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REVISITING "MASS COMMUNICATION" AND THE "WORK" OF THE AUDIENCE IN THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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DONALD MCGANNON
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH CENTER

WORKING PAPER

REVISITING "MASS COMMUNICATION" AND THE "WORK" OF THE AUDIENCE IN THE NEW MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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December, 2008

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Revisiting ‘Mass Communication’ and the ‘Work’ of the Audience in the New Media Environment

Abstract

This paper revisits the concept of mass communication, which has faced persistent challenges to its continued relevance in light of changes that have taken place in the media environment. This paper offers a counterpoint to claims of the term’s diminished relevance, as well as to some recent efforts to reposition the term, by putting forth an interpretive approach that is not exclusive to the “institutional communicator” and that allows the term “mass” to extend to both the senders and receivers of messages. This paper argues that this interpretive approach is in keeping with some early interpretations of the concept’s meaning, and that such an interpretation is viable in light of the definitional ambiguity that has always surrounded the term. This paper then considers how the notion of the “work” of the audience is reconfigured in this new mass communication environment. As this paper illustrates, the claim of the audience engaging in ‘watching as working’ merits extension in an environment of interactive media and user-generated content.

Revisiting 'Mass Communication' and the 'Work' of the Audience in the New Media Environment

Introduction

'Mass communication' long has been an embattled term. As the media environment has evolved, arguments have persisted that the term has outlived its usefulness, that it fails to capture the dynamics of the contemporary media system. Yet, though diminished, the term has endured. Changes now taking place in the media environment would seem to warrant another round of re-examination of the term and its continued relevance in communications scholarship. There have, however, been surprisingly few efforts to reassess mass communication as a concept in light of the changes that the Internet and other new media technologies have imposed upon the media environment (for exceptions, see Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Lorimer, 2002).[1] And, more important, no such reassessments have been conducted recently enough to have fully taken into consideration the implications of current developments such as the growth of Web 2.0 platforms and the rise of user-generated content.

In an effort to address this gap, this paper revisits the concept of mass communication in light of the changes taking place in the contemporary media environment. In doing so, this paper pays particular attention to the central role that the audience plays in the process of mass communication, given that, as Mosco and Kaye (2000: 33) note, 'the term *audience* has over time become embedded within the literature of mass communication studies' (emphasis in original). As this paper illustrates, a contemporary approach to mass communication can be articulated around a more robust conceptualization of the idea of the 'mass,' in which the term refers both to the senders and the receivers of information. Such a formulation of the concept of mass communication, and the role of the audience within it, better reflects the contemporary dynamics of interactive media and user-generated content.

Such an approach to the concept of mass communication highlights the changing nature of the media audience. And while scholars have devoted a substantial amount of attention to the ways that the new media environment is recasting the notion of the audience (see, e.g., Cover, 2006; Livingstone, 1999, 2003), one set of propositions about traditional media audiences that has not been thoroughly reassessed in light of contemporary technological changes involves the notion of the 'work' of the audience. Critical approaches to the media audience as 'commodity' have emphasized the 'work' engaged in by traditional media audiences via their consumption of media content – given the monetization of audience attention by media organizations that takes place in the audience marketplace (Jhally and Livant, 1986; Smythe, 1977). Like the concept of mass communication itself, the prominence of this notion of 'watching as working' (Jhally and Livant, 1986) seems to have been on the wane over the past two decades.

However, today's reconfigured dynamics of mass communication compel us to revisit the relevance and analytical utility of foregrounding the work of the audience. In today's media environment, this notion of the audience commodity engaging in work is highlighted via the new mechanisms through which audience activity is being monetized. Avenues such as the integration of user-generated content into the business models of media organizations and the increased reliance of marketers and advertisers on online consumer discussion and other forms of user-generated content to disseminate brand messages are two of the most visible ways in which the work of the audience is now extending well beyond simply watching.

