

## CHAPTER 1

# Why Do We Need a General Framework?

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Mass media scholars have accomplished a great deal over the past six decades. Our wide-ranging exploration of our phenomenon of interest has produced a very large literature of published work that is full of creative insights and empirical findings. However, the development of this literature has altered our challenge. The thesis underlying all the arguments in this book is that we cannot continue to do the same things and expect to continue making good progress in increasing our understanding of the mass media. We must evolve as a field by putting old challenges behind us and prepare to meet the newly emerging challenges. Now is a critical time for such an evolution as we are coming off the successes we achieved in the past by using what I will call a Generating-Findings perspective, where all topics, assumptions, explanations, and methods have been useful tools in generating an incredible variety of findings.

Now we are reaching a point of fragmentation where we need to take stock much more formally of what we have produced and assemble the vast array of individual findings into synthesized structures of knowledge to meet the needs of our three major constituencies. The first constituency is the mass media scholar. We need to organize findings so as to develop a higher profile scholarly field and guide the use of our limited resources in the most efficient manner possible to conduct future studies that will make the most difference in ratcheting up our knowledge of the mass media phenomenon. A second constituency is the student in higher education. Mass media courses are highly popular, but too often, the knowledge taught in these courses is a boring history of thinking long since discredited, a glitzy overview of so-called “new” media without contextualizing them in the larger phenomenon of mass media, or a myopic set of training experiences for entry-level jobs in the media industries. What is missing is a big-picture overview that is both complete and practical. And the third constituency is the general public, who has irrational fears of and expectations for the mass media. The general public—like students—needs a big-picture understanding of how the mass media organizations work, why they produce the content messages they do, and how exposure to those messages affects them and the people around them.

Beginning with this chapter, I show how a shift from the past Generating-Findings perspective to a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective is not only desirable but also essential if we as scholars are to serve all three constituencies better. This argument is elaborated in all subsequent chapters, where I show the advantages of such a shift and also provide some concrete guidelines and conceptual tools to help bring about such a shift.

In this chapter, I lay the foundation for the book by showing how the Generating-Findings perspective has been necessary to get us to this point. I then critique this perspective by showing that it has now reached a point of significantly diminishing returns and that it is time for an evolution into a new perspective that will better meet our current—and especially our future—challenges as an emerging scholarly field. Labeling it the *Mapping-Phenomenon perspective*, I will show how this perspective can be a useful tool in guiding this evolution in thinking and practice.

## Generating-Findings Perspective on the Mass Media

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The 20th century was a period of great technological development that spawned industries that have come to be known as the mass media. Parallel to the growth of the mass media has been an interest in examining those media as an economic, political, social, psychological, and cultural phenomenon. This research has been predominantly Generating-Findings in nature; that is, it is characterized by inductive processes and wide-ranging debates where the purpose has been to ask as many questions as possible and to try as many approaches, methods, and designs as possible to see what generates the most useful answers to which questions.

### Growth of Mass Media Research

Up until near the end of the 19th century, a few technological channels were used to disseminate messages to a broad range of people. The mass media were newspapers, magazines, and books. Then in the span of a few decades, technological innovations pushed forward, with business entrepreneurship bringing about the newer mass media of film, recordings, and radio.

With the growing importance of each of these new media, the public expressed a growing concern about their impact on the culture. There was more scholarly activity in addressing questions such as the following: Could these channels be treated as a set of “mass” media? Can we identify patterns in their development that would help us understand their fundamental nature, their values, and their operating principles? How do these media construct and maintain their audiences? How do the media produce their content, and what is the nature of that content? What are the intended and unintended effects on audiences? Which media, types of messages, and message elements are especially influential in bringing about which effects? And are there certain types of audience members who are especially influenced by the media?

These questions became more pressing as television reached virtually complete household penetration shortly after midcentury, and scholars began conducting a great deal of research about the effects of such a powerful medium. Then, in the last few decades of the 20th century, newer technologies caught the attention of vast audiences as major content providers turned these newer channels of information distribution into mass media. These include cable TV, satellite TV, household computers, low-cost Internet connections, and digital gaming.

Throughout the 20th century, these questions attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars. Psychology scholars, who were primarily interested in how humans think and make sense of their world, began using mass media messages as stimuli in experiments. Political scientists, who were primarily concerned with how humans acquire and use power in social situations, began studying how people running for political office used the mass media to influence public opinion and voting behaviors. Scholars of literature, who were primarily concerned with how humans reconstruct their experiences and extend them in stories they tell one another, began studying how people use the mass media to restructure and disseminate those stories.

