

Functions of Mass Communication

Defining mass communication was once straightforward. The media were relatively stable and well known. The functions of mass communication in society were also relatively well understood and thoroughly researched. Studies by Harold D. Lasswell, Charles Wright, and others suggest that these functions have tended to fall largely into four broad categories.¹² These functions can be a useful lens through which to examine various forms of mass communication.

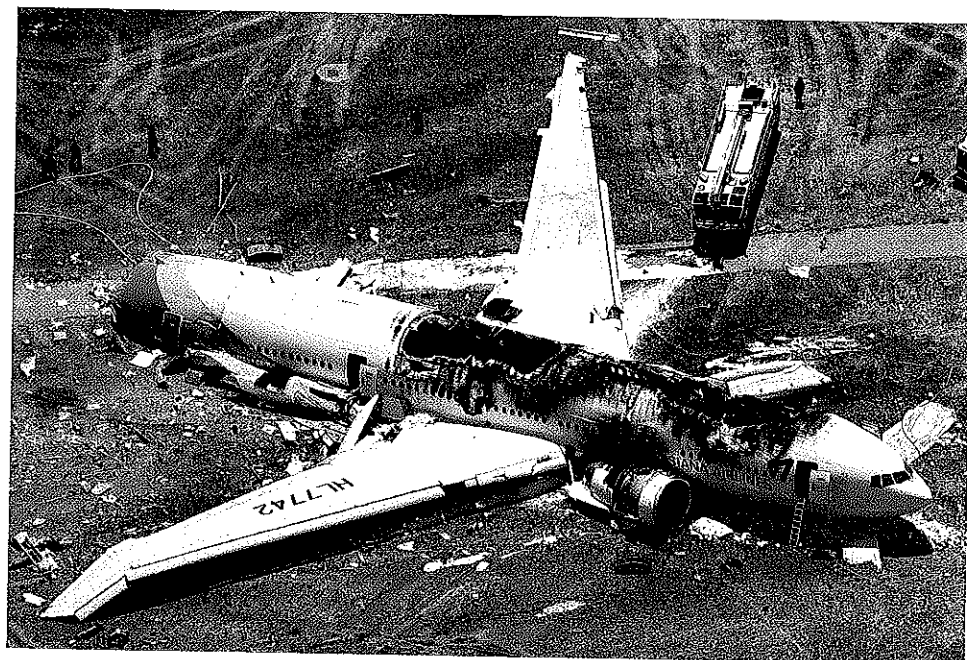
surveillance

Primarily the journalism function of mass communication, which provides information about processes, issues, events, and other developments in society.

SURVEILLANCE

In mass communication, **surveillance** refers primarily to journalism that provides information about processes, issues, events, and other developments in society. This can include news on the latest military activities, weather alerts, and political scandals. Aspects of advertising and public relations as well as educational communication can also employ surveillance.

One weakness in the surveillance function is that an excess of news about disasters, murders, or other unusual events can skew the audience's perception of what is normal in society. Receiving too much information on a particular topic can also promote apathy. Consider how media coverage of a scandal regarding a sports figure such as Yankees baseball player Alex Rodriguez can take on a life of its own and seem to continue forever until we are truly sick of seeing any more stories about A-Rod and athlete doping. Celebrity scandals may present more trivial examples, but skewed or apathetic responses to coverage of wars or disasters, especially in developing countries, are more significant and problematic.



Although surveillance is an important function of mass communication, repeated exposure to a story can have negative effects. After you hear about plane crashes in the media, are you more likely to worry about being in a plane crash?

CORRELATION

Correlation refers to the ways in which media interpret events and issues and ascribe meanings that help individuals understand their roles within the larger society and culture. Journalism, advertising, and public relations all shape public opinion through commentary, criticism, or even targeted marketing campaigns. Polls or surveys allow individuals to learn what others think about an issue and where their views fit within mainstream opinions. People may even shift their views or beliefs subtly to better align themselves with a desirable social group.

By correlating one's views with other groups or perceived notions of general public opinion, the media can help maintain social stability, although this function can be taken too far, and the media can thwart social change or block a full range of views from being disseminated to a mass audience. Interpretation can also tend to favor established business or elite interests over disadvantaged or minority groups, increasing the apparent credibility and authority of the dominant culture.

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Cultural transmission refers to the transference of the dominant culture, as well as its subcultures, from one generation to the next or to immigrants. This includes socialization, which the media perform by teaching societal rules and depicting standards of behavior. This function is especially important for children but also necessary for adults who may have immigrated recently to a new country with a different culture.

Not all aspects of cultural transmission are viewed favorably. It has been criticized for creating a homogenized culture that promotes mindless consumerism as a means to achieve happiness rather than imparting more humanistic, and ultimately more rewarding, values such as an appreciation of multiculturalism and diversity.

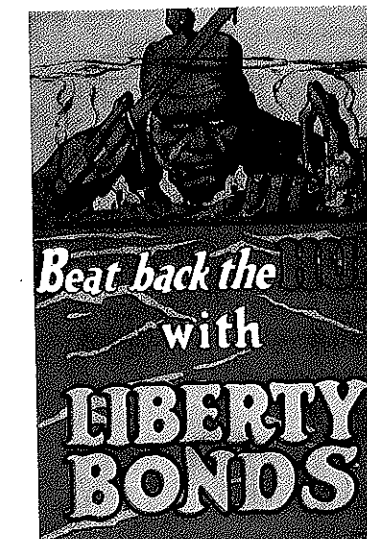
ENTERTAINMENT

The entertainment function is performed in part by all three of these activities (surveillance, correlation, and cultural transmission) but also involves the generation of content designed specifically and exclusively to entertain. Although some claim that this function helps raise artistic and cultural taste among the general populace, others disagree, arguing that mass media encourage escapism and promote lowbrow entertainment at the expense of high art.

Entertainment can also perpetuate certain stereotypes about various groups, wittingly or unwittingly. These can be especially hard to detect because they are often presented as part and parcel of a story line that makes oversimplified characters seem natural in context. For good and for bad, powerful cultural principles and symbols permeate entertainment, transmitting specific sets of values that can go unquestioned.

correlation

Media interpretation ascribing meaning to issues and events that helps individuals understand their roles within the larger society and culture.



Wartime propaganda posters provide windows into how public opinion can be shaped.

cultural transmission

The process of passing on culturally relevant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values from person to person or group to group.



Cultural transmission is a function of mass communication sometimes criticized for promoting mindless consumerism.