it. Examples might supplement a formal definition but should not serve in its place. A *definition* that sets *definite* boundaries need not qualify its rigor as *relative*. DeFleur's (2010) is far from the only mass-produced definition to interleave mass media, mass communication, and mediated communication as near or

complete synonyms. Imagine an organic chemist or civil engineer asked at a dinner party to explain her field and spending 10 min offering a 222-word definition with a logically inconsistent list of 20 examples.

Let us propose a workable definition of “mass media” and demonstrate its robust utility. Mass media (popularly abbreviated as “the media”) consist of organizations, usually profit driven, who produce richly mediated content (news and entertainment) intended for a mass audience. The structure of this formal sentence definition will be familiar to any technical writer (Markel, 2014): introduce the term (mass media), identify the category (organizations), and distinguish the specific type from the other organizations. Follow with a list of examples of familiar mass media businesses or conglomerates. One might productively replace the words “a process by which” with “organizations which” in DeFleur’s (2010) definition or that of DeFleur, Kearney, Plax & DeFleur (2014) to transform either one into a comprehensive definition of mass media, which, though an example of mass communication, is not a synonym for it.

Of course, “mass media” engage in “mass communication.” Unfortunately, even a few experts commit a basic logic error in running the sentence “Mass media are mass communication” in reverse, or in misapprehending its verb. A glance at the semantics of “is/are” reveals that only for certain utterances does the word equal “=” (Jim is a Canadian). In other contexts, “is/are” might entail “entails” or mean “means,” or “involves,” or “requires.” In our case, we intend to say that mass media makes use of or requires mass communication. Clear enough, but that sentence is not logically reversible.

Of the four species of major premise in a deductive categorical argument (All A is B; No A is B; Some A is B; Some A is not B), only the second and third are logically reversible (if no, or some, Jews are Buddhists, the reverse is also logically necessary). As for the possible reversibility of the fourth premise, the logical answer is “maybe, but not necessarily.” Despite the popularity of the more consequential error, “All B is A, because All A is B” is true IF AND ONLY IF $A = B$. To define mass communication with reference to examples of mass media is to equate the two, thereby to concede one is using two different terms for the same concept, two different signifiers for an identical signified. If two symbols signal the same referent, let us adopt the better of them and let the other be, in the British term, “made redundant.”

The inductive proof is simpler. Simply postulate examples of mass communication that have nothing to do with “the media,” such as flyers inserted under every driver-side wiper in an IHOP parking lot or Presidential tweets throughout 2017. So, we cannot define mass communication with reference to audience size or “the media.” Let us dispense swiftly with a third, and quite popular, misconception, the conflation of mass communication with electronic broadcast. When asked to offer examples of mass communication, first-year students invariably cite broadcast media such as radio and TV. When prompted next for examples that require no electricity, they swiftly recall the printing press.

Herein lies the common ground which uniquely identifies the special distinction of mass from other species of human communication. Ben Franklin running his hand-operated press under the light of whale oil lanterns is in the same category as a Super

Bowl telecast in that each entails the mass production or mass distribution of communicable symbolic content. Each is not merely symbolic action at a distance. Neither is merely “communication to an audience not physically present with the speaker,” which stands as a succinct definition of *mediated communication*.

Gutenberg and CBS exemplify symbolic communication technically reproduced, whether as mass production of tangible content, or electronic broadcast of symbol-laden signals to individual receivers. Therefore, a relative or neighbor asking a student majoring in mass communication, “What’s mass communication?” should hear in reply something like “Mass communication is the mass production or mass distribution of any symbolic content and the study of any profession relying on it, like journalism, advertising, or social marketing.”

To distinguish it from related terms, we may offer a simple hierarchy of umbrella terms. Any communication in which the participants are not present in the same place or time is *mediated communication*, invented the first time someone memorized a message, and then rode or ran to its intended recipient to recite it. Writing cracked the world of mediated communication wide open. The printing press allowed for the mass production of mediated communication, while radio permitted its mass dispersion to an array of individual electronic receivers. Mass media organizations are the most prominent producers of mediated content by way of mass communication, but not, in the current Internet era, the only ones.

