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## Section One

# Introduction to Media Psychology

- 1 History of the mass media
- 2 Ways of thinking about psychology and the media

## Section summary

We live in an age in which media are everywhere. We consume media constantly: radio, television, Internet, electronic games, multiple sources of advertising. We *use* media constantly: mobile phones, social networking and various communication devices. So prolific have the media become, we sometimes exist in a state of 'media blindness', where we fail to acknowledge the presence, much less the influence, of media in our decision-making, beliefs and attitudes. And with the arrival of the Internet – it's easy to forget how recent it is – the distinction between traditional ('passive') media and communication ('active') media has become blurred. It's not surprising therefore, when we talk about media, that the term means different things to different people. And very often, people use 'the media' in a lazy, shorthand way for newspapers and TV shows they don't like.

So that's really my starting point for this book. In order to understand how media and psychology interact, first of all we need to work out what media are, and where they come from. As a matter of fact, psychology has neatly avoided saying much about the media until fairly recently, probably because psychologists have tended to be more interested in universal phenomena, disconnected from time and space. As each new medium appeared – radio, television and so on – it was hoped they would eventually go away and stop bothering us. Maybe it is only with the Internet, a medium now used by all academics, everywhere, that the media have become impossible for psychologists to ignore. Nevertheless, we still hear claims that the Internet is special, something above and beyond the media.

Partly, this is because the media have earned themselves a dreadful reputation over the decades. Sensationalist news reporting, unethical advertising, 'trash' television, pornography and violence are all charges that have been levelled at different media over the years. We hear all manner of dreadful things being blamed on the media, often, ironically, by people on television and in newspapers, and psychology has played its part by producing what seems to be extensive evidence for the ill effects of media on human behaviour. But along came a medium that psychologists rather liked. When you've

been accusing the media for years for their part in the decline of civilization, how do you face up to the fact that some media might actually be good?

Well, the fact of the matter is that no medium – from the humble newspaper to the cyberspace paradise of *Second Life* – can ever be evaluated in purely moral terms. There are bad people, who sometimes own media, and use them for their own self-promotion or power. Other bad people, such as political extremists and paedophiles, create a market for certain types of media content. But these things are the fault of bad people, not the media they use to communicate with one another and to express themselves.

When thinking about media, one of the most important things to acknowledge is the date. With media, we can't wish time and space away. A study conducted in 1962 can tell us very little about the psychology of media in 2010. It can begin to point the way, but one of the fundamental considerations of media psychology research is that humans have very different media experiences in different historical periods. When television first appeared, it seemed like magic. How would people from the first half of the 20th century deal with the Internet?

That's why it's important never to lose sight of the history of the media. In Chapter 1 we'll consider how remarkably new many of the media that we use every day are, and at the same time, how many of the same issues crop up each time a new medium arrives on the scene. Perhaps there may be something 'universal' about human responses to media after all.

### **One medium, several media**

The word 'media' is a plural noun. You can't have 'a media'. If you're just talking about one form of media – television, say – you have to call it 'a medium'. Just don't get it confused with palm readings and seances, that's all.

## Chapter 1

# History of the mass media

### Introduction

This opening chapter aims to introduce you to the concept of media in general. It is actually quite a difficult concept to define, so I begin by discussing what qualifies something for it to be considered a medium, the definition of ‘mass medium’, and, in particular, the work of Marshall McLuhan, one of the most important thinkers about the media in history. I go on to explain why McLuhan’s ideas are vitally important to media psychology, even though they have been ignored by a good deal of the research that is covered in this book.

### What is a medium?

Any history needs a starting point, and the obvious place to begin here would be the appearance of the first medium. But we can’t kick this story off without defining the term ‘medium’. We might use the term ‘medium’ to refer to literally anything that humans use in order to communicate some kind of message – a cave wall, perhaps, in the Stone Age, or a Post-it note today. However, the kinds of messages discovered in prehistoric caves, the subject of much historical debate, are likely to differ markedly from those stuck on desks and doors, which solely convey a short-lived, soon-to-be-redundant piece of information: ‘Back at 9.30’, ‘Charlie rang’ or ‘Don’t forget the onions.’ Whatever Palaeo-

lithic humans were daubing down in their subterranean chambers, it probably wasn't 'Don't forget the onions.'