By the last decades of the 20th century, many scholars shifted their interest primarily to the mass media and relegated other concerns to a secondary role. Professional societies formed, journals were created to showcase media scholarship, and universities created programs to teach students about the mass media and train new generations of scholars to study it (Chaffee & Rogers, 1997; Lowery & DeFleur, 1988). Scholars had their thinking and practices shaped by a Generating-Findings perspective, which valued breadth over depth and divergence over convergence. All questions about the media were useful because scholars were trying to identify the perimeter and contours of this new field of study. Scholars could justify a new research study by simply stating, “No one has yet done a study on X.” All methods were tried as scholars attempted to figure out which designs generated the most interesting insights about the mass media and which measures captured the most interesting concepts. Scholars looked for patterns in data distributions and patterns across studies to try to tap into the essence of the mass media. Thus, the inductive process underlay most scholarly activity.

## Inductive Process

Most of the research in the Generating-Findings phase was inductive in nature. That is, individual research studies were typically motivated by questions rather than by a priori reasoned systems of explanation. Researchers collected data, and then looked for patterns in those data. When they found a pattern—such as a statistically significant treatment difference across means or a relatively strong degree of association among variables—they reported their findings as a suggestive answer to their research question. I say *suggestive answer* because the inductive method requires continual replication of studies to build greater evidence of a pattern until readers of the literature can have greater confidence that the pattern is robust enough that it is worthy of their attention rather than an anomaly of a particular measurement device, sample, or treatment.

Using this inductive approach, scholars could ignore no question because they could not be sure which question would tap into a rich mine of insight. The posing of any question was valuable because so little was known about the mass media. The results of just about any research study had good potential for contributing to knowledge.

Also, no approach, method, or assumption was considered out of bounds; all were tried for their usefulness in addressing all kinds of questions. All kinds of assumptions about the mass media, their content, their audiences, and their effects were tested to see which were the most useful. All kinds of constructs with all kinds of definitions were tried. All kinds of pairs of constructs were tested to see what was related to what. This brainstorming activity was necessary to “feel our way in the dark” and find out where the boundaries and contours of the phenomenon were.

To help in this Generating-Findings process of examining the new phenomenon of the mass media, scholars imported ideas and methods from other fields. This is understandable because other fields—particularly the more established social sciences and humanities—had theoretical and methodological traditions that they had been using as tools to examine the mass media within the context of their own scholarship. Media scholars found it very helpful to use these tools and continued

to import these ideas heavily even into the late 20th century (Reeves & Borgman, 1983; Rice, Borgman, & Reeves, 1988).

## Debates

The development of our research field has been characterized by debates on many scholarly topics, particularly debates about paradigms and about conceptualizations of effects, audiences, and content. This is understandable. When scholars import ideas from different fields, they must debate which of those imported ideas fit best within the context of mass media scholarship. Therefore, these debates have been a salient characteristic of our Generating-Findings phase.

*Paradigms.* The paradigm debate serves an important function of challenging us to think about the assumptions we make about the nature of our phenomenon of interest (ontology) and the limits on our ability to access the meaning of that phenomenon as humans and scholars (epistemology; see Kuhn, 1970a, 1970b). As for ontology, the paradigm debate is a disagreement over the nature of the human mind, that is, the degree to which we have free will. On the one side of the debate are scholars who regard the human mind as a machine that is an orderly system; this position is referred to as mechanistic determinism. On the other side of the debate are scholars who regard the human mind as an ever changing organ that allows people complete freedom to make a wide array of interpretations of any stimuli; this position is referred to as actionalism.

Mechanistic determinists regard the human mind as a wonderfully complicated machine that is hardwired to perform a great variety of tasks quickly. This “wiring,” which makes the brain efficient at doing certain tasks, also constrains the brain from doing other tasks. Under this conception, the existing architecture of the brain can be reworked—through conditioning—to perform certain functions even better. Humans can be programmed to think better, which usually means more rationally, more logically, and more efficiently.

As a machine, the human brain employs standard parts; that is, the similarities across human brains are so striking as to be uniform. The differences across human brains are so minor and rare that they are regarded as characteristics of illness or nonnormal brains. This uniformity allows researchers to study one brain and conclude that the patterns found there represent the patterns that would be found in any other human brain. Thus, we have developed an educational system with standard treatments in the belief that the more individuals work with the standard treatments in exercising the mind, the better their thinking processes will be. There is also a negative side to this programming; when antisocial messages become widespread in a culture (drugs are fun, violence is a successful way to solve problems, consumerism leads to a happy life, and the like), the population is conditioned to hold antisocial beliefs, and this weakens society as people act on these beliefs.