In addressing theses issues, the first section of this paper reviews the origins of the concept of mass communication, the debates surrounding its appropriate definition, and the various definitional reassessments that have taken place over the course of the past 70 years as the media environment has continued to evolve. The second section outlines the specific ways in

which the dynamics of today's interactive media environment are, to some extent, resuscitating the concept of mass communication, albeit under somewhat reconfigured terms. The third section extends this reconsideration to the notion of the audience and its work, arguing that the somewhat dormant notion of the audience's work merits a revival in a media environment in which various forms of user-generated content are playing an increasingly central role in the business models and strategies of media organizations, advertisers, and marketers. The concluding section considers the implications of the arguments presented here, as well as areas for additional research.

The Rise and Decline of Mass Communication*:* A Brief Intellectual History of the Term

A key element of the argument being developed in this essay is that the term 'mass communication' is inherently flexible enough to satisfactorily account for the dynamics of the contemporary media environment. This position stands in contrast to assessments over the past three decades that have asserted, to varying degrees, that the term is something of an historical anachronism incapable of supporting a useful overarching framework for representing the contemporary media environment (e.g., Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Escarpit, 1977). However, as this section will illustrate, by many accounts the term mass communication has always been more wide-ranging in its meaning than many critics of the term have acknowledged. And, perhaps more important, this demonstrated definitional ambiguity that has surrounded the term establishes a level of interpretive flexibility that accommodates the definitional reorientation proposed here.

Origins of the Term

It is difficult to locate the definitive origins of the term 'mass communication'. Chaffee and Rogers (1997) tentatively attribute the origins of the term to Rockefeller Foundation official

John Marshall, who, from the 1930s through the 1950s was instrumental in bringing together scholars from around the U.S. with an interest in communications research and funding a substantial amount of early research in the nascent field. Buxton (1994) similarly speculates that Marshall's use of the term in a 1940 memorandum may have been the first use of the term as an analytical concept, though the term itself certainly predates Marshall's use in that document (see, e.g., Hettinger, 1935; Kaempffert, 1931).

It is within the context of these Marshall-initiated convenings that Harold Lasswell's (1948) well-known framework for the field: "Who says what to whom via what channel with what effect?" was developed. Like the term mass communication, this framework also has been speculated to have actually originated with Marshall (Buxton, 1994). As many historians of the field have noted, the effects component of this framework came to dominate, and thus characterize, early mass communication research. This tendency was reflective of the concerns about domestic and international opinion formation and influence that were prominent at the time, in response to events such as the two World Wars, and the subsequent Cold War (Gary, 1996; Peters, 1986). It is also important to note that, in light of the subsequent accumulation of findings over the next two decades indicating generally low levels of the types of media effects that were being investigated, some observers asserted, even at this early point in the history of mass communication as an academic field, that the field was essentially a dead end (see Berelson, 1959; Klapper, 1960). Such assessments obviously approached mass communication as an academic field with much narrower parameters than were articulated by Lasswell (1948).

While a review of all of the definitional approaches to the term mass communication is beyond the scope of this paper,[2] it is important to recognize that, even in its earliest incarnations, the precise scope of the term was contested territory. In 1953, sociologist Eliot Freidson outlined

what he perceived as the predominant definition of mass communication, which included four distinguishing features for the mass audience: 1) it is heterogeneous in composition; 2) it is composed of individuals who do not know each other; 3) the members of the mass are spatially separated; and 4) the mass has no definite leadership and has a very loose organization (313). An oft-cited definition by Wright (1960) emphasized the following three elements of mass communication: a) content is directed toward large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audiences; b) content is transmitted publicly, and often reaches audiences simultaneously; and c) the communicator tends to be, or operate within, a complex organization that may involve great expense (Wright, 1960). Early on, the concept also was strongly associated with the broader theoretical notion of the 'mass society' (e.g., Wirth, 1948) which tended to emphasize audiences as an aggregate of somewhat passive, atomized individuals highly susceptible to mass mediated messages (see Beniger, 1987; Peters, 1996).