Any student of mass communication who does not routinely recite some variant of the previous paragraph as a matter of common contributes to the current confusion in the public sphere about the nature, scope, purpose, and influence of mass communication. About a half-century ago, George Gerbner (1966) wrote,

Mass communication is the extension of institutionalized public acculturation beyond the limits of face-to-face and any other personally mediated interaction. This becomes possible only when technological means are available and social organizations emerge for the mass production and distribution of messages. (p. 431)

A mystery outside the scope of this discussion is why so straightforward and conceptually clear a definition did not enter the mainstream of mass communication education. There is no reason it should remain on the periphery.

Now, one might excuse journalism teachers who use the terms mediated communication, mass communication, and mass media interchangeably. After all, campus and professional journalists use mediated communication within mass media organizations to bring news to a mass audience through mass communication. If only everyone could clearly say what they meant by “news.” This puzzle we address next.

Breaking “News”

Midway through my winter 2015 semester at Baku State University as a Fulbright scholar in Azerbaijan’s only remaining journalism program, I volunteered as a guest lecturer in a program cosponsored by the U.S. Embassy and ANS-TV in Baku, at the

time one of the last remaining privately owned and semi-independent broadcasters in the country.¹

For a month, about 40 grad school-aged mono- to trilingual students stayed twice weekly after their late afternoon classes in a long, sunny classroom on the fifth floor of a Soviet-era building, housing the TV station and much disused office space to hear whatever I wished to impart about rhetoric, mass communication, or American news. As many textbooks Azeri students might acquire secondhand or online conflate mass communication with mass media, I sharply distinguished, as in the previous section, *mass communication* as any effort at mass production or technical reproduction of expression, messages, or content, from *mass media* organizations that produce news or entertainment. Students wondered where journalism fit in. Differentiating among journalism, news, and entertainment turned out to pose a challenge beyond our language barrier.

Contrasting journalism with entertainment was easy enough. *Entertainment* we defined as a performance, or record of such, intended to put its audience in a desired mood or frame of mind. And my Azeri students accepted as readily as do my American ones, a definition of journalism derived from the work of Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007): Journalism is a discipline of verification whose purpose is providing citizens information they need to be free and self-governing.² (A few asked whether an online news blog post about the reopening of a long-shuttered downtown subway entrance counted as journalism. I replied Yes; entry-level, but yes.) So was *journalism* another word for *news*? The history of the terms suggests not, otherwise news organizations would have called themselves journalism companies for decades, and the latter notion would not have appeared generations ago in words like “newspaper,” “newsmagazine,” or “newsreel.”

So what was *news*? One difficulty in translating “newsworthiness” in that early evening Baku classroom lay in the vagueness of its definition in English. Certainly, it means “information possessing qualities that merit putting it on the news” or “printing alongside other news” (as “trustworthy” or “blameworthy” mean worthy of trust and worth blaming), but one might as well say opium makes one sleepy due to its “dormitive principle” (*virtus dormitiva*), a joke Molière penned 17 years before the first newspaper appeared in North America. I was bemused the first time I heard a colleague in mass communication describe a “newsworthy” story using the acronym TIPCUP (timeliness, impact, proximity, conflict, unusualness, prominence), and disappointed to find it in common use. (I thought PICTUP more evocative acronym, but soon learned earlier instructors had scooped me.)

As it turns out, a conceptually clear formal definition of “news” has eluded us for decades or longer. Pamela Shoemaker (2006) calls *news* a “primitive construct—one that requires no definition in ordinary conversation, because everyone knows what it is,” adding that “When asked to define a primitive term, it is difficult to do so without using the term in the definition” (p. 105). We should thus find that dictionary denotations of “newsworthy” loop back on themselves, and indeed they do. Merriam-Webster’s “interesting enough to the general public to warrant reporting” is typical, as is Collins’s “interesting enough to be reported in newspapers or on the radio or television; having the qualities of news.”

Instead of defining news precisely through qualities that distinguish it from other types of the general category of *information* (as we can journalism), we describe an instance of news obliquely, as that worth including among other things we already classify as “news” calling this or that event “newsworthy,” but defining that term only with reference to a list of qualities or “news values.”

