

What is Mass Media?

The Changing Role of Mass Communications and the Media Industries

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Media studies definitions are changing quickly as digital technology evolves, taking mass media and advertising and marketing communications in new directions.

By definition, mass communication is a message created by a person or a group of people sent through a transmitting device (a medium) to a large audience or market.
So what exactly is mass media?

Mass media is any medium used to transmit mass communication. Until recently mass media was clearly defined and was comprised of the eight mass media industries; Books, Newspapers, Magazines, and Recordings, Radio, Movies, Television and The Internet.

Defining mass media is no longer clear-cut or simple. The continuing explosion of digital communication technology is producing more than a little confusion on the subject.

Developing new technology breeds new questions. Should cell phones be included in a definition of mass media? What about video and computer games? Is "World of Warcraft" a mass medium strictly speaking?

Considerable debate surrounds this topic at the moment and the answer is still not entirely clear.

A cell phone or any phone for that matter is not typically considered to be a mass medium. A telephone is a simple two way communication device, capable of serving only few people at time. Looking at the definition of mass media, it is clear that a mass medium must communicate a message to a large group, often simultaneously. However, modern cell phones are no longer a single use device. Most cell phones are equipped with internet access and capable of connecting to the web which is in fact a mass medium. Does this make cell phones a mass medium or simply a device to access the web?

Currently, there is a plan in motion that will allow marketers and advertisers to tap into satellites and broadcast commercials and advertisements directly to millions of cell phones, unsolicited by the phone's user. Transmitting mass advertising to millions of people is indeed mass communication. Someday, in the near future, you may check your cell phone and find it flashing a message that you have two missed calls AND that four out of five dentists chose Trident.

Video games may also be evolving into a mass medium. Consider the fact that video games certainly contain messages and ideologies conveyed to users. Users sometimes share the experience by playing online but players of video games are also sharing a common experience when they have played the game separately. It is possible to discuss in great detail the events of a video game with a friend you have never played with because the experience was identical to you both. Are you receiving the same message along with millions of others? Is this mass communication? Experts disagree but once again, the question may soon become moot as advertisers are looking into placing advertisements as well as incorporating product placement into the games themselves.

As digital communication technology continues to expand, exactly what devices constitute a mass medium will undoubtedly continue to evolve and expand the current definition beyond the eight mass media industries.