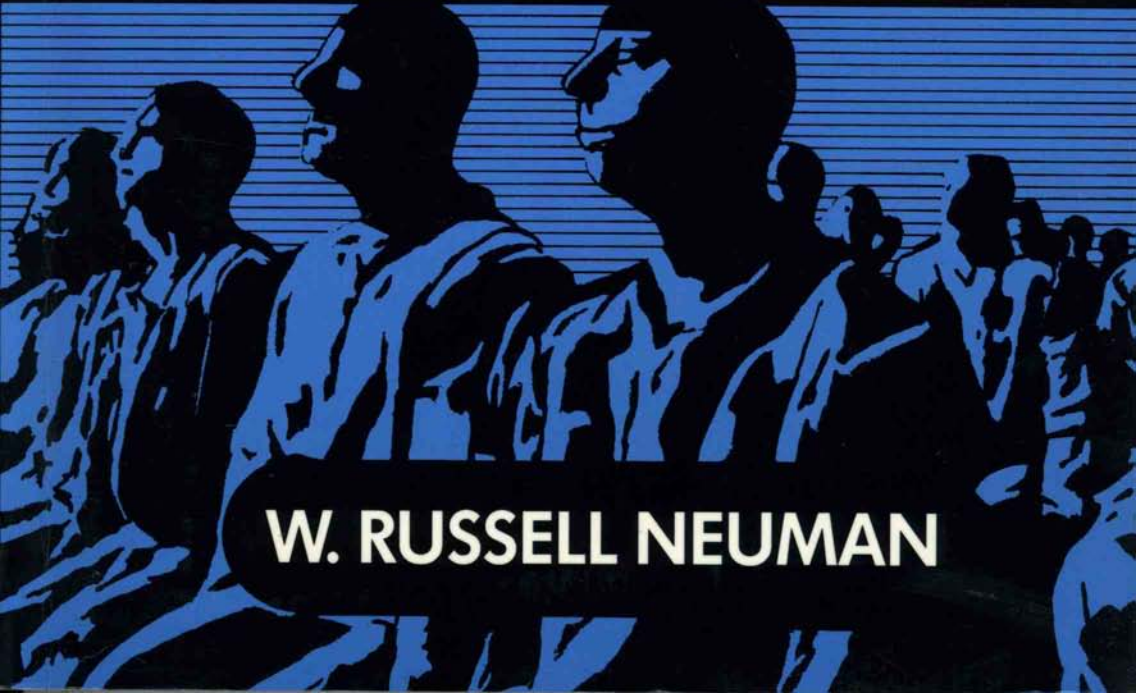




◀ THE FUTURE OF ▶  
THE MASS AUDIENCE



W. RUSSELL NEUMAN

**THE FUTURE OF THE MASS AUDIENCE** focuses on how the changing technology and economics of the mass media in postindustrial society will influence public communications. It summarizes the results of a five-year study conducted in cooperation with the senior corporate planners at ABC, CBS, NBC, Time Warner, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. The central question is whether the new electronic media and the use of personal computers in the communication process will lead to a fragmentation or "demassification" of the mass audience. Some analysts, for example, have suggested that with the growth of increasingly specialized cable television channels and on-demand electronic publishing, citizens will filter and preselect news concerning only their own special interests and prejudices, with the result that cultural and political life will be increasingly polarized, and the common culture and national media will atrophy. This study indicates, however, that the movement toward fragmentation and specialization will be modest and that the national media and common political culture will remain robust. The analysis draws on a detailed review of the economics of advertiser- and subscriber-supported "narrowcast" media and the psychology of media use. The author concludes that the production and promotion costs and economies of scale for electronic media put natural constraints on special-interest, small-audience programming. The conclusion sets forth a policy agenda for making the most of the participatory and democratic potential of evolving electronic communications systems.

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"*The Future of the Mass Audience* presents a concise and highly readable summary of trends and theories affecting the business of communications ... a valuable addition to the literature in this field."

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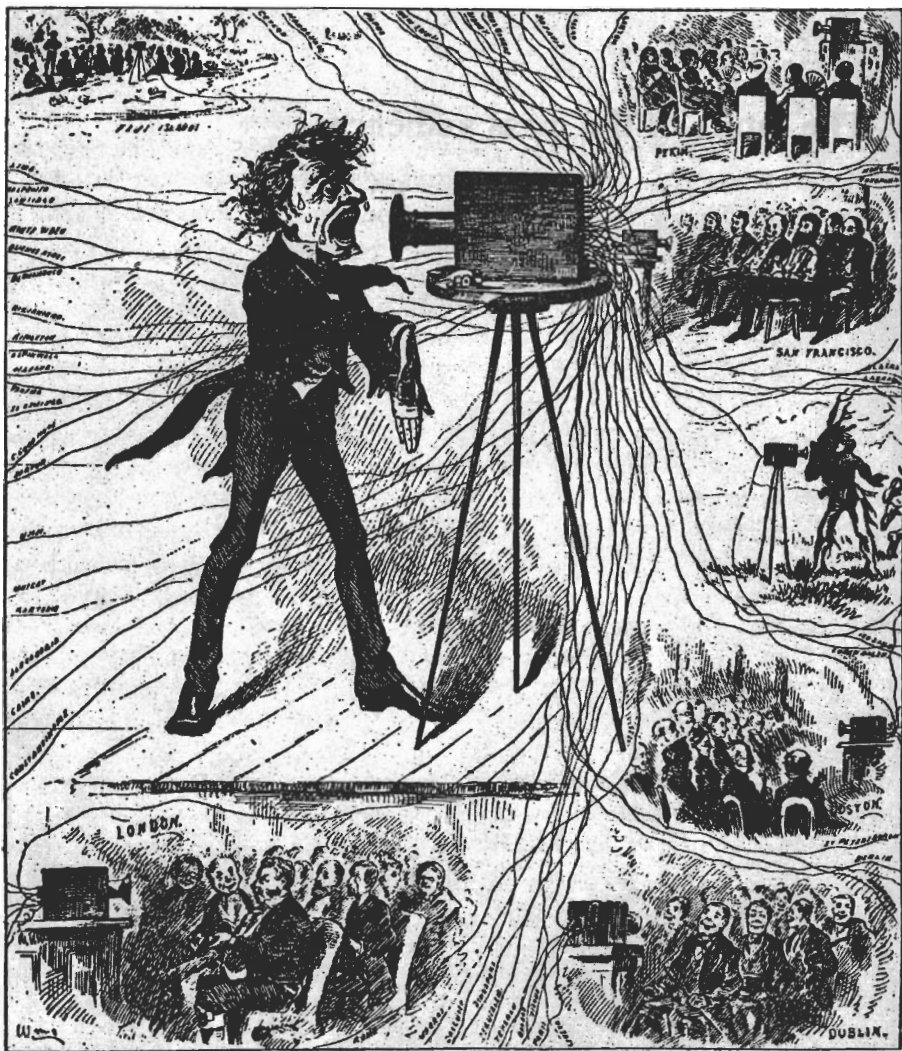
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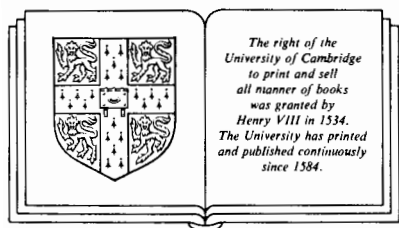




Terrors of the telephone (From *Daily Graphic*, New York, March 15, 1877).

# The future of the mass audience

W. RUSSELL NEUMAN



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## Preface

There is a story, apocryphal perhaps, that when the town fathers of a village in Poland gathered after World War II to assess their ravaged community, they realized that almost nothing could be salvaged. They would have to build the town anew from scratch. They had the opportunity to be creative, to design something fresh and new. They could move beyond the awkward hodgepodge of the old village, with its narrow, winding streets that had evolved through the Middle Ages. But, of course, they did not. Weary of all that the war had imposed on them, they wanted desperately to re-create what they had lost, and with art and precision they reproduced the narrow, winding streets and medieval architecture of the old village.

Major technological developments present opportunities of a similar sort. Like the town fathers of the Polish village, we see the new in the light of the old. Our language reveals our mind-set – the terms “horseless carriage,” “wireless telephone,” and “talkies” distinguished new technical wonders from what was already known and taken for granted.

As this study is being completed in the early 1990s, we stand on the threshold of what appears to be a new generation of communications technologies. We have the opportunity to design a new electronic and optical network that will blur the distinction between mass and interpersonal communications and between one-way and two-way communications. We invent terms like “micropublishing” and “two-way television” because in our experience it has been the nature of publishing to be large-scale and of television to be one-way, just as it had been in the nature of carriages to be fastened to horses.