News has certainly been theorized in-depth by tenured academics and independent scholars for many years, by Tuchman (1978) as an aspect of the social construction of reality, for example, or as a social myth in Barthes’s sense by Koch (1990), but for educators, “textbook authors give nearly identical lists of characteristics when defining what news is” (Cotter, 2010, p. 68). Cotter tabulates lists of “news values” from five contemporary textbooks, all of which devolve to PICTUP. This works as a slick mnemonic, but crafting a complete sentence with all six transforms some into either awkward adjectives or peculiar nouns. Neither list limits itself to everyday words (only “prominent/prominence” align well—“proximity,” sure; but “proximal”? “unusual,” yes; but “unusualness”?). Instructors may search in vain for a conceptually clear and nontautological definition, finding only lists of five to 12 attributes.

Contrasting journalism with entertainment comes easily to most people, even when they find some journalistic content incidentally entertaining (the public shaming of a political foe, for example). The problem lies in distinguishing news from journalism or from entertainment. My students from Arkansas to Azerbaijan, Bowie County to Baku, answer the same way when I display a list of “news values” and ask whether all or most of those terms might also describe *some* journalism or *some* entertainment. Each possibility appears immediately obvious. Timely and interesting stories of unusual events or conflicts involving nearby or prominent figures might comprise information a citizen needs to be free and self-governing, but not necessarily. Alternatively, much “news” might be “for entertainment purposes only.”

Many organizations prospered for generations, especially throughout the 20th century, by offering all three products—journalism, news, entertainment—to mass markets. Profits from some news and much entertainment underwrote expensive investments in investigative journalism. Consider the possibility that one contributing factor in the rapid downsizing, consolidation, and elimination of many newsrooms and news bureaus might have been an inability to articulate a clear defense of journalism to investors and traders arguing that leaner departments were still news organizations, still in fact producing *news*, just the news that market research indicated consumers preferred.

Consider an analogy with “food.” Assume an organization might opt to market nutrition, or food, or snacks. Let us formally define nutrition versus snacks as follows: Both, like food, are types of ingestible substances (the general category), with the former directly conducive to one’s health and the latter to one’s elevation or management of mood. So what’s *food*? Imagine we had no idea, nor ever defined the term, but we trusted that folks in the food business knew food when they see it. Old-school foodhounds in the foodroom had a nose for food. Why is this or that substance on the shelf at the foodmarket? Because it’s foodworthy. It has foodworthiness. Clever teachers will put TIPCUP on the tip of the tongue: taste, ingestible, palatable, caloric, unspoiled, and preserved. So is food also nutrition? Could be. Are snacks food? Sure.

Imagine further that nutrition is labor-intensive and expensive to produce, while snacks can be mass-produced as cheaply as, well, corn syrup. Picture a world in which Wall Street analysts compel food organizations, owned by fewer and fewer conglomerates, to produce more snacks to boost quarterly profits. Should nutractivists claim the mass feedia are failing in their civic duty to malnourished or snack-obese citizens, the defense is simple: We are food organizations, and we have a duty to our plateholders. Or, we're only giving eaters what they want to consume. "Good for you" doesn't sell, but fun snacks leap off the shelves. So why not produce more snack-like substances that still exhibit foodworthiness? Given our established list of what makes a thing foodworthy, we are still producing food, as we always have been.³

Small wonder that after the business model of print journalism underwritten by local advertising largely collapsed over the past generation, some considered our civilization glutted with entertainment and starved for journalism. If journalists, news professionals, and entertainers struggle to define news to interns, students, and one another, we might forgive wide swaths of the general public for consuming "infotainment" when it is offered from so many sources, or concede that some financial analysts might sincerely wonder why news organizations would run up expenses for "hard news" when "soft news" is more profitable.

Outro

In the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, journalism professors among other concerned citizens wondered whether the content and caliber of information provided by news organizations had adequately served the public interest in prior weeks and months. Whether all breaking news rose to the level of journalism or was simply click-bait, all of it was, by definition, news. All exhibited most of the "news values" of newsworthiness. To the suggestion that relentless coverage of Secretary Clinton's email server fell short of historical benchmarks in journalism, one cannot call it unnewsworthy.

