

McQuail's Mass  
Communication  
Theory

6th edition

Denis McQuail



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

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# Preface

This version is an updating and consolidation of the last edition, building with more confidence on the proposition that mass communication is evolving and becoming more complex rather than withering away. The earlier expectation of demise was based on the belief that the 'new media' of public communication that were appearing in the latter part of the 20th century would ultimately prove to be superior in all respects to the relatively crude forms of traditional 'mass media' (especially newspaper and television broadcasting). This supposition was itself out of step with the lessons of media history that has already demonstrated the power of different media forms to adapt and survive in new environments. It is now the turn of the traditional mass media to adapt to new technology under changing social, economic and cultural conditions. The persistence of mass communication as a process and the continued relevance of much of the accumulated theory and research stem, even so, from continuity in the kind and direction of dominant social forces, especially those that fall under the headings of globalization and modernization/development. In the same way that media of all kinds are converging, so also are theories of the new and old media converging.

Despite the expectation that mass communication will evolve and survive, the changes taking place to, and within, the spectrum of public communication media are fundamental, accelerating and open for all to see. They outpace the capacity of a book of this kind to keep pace with what is happening on the ground. But the purpose, as before, is not to chart media change, but to provide some relatively firm theoretical islands or platforms from which to observe and understand what is happening around us. The evidence for all this comes primarily from the continuing stream of findings of academic research in media and communication, which is itself always anchored in and directed by theory, but also rather slow to appear. The main changes made in this edition have been motivated by the aims of testing the continued relevance of old theory and of adding, where possible, to the stock of theory. Often it is reports about the effects and significance of new media that are most fruitful for the second purpose.

A process of revision of this kind depends not only on scanning and evaluating newly published theory and new empirical evidence. It also calls for continuing contact with others engaged in more active ways with the field of inquiry. I have been fortunate in having continued opportunities for exchange of ideas and for learning new things from colleagues, friends and students. I cannot repay all debts, but I would like to mention here some of the people, places and events that have been of particular help on the journey. I have been much helped, thanks to Karin Raeymackers, by ready access to the communication library of the University of Ghent, with its now rare collection of current and recent international journals. I have also appreciated regular contact with my co-editors and others associated with the *European Journal of Communication*, especially Els de Bens, Peter Golding and Liesbet van Zoonen. The periodic seminars organized by the *EJC* have been an important learning experience. A continuing link with the *Euromedia Research Group*, by participation in meetings and publication, has been another source of stimulation (too many names to name). Another recurring source of stimulation has been the chance to participate in the annual doctoral Summer School organized by the European Communication Research Association (ECREA) and held for the last five years at the University of Tartu, Estonia. I have benefited also from invitations to teach or give lectures at a number universities. Particular thanks are due in this respect to Prof. Takesato Watanabe at Doshisha University, Kyoto. I have similar debts to Helena Sousa, at the University of Minho, Portugal; Josef Trappel at the University of Zurich, Elena Vartanova at Moscow University Faculty of Journalism; Miquel de Moragas Spá at the Autonomous University of Barcelona; Miroljub Radoikovich, University of Belgrade; Konca Yumlu at Ege University, Izmir; Vita Zelče and Inta Brikše at the University of Latvia. Naming names is always a bit invidious and I have to omit many, but I will just mention my appreciation of renewed contact with my comrade-colleague of old, Jay Blumler, and last but not least my association with the self styled Soul Brothers, Cliff Christians, Ted Glasser, Bob White and Kaarle Nordenstreng, especially as our 'eternal' book on normative media theory has at last appeared. It is more than mere convention to say that the present book would not have appeared without the initiative, persistence and enthusiasm of Mila Steele, of Sage Publications. I hope it lives up to her high hopes. It is probably the last edition of this book, at my hand at least, but if mass communication endures so also will mass communication theory.

This Preface was written during a visit from young grandchildren who are already forming the future audience for mass media. For this reason I have dedicated the book to them all, borrowing an idea from Hanno Hardt. My last words of thanks are to my wife, Rosemary, for making so much possible.

Eastleigh, Hampshire, UK, November 2009

# How to Use this Book

The text can best be used by readers as a resource for learning about a particular topic. There are several ways this can be approached. The table of contents provide an initial orientation, or map, to the book, and each chapter begins with a list of the main headings to help you orient yourself in the book. The subject index at the end of the book includes all key words and topics and can also be used for an initial search.

Each chapter contains boxes to help you explore the background, relevance and research on the themes and theories discussed in the book. Symbols beside the boxes help you navigate so you can quickly find summaries; review; name-check; and take it further with key quotes and additional information.



**Theories:** These boxes give a bullet-point outline to key theoretical propositions, helping consolidate your understanding of the essential themes and theories.



**Information:** These boxes supplement the discussion with essential addition information. Tables and lists give you extra information to help ground theory with empirical data.



**Summaries:** Use these as an easy reference to summarize many key themes and principles as you go along.



**Quotations:** Quotes from major thinkers and texts clarify and emphasize important principles and will help familiarize you with the some of the research literature on mass communication theory.



**Questions:** Key questions reflect in summary form the main divisions and points of debate in major issues of theory.

**Research:** Research examples will help you understand some of the ways in which theoretical questions can be answered empirically.

**Further readings:** An important aim of the book is to provide a guide to follow-up study. Each chapter ends with an annotated list of further readings to where the ground covered can be explored in more detail.



**Online readings:** all readings marked with a mouse can be accessed for free on the companion website ([www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail6](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/mcquail6)). These articles examine issues and theories in detail and provide valuable links to other relevant sources.



**Glossary:** At the end of the book you will find a detailed glossary of all the key concepts defined in the book. Glossary terms are indicated in **bold** and with a star in the margin to help quick cross-referencing.