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# Journalism

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What is This?

# Three-step flow

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Ten years ago, it was still common to find references in the literature to 'mass media' and 'mass communication'. Today, such references have mostly disappeared. Instead, we study 'media and communication', while still trying to figure out what *and* means. The future of journalism hinges on the meaning of that little word.

The background to the shift in terminology is well known. With the public and popular breakthrough of the internet from the mid-1990s, the concept of media, which had only come into general use during the 1960s, was, once again, in question. In an early response, the International Association for Mass Communication Research, which had been founded in 1957 in the age of television, changed its name, in 1996, to the International Association for Media and Communication Research, happily preserving the abbreviation, IAMCR. More media forms were in the making, which might facilitate more communication by more people.

Journalism traditionally has been, and remains, a privileged genre of communication; the news media constitute a distinctive institution in modern society. Their business, ideally, is to facilitate the participation of the public at large in the political process – the practices serving to negotiate, legitimate, and authoritatively allocate values for a whole society (Easton, 1953: 131), centered on, but not confined to the institutions of parliamentary democracy. News media serve as central switches for widely distributed communicative practices and deliberations on political ends and means, thus facilitating a two-step flow of mass and interpersonal communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

One-to-many and one-to-one communications have recently been joined by technologically enhanced many-to-many communications – far beyond the forum and the marketplace. The point is not so much particular technical protocols or genres of interaction – communities, blogs, wikis, social network sites, and other formats still to come. The point is the sheer potential of networked media to change the flows of communication in society. Compared to one-to-one or one-to-many communications, many-to-many communications are much less familiar as practices and institutions of

political life. Certainly, political parties, popular movements, labor unions, cultural interest groups, and other sub-publics have long relied on diverse organizational media to support their internal and external communications. Conceived as a public sphere (Habermas, 1989[1962]), however, many-to-many communications represent unfamiliar territory to citizens and researchers alike.

Communicative practices are distributed; political systems have centers. Political democracy in a modern sense is inconceivable without a technologically mediated and coordinated infrastructure of communication. In order to account for the interrelations of the current range of media and the communicative practices that they enable, research should revisit two great divides. In the past, the field has produced largely separate bodies of mass and interpersonal communication studies (Rogers, 1999). During the 1990s, moreover, the first generation of internet studies tended to assume a radical distinction between online and offline reality, as if cyberspace were a world apart, whether in utopian or dystopian terms (for a critique, see Slater, 2002). At present, a key challenge for media and communication studies is to both conceptualize and empirically examine an emerging configuration of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications that flows across mass and interpersonal, online and offline divides.

The finding regarding a two-step flow of communication was serendipitous; Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues (1944) were trying to fathom the political implications of mass media, not least their anticipated effects on individual voters. Today, research is faced with yet another new media environment in which the communicative roles and interrelations of sources, reporters, editors, commentators, representatives, lobbyists, activists, and more are in question. Research can neither predict nor design the future of journalism. What we can do, with the benefit of historical and theoretical hindsight, is to begin to study what constitutes at least a three-step flow of communication.

## Acknowledgments

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