These new technological developments are most often characterized as an explosion or proliferation of new media. The term “media” is plural, and indeed most reviews of the field have proceeded listwise through the growing array of electronic devices, identifying the special properties of each: direct-broadcast satellites, personal computers, digital, high-definition, and interactive television, videotex and teletext, electronic mail and high-speed-



computer networks, as well as a variety of enhanced services for an expanding digital telephone network (Williams 1982; Aumente 1987; Dizard 1989). A special irony is that, in the end, the new media will be one – a single, high-capacity, digital network of networks that will bridge what we now know as the separate domains of computing, telephony, broadcasting, motion pictures, and publishing (Huber 1987; Gilder 1989; Garcia 1990; Egan 1991; Elton 1991).

As a result, from the point of view of communications economics, we find ourselves living in most interesting times. Each of these industrial sectors currently enjoys a highly profitable tradition of business practice. The market boundaries between these sectors are based on a series of evolved social conventions for the repertoire of media appropriate for each category of human communication. A single integrated electronic system for high-quality video, audio, and printed output will make such artificial barriers less meaningful. As a result, each corporation in these fields will soon face three or four times the previous number of determined and well-financed competitors for its business, a prospect about as welcome as an invasion of Vandals and Visigoths.

In the tradition of the American free-enterprise system, the new media network will be designed and promoted by the currently active corporate players. But these players are ambivalent and conflicted. On the one hand, they prefer the existing system and the limited market definitions that won them, in most instances, more than adequate profit margins. If they can prevent or even just delay the entry or interconnection of some new media, they are likely to try. On the other hand, the prospect of investing in new technology to take over someone else's market, while keeping one's own, warms the hearts of all self-respecting capitalists. Industry strategists wonder if a good offense will result in a successful defense. It might be necessary only to threaten to invade a neighboring market sector to give the dominant players there second thoughts about trying to invade one's own. Strikes and counterstrikes, barbarians at the gates – military analogies abound.

The American political tradition in such matters is *laissez-faire*. The concept of a comprehensive industrial policy or even a broadly focused reformulation of communications policy for the information age is political anathema in the centers of power. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and Congress's Office of Technology Assessment occasionally sponsor a study, but elected officials are not inclined to challenge the media giants on whom they depend for the means to communicate with their constituents.

We face a fascinating set of strategic issues. The corporate players have the first move. The federal establishment and the marketplace can respond. Some corporate players have succumbed to delusions of grandeur about pub-

lic demand for their latest electronic gizmos. If from the aggregated business plans, one adds up all the time that the average citizen is predicted to spend each day on new video games, electronic newspapers, on-demand movies, and the like, it exceeds a 24-hour day, leaving no time for sleep or work. Clearly, not all of these visions of the future will be realized. The early and rather dramatic market failures of the videophone, videodisc, and videotex systems for home electronic information retrieval and entertainment have put the industry on notice. Although some battles may have been lost, the war is still on.

I have spent much of the past 10 years as a sort of war correspondent among the corporate strategists of the communications industries. As an academic research specialist on new media technology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I was asked how the existing research literature on media use and economics might inform their strategizing. The key questions, reasonably enough, were which of the new technologies would succeed in the marketplace and how soon they would arrive. Our research team analyzed past attempts to predict the adoption of new media (Lazarus and McKnight 1983) and designed computer models, dubbed *MEDIACALC* and *TELE-CALC*, that allowed us to vary the assumptions about the costs and demands for new media and estimate the impact on the existing media (Feldman 1985; Frechter 1987; Elkington 1988). Later, in cooperation with the MIT Media Laboratory, we designed and tested prototype systems for interactive television (Neuman and Cader 1985), advanced imaging systems (Neuman et al. 1987), and home shopping (Gagnon, Neuman, and Kosloff 1988). The research program was supported by Capital Cities/ABC, CBS, and NBC, by the New York Times Company and the Washington Post Company, and by Time Inc. and Warner Communications, which at the time were separate companies. Support for supplemental research was provided by Polaroid, GTE, the Markle Foundation, and the Center for Advanced Television Study.

The program was a success; we learned a great deal, and the sponsors seemed pleased and occasionally found our models and research reports of some practical use. We formulated a generic game plan for corporate warriors that was dubbed the "Upstream Strategy." The idea is straightforward: We argue that current profits are relatively high in the media industries because competition is artificially constrained by federal regulations as a result of a perceived spectrum scarcity and a related set of economic factors tied to the production and marketing of informational and cultural goods. Entrepreneurs who wish to produce and sell new informational goods generally find it advantageous to work with the existing oligopolists who dominate the downstream marketplace, the final connection to the paying customer, such as the major motion-picture studios, large publishers, the television networks, and the local telephone company. A review of these factors is developed in Chapter

5. The changing technologies of communications (Chapter 2), however, will increasingly erode the bottleneck situation and the corresponding profitability the firms currently enjoy. "Upstream migration" will mean vertical integration and heavy investment in the creative community, because value will increasingly reside in creation rather than in delivery of media content. Thus, a newspaper needs to promote its identity not as ink-on-paper delivered in the morning but as a unique and reliable information package and a contractually exclusive source for well-known journalists, commentators, cartoonists, and reviewers. If new means of electronic communications start to compete with the existing newspapers as alternative forms of delivery, and they will, the upstream creative resources will have all the bargaining power and will increasingly derive the profits from the value they create. The same dynamics will bring increasing pressures to bear on radio and television stations, cable systems, movie theaters, and ultimately even telephone systems. We are now seeing the beginning signs of this process in global media mergers, joint ventures, and a massive six-year battle over program ownership rights between Hollywood and the television networks.

Ironically, in all our industry meetings and reports, a broader question kept getting lost in the market predictions and the military metaphors. This was the question of how the evolution of this rather perverse chess game might affect the quality of human communications and the scope of public information and popular culture. The longer-term social impacts of the new media are, as the economists might say, simply externalities, artifacts of how the marketplace works. Artifacts or otherwise, such issues provide the substance and focus of this book. I find myself strongly drawn, at this point, toward trying to answer the questions I was not asked.

Just underneath the surface of the conflicts among broadcasters, cablecasters, and telephone companies lies a decision about how to design the conduits of human communications for perhaps the next century. We face in the realm of public communications what Piore and Sabel (1984) have identified in the realm of manufacturing as a great industrial divide: a new opportunity to reconceptualize the scale and character of public communications, but only if that opportunity is recognized.

So my purpose here, in part, is to try to draw the spectators into the fray. The academic community, the regulatory establishment, and the general public generally watch with some interest as the media titans do battle. If the issue of the new media is narrowly defined in terms of who invented what technology or who will dominate which market, then spectators can watch from the sidelines or, if so inclined, bet on winners and losers in the stock market. If the issue of the new media is how to design an entirely new national infrastructure for both personal and public communications, we move from the domain of private business strategy to public policy.

As a result, I have written a book with four audiences in mind: communications professionals, who are primarily interested in the fate of their industries; social scientists, who by nature focus more on the longer-term impacts of media institutions on political and cultural life; the communications policy community, which is still debating whether or not there is any role at all for government policy in shaping the new media environment; and interested general readers. The dominating perspective, reflecting my training and the history of this particular research project, is that of the social sciences. I argue, following Rice and Williams (1984) and McQuail (1986), that the challenge of the new media productively draws our attention back to a set of fundamental questions about the social order in industrial society that go to the roots of sociology and political science as disciplines. Perhaps many researchers in this field share such views, but it is rare in this growing literature that one finds an explicit connection between the new media and traditional theoretical concerns.

The Introduction and Chapter 1 develop this thesis further. Chapter 2 focuses primarily on the technology, the emphasis being not on specific media or market trials but on the fundamental properties of the integrated electronic network. Chapters 3 and 4 assess how new forms of communications interact with both the ingrained habits and the unmet needs of the mass audience. Chapter 5 draws a series of economic and institutional issues into the analysis. Chapter 6 draws the accumulated evidence together with a special eye to how such findings might contribute to the communications policy debate.

I suspect that some specialists may be drawn only to those chapters that reflect their specific backgrounds and experiences. Such an approach is not recommended. The literature in this field is dominated by subdisciplinary studies that adhere closely to their home domains of classic cases and predictable conclusions. The whole, I contend, provides quite a different picture than would a simple sum of the parts.

In addition to the research sponsors listed earlier, many of my colleagues and numerous specialists in academe, government, and industry were most generous with their time and counsel as this project progressed. Without trying to thank them all, I would like to acknowledge the help and advice of Wally Baer, Dan Bell, Jim Beniger, Don Blackmer, Nolan Bowie, Terri Cader, John Carey, Ben Compaine, Barry Cook, Ann Crigler, Peter Cukor, Henry Elkington, Rich Feldman, Allen Frechter, Diana Gagnon, Bill Gamson, Manny Gerard, Ross Hamachek, Phil Harding, Terry Hershey, Harvey Jassem, Charles Jonscher, Gail Kosloff, Bill Lazarus, Peter Lemieux, Andy Lippman, Sean McCarthy, Scott McDonald, Lee McKnight, Bob Maxwell, Michael Maynard, Ron Milavsky, Richard Montesano, Marvin Mord, Nicholas Negroponte, Suzanne Neil, Eli Noam, Shawn O'Donnell, Tony Oet-

tinger, Bill Page, Pepper, David Poltrack, Lucian Pye, Michael Robinson, Dan Roos, Bill Rubens, Steve Schneider, Bill Schreiber, Dorothy Shannon, Al Silk, Marvin Sirbu, Richard Solomon, Jim Sorce, Alan Spoon, Jules Tewlow, John Thompson, and Joann Wleklinski. The frontispiece graphic is a favorite of Erik Barnouw and was used in several volumes of his history of American broadcasting. It strikes me as particularly apt given the themes of this book and seems worth reprinting here in a new context. I would like particularly to express appreciation for the guidance and encouragement at the early stages of the work provided by the late Ithiel de Sola Pool. With a list so long, it may seem odd not to note all the friends and colleagues who have contributed to this project over the years, but my debts are numerous.