A Concept in Decline

As early as the 1970s, scholars began to question the applicability of such formulations of the concept of mass communication to the dynamics of a changing media environment, in which a greater proportion of the media system was composed of outlets serving relatively narrow segments of the audience (see, e.g., Maisel, 1973). In a 1977 article in the Journal of Communication, Robert Escarpit described the notion of the 'mass' as 'rapidly dissolving to be replaced by the puzzling yet far more workable image of an intricate network of communication channels (47). As Maisel noted in 1973, 'we must begin to think of, and study, the individual in our society as a communicator having access to a very powerful set of media tools and as a recipient of a wide range of equally enriched communications directed to him by others' (170). Certainly, these statements from over 30 years ago seem surprisingly reflective of the dynamics

of contemporary communication. Underlying these critical reassessments, however is the premise that the mass communication concept did not – or could not – account for such communications dynamics that extended so far outside of the mass society paradigm.

This impetus behind the decline of mass communication as an orienting term accelerated in the late 1980s and picked up increased momentum in the 1990s (see Turow, 1990). During this time, the evolving media environment, with its ability to facilitate the targeting of small, homogenous audience segments due to increased media fragmentation (particularly via the growth of cable, the VCR, and, later, the Internet), and its ability to facilitate more interactive forms of communication, increasingly became one in which perceived traditional notions of mass communication, involving the one-to-many dissemination of content to a large, heterogeneous audience who simultaneously received the content, represented an increasingly rare form of communication (see Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Neuman, 1991).

Such critiques affected the self-image of the field, as many academic departments renamed themselves, abandoning the mass communication label in favor of terms such as 'media studies' or 'telecommunications'. In 1996, one of the field's major international academic associations, the IAMCR, changed its name from the International Association for Mass Communication Research to the International Association for Media and Communication Research (Nordenstreng, 2008). In 2001, one of the more prominent journals in the field, Critical Studies in Mass Communication, similarly changed its name to Critical Studies in Media Communication. Clearly, the term mass communication has been on the wane in the academic sector, with the changing technological dynamics of mediated communication being the driving force.

Alternative Interpretations

The above account represents the fairly standard narrative of the decline of mass communication as an orienting term in light of technological change. It is important to emphasize, however, that some scholars have sought to defend mass communication from decline by offering reinterpretations that better position the term to capture contemporary communications dynamics (Budd and Ruben, 1988). Turow (1990, 1992) proposed an approach to the term in the early 1990s that stripped away many of its (perceived) traditional definitional elements and focused instead exclusively on the industrialized production and distribution of content. Such an approach foregrounds a scholarly focus on the structure and behavior of media institutions and the consumption of the content that they produce (Turow, 1992). Turow's (1992) "re-positioning" of mass communication can be seen as an effort to maintain the relevance of the term in the face of the fragmentation taking place in the media environment in the 1980s and early 1990s due to emergent technologies such as cable television and the VCR. As he noted, 'in shifting the primary focus of the word "mass" from the nature of the audience to the nature of the process, we avoid setting forth requirements about the number and nature of the people attending to the messages' (Turow, 1990: 16).

Obviously though, Turow's effort largely fails to maintain the term's relevance in the face of the ways that the dynamics of mediated communication have changed since the pre-Internet days of 1992, in which the diminished prominence of the institutional communicator and the rise of the individual as mass communicator are defining characteristics (see below). However, efforts such as Turow's do suggest a level of persistent definitional ambiguity and flexibility in the term that allows for, and perhaps even justifies, continued reconsideration in light of ongoing technological changes.

The extent of the interpretive flexibility of the term mass communication is further reflected in the fact that an alternative narrative to the term's intellectual history has been convincingly constructed – one in which the logic of the term's decline in relevance seems much weaker. Historical research has revealed the prominence of a much richer conceptualization of mass communication, even in the term's early, formative stages. Peters (1996), for instance, argues that it was only *after* World War II that the dominant approach to the process of mass communication was one involving the simplified one-to-many exchange between media outlet and a large, undifferentiated, and largely passive, audience. Prior to, and during, the war, "thinkers who pondered broadcasting were attentive to the potential for interchange within large scale communication. . . . Many were fascinated and alarmed by radio's apparent intimacy, its penetration of private spaces, and its ability to stage dialogues and personal relationships with listeners. The question was often less how radio amassed audiences than how it individualized them" (Peters, 1996: 109). Along similar lines, many histories of media audiences have emphasized the notion that the arrival of what are typically termed 'mass media' operated early on with much more robust, individualistic, and interactive conceptualizations of the mass audience than is commonly assumed (see, e.g., Butsch, 2000, 2008; Lenthall, 2007; Newman, 2004; Ross, 1999).