If all media were essentially the same type of communication system, it would be easy to identify the key moments in media history. But we have to fit in something like the telephone, which as a communication system has been so popular that we cannot imagine life without it, yet – until the advent of text or SMS – it has never been capable of broadcasting messages to more than one listener.

And what do we define as a **message**, anyway? Should we all be able to agree on its content and meaning? Should it have a clear, unambiguous sender, and a clear, unambiguous hearer or reader? These questions might appear abstract and philosophical, but, as you will see as you think more and more about media, they are fundamentally important, particularly if you are studying their psychological impact.

### Media or mass media?

According to McQuail (2005), there are four elements that determine the emergence of a mass medium:

- 1 Purpose of, or need for, communication
- 2 Technology for public communication
- 3 Social organization for production and distribution
- 4 Governance in 'the public interest'.

The first two elements may be independent of one another: the emergence of a medium may, or may not, arise out of a need for communication (although it could be argued that this basic human need underpins the success of all media), but it could simply reflect technological progress and the availability of the new technology. Even then, the latter two elements are essential for mass take-up: a company, or several companies, producing the hardware and software, and some kind of state or multinational body to oversee the medium's evolution and monitor its uses. In effect, though, the term 'mass media' has become almost obsolete in recent years, probably because when people refer to media, it is almost always the mass media they are talking about. The 'mass' bit has simply dropped off.

### Marshall McLuhan: media visionary

The most famous writer on media in history is undoubtedly **Marshall McLuhan** (1911–80). McLuhan grew up in Canada but studied at

Cambridge University and various US colleges and published a series of ground-breaking books in the 1960s that were picked up by the media and other communication theorists. His most famous work is probably *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964/2001), and it is worth reading for its seductive blend of philosophy, history and literature. McLuhan is sometimes criticized, like Freud, for not having tested any of his theories (McQuail, 2005), but this is no reason to discount them.

McLuhan is best known for coining the phrase ‘the medium is the message’. He was trying to say that media and their messages cannot simply be separated and studied as separate entities. Let’s take music broadcasting as an example. Since the birth of radio, music has dominated the airwaves: being an aural medium, it is not surprising that music should have proved its most successful type of programming. And it’s easy to present music on the radio: whether you are a classical presenter or an urban DJ, it’s simply a matter of cueing up the recording and announcing the details.

Music on television has turned out to be quite a different matter. An orchestra sitting on a stage is only of interest to serious musicians. Only a DJ would really be interested in the sight of another DJ working the decks. Until promotional videos appeared in the mid-1970s (Queen’s ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ being one of the first), TV producers had to fill studios full of dancing teenagers in order to provide some visual appeal for the audience, even at the height of glam rock. Increasingly, with the advent of MTV and other round-the-clock, non-stop video channels in the 1980s, the message seemed to be less about the music and more about what was happening in the video. The ‘message’ provided by music on TV, then, is fundamentally different from that communicated by radio.

Another important concept developed by McLuhan was the idea of media as ‘extensions of man’. He argued that a medium could be defined as any phenomenon that changed the way we go about the world. Two objects he defined as media were the electric light and the car. Before the electric light, night-time had a different meaning than it does today. Take a walk through the city at night and try to imagine the experience without any artificial light. You’d probably want to turn back home very quickly! Then think of all the human activities, particularly in the winter, that are illuminated by electric lighting, from everyday things like cooking the evening meal, shopping and travelling, to entertainment, social life and playing floodlit sport.

For McLuhan, the electric light acted as a medium because it opened up new possibilities for human activity. Before it arrived, the difficult business of struggling with oil and gas lamps, and simple candles, made it hard to do more than a few essential activities at night. With electric lighting, the dark half of life became full of possibilities. Today, there are people making a living from the entertainment industry who practically live a nocturnal existence – all because of the power of this particular medium.

For the electric light, substitute the car. Think of life in the late 19th century, when the railways were the only real option for long-distance travel, and private transport consisted of nothing much faster than a horse-driven carriage. People's life choices were severely limited. You couldn't live far from your work, unless you could travel by train. Shopping had to be done locally. Visiting people and places was dependent on distance or, if possible, the railway timetable. But the car has opened up innumerable options for people to plan busy lives, commute many miles to work, and travel to far-flung parts of the country for leisure or business, often on a daily basis. Prior to the car, there was the wheel: McLuhan saw the wheel as an even more fundamental medium, which speeded travel up, and paved the way for all the means of transportation that followed.