# 1

## Two theories of the communications revolution

At the end of World War II, just as the process of rebuilding was about to begin, there was a chance to pause and reflect. It was an opportunity to think carefully about what had happened, what might have happened if the Axis powers had won and spread their totalitarian utopia around the globe, and what would happen next as the Soviet Union and the United States, with their contrasting political traditions, were thrust to the front of the world's stage. That era produced two new perspectives among social scientists who were trying to understand the roles of communications media in holding large, diverse, and potentially contentious societies together as nation-states.

Those were heady times: The war effort had led to some spectacular technological breakthroughs in rocketry, atomic energy, high-frequency radio, and electronic computing. Those technologies would play important roles in defining the character of the decades to follow: The world tried to adjust to living with the bomb; television sets quickly found their way into virtually every home in the industrialized world; rockets lifted communications satellites to connect the world with instantaneous electronic communications; and the computer moved from a room-size, multi-million-dollar prototype to a desktop model for the home, priced in the same range as a color television set.

This book is about the impacts of that revolution in communications technology on public life and political culture. We begin with two contrasting views of the technological future that were put forward at the close of World War II. Those views anchored the ends of a continuum: At one end, the new electronic technologies were seen as unprecedentedly powerful new tools for political control and oppression, irresistibly tempting to political and economic elites; at the other end, those technologies were seen as new, inexpensive information tools for use by the mass citizenry that by their nature would tend to promote an open flow of information and to strengthen democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the connection between such



analyses of the new media and several enduring themes in social theory concerning continuity and change in social institutions. All too many studies in this field have approached the new electronic network as if it were a unique event: the first case on record of social change stimulated by technical developments. The approach undertaken here, in contrast, will strongly emphasize the development of new communications media as a case study in the ongoing traditions of communications research and the sociology of technological change.

### **Mass society theory and the perils of propaganda**

The most famous prophecy in this area is George Orwell's ominous *1984*. Orwell's technology of the future is symbolized by the omnipresent telescreen. He describes it as a large metal plaque, with a surface like a dulled mirror, covering almost an entire wall in each home and workplace. It is wired directly into the Ministry of Truth and drones on about the production of pig iron, war and peace, and the need for total obedience. At appropriate times, the screen is filled with the strong features and deep voice of Big Brother himself. The telescreen can be dimmed, but there is no way of turning it off. Most important, it is a two-way technology. Every movement one makes, except in darkness, and every word above a whisper can be scrutinized in the central offices of the Thought Police. Orwell's imagery is so powerful and his writing so widely circulated that the theme and ideas of his novel have now become part of our common culture and language.

The central theme of Orwell's book is the power of a government-controlled social system to force a singular pattern of thought on every citizen. No wonder it is still so frequently read today. The omen of propaganda is a powerful political symbol, and its connection to technologies makes it more so (Ellul 1964; Wicklein 1981; Ganley and Ganley 1982; Mosco 1982; Pool 1983b; Noelle-Neumann 1984; Dizard 1989).<sup>2</sup>

Orwell's *1984* is modeled on the totalitarian political systems of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. Studies of real-world totalitarian propaganda and political mobilization campaigns have revealed that attempts at total thought control over mass populations have fallen far short of Orwell's haunting scenario, although all too many regimes continue to persist in the tradition of Goebbels and Lenin (Hiniker 1966; Mueller 1973; Pool 1973; Mickiewicz 1981).<sup>3</sup>

Our focus here, however, is on political communications and the new electronic mass media of modern industrial democracies, particularly the United States. It may seem odd to assert that Orwell's exaggerated fantasy should be taken seriously and bears important lessons for American politics of the 1990s, but that is precisely my point. If there is an irony in the way

Orwell is read today, it is certainly the confidence with which modern readers seem to reject the scenario as quaint and improbable. Orwell's imagery seems more rooted in World War II than in the 1990s, as, of course, was the case. But, writing in 1949, Orwell argued that the political issues of propaganda and domination had not been settled simply because fascism in Europe had been defeated militarily. Orwell's *1984* was forward-looking. The delicate balance between too much and too little government influence on public communications continues to be a fundamental and critical public issue (Schiller 1982; Le Duc 1987; Pool 1990).

In order to better understand the potential impact of new media technologies, it is important to build from the base of what is already known about the relationship between communications structure and social structure. Much of the work on these issues was conducted in the decade following the war and was motivated by the same set of concerns that moved Orwell to write his novel. What is the nature of propaganda and mass persuasion? What are the unique powers of these new electronic mass media? How can the delicate balance be maintained between the need for central authority and the need to protect social and political pluralism?

Although these issues had their roots in the evolving disciplines of psychology, sociology, and political science, the interdisciplinary effort to understand these dynamics took on new urgency during and after the war, yielding what came to be known as the theory of mass society. It represents a substantial corpus of theoretical and empirical work. Ironically, the shifting fads and fashions of the social sciences and the urban and student unrest of the 1960s drew attention to what were perceived to be new issues of media, ideology, and mass politics. The underlying issues, however, were hardly new. Concepts such as pluralism, propaganda, and mass society gradually became passé and were overtaken by new terms with a more critical bite, such as media hegemony, media cultivation of values, and the rather ominous European theory of a spiral of silence.

Given the lack of clear-cut progress in resolving the puzzle of mass society, the impulse to start afresh on "new" and hopefully more tractable problems was understandable. But it is increasingly clear now that the adrenaline of immediate events has worn off, that Vietnam, which through television became the first "living-room war," Hitler's rousing radio addresses, and Roosevelt's discovery of the instantaneous, nationwide, fireside chat all contributed to a theoretical heritage we would be ill-advised to ignore.

#### *The discovery of mass society*

A mass society is characterized by homogeneity of the mass population and a weakness of interpersonal and group life. Riesman's phrase (1953) "the

lonely crowd" captures the essence of the concept. Various essays in this literature emphasize different factors, but the loss of a sense of community and political belonging remains a central theme. The theory posits that since the turn of the century, the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Europe and the United States have resulted in the following trends: (1) The decline of family life: The nuclear family replaces the extended family; family members spend less time together; children attend large, centralized, anomic school systems; working mothers may be absent from the home; television watching replaces family conversation. (2) The alienating workplace: Mobility from job to job and isolating work conditions in large organizations make both the workplace and work associates less important to the individual. (3) The decline of local community: Dispersed suburban areas separated from central, integrating cultural institutions of the city give residents little sense of community. (4) The weakening of religious ties: Although the majority of people may identify themselves as religiously affiliated, such affiliation is nominal, and participation is irregular or nonexistent. (5) The weakening of ethnic ties: Over time, ethnic communities blur into a massified urban landscape. (6) The decline of participation in voluntary associations: The lack of group life further weakens the individual's sense of identity and connectedness (Fromm 1941; Riesman 1953; Arendt 1951; Kornhauser 1959, 1968; Bramson 1961; Bell 1962, 1973, 1979; Shils 1962; Wilensky 1964; Pinard 1968; Giner 1976; Beniger 1987; De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach 1988).

The historical argument is that just as these social forces reach a stage of crisis, the evolving mass media technologies, including radio and television, become available to provide a new nationally centered identity for the isolated and rootless individual who seeks a sense of belonging. Hannah Arendt, in exploring the origins of totalitarianism, characterizes the process as follows:

The masses grew out of fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships. Coming from the class-ridden society of the nation-state, whose cracks had been cemented with nationalist sentiment, it is only natural that these masses, in the first helplessness of their new experience, have tended toward an especially violent nationalism, to which mass leaders have yielded against their own instincts and purposes for purely demagogic reasons. [1951, 310-11]

Kornhauser (1959) follows this line of argument, tracing the Nazis' mobilization of alienated and restive youth groups in Germany in the 1920s. Those young Germans had abandoned their traditional religious ties and community ties and had substituted a sense of direction and belonging derived from Hitler's charismatic leadership. An intensive propaganda campaign in 1924 helped to coordinate a number of diverse groups into a Greater German

Youth Movement. The character of those propaganda appeals focused on remote and abstract political symbols, rather than on the more specific and concrete political issues of day-to-day political life. Those media symbols represented a pseudoauthority in that they were concocted and manipulated to sway the masses, were shallow in content, impinged directly on individuals through the media, rather than being filtered through the community or educational system, and encouraged a compulsive, irrational form of loyalty and attachment (Kornhauser 1968).