As this discussion suggests, the meaning of the term mass communication has not been as rigidly narrow as is often assumed. Ultimately, the extent to which one sees the concept as having diminished relevance depends upon what one embraces as the concept's key defining characteristics. For instance, some approaches to defining the term have downplayed the centrality of simultaneous delivery of content, given that the long shelf life of content allows it to aggregate audiences over time (Webster and Phalen, 1997). Similarly, the centrality of an

undifferentiated, anonymous audience has been critiqued as more ideal-typical than realistic, given the long history of efforts to segment audiences according to identifiable criteria (Webster and Phalen, 1997). A number of scholars have taken issue with the notion of mass communication ever being strictly associated exclusively with the one-way dissemination of content amongst a large, undifferentiated, and largely passive audience (Cantor and Cantor, 1986; Corner, 1979; Mosco and Kaye, 2000). Such perspectives extend back almost 60 years. Like many later scholars, Freidson (1953) questioned these somewhat limited interpretive approaches to the mass audience, emphasizing instead the innately social character of being part of the media audience.

Beniger's (1987) overview of the various theoretical perspectives that have characterized mass communication research from the 1930s through the 1980s compellingly illustrates the prominence of theoretical approaches (ranging from uses and gratifications to audience decoding to framing) that extend well-beyond the notions of one-to-many dissemination of messages, simultaneously received, and similarly interpreted, by large, heterogeneous, and largely passive audiences, that came to mischaracterize the field in many circles. Thus, it would seem that mass communication has always extended beyond the limitations inherent in the mass society paradigm.

This seems to continue to be the case, as many assessments of the 'de-massifying' effects of the new media environment that have taken place in the wake of the emergence of the Internet have concluded that the concept of mass communication has maintained a position of relevance – and even prominence – in the online realm (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001; Downes, 2000; Napoli, 1998, 2008; Roscoe, 1999). The prominence of perspectives such as these reflects the likelihood that many of the more critical approaches to the term have tended to engage in significant

oversimplifications of its meaning, and that these oversimplifications were misleading in terms of the characterizations of the media audience produced by the field and in terms of the range of scholarship being produced under the 'mass communication' heading (Beniger, 1987; Lorimer, 2002).

As should be clear, at the very least we can see that a precise definition of mass communication long has been contested territory. Indeed, the main point here is that this is a term whose definitional origins are sufficiently ambiguous, and whose definitional history has been sufficiently dynamic, to allow – and even to warrant – contemporary reconsideration.

Reconceptualizing Mass Communication by Broadening the 'Mass'

The concept of mass communication can effectively account for the dramatic changes taking place within the contemporary media environment, when the term 'mass' is conceptualized a bit more inclusively, to account not just for the receivers of content, or for the nature of the production process, but for the senders of content as well. The communications dynamics reflected in Web 2.0 (see Mabillot, 2007) applications such as YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and Flickr are increasingly foregrounding an approach to mass communication in which the individual audience member operates on nearly equal footing with the more traditional institutional communicator. As Benkler (2006) and others have demonstrated, the new media environment is one in which the tools of participation in public discourse and creative activity are much more widely distributed (Beer and Burrows, 2007; Jenkins, 2004; Kendall, 2008; Mabillot, 2007). Mass communication is now a much more egalitarian process, in which the masses can now communicate to the masses (Fonio, et al., 2007). It is important to recognize that the one-to-many dynamic at the core of the meaning of mass communication persists here. It is simply that there are many, many more instances of it. It is this proliferation of the one-to-

many capacity that represents the communication dynamic that was largely absent from previous incarnations of our media system, in which the capacity to mass communicate was technologically constrained to a select few.