What have these things got to do, you may be wondering, with radio, television, the Internet – all the conventional media you expect to read about in a book on media psychology? Well, McLuhan encouraged us to consider these devices in exactly the same way. Just as no one envisaged what changes in society the electric light, or car, might eventually bring about, no one really imagined the effect that television or, indeed, the Internet would eventually have on society. The world-changing success of sites such as *Google*, *eBay* and *Amazon*, and the explosion of online social networking, dating and blogging, was not predicted by even the most fanciful of early Internet enthusiasts. The point is that humans are creative and adaptable, and will exploit all the technological features of any medium, however limited.

### McLuhan and media psychology

McLuhan's ideas are vitally important to media psychology, because psychology has always had a rather *functional* perspective on media. If we see radios, TV screens and computers as technological devices presenting

‘stimuli’ to research participants, then we are not studying them as media, just as technical apparatus. Here, the ‘message’ is composed of abstract information, carefully composed by the researcher, and the medium is merely the latest piece of kit for displaying it. Sadly, much psychological research on media has taken precisely this approach.

Let’s think of violence as an example of a mediated message. A chemistry-style scientific approach might be to try and isolate violence in the laboratory as an experimental stimulus in order to channel it through the latest medium, say, an interactive video game. The whole idea would be to study a participant’s reaction to it as a piece of universal behaviour, in which media are simply the latest manifestation of earlier media – different screens, but the same, fundamental, chemically reduced, message. Of course, though, we aren’t dealing with abstract, value-free chemicals. Violence is an extremely complex human phenomenon that becomes even more complex when considered as a media phenomenon. It is interesting how much of the research on video games repeats previous experiments conducted on television and film. But anyone who has ever played a video game knows that the user’s *experience* of violence is completely incompatible with the experience of watching a gangster film, a Bugs Bunny cartoon, a boxing match, or any of the dozens of different media materials that have been lumped together in media violence studies – never mind the experience of *actual* violence.

McLuhan’s theory of media forces us to treat each new medium that emerges as an entirely new cultural phenomenon. So the interactive video game cannot automatically be studied as just a glorified TV. It might be more instructive to return to research conducted on games per se – toy soldiers even, or Monopoly. Other researchers prefer to think of video games as texts, or narratives, rather than just stimuli. Either way, it’s essential for us as psychologists to be as adaptable to the medium as the people who use it.



## History of media: from early newspapers to *Twitter*

### Pre-twentieth century

Leaving aside electric lights and cars for now, the history of conventional mass media can probably be said to begin in the 17th century. The invention of the printing press, and the emergence of the book, takes us back

to the medieval era, but in terms of mass circulation, and instant communication, we should start with the earliest commercial newspapers. Handbills and other publications had been circulating for some time, with private adverts and announcements of local events like fairs and markets, while the first recorded newspaper appeared in Germany in 1609. The first daily British newspaper, the *Daily Courier*, appeared in 1702, consisting mainly of advertising. Before long, it had become essential for any developed country to have at least one national newspaper.

In addition to newspapers, magazines (also known as ‘periodicals’) began to be published in the 18th century. These were aimed initially at middle-class households, but later became more specialized, dealing with all manner of leisure interests and also with current affairs and politics. Eventually, newspapers – especially at weekends – began publishing their own glossy magazines as they began to incorporate more and more advertising space.

It is a frequent criticism of newspapers that they appear to be full of advertising, that the news at times seems almost incidental, with the implication that the ‘classic’ newspaper was once a lovingly crafted, ad-free collection of news stories and erudite feature articles. In reality, the history of newspapers and magazines is – even more than other media – indistinguishable from the history of advertising. News has never really been more than attractive filler material, wedged between the adverts that pay for its existence. Indeed, no new publication has ever appeared on the market without an eager market of advertisers and a clear advertising strategy.

## Twentieth century to the present day

We have to wait until the 1920s for the next truly mass medium to emerge – radio – which overlooks a period of intense economic, industrial and technological development, and also the emergence of visual media such as photography and film. While these are undoubtedly media, we might regard them more as art forms, as with the book, and various recording formats such as vinyl records, CDs and DVDs. We should also note the appearance of the telephone during this period.