A rapid breakdown of traditional norms of behavior may suddenly provide more freedom than the individual is psychologically prepared to handle (Fromm 1941; Riesman 1953), and such anomic individuals may find comfort in the pseudoauthority and pseudocommunity of the mass media (Herzog 1944; Boorstin 1961). But these cultural dynamics lead to political instability, because such individuals are easily mobilized by authoritarian and demagogic appeals. This cluster of concerns has stimulated a large corpus of social science research on persuasion, attitude change, mass psychology, and political communications (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley 1953; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Milgram 1965; McGuire 1969). Michael Robinson (1976) developed a theory that the increasing dependence of the mass population on television for political news fosters the growth of political malaise, and he demonstrated that connection in a series of empirical studies. Other found evidence that isolated individuals were more easily persuaded and were prone to extreme political views (Kornhauser 1959; Kerr and Siegel 1954). As with Orwell's work, the historical fact of Hitler's rise to power in Weimar Germany and a special concern about the fragility of democratic institutions serve as the intellectual backdrop. There remains the haunting question – under what conditions might it happen again (Hamilton 1972; Linz and Stepan 1978).

Although such critics as Daniel Bell have characterized the concept of mass society as a rather slippery and odd mixture of moral philosophy and systematic social analysis, he describes it, nonetheless, as one of the most influential social theories of the mid-twentieth century (Bell 1962, 21). Indeed, it traces its legacy directly to the founding studies in the field of sociology, having to do with the maintenance of social integration during times of change, conducted at the turn of the century by such luminaries as Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies, and Comte.<sup>4</sup>

### *Mass society rediscovered*

By the 1960s, the term “propaganda” had returned to use primarily as an epithet, rather than as an analytic concept in the study of political communications. An important exception to that general trend is the work of the

prolific French philosopher-sociologist Jacques Ellul. He argues that the concept of propaganda is no less appropriate to the study of modern industrial democracies than to the study of fascism or communism (Ellul 1965). His view is that the phenomenon of propaganda and its connection to the dominant technologies of communication need not to be the planned outcome of a nefariously scheming totalitarian elite:

A common view of propaganda is that it is the work of a few evil men, seducers of the people, cheats and authoritarian rulers who want to dominate a population; that it is the handmaiden of more or less illegitimate powers. . . . This view seems to me completely wrong. A simple fact should lead us to question it: nowadays propaganda pervades all aspects of public life. [Ellul 1965, 118-19]

Ellul goes on to discuss what he calls the necessity of propaganda. Some of his arguments may sound strange to American ears. His point is that pervasive, purposeful political mass communication is an inevitable outgrowth of modern technology. He asserts that Goebbels's theories of propaganda were based in part on the work of Freud and that Stalin's strategies drew on Pavlovian psychology. So far so good. But he proceeds to argue that American propaganda is similarly based on John Dewey's theories of education.

This is a point central to Ellul's thesis. Propaganda, he argues, is very much akin to mass education. It is used more often to reinforce existing tenets of civic culture than to persuade or change attitudes. It is a subtle and natural phenomenon of modern politics, emphasizing unquestioned half-truths more than intentional falsehoods. It draws on common myths, simplifies complex realities, and more often than not provides welcome and comforting assurance that all is well to a half-attentive mass audience. Perhaps that is why Ellul makes such good reading for American audiences today; in the American vocabulary, the concepts of education and propaganda seem such distant cousins. It is refreshing to think through the parallels.

Ellul's work, like Orwell's, takes the strategy of warning its readers of the dangers of allowing the centralized political institutions to accumulate too much control over the cultural technologies. This theory focuses on the extreme case and the end point of the process: the totalitarian regime. The allusions to the symbols, strategies, and extremes of European fascism are integral to the case each book presents. Such arguments may not always succeed in convincing readers that these issues are as relevant to the 1990s as to the 1940s, but that connection should be made.

This study focuses not on modern-day totalitarian media but rather on the potential structural weaknesses of mass democratic institutions. How do democracies break down? Will the new media upset a potentially delicate balance by overloading the flow of communications, by exacerbating social tensions and inequalities, or by providing elites or potential elites an irre-

sistibly tempting tool for manipulation? Or, instead, will the new media, on balance, serve to bolster democratic practice by stimulating the flow of political information and deepening mass participation?

Orwell imagined how Hitler or Stalin might have used the technology of two-way wall-size telescreens. Indeed, today we have large-screen and two-way cable television. It is, however, the product of industrial capitalism, and the video cables are connected to corporate headquarters rather than to a governmental Ministry of Truth. There are many channels and as many Big Brothers, and they hawk consumer products as well as politics and religion. One might speculate on the type of book Orwell might have written had he chosen to explore the future excesses of industrial capitalism, rather than those of state socialism.

Although the term "mass society" is less often used today, and the power of its connection to seminal theory in sociology and political science has been weakened, its critical focus on manipulation of the population by centralized media has been picked up by new voices with quite different perspectives. Many are Marxists, who in their attempt to understand the false consciousness of public enthusiasm for capitalist democracies tend to attribute rather spectacular powers of persuasion to the mass media. Unlike the situation with totalitarian propaganda, which is singular in its argument and anything but subtle, this modern critical literature identifies a more sophisticated form of cultural dominance based on the ability to deflect critical views rather than outlaw them. Another strand of media criticism quite independent of Marxist views simply identifies negative values and practices of the media, such as an emphasis on commercialism, sex, and violence, and particularly the manipulation of children. This group is inclined to recommend regulations and prohibitions in the spirit of institutional media reform. Others focus on the international flow of communications or on citizens' privacy. All share a certain stridency and an innocence of the roots of these concerns in the concept of the mass society. But from diverse starting points, several currently active research traditions have come to a position quite like Ellul's. They find the media to be successful seducers, addictively pacifying and fundamentally inimical to social pluralism.

### *Critical media theory*

Among the champions of this point of view one might include Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Armand Mattelart, Ariel Dorfman, and Herbert Schiller. They focus on what they describe as a subtle but very effective repression of contrary ideas in the name of tolerance and democratic pluralism. Marcuse (1964) argues that we have a one-dimensional society that assimilates contrary ideas into the commercial main-



stream by romanticizing and personalizing them into apolitical fragments of advertiser-supported network news-drama. He refers to the modern media system in his characteristic language as providing a "comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom." Can we, he asks, really distinguish between the mass media as agents of information and entertainment and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination?

Likewise, Enzenberger, the German poet, playwright, and essayist, asserts that

George Orwell's bogey of a monolithic consciousness industry derives from a view of the media which is undialectical and obsolete. . . . With the development of the electronic media, the industry which shapes consciousness has become the pacemaker for the social and economic development of societies in the late industrial age. It infiltrates into all other sectors of production, takes over more and more directional and control functions, and determines the standard of the prevailing technology. [1974, 95, 98]

The ultimate use of the new technologies, Enzenberger argues, has not yet been determined. The expansion of international flows of communications and user-controlled technologies could shift the momentum of control over the flow of the public debate from the established authorities to progressive movements in society, if only they can recognize that the monolithic media need not be monolithic. His optimism about the potential of new art forms and populist or, as some have put it, guerrilla video has drawn a worldwide readership.

### *Media criticism*

There is another literature, curiously parallel in its thrust to the Marxist critique, that denounces the mass media, especially television, for their negative influence on culture and society. There is not much of Marxism in its roots, however. It simply denounces the media for their undue commercial influence, especially on children. Among the popular spokespersons here one might include Marie Winn, Jerry Mander, Neil Postman, Frank Mankiewicz, Joel Swerdlow, Rose Goldsen, Dorothy and Jerome Singer, Ben Bagdikian, and George Gerbner. The media are seen as having a variety of effects: inducing passivity; distracting individuals from other, more serious pursuits, such as education; forcing adult values and expectations on children at much too early an age; inculcating superficial, acquisitive, materialistic values; desensitizing viewers to real-world violence; and, most closely associated with the critical school, trivializing political life. This literature shares both a stridency and a sense of urgency with the Marxist writings, but in contrast, it bases many of its conclusions on experimental and survey studies of viewers and their social attitudes. Although the data and findings from most of the

individual studies can be and have been disputed, it is difficult to argue with the conclusion that somehow the mix of media content in the United States could be richer, more diverse, and more humane.

### *The Third World critique*

A third stream of criticism comes from those in the Third World who are concerned about their inability to control the seemingly inexorable onrush of Western commercial entertainment and news media. The problem here is exacerbated by the simple economic fact that once the production costs for American and European television programs and motion pictures have been covered in their country of origin, they can be sold profitably around the world at prices much lower than the costs of producing indigenous programming. Among the voices of concern here one might include Kaarle Nordenstreng, Jeremy Tunstall, Herbert Schiller, Dallas Smythe, and L. Ramiro Beltran. An issue of tension is drawn between the acknowledged value of a free flow of information across international boundaries and the need for developing countries to nurture and protect their own indigenous cultures and values. Because programming tends to flow from the more to the less developed nations of the world, the nature of the process is most often characterized in conspiratorial and neocolonial terms. Thus, in parallel to the analysis of economic flows, one hears a call for a "new world information order" that would somehow attempt to redress the imbalance (MacBride 1980).