Terms such as ‘prosumers’ and ‘produsage’ have been coined to capture the ways in which the media audience is evolving, and the ways in which content production and distribution are migrating beyond the traditional industrial paradigm (Banks, 2002; Bruns, 2007; Deuze, 2003). As Beer and Burrows (2007: 8) note, ‘Perhaps the key defining feature of Web 2.0 is that users are involved in processes of production and consumption as they generate and browse online content, as they tag and blog, post and share. This has seen the “consumer” taking an increasingly active role in the “production” of commodities’. One forecast estimates that, by 2010, 70 percent of the content available online will be created by individuals (Slot and Frissen, 2007).

What is surprising about many user-generated content discussions is that the focus is often misguidedly on the revolutionary or disruptive aspects of user’s ability to *produce* content. Even the term, user-*generated* content, reflects this misplaced emphasis. This is not the aspect of contemporary developments that is new or of the greatest significance. Users’ capacity to generate content has been around for quite some time, due to the long-established availability of production technologies such as home video cameras, personal computers, typewriters, and home recording equipment. What is different today is the ability of users to *distribute* content, to use the Web to circulate their user-generated content (as well as, to media companies’ dismay, traditional media content) to an unprecedented extent.

Shifting our focus to the distribution issue highlights how the increasingly global reach of the Internet eliminates any notion of the relevancy of the concept of mass communication being

undermined by the dramatic fragmentation of the media environment and the fragmentation of audiences that has taken place over the past 15 years. As fragmented as the media environment may be, it is still relatively commonplace for a home-made video produced by an individual sitting at his computer to be watched by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people world-wide via YouTube, or for a song produced by an unsigned band to attract a similarly large listenership via online distribution. The globalization of the potential audience available online essentially serves as a counterweight to the technological process of media fragmentation. A recent study by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company indicated that the primary reason that people post user-generated videos online is to achieve fame and recognition (Bughin, 2007). Clearly, the intention here is to reach as large an audience as possible – not to target narrow niches. In the contemporary media environment, the masses often seek to reach the masses.

The Diminishing Importance of the Institutional Communicator

Obviously, the re-orientation of the concept of mass communication here runs somewhat contrary to some previous efforts (e.g., Budd and Ruben, 1988; Turow, 1990, 1992) in one very important way – it suggests a definition of the term that is not dependent upon the involvement of an 'institutional communicator'. However, though the notion of mass communication emanating from some form of complex organization has been central to many definitions of the term (e.g., Budd and Ruben, 1988; O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, and Fiske, 1983; Turow, 1990), it has not been central to all of them. Some definitions do not directly address the nature of the source of the communication, focusing instead on the nature of the content and/or the audience (see, e.g., Freidson, 1953). In other instances, the presence of the institutional communicator has been expressed as a tendency, rather than as a fundamental component.

Wright (1960: 606), for instance, states in his definition that 'the communicator *tends* to be, or operate within, a complex organization that may involve great expense' (emphasis added).

An approach to mass communication that eschews the centrality of the institutional communicator does not seem to contradict the term's intellectual history. In addition, to the extent that the de-institutionalization of mass communication is a defining characteristic of the new media environment, such an interpretive approach to the term is fundamental not only to the term's continuing relevance, but also to its logical consistency. An adherence to a definition that accounts *exclusively* for the institutional communicator is one in which, in assessing two different speakers utilizing the same medium and transmitting the same type of content to an audience of the same size and composition, we would – based solely on the characteristics of the speakers – determine that one is engaging in mass communication while the other is not (think, for instance, of a record label's and an unsigned band's use of iTunes to distribute music). Utilizing the institutional communicator as a point of distinction made more sense when the institutional communicator had exclusive access to communications platforms that other speakers did not. Of course, on the Web this is no longer the case.

The point here is not to argue that the traditional institutional communicator is now of marginal relevance to the concept of mass communication, only that it has no status of exclusivity within the concept. Indeed, many of the de-institutionalized forms of mass communication that are now taking place do still involve traditional institutional communicators – only in more ancillary roles as content aggregators, navigation services, or platform providers (roles served by institutional communicators such as Google, YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook). These forms of integrated activity between the institutional communicator and the individual user are, in fact, central to the emerging significance of the 'work' of the audience.