Although we tend to think of radio and television in Britain as initially state-run public services, the original BBC (the British Broadcasting Company, begun in 1922) was actually a commercial organization, and it was only after several years that it was taken over by the Post Office and

licensed to the government. In 1927, it was renamed the British Broadcasting Corporation, and thanks to laws restricting the use of UK airtime, it had little commercial competition until the 1960s, when 'pirate' radio stations, broadcasting from offshore locations, started to pick up a large audience, particularly composed of young listeners. These stations were outlawed by the British government, but by 1967 the BBC had its own pop music station, Radio 1, presented by some of the DJs who had previously worked on the pirate stations (notably Tony Blackburn and John Peel).

BBC television followed in 1936, as did television in the US and a number of European countries, although the Second World War hampered progress, and it was not really until the 1950s that significant numbers of households began to acquire television sets. In the UK, commercial competition arrived in the shape of ITV in 1954, and during the 1980s cable and satellite technologies opened up a plethora of different channels that were available to viewers, many of them requiring separate payment. Despite the changing landscape of British television, TV owners are still required to pay a licence fee to fund the BBC.

In the past 20 years, the mass media picture has become increasingly complicated. Most of the media that have emerged during this period have become known as 'new media', although as some commentators have pointed out, this is ironic since much of the technology appeared as long ago as the 1980s (Lister et al., 2009). But essentially 'new media' distinguishes computer-based media from broadcast media like radio and television.

Above all other new media sits the **Internet**, the basic communication network that links together all (enabled) computers in the world. The Internet is now so vast that it has become common to talk of media that sit within the network, so email is a communication medium as distinct from the Web, even though both operate using the same basic technology. New media experts also distinguish two clear phases of Web technology, **Web 1.0** and **Web 2.0**, the latter term describing media that have appeared in the mid- to late 2000s, such as *Second Life*, social networking sites and blogs.

To complicate the picture yet further, the evolution of devices that interact with the Internet – notably mobile phones and digital music players such as iPods – has forced us to expand our criteria for mass media to encompass the contemporary equivalents of devices that were

neglected in the study of old media, such as the humble telephone and portable music players like the 'Walkman' from the early 1980s.

To bring us full circle, we have to acknowledge the fact that old media have established their own presence within the new media. So, newspapers, radio and TV stations have evolved online equivalents that have become almost as important as their offline selves. You can't fold up the online Guardian and read it on the train like an old-style commuter, but you could access [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) through a handheld device. Then again, as McLuhan might have said, perhaps the advent of handheld devices means we'll do other things to pass the time while travelling rather than read the paper.



## Media are everywhere, all the time

One of the most important insights that McLuhan has brought us is that media are not, as we often talk about them, simply convenient technologies for communicating the same content from one generation to the next. The newspaper owners who feared for their future with the arrival of radio misunderstood this point, as do the many social commentators who see the Internet as replacing and rendering redundant the old media.

Indeed, one of the characteristics of contemporary society is the overwhelming quantity of mediated information. Social commentator Alvin Toffler (1970) has spoken of 'information overload', whereby we encounter so much verbal and visual material in everyday life that it leads to a state of disorientation. Sorting out reliable, or useful, information from junk, marketing and downright lies requires a level of **media literacy** that is not always within our capabilities. The upshot may well be a state of 'media blindness', where we are unable to locate the source of the information we acquire, and confuse our actual experiences with mediated experiences. For instance, advertising works because we can't always see it. We are often media blind to advertising. Try looking at yourself in the mirror. It is quite likely that somewhere on your person you are advertising something. It might be on a T-shirt or pair of trainers, or a plastic bag you're carrying, but unconsciously, every day, many of us are marketing products without even being aware of it, simply through wearing a designer shirt or carrying a cheap store carrier bag.

One of the aims of media psychology is to try and make all of us that little bit more aware of the way that media infiltrate everyday life and,

indeed, how media have now *become* everyday life to an extent that we frequently fail to realize. I have lost count of the number of intelligent people who watch television avidly every night, or who chatter on about celebrities, and then claim that the media have no influence on their lives.

We may never really know the true extent of that influence: it may not be something we can ever ascertain, much less measure. But media psychology is about at least *trying* to understand how the way we behave in 2010, or whenever you're reading this, is a combination of the contemporary media age and deep-rooted, enduring human characteristics.

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Entries in **bold** refer to glossary definitions

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