### *The privacy issue*

The final strand of the literature concerns the issue of personal privacy. Because so much of economic life involves computers that are increasingly interconnected by routine data communications, every economic act is likely to leave an electronic footprint. Telephone companies, of course, keep records on every long-distance call. Banks and credit companies have detailed records and profiles of purchasing behavior. The Internal Revenue Service, the Census Bureau, and the Social Security Administration know a great deal about the physical, social, and economic well-being (or lack thereof) of the great bulk of the citizenry. In homes monitored by the A. C. Nielsen Company, electronic "people meters" send data instantaneously to centralized computer banks in Florida detailing which member of the household watched which program or videotape. The "universal product codes" on each item brought to the checkout counter allow a store to keep up-to-date inventories and also, if so motivated, to keep track of exactly who bought what. Even if the data-collecting organizations have no intention of using information for anything

more than internal bookkeeping, it is difficult to anticipate all the possible uses of the data after they are collected. The QUBE two-way cable system in Columbus, Ohio, for example, keeps records of who watched which movie, for billing purposes only. But in 1980, defense lawyers for the operators of a local X-rated movie house subpoenaed those computerized records, because the movie at issue in the trial, one *Captain Lust*, had recently been shown on QUBE, and the question of community standards regarding sexually explicit material was central to the legal determination of obscenity.<sup>5</sup>

Privacy is a delicate issue. Charles Ferris, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, did not mince words in summarizing his view: "The fundamental problem I see with the coming information age is that it will rob us of one of our more important rights in a free society, the right to privacy" (Burnham 1983, 246). The issue of personal privacy in the electronic age grew in significance and ultimately became the subject of a series of investigatory commissions, resulting in the landmark legislation of the 1970s and 1980s (Belair 1980). Among the principal spokespersons here one might include John Wicklein, David Burnham, Robert Ellis Smith, and Gary Marx.

These streams of research and analysis converge in their concern regarding the unconstrained and pervasive power of the established communications media. The abilities of the dominant media to frame the political debate, to subsume and repress messages contrary to the established orthodoxy, and to collect and integrate data from diverse sources allow them to exert a form of power that is especially dangerous because of its subtlety. These concerns are redoubled in the face of the new generation of communications technologies, whose powers to monitor, to engage, and to persuade are perhaps several orders of magnitude stronger than those of their predecessors.

It is fitting that Orwell chose to conclude his book with the ultimate and complete defeat of his hero's independence and self-control. The ultimate form of propaganda is brainwashing. In the final pages of the narrative, Winston Smith, the book's protagonist, was worn down by concentrated, continuing torture and thought control. No one has the strength to resist brainwashing forever. Such imagery lies at the very core of concern about the future of public and private electronic communications.

### **Democratic theory and the promise of political pluralism**

Vannevar Bush's idea for Memex, a brilliant vision in 1945 of what was to evolve 40 years later into the personal computer, represents, on the range of technological potential, the polar opposite of Orwell's telescreen. Professor Bush's ideal was more akin to the famous library in Alexandria that substantially succeeded in accumulating the entire store of the world's knowledge

in the third century B.C. But in Bush's scenario, the storehouse of accumulated wisdom would be instantaneously and conveniently available via electronic delivery to anyone in the world who might care to inquire. A more recent paper by Alan Hald fleshed out what the Memex might look like:

Within this decade [the 1980s] a typical office or home could have an affordable computer system integrated with high-capacity information storage and recording devices such as video disc players and video cassette recorders. This equipment would be tied into a global communications network through the telephone system, cable television and other media.

A small library could be quickly accessed through this equipment. For example, if you ask about zebras you are shown a zebra running and told about its habitat and characteristics. Information is automatically adjusted to your level of understanding whether you are a five-year-old child or a doctor of zoology. I can see the children of the future bouncing through this playground of knowledge, motivated by curiosity and the fun of instantly having their questions answered, assisted by either a human or a computer guide through human knowledge.

Imagine what it would be like to be exposed from birth to this type of medium. A child would quickly become experienced in searching for and finding information on anything – relating ideas and weaving patterns of understanding, developing a form of thinking that would be highly conceptual. By today's standards, such a child would appear to be a genius. The impact on an entire generation would be dramatic. Our children's children may become the first genius generation. [1982, 10–11]

The basic difference between the visions of Orwell and Bush lies in who controls the cultural technology. In Orwell's future, every aspect of the communications process is monitored and controlled to protect the interests of the state and to reinforce its ideology. Vannevar Bush's future, in contrast, posits that control of communications and information will reside increasingly with the individual, a natural outgrowth of technological evolution.

Indeed, this is the normative engine that drives much of the research in this field. If we are to understand the future of the mass audience, the question to guide our inquiry is how new technologies might be structured to strike a new balance in the control of information between centralized authorities and the public at large. If such a new equilibrium were to be achieved, it no doubt would become one of the defining characteristics of the postindustrial age.

A central metaphor for this literature is the computer as an intellectual tool, a natural extension of the human mind in the second industrial revolution, just as machines extended and gave power to the human hand in the first industrial revolution (McLuhan 1964; Bell 1973; Dertouzos and Moses 1979; Masuda 1980; Nora and Minc 1980; Zuboff, 1988). Thus, mathematical problems that once taxed Newton's powers can be solved quickly and effortlessly by high-school students with calculators and computers.

A corollary is that the new technological basis of society will lead to a new politics. Fred Williams, for example, characterizes this view:

The political order of nations is being rapidly transformed from the written document and spoken word to an electronic communications network enveloping everybody. The new political order is the communications infrastructure. . . . The new communications technologies offer the opportunity for citizen information and participation undreamed of by our Founding Fathers. . . . We may have to adjust our democracy away from the constraints of the eighteenth century and toward the advantages of the twenty-first. [Williams 1982, 199]

*Communications and political development theory*

The belief that the communications media are central and prerequisite elements for the evolution of the modern, pluralistic democratic state has its roots in a corpus of research on comparative politics and political development. This literature underpins Vannevar Bush's arguments and forecasts, just as mass society theory supports Orwell's. Also, like mass society theory, this work had clear ties to the historical circumstances that spawned it. Gabriel Almond, in a recent retrospective analysis of this tradition of research, describes a generation of young social scientists following World War II who tried to make sense out of the reconstruction of governments and economies in Europe and the explosion of new nation-states around the globe. Their mood was optimistic, and their theories were of grand scale. As Almond describes it, these young scholars sought to apply the concepts of the Enlightenment and the social theories developed in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to derive a model for the world at large. They shared a faith in human progress, and they developed theories of critical "takeoff points" based on the spread of knowledge and technology, the development of new markets, higher standards of living, and lawful, humane, and liberal politics, beckoning nations newly freed from the bonds of colonial exploitation (Almond 1990).

Among all the technological developments sweeping the Third World, communications technologies were singled out as having the most pervasive effects on human societies (Millikan 1967) and as the key prerequisite to democracy (Lipset 1960).<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the quintessential statement of this literature is Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958). He describes a causal model that posits critical roles for mass literacy and the growth of media institutions in the process of political and economic development. It reflects the logic and optimism of Walt Rostow's notion of a critical take-off point for economic development. In the original formulation, Lerner described four variables arrayed in causal sequence:

urbanization → literacy → media development → political development

That basic model provided the stimulus for a succession of comparative and time-series studies (McCrone and Cnudde 1967; Frey 1973; Duch and Lemieux 1986; Neuman in press). Those empirical studies uncovered mixed and sometimes conflicting results. Duch and Lemieux, in particular, argue that the type of political regime may affect media growth as much as the latter affects the former. Thus, although the causal ordering is subject to debate, there is little doubt that these variables constitute a highly interrelated cluster.

The emphasis in this literature is on the role of communications technology in national integration and nation building. Karl Deutsch (1963), for example, analyzes the delicate trade-offs between the vested interests of the local and traditional geographic units and the common benefits derived from national unification. Such arguments hark back to Marx's description of nineteenth-century France as a "sack of potatoes," independent homologous villages, self-sufficient clusters of peasants, not connected with each other either by communications or by economic interdependence (Marx 1852).

Ithiel de Sola Pool summarizes the view that the mass media system is the critical catalyst:

The existence of daily price quotations facilitates the establishment of a national market. Media encourage a national art and literature by holding up products against each other. The media broaden the relevant reference groups in discussions. The same kinds of processes of national organization through the media take place in social life, in cultural life, in economic life, and in party politics. [1963, 253]

Another key concept of this literature is the media's role in inculcating a psychological openness to change within the citizenry. Lerner describes the self-perpetuating psychology of the traditional peasant who in response to the question what it would be like to play the role of social leader responds emphatically that such a thing could not be imagined. Lerner uses the term "empathy" to characterize the ability to imagine change and to be alert to news and information from outside the setting of the local village. The development and nurturance of empathy thus becomes a central mechanism by which the mass media can reinforce economic and political development. In addition to fostering human empathy, the communications media are needed to develop a sense of fundamental political trust to reinforce the legitimacy of national institutions. Lucian Pye, for example, describes the delicate task of coalition building among mutually distrustful ethnic groups and the need to build a culture of acceptance of electoral defeats as well as victories (Pye and Verba 1965). Almond and Verba (1965) and, more recently, Inkeles and Smith (1974) develop the distinction between an obedient orientation and a participatory orientation, reinforced by emerging institutions of education and the mass media as critical components in the process of political growth and the development of a viable civic culture.