Looking ahead, we might welcome some recent indicators of change. First, we might support those enterprises explicitly referring to themselves as journalism organizations, if they produce information citizens need to remain free and self-governing through a transparent process of verification. Second, if an enterprise calling itself a news organization produces little but entertainment, let us support it only if entertainment is all we desire, but withdraw our attention otherwise. Instead of asking, of a newscast or publication that falls short of our needs, "How is this news?" we might ask "Is this journalism?" We might also prefer organizations using "news" as a primitive construct only if they specify what kind of news they produce. "Entertainment news" or "MMA news" strike me as useful distinctions (as do the familiar "sports" and "weather").⁴

We have watched "news" slowly infected by the MRSA of entertainment, atrophy-ing limbs of journalism, in part because we defined news so carelessly that it could often logically overlap, as in a Venn diagram, with either journalism or entertainment. Perhaps it is past time to declare what news is so we know it when we see it, or qualify what kind of news we mean, or abandon this primitive construct for terms we understand clearly, like entertainment. Or journalism.

As for the means by which most news is disseminated, Gerbner spent the better part of a half-century telling his students,⁵ many of whom became professors with students of their own, that mass communication involves the mass production or dispersion of messages or content, but his impeccably clear definition did not enter the mainstream of “EJMC” pedagogy.

We might have underprepared a generation of students born after the World Wide Web was established, reaching the age of reason when the first smartphone launched, to engage with the Queen of All Media, the Internet, which converges all prior means of mediated and mass communication into a global network. The bulwarks of the analog gatekeepers have fallen to the digital gatecrashers, many producing innovative experiments in citizen journalism (sometimes for little compensation or at considerable personal risk), but with many more content with click counts salable to advertisers, producing what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) courteously call the “journalisms” of assertion and affirmation, or what the rest of us have long more bluntly identified as BS and propaganda. Many educators hail from a century in which one needed to control, or achieve a certain rank in, a government or heavily invested capital enterprise to attempt mass communication. A key difference between this century and the last for students lies in their current economic and technical ability, among a mass of “prosumers,” to attempt mass communication.

Unfortunately, many new media appear on the surface as enhancements of previous forms of mediated communication, but can be redirected at will, not necessarily by the initiator of a message, toward mass communication. This leaves all manner of disgraced PR consultants (Justine Sacco) or comics tweeting tasteless jokes (Gilbert Gottfried), high school sexters, or politically opinionated tenure-track (subsequently adjunct; or adjunct, subsequently fired) educators vulnerable to the ease with which what might appear as improved point-to-point media may swiftly pivot to viral mass communication. Many of us can do more to define the parameters of our field and provide a clear conceptual map to the world ahead for both students and citizens.

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Notes

1. The government revoked the station’s license in July 2016, ostensibly over its plan to air an interview with the Turkish dissident Fethullah Gulen, deemed inimical to “the strategic partnership between the Azeri and Turkish people” in a lawsuit filed by the country’s National Television and Radio Council (Bagirova & Antidze, 2016).
2. A definition endorsed by the former American Press Institute (2017), now amalgamated with the News Media Alliance. “No one,” writes the self-styled Missouri Group at the Missouri School of Journalism, “has done a better job of describing journalism and the news journalists report” (Brooks, Kennedy, Moen, Ranly, & The Missouri Group, 2017, p. 4).

3. Meanwhile, the Food Snax chain (FAX) declares beer and opioids food because both meet a couple of foodworthy standards while Nutritional Public Restaurants has its funding cut.
4. These are of course “weather news” and “sports news.” The first half of a typical American news broadcast might consist largely of journalism usefully classified as “local,” “regional,” “national,” or “international,” but the wide net cast by “news” might catch a rumor of a pop singer’s divorce, photos of a bus crash in Tashkent, or a grisly home invasion in Memphis reported at the top of the hour in Shreveport.
5. Prominent among them Michael Morgan, the first instructor I encountered in any medium who defined mass communication as I had done, and who kindly alerted me to my definition’s distinguished precursor.

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