The New Mass Audience and its Work

The previous section suggested an approach to the term mass communication involving a definition of 'mass' that encompasses both the senders and the receivers of messages. In this regard, this redefinition strikes directly at the notion of the 'mass audience' that long has been a central element of the concept of mass communication (see, e.g., Neuman, 1991; Webster and Phalen, 1997).

One important outgrowth of this proposed re-orientation is the way that it resurrects a line of thinking about the mass audience that has been largely dormant in recent years. Specifically, when we consider an approach to mass communication that incorporates the mass audience not only as receivers of messages, but also as senders, and when we also look at how the place of the audience as mass communicators is now being integrated into our media system, we are confronted with the issue of the 'work' that the audience engages in in the new media environment.

Revisiting the Audience Commodity and its Work

The notion that media audiences work began with economist Dallas Smythe (1977) who, in providing the initial influential formulation of the media audience as a 'commodity' manufactured and sold by ad-supported media, argued that the act of consuming media represented a form of wageless labor that audiences engaged in on behalf of advertisers. According to Smythe (1977: 6), the key work that audiences engaged in on behalf of advertisers was to 'learn to buy particular "brands" of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly. In short, they work to create the demand for advertised goods which is the purpose of the monopoly capitalist advertisers'. Smythe's observation was fundamental to his larger critique of what he saw as a failing by Marxist theorists to adequately account for the production

of audiences in their analyses of the political economy of the media, which, according to Smythe, tended to focus overwhelmingly (and misguidedly) on the production of content.

Smythe's notion of the work of the audience was subsequently taken up and expanded by Jhally and Livant (1986: 127), who, with a focus on television, argued that the advertising revenue that programmers earn that extends beyond the costs of the programming represents 'surplus watching time'. Jhally (1982) and Livant (1982), in earlier iterations of the ideas that would be central to their later collaborative piece, emphasized their departure from Smythe in the extent to which they saw audiences working not for the advertisers but for the mass media' (Jhally, 1982: 208; Livant, 1982: 213). The viewing audience, having already received their 'wage' in the form of the free programming, was now, in their program viewing, working on behalf of the programmer. The programmer is then able to convert this surplus watching time into additional advertising revenue.

This perspective on the media audience was the subject of substantial debate and discussion at the time (see, e.g., Livant, 1979; Murdock, 1978; Smythe, 1978). In the years since, however, this perspective has received relatively little attention in communications scholarship (for exceptions, see Andrejevic, 2002; Cohen, 2008; Shimpach, 2005).[3] However, just as contemporary developments in the media environment have invited a reconsideration of the concept of mass communication, so too do they invite a reconsideration of this corollary notion of the work of the mass audience.

Again, the key driver here is the way that the new media environment empowers the audience to serve as both receivers and senders of mass communication. Specifically, the notion of the work of the audience, which may have been a bit more tenuous when the work being monetized was isolated to media consumption, becomes much more concrete in an environment

in which the creative work of the audience is an increasingly important source of economic value for media organizations.

Again we find ourselves returning to Web 2.0 applications and the ways that they help the masses to mass communicate. Here, however, the concern is not just with the fact that such communication is taking place, but also with the fact that the communication itself often becomes a source of economic value for media organizations. The dynamic under consideration here is well-expressed by Cohen (2008: 7):

> Web 2.0 has altered the terrain of the media business, notably by adjusting consumers' roles in the production process. Business models based on the notion of the consumer as producer have allowed Web 2.0 applications to capitalize on time spent participating in communicative activity and information sharing. In mass media models, the role of consumers has been just that, to consume, or to watch and read the product. Web 2.0 consumers, however, have become producers who fulfill a critical role.

The advertising revenues that sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace generate are derived largely from audience attention captured with content produced by members of the user/audience community. Aggregating or providing a common platform for user-generated content, and then selling advertising on these platforms, represents the core business model of most Web 2.0 applications. User-generated content such as comments, ratings, and reviews also has become an important source of added value for organizations involved in the production and/or distribution of more traditional institutionally-produced content. Examples along these lines include the user ratings/comments on sites such as Netflix or Amazon, and the increasing extent to which newspapers' Web sites are incorporating reader feedback and comments into their presentation of traditional journalism (Schultz, 2000).