Of equal importance in these theories of political development is the emphasis on a need for gradual and balanced growth. Huntington (1968), for example, stresses the dangers of rapid economic growth, which can destroy traditional cultural values and institutions without adequately replacing them and can raise material expectations without providing for them. Likewise, Barrington Moore (1966), in his analysis of English economic development, stresses the importance of the fact that the process was gradual, with the economic position of the traditional ruling elite being slowly eroded, allowing political development to evolve in new directions. The central problem for this theory is the class-linked polarization of political interests. As Moore succinctly puts it, no bourgeoisie, no democracy (1966, 418). Overlapping and crosscutting religious, tribal, geographic, and economic interests are most conducive to balanced, democratic growth (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

The critical elements of the theory of communications and political development, then, are (1) the growth of literacy and communications institutions and (2) a corresponding psychological openness to diversity and change in the context of (3) gradual economic growth and crosscutting political pluralism.

The fresh enthusiasm of Almond's generation of postwar social scientists waned somewhat as it became recognized that modernization was a slogging, brutal process, an interplay of both growth and decay. Furthermore, the paradigm of communications and development came under increasing criticism as a handmaiden of neocolonial interests and as a mode of analysis insensitive to both the realities of political economy and the richness and diversity of indigenous cultures (Rogers 1976; Almond 1990). Thus, although attention began to shift to other matters, a theoretical basis for understanding the interaction of communications technology and political growth had been established.

#### *New research on communications and democratic pluralism*

In the ensuing years, three further themes in this evolving literature came to prominence, each of which reflects the enduring faith that communications technology is an engine to drive politics in the direction of a revitalized democracy. The primary emphasis in this new work is on the new media in the First World, rather than on the existing media technologies in the Third World, and the intellectual debt to the political development literature is not always acknowledged, but the underlying logic remains unchanged. The first theme in the literature celebrates unprecedented abundance of information; the second emphasizes a new pluralism, an outgrowth of the informational diversity and open marketplace of ideas; the third identifies a growth of participatory activity stimulated by the first two factors.

*Information abundance*

According to one popular account, the new media have provided an "information bomb . . . exploding in our midst, showering us with a shrapnel of images and drastically changing the way each of us perceives and acts upon our private world. . . . We are transforming our own psyches" (Toffler 1980, 156).

Television is central to the communications explosion. During World War II there were only six stations in the entire United States, broadcasting one to two hours each day to a handful of sets, but within 15 years, 90% of the nation's households had television sets. For the next decade, most metropolitan areas had three network-affiliated stations, public television, and a few independent stations providing movies and reruns. But with the advent of satellite-delivered cable television, the true potential of the "tube of plenty" (Barnouw 1975) began to be realized, including extensive public-affairs, news, and religious programming, as well as programming designed expressly for little-served ethnic and linguistic minorities. One cable system in New York, for example, regularly provides programming in Korean, Italian, Greek, Hindi, Hebrew, Spanish, and Chinese (Baldwin and McVoy 1983; Neuman and Pool 1986; Heeter and Greenberg 1988). The result is that in the 1990s, most modern cable systems are broadcasting 30 to 75 channels, and the next generation of optically based cable systems will have capacities of 150 channels or more (Nicholas, Levin, and Ross 1991). Recent figures from the Nielsen Company reveal a stabilized usage pattern that results in just under 60% of American homes subscribing to cable, representing 76% of the homes passed by coaxial cable. In more remote areas, more than 2.5 million households with backyard satellite dishes can choose from over a hundred broadcast signals. In addition to this national diversity, local cable channels and the new small-scale "low-power television" broadcasters are able to provide locally produced and locally oriented video fare (Pool 1977; Arterton 1987). The video explosion, it is argued, makes possible a cultural and political pluralism that may become the hallmark of postindustrialism (Pool 1983b).

The videotape recorder is another important element in the new video diversity. A recording capability allows the individual to record broadcast programming at unusual or inconvenient hours for later viewing, further maximizing the potential for diversity and flexibility (Levy 1987). Furthermore, tape rental outlets and video libraries have sprung up in virtually every community, stabilizing in 1986 at about 27,000 stores. Most of these outlets focus on popular movies, but the potential for greater variety is there. One sourcebook, for example, lists 40,000 video titles on tape and disc available to institutions and individuals. As competition in the video rental business grows, diversity of the available programming will increasingly become a

critical competitive factor. The technology of the videocassette recorder may seem a bit mundane, but it is as clear an example as is provided by any of the new media of how technology can give increased control to the user of the medium (Ganley and Ganley 1987).

The print media have not been falling behind either. More than 10,000 periodicals are currently published, and the numbers are steadily increasing. The book industry remains healthy as well, averaging more than 40,000 new titles each year (Compaine 1982).

Nevertheless, the ultimate symbol of the cornucopia probably will remain the home videotex terminal, much like the Memex described by Vannevar Bush. Given a two-way connection by telephone lines, the individual, through a personal computer or terminal, can call up virtually any electronically stored information or data base – the universal Alexandrian library. Originally the idea of videotex was based on connecting a terminal to a central information-providing computer. The early designers imagined a data base of several million frames of information as economically feasible, and that seemed like a lot (Fedida and Malik 1979). But as new systems emerge, their interconnectedness allows the central computer to serve as a gateway to all the others, and so the accessible information base quickly becomes, in effect, limitless, or limited only by the individual's awareness of what is available (Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Tydeman et al. 1982; Barber 1984).

The historical parallel between Gutenberg's printing press and the new media is frequently drawn to emphasize the range of the potential impacts on social life. Thousands of monks working in the medieval scriptoria copying manuscripts by hand could barely keep up with the natural processes of wear and decay, let alone produce new manuscript copies in usable quantities (Smith 1980), and as a result, the total number of books and the number of titles were quite small. Holmes (1952) describes the medieval university education as consisting of some exposure to about a dozen books, mostly Latin classics, with very little else available. A "major" library of that era may have contained as few as 500 books. The invention of movable type and, later in the nineteenth century, high-speed printing made possible the accumulation and dissemination of an immeasurably larger knowledge base. If what characterizes civilization is the ability to accumulate and build on the knowledge of preceding generations, then the technologies of information storage, retrieval, and communications will play a critical role (Machlup 1962; Eisenstein 1979).

### *Information diversity*

The second element of this analysis is a growing social and political pluralism that corresponds to the diversity of the information environment. As Naisbitt

puts it in his characteristic prose: "Centralized structures are crumbling all across America. But the society is not falling apart. Far from it. The people of this country are rebuilding America from the bottom up into a stronger, more balanced, more diverse society. The decentralization of America has transformed politics, business, our very culture" (Naisbitt 1982, 103). The key symbol is the demise of the general-interest magazines, such as *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. They were symbols of a common culture. But by the mid-1960s the economics of printing, mailing, and, most important, advertising had forced those giants out of the mass magazine business, to be replaced by smaller, more focused, special-interest magazines that provided advertisers access to various select audiences, more likely to be interested in the particular products they had to sell (Maisel 1973; Compaine 1982). By the late 1970s the same pressures were being felt by the major television networks. Whereas only a few years earlier they could depend on sharing between them at least 90% of the prime-time viewing audience, by 1990 that share had slipped to 65% (*Nielsen Media Research News* 1990). The viewers have not left television, but they are watching other channels, independent stations, and cable programming that have been utilizing a strategy based in part on special-interest appeal.

The diversity of media content, so the reasoning goes, corresponds to a rebirth of social diversity. Naisbitt cites numerous examples of this trend, including new citizen advisory panels for public agencies, a rebirth of interest in states' rights, new regional organizations fighting for local interests, and an apparently explosive growth of citizens' groups to provide neighborhood crime watches, fight local pollution, and lobby for other local concerns (Naisbitt 1982, 121). Toffler describes a similar pattern, a bewildering profusion of new special-interest groups: "Mobile-home owners organize to fight for county zoning changes. Farmers battle power transmission lines. Retired people mobilize against school taxes. Feminists, Chicanos, strip miners and anti-strip miners organize, as do single parents and anti-porn crusaders" (Toffler 1980, 409).