The work of the contemporary media audience can be taken one step further. Increasingly, not only are audience members contributing content that can be monetized by content providers (typically via ad sales), but it is also increasingly the case that audiences willingly engage in the work of the advertisers and marketers who traditionally support these content providers. That is, audiences today engage in a wide range of activities that assist with the marketing of products, ranging from self-producing commercials to engaging in online word-of-mouth and endorsements (via blogs, etc.) to integrating brand messages into their own communication platforms (e.g., their MySpace or Facebook pages) (Cheong and Morrison, 2008; Deuze, 2007; Spurgeon, 2008). Contemporary marketing and advertising strategy increasingly focus on taking the value of consumer 'word of mouth' to entirely new levels and developing new methods for facilitating and encouraging consumers to do the work of the marketers and advertisers in the dissemination of brand messages.

Today, then, the division that divided the early theoretical approaches to the notion of the work of the audience between those who perceived the audience as working for advertisers (e.g., Smythe, 1977) and those who perceived the audience as working for media organizations (Jhally and Livant, 1986), seems to have been bridged in the new media environment, in which audiences seem to be clearly working for both.

The nature of these extensions of the work of the audience highlights one of the most distinctive, yet under-examined, aspects of the economics of media – the extent to which individuals engage in the production of media products absent any meaningful guarantee – or even expectation of – financial compensation. This has always been the case, ranging back to unpublished novels and short stories stashed in desk drawers, to garage bands toiling away without a recording contract. What is different today, of course, is that these producers of

content now have, thanks largely to the Internet, the access to potential audiences that was largely missing in previous generations. Another distinguishing characteristic of the activities of today's audience is their demonstrated willingness to allow others (typically media organizations) to capture all of the revenue generated by their aggregated efforts.

This latter point reflects the value that individuals place in enhancing their opportunity to reach audiences. This need helps to maintain a role for the institutional communicators who typically manage the Web 2.0 platforms that provide an opportunity (via the aggregation of content and the investment in marketing resources) for greater audience reach than an individual communicator could likely achieve without such platforms. We could then argue that it is this enhanced ability to access an audience with one's creative expression that online media organizations are now providing in exchange for that creative expression – which they in turn monetize. This is obviously a very different content production/distribution/exhibition/consumption dynamic than has characterized traditional media.

These observations point to an important reorientation in focus that needs to take place in the field of media economics, in terms of focusing more intently on the underlying dynamics of how (and why) user generated content is produced, distributed, and consumed, as well as on how these dynamics transform the underlying economics of traditional media organizations. As much as the notion of the audience engaging in work has historically been a centerpiece of Marxist political economy approaches to mass communication (Jhally and Livant, 1986; Smythe, 1977), it is also a fundamental observation that merits more intensive treatment beyond such analytical approaches to our media system. The work of the audience is becoming an increasingly

important dimension of the economics of the media that scholars of media institutions, economics, and audiences of all stripes need to account for in their explanatory models.

Conclusion

As Morris and Ogan (1996: 42) noted in an early assessment of the Internet, ‘A new communication technology . . . allows scholars to rethink, rather than abandon, definitions and categories’. In engaging in such an effort, this paper has argued that the communications dynamics of the new media environment compel a reassessment of the concept of mass communication and the nature of the work of the audience in these reconfigured dynamics. In engaging in this reassessment, this paper has illustrated that a broadening of the term ‘mass and a relinquishing of an exclusive focus on the institutional communicator allows mass communication to effectively capture evolving communications dynamics, in which audiences increasingly are able to function as both senders and receivers of mass communication. This paper also illustrates how the expansion of the capabilities of the audience is enhancing the ways in which audiences ‘work’ within the functioning of media markets.

These developments highlight some key areas of interest for future research. Research that examines the reconfiguring of the audience commodity that is taking place is of particular importance. Research in this vein needs to better account for the as-yet-unclear supply and demand dynamics of user-generated content within the analytical frameworks developed within the field of media economics. Future research also needs to explore the broadening of the criteria via which media organizations and advertisers place value on various segments of the media audience and the mechanisms used to gather the information necessary to engage in the analyses that produce these valuations. The new ‘work’ of the audience is serving not only as a media product in its own right to be monetized alongside traditional institutionally-produced

media, but also as a data source used to enhance audience understanding and to serve as complementary currencies in the audience marketplace (Author, 2008).