Such popular accounts, of course, tend to argue by example and anecdote, leaving numerous counterexamples unnoted. But single-issue politics, according to almost all accounts, will play an increasingly central role in the political process. Arterton, for example, argues that this will be an outgrowth of the technologies of horizontal communications (rather than vertical communications) empowering those who wish to mobilize their peers, rather than complain to those in centralized positions of authority (Arterton 1987). Where once a group might have relied on a mimeographed newsletter, there are now dozens of tools for political communications. Abramson, Arterton, and Orren (1988) cite the increasing sophistication of computerized mailings that personalize the message to address the particular interests and concerns of the

recipient. These are particularly handy tools for direct-mail fund-raising, as the computer unfailingly records which appeals seem to be most successful with which households. They conclude that such developments bring to mind the earliest days of the American republic, when potential political leaders created and sponsored their own small newspapers (Abramson et al. 1988, 58).

A particularly interesting aspect of the new pluralism is the much-heralded decline of the American party system. There has been a dramatic decrease in the number of voters who consider themselves affiliated with the Democratic or Republican party. Even among those who still identify themselves as affiliated with a political party, there are higher levels of cross-party voting. Candidates are increasingly getting their funding from political action groups and from federal campaign financing, which further frees them from the control of the party apparatus. The increasing use of media-oriented state primaries, rather than party-organization-oriented nominating conventions, reinforces these trends (Burnham 1970; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984).

The party system is far from dead, however. Third-party candidacies are still likely to be symbolic rather than politically viable. Most citizens still feel some bond with a political party, and the parties themselves are adjusting to the changing environment by providing sophisticated advice on computerized fund-raising and media strategies. But the flow of politics does seem to be more fluid, open, and pluralistic. Some analysts have been predicting realignments of various issues and interest groups vis-à-vis the dominant political parties. Perhaps we are in a transitional cycle of party politics that parallels the establishment of the American electoral system in the eighteenth century, rather than an end to the party system and centralized political structures in themselves.

Simon Nora and Alain Minc, in their report to the president of France, explain that the trend toward decentralization is a natural outgrowth of the new information technologies. With increasing electronic connectivity, it is simply easier to provide information where it is needed. The original reason for bureaucratic centralization, they point out, was the need to put decision-making power in the hands of those at the top, who could amass and analyze the flow of information in increasingly large and complex organizations. But with distributed data processing and the ability to access the central data bases instantaneously, such organizational structures are no longer the obvious choice (Nora and Minc 1980, 52).

Geographic pluralism is also reinforced by the structure of the American media system. Although one is accustomed to thinking of network television, for example, as an integrative, nationally oriented medium, the fact of the matter is that the networks themselves own only five broadcast stations each

and must rely on independently owned local stations to reach the economically essential critical mass of national coverage (Poltrack 1983). To reach the American population by means of advertising, political or otherwise, one communicates through local stations and newspapers. New newspaper printing technologies are reinforcing this trend further by allowing central metropolitan papers to add individualized sections and even change the news and advertising for different communities (Compaine 1982).

### *Public participation*

The third major trend in the literature on the new media environment identifies a new level of public participation in the political process. It is linked, of course, to the new pluralism:

The ethic of participation is spreading bottom up across America and radically altering the way we think people in institutions should be governed. Citizens, workers, and consumers are demanding and getting a greater voice in government, business and the marketplace. [Naisbitt 1982, 175]

In most cases, the new communications technologies, often in concert with the old, play a central role. In Hawaii, for example, Professor Ted Becker organized the Televote Project, which provided detailed packets of information for citizens to review before casting votes via telephone. These telephone plebiscites are, in turn, publicized and discussed in the local media. A related project utilized broadcast television to organize an electronic town meeting for the city of Honolulu. Congressman Edward Markey, from Massachusetts, joined a number of his constituents in an "electure," a computer conference on the Source Telecomputing Network that allowed each participant to contribute and react to others' comments. In that case the focus was American policy on nuclear armaments. In Reading, Pennsylvania, the local cable operator, Berks Community Television, set up electronic office hours for community officials to solicit citizen participation on public issues. The same group set up a two-way cable link between a senior citizens' center and the high school to facilitate communications between two groups that ordinarily have little common ground (Arterton 1987).

An even grander vision of the new active citizenry has been put forward by Benjamin Barber (1984). He, too, sees a great potential in the new technologies for facilitating broader popular participation in the political process. It will not happen suddenly, he warns. The trick is that democracy breeds further democracy: As citizens succeed in voicing their views, they begin to change their views of the citizenship role. He puts forward a program of a dozen institutional reforms and initiatives that he believes will help to revitalize the citizen's role, including the establishment of a "civic videotex

service” and a “communications cooperative” to oversee the development of new communications technologies and extended electronic balloting on a series of public referenda and initiatives. His model of a citizen-controlled communications infrastructure recalls the earlier visions of Brecht (1932), Habermas (1962), and Enzenberger (1974).

These laboratory and field experiments with new media are yielding some exciting results. The studies are not yet completed, but there are strong suggestions that over time the use of these connective technologies will expand the interests and expectations of those citizens who use them. If these initial findings prove to be accurate, Masuda (1980) argues, they will reflect a fundamental shift from parliamentary to participatory democracy.

The optimism of these projections has a familiar ring. It is an echo of the development theorists, who in seeing an increasingly interconnected and reenergized world around them at the end of World War II sought to rebuild and enrich it. The common denominator in all of this work is the vision of the new electronic communications media as powerful resources for pluralist democracy.

### **In the balance**

Orwell's *1984* offered a vision of enslavement. Bush's Memex focused on the liberating potential of the new technologies, a second industrial revolution as significant as the first. The future of the mass audience, no doubt, lies somewhere in between these two contrasting visions of the future; to find out where will require an examination of social and technological forces in tension. This book focuses in particular on three forces. Figure 1.1 outlines these fundamental dynamics. The first force, labeled the “communications revolution,” represents the push of new information and communications technologies. My thesis is that the fundamental characteristics of the new media encourage both a diverse pluralism and increased participation in public life. This is the central argument of Chapter 2. Personal computers and sophisticated electronic communications systems have the potential to give individuals unprecedented powers to access and process information. The centrally controlled one-way mass media, such as broadcasting and print media, are supplemented and enhanced by two-way electronic networks and interactive media. Narrowcasting becomes as viable as broadcasting. People are able to select from an almost limitless electronic library, rather than passively view whatever happens to be on television. Individuals can respond electronically to statements by central authorities or, if they wish, evaluate and discuss public issues through horizontal communications with their peers. If I were a technological determinist, I might stop there and conclude that Vannevar Bush was entirely correct. But I am not, and he is not. There is

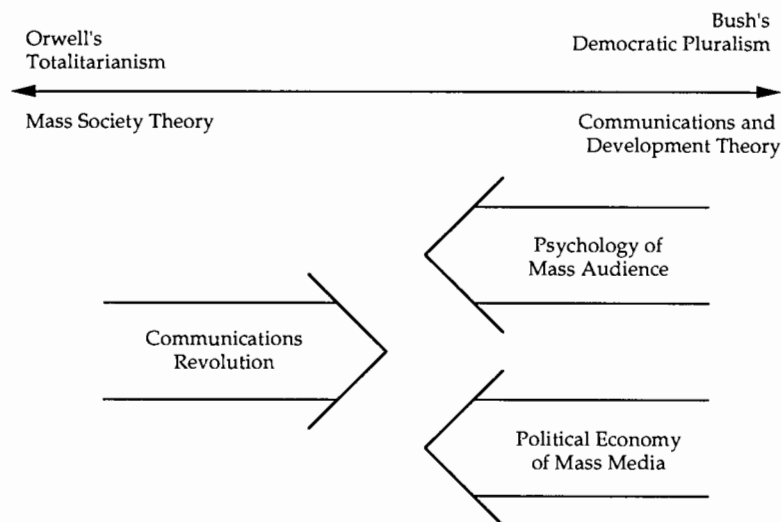


Figure 1.1. Forces in tension.

more to the story. Technological forces do not determine social structure and cultural values, but rather interact with them.

The second force is the inherited culture of mass communications behavior, the social psychology of media use. This force, the subject of Chapter 3, functions in direct opposition to the potentially liberating push of new technology. As evolving information technologies make new forms of education, exploration, and public participation possible, deeply ingrained habits of passive, half-attentive media use constrain that potential.

The third force is the political economy of the American mass communications industry. It is analyzed in Chapters 4 and 5. It, too, constrains the push of technology in fundamental ways. This force represents a combination of regulatory traditions and the economic dynamics of selling information and entertainment for a profit. The American infrastructure of mass communications and telecommunications is unique among advanced industrial nations in that it is entirely privately owned. Europe and Japan now seem to be moving in that direction as well (Hills 1986). Economies of scale push in the direction of common-denominator, one-way mass communications, rather than promoting narrowcasting and two-way communications.

The net result is that although the new media make possible new forms of political and cultural communications, in the main they are not likely to be used that way. Such stories are not new in the history of technology. But because the communications revolution is still very much in progress, it is particularly important to try to understand how these dynamics of technology



and society are likely to influence our lives and, in turn, how we might try to influence them.

Orwell calculated that the new electronic technologies would provide the central authorities unprecedented tools with which to control, manipulate, and enslave a powerless mass populace. It was a vision so dark and foreboding that it caught the imagination of a generation. Vannevar Bush's scenario, in contrast, was one of liberation. He saw in the emerging technologies new tools for communication and information retrieval that would give each member of society the power to search out and manipulate information once reserved for princes and presidents. Bush's writings on this topic never became as well known as Orwell's, but his central theme has been picked up and developed by numerous scholars as the Memex he imagined is actually finding its way into homes and offices around the world.

Mass society theory corresponds quite closely to Orwell's vision, and its advocates have found evidence that the mass media and the related large-scale institutions of modern society weaken the vitality of community life and open up the individual citizen to anomie, mass manipulation, and control. The literature on communications and development, on the other hand, is much more optimistic in spirit and tends to define the mass media as a positive force for public communications, national integration, and the development of a participatory civic culture.

Although the contrasts between the two traditions could hardly be more striking, a look back on this body of scholarship from the vantage point of the 1990s can provide a new perspective. I have come to conclude that despite what at first appear to be polar opposite conclusions and emphases, these traditions of research converge on a common insight about the fundamental importance of balanced growth of communications technologies and political institutions. Theories of communications and development focus on the early stages of nation building, primarily in the Third World. Mass society theory, in contrast, draws its historical examples from the potential for political decay in industrialized nations, with the growth of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s as the central metaphor. Development theory emphasizes the need for a strong and articulate central government able to mobilize the reluctant and traditionalist mass population to confront their critical, common economic problems. Mass society theory emphasizes the dangers when such central voices become too strong and stifle an open debate over public policies.

The two literatures outline the potential pathologies of the political communications process with similar words and concepts. Such terms as "balance," "moderation," "pluralism," "crosscutting cleavages," "gradualism," "equilibrium," "openness," and "institutional flexibility" are shared by the two perspectives. The common concept is one of maintaining balance between forces in conflict through a period of social change. The central issue con-

fronting both traditions is whether or not there can be systemic change without system breakdown. Each literature has its analyses of the need for moderation in the rate of historical change, the optimal sizes of institutions, the acceptable levels of inequality between social classes, and the need for a structured balance between public desires and realistic expectations.

Kornhauser's review of mass society theory, for example, describes historical "disjunctures" and "discontinuities" as the critical factors in explaining a society's vulnerability to totalitarianism. He reviews the statements of aristocratic critics who have bitterly denounced democratization, mass mobilization, and the breakdown of the old class system as the "causes" of totalitarianism:

It is not democratization per se which produces extremist mass movements, but the discontinuities in political authority that may accompany the introduction of popular rule. Where the preestablished political authority is highly autocratic, rapid and violent displacement of that authority by a democratic regime is highly favorable to the emergence of extremist mass movements that tend to transform the new democracy in anti-democratic directions. [1959, 125]

In the development literature, the theme is much the same and can be traced back to Tocqueville's observation that the areas of France that had experienced the most rapid and profound economic changes were those where popular discontent ran highest (de Tocqueville 1856, 175). Huntington traces nine factors, including the disruptive effects of rapid economic change, geographic mobility, and the displacement of traditional class groups by an insecure and inexperienced *nouveau riche*, as destabilizing forces (Huntington 1968, 50).

Another component of this concern with balance focuses on the balance of class interests and the degree of economic inequality in society. The growth of a large, vital, and active middle class helps to diffuse tensions between the highest and lowest strata. In a study of 47 countries, for example, Russett (1964) found a substantial correlation between the degree of economic inequality and the level of domestic political violence. These same themes permeate the mass society literature, where the problem is conceptualized as that of direct contact between elite groups and mobilized interest groups, without the moderating effects of intermediating social groups and local institutions. Mass society and development theories both stress the importance of avoiding disruptive political mobilization. Both emphasize the need for nurturance of community organizations and crosscutting political cleavages that will socialize people into the need to accept their political gains and losses gracefully, preventing the kind of ideological polarization and crisis mentality that seemed to characterize the totalitarian demagogues of European fascism.

Mass society is seen as arising from the breakdown of traditional community ties to church, family, and civic organizations, brought about by the homogenizing geographic mobility and dehumanizing organizational scale of urban industrial society. The extremely swift transformations inherent in modern life-styles dislocate, atomize, and alienate individuals from their social and cultural roots. This process makes the individual an easy target for the demagogue or authoritarian leader promulgating abstract symbols and practicing psychological manipulation of the need to belong. Essentially the same argument can be found in analyses of the rapid transitions from traditional to modernizing societies in the Third World.

If this analysis of underlying themes is fundamentally correct, we may now be in a position to formulate a general model of communications technologies and institutions in the process of social change. It is hoped that the model will provide some guidance in understanding the conflict between Orwell's dark pessimism and the naive optimism of the technological futurists. The basic dynamics at work here can be seen as an equilibrium model, as outlined in Figure 1.2.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Figure 1.1, the political ideal of "democratic pluralism" now stands at the middle of the model, and the process by which communications technologies might facilitate or undermine that goal can be more clearly outlined. As before, the model reflects forces in tension.

The two axes of the figure show the amount of political communication in a given political system (the vertical dimension) and the level of political centralization (the horizontal dimension). As each of the analysts would seem to agree, too much or too little of either can lead to a breakdown of the system. The concern of Orwell and the mass society theorists was that the nature of the new technologies would lead inexorably to a breakdown of democratic pluralism, toward the upper right corner of the figure, an increasingly centralized and intensely political communications system.

In contrast, the starting point for the theory of communications and development is the lower center of the diagram. Developing countries do not yet have political and economic infrastructures adequate to provide conduits for political communication. These dynamics, it turns out, create a triangular diagram, rather than a four-cell table, because when there is virtually no political communication, the dimension of centralization-decentralization is irrelevant. The problem is one of political entropy, a nonfunctioning political system. The emphasis of the development theorists, naturally enough, is the need for more communication, to develop literacy programs, newspapers, a national broadcasting authority, a telecommunications network. Given the divisiveness and the cultural and linguistic differences found in so many emerging nation-states, the assumption is that new communications technologies might provide a powerful force pressing toward the upper left corner

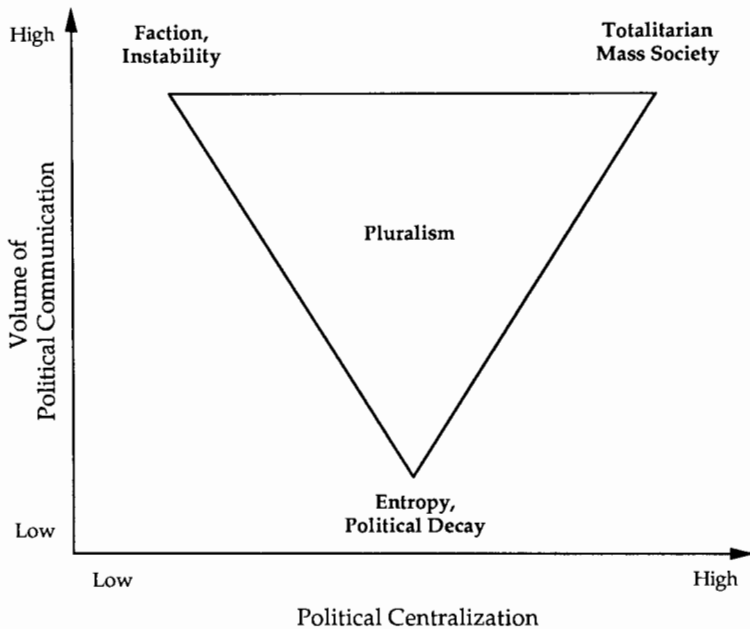


Figure 1.2. The equilibrium model.

of the diagram, toward violent factional disputes and a breakdown of central authority. So the analysts of communications and development emphasize the need for strong, centralized communications institutions.

The political ideal reflected in both the mass society perspective and the development perspective, however, is consistent (Takeichi 1991). The common goal is a balanced pluralism, an open system neither too centralized nor too decentralized, with moderate levels of two-way political communications.

Figure 1.2 thus provides a central organizing model for this book. We focus here on the future of the mass audience in the American political communications system as it enters the last decade of the twentieth century. It is a case study, a bellwether for advanced industrial capitalism. The dramatic technical developments that both George Orwell and Vannevar Bush imagined are just now coming to pass. Although we must take care to avoid crude models of technological determinism, we hope as well not to fall into the trap of assuming that all technologies are politically neutral. The task at hand is to review the fundamental properties of the evolving communications media. How do these properties interact with the forces pulling toward and away from political pluralism? How do the new technologies interact with the economics of commercial, entertainment-oriented mass communications?

How does the potential of the new technologies accord with the casual, semiattentive manner in which most people use the mass media?

The next chapter will review the underlying properties of the new media, examine the impact of the increasing volume of communications flows, and begin the analysis of how each new medium is likely to interact with the forces pulling toward and away from increasingly centralized control. It turns out that these digital electronic technologies do have characteristic properties, but in almost every case the ultimate political impact will be determined in great degree by the way society chooses to structure and control them.