Many of the concerns related to the social and cultural impact of differentiated valuations of different audience segments that have characterized research on the role of audiences in the economics of media industries translate, in somewhat modified form, to this more multi-faceted conceptualization of the audience emerging in the new media environment. A well-established body of research has focused on how the fact that advertisers value the *attention* of various audience segments differently affects the extent to which content providers serve a diverse array of audience interests and concerns (for a review, see Author, 2003). Similar concerns arise when the role of the audience extends into the realms of content production and distribution, except now these concerns stem from variations in the levels of participation in online content creation and distribution by different demographic groups (see, e.g., Hargittai and Walejko, 2008), and the extent to which such content serves as a basis by which media organizations, advertisers, public officials, or policymakers analyze the public and formulate judgments about their needs, interests, and opinions (see Rochet, 2006/2007). Data on audiences' content production now functions alongside data on audiences' content consumption.

Finally, as much as this analysis has focused on why the concept of mass communication *can* effectively reflect the communication dynamics of the new media environment, it is also important to address the question of why it *should* continue to be used; otherwise, the analysis conducted here is primarily an exercise in semantics. The answer to this question is both pragmatic and theoretical. From a theoretical standpoint, maintaining the use of the term mass communication in the context of the new media environment is, in many ways, a corrective to the narrow approaches to the term that, as this paper has illustrated, to an extent misrepresented

and over-simplified what the term actually meant throughout its history and the nature of the academic field that emerged around it. Maintenance of the term reflects the continued relevance and analytical utility of associated theoretical approaches such as uses and gratifications and agenda-setting (regarding the latter, for instance, we are only just beginning to understand the complex inter-media agenda-setting effects taking place between the mainstream media, the 'blogosphere,' and the public). The concept of mass communication has never been the poor a fit for the communications dynamics of the new media environment that many of the term's more recent critics have asserted.

From a pragmatic standpoint, this discussion is important to the deserved continuity of mass communication as an academic field, which is tied to the continuity of the mass communication terminology. In many ways, the field is at an historical moment today that is not unlike nearly 40 years ago, when the absence of evidence of powerful attitudinal media effects was seen by some as signifying the death of the field (see Beniger, 1987). However, mass communication was always about more than narrowly defined media effects, as Lasswell's original framework makes very clear. Thus, as much as it was a mistake to define the field of mass communication purely in terms of its ability to document significant, empirically measurable effects on attitudes and opinions, so too is it a mistake – in terms of mischaracterizing the field's history and in terms of mischaracterizing the historical meaning of the term – to define the field of mass communication purely in terms of the analysis of the mass production and one-way dissemination of messages by institutional communicators to audiences. In this regard, then, reasserting the relevance of mass communication to the dynamics of the contemporary media environment is in many ways reasserting a more robust, well-rounded – and historically grounded – conceptualization of the term and its associated field.

Endnotes

[1] There have been comparatively more efforts to assess whether the Internet fits into the framework of mass communication scholarship – that is, efforts to determine the extent to which the Internet functions as a traditional *mass* medium (e.g., Downes, 2000; Morris and Ogan, 1996; Napoli, 1998, 2008; Roscoe, 1999). This, however, is a different (though certainly related) exercise from reassessing the contours of mass communication as an organizing concept.

[2] Based on the research conducted for this paper, it would seem that the thorough and definitive intellectual history of the term 'mass communication' has yet to be written, though it is sorely needed. Startlingly, the term is not even included as an entry in the ICA's recently published multi-volume *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Donsbach, 2008).

[3] According to Artz (2008: 60), 'although many of Smythe's concerns have been championed and popularized in international communication discourse, his observations regarding the function of audiences in the media process have been less visible. In fact, despite cogent argument and ample evidence, his perspective on the commodity audience has been institutionally shunned by academic departments across the U.S. for some fifty years'.

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