The scholar who is most strongly identified with this ontological position of mechanistic determinism in the 20th century was B. F. Skinner. He argued that in order for the study of the human mind to be a science, scholars must accept the assumption that

human behavior follows certain laws—that is, “we must expect to discover that what a man does is the result of specifiable conditions and that once these conditions have been discovered, we can anticipate and to some extent determine his actions” (Skinner, 1953, p. 6). Skinner recognized that this position would be offensive to many scholars. “It is opposed to a tradition of long standing which regards man as a free agent, whose behavior is the product, not of specifiable antecedent conditions, but of spontaneous inner changes” (p. 7). Skinner believed that humans have little real capacity for choice or self-motivated behavior. Everything that happens in the world is determined by prior physical causes acting according to invariable laws.

While strict behaviorism had an enormous influence on the field of psychology during the middle part of the 20th century, its influence has waned in favor of more cognitive approaches to explaining human thinking and behavior. However, most cognitive approaches still exhibit elements of mechanistic determinism. For example, in their chapter on theories of learning in the *Handbook of Cognition*, M. E. Young and Wasserman (2005) viewed human learning primarily in terms of making associations. They said that “associative learning is more than acquiring simple stimulus-response association. A sophisticated cognitive machine must be able to learn associations between configurations of stimuli, associations between sequences, the precise temporal relations among events, hierarchical relationships, and how much attention to pay to the variety of features, dimensions, and events extant in the environment” (p. 162). While their conception of human learning is not limited to simple stimulus-response (S-R) connections, the idea of association still dominates their view.

Bargh (1997) updated this mechanistic determinism position by saying, “Because of social psychology’s natural focus on the situational determinants of thinking, feeling, and doing, it is inevitable that social psychological phenomena will be found to be automatic in nature” (p. 1). Thus, the examination of automatic processes governing human thinking and action extends the view that humans are machine-like. Bargh is not a strict behaviorist like Skinner because he disagrees with Skinner’s position that cognition plays no role in the stimulus control of behavior; however, the inclusion of cognition does not weaken Bargh’s view that stimuli can determine humans’ responses in an automatic fashion. Barsalou (1992) concurred by saying, “Like behaviorists, most cognitive psychologists believe that the fundamental laws of the physical world determine human behavior completely. . . . The illusion of free will is simply one more phenomenon that cognitive psychologists must explain” (p. 9). Bargh went as far as to say that most of what people think, feel, and do is primed by cues in the environment so much so that he argued for changing the focus from social cognition to social ignition.

Over time, scholars holding to this mechanistic determinism view have elaborated their position to try to explain the vast array of challenges the human mind encounters in everyday life. Their explanations are more involved and more complicated, but at base, they still reveal a view of the human mind as a machine.

In contrast, actionalists regard the human mind as a vastly complicated system with a wide-open architecture allowing individuals—and even requiring individuals—to solve a wondrously wide array of problems in a fully creative manner. Each

person is a free agent in constantly creating his or her own interpretations of everyday reality. At any given decision point, people are free to take any option. Because there are so many decision points in the process of solving everyday problems, each person constructs a highly idiosyncratic sequence every day. With actionalism, explanations for human actions focus on human goals and intentions rather than external factors. For example, Giddens (1981) criticized the social science perspective—what he called the orthodox consensus of communication research—for treating individual behavior as “the outcome of structural causation or structural constraint—as though it derived directly from social forces” and that “we are driven by influences of which we are unaware” (p. 57). He argued that most of what we do is intentional, and “we are aware of our reasons for doing it. All human agents know a great deal about the conditions of their activity, that knowledge not being contingent upon what they do, but constitutive of it” (p. 57).

Scholars also differ on epistemological beliefs. Some scholars with a positivist view follow the ideas of Comte, who believed that observations about human behavior can be made (and need to be made) in as scientific and objective a manner as possible. In contrast, scholars with a constructivist view (following from the ideas of Kant) believe that humans cannot be both the object of study and the instrument of observation in an objective manner, and thus observations of the social world are highly subjective and idiosyncratic to the human observer. The constructivist position is illustrated in the writings of Hall and Newcomb, who believe that humans create meaning for themselves as they encounter experiences, such as media messages.

The debate over paradigms is reflected in debates about the use of particular research methods. The central question is as follows: Is it better to use social scientific or humanistic/critical methods to study the media? Livingstone (1993) has argued that “perhaps more than any other field of social science research, mass communication research has been dominated by key theoretical and methodological oppositions that underlie the fierce debates and splits within the field. These oppositions include critical versus administrative research, the study of texts (which itself is conducted in very different ways) versus the study of audiences, and the use of qualitative versus quantitative methods” (p. 5).

The paradigm debates have been featured prominently in three major publications: the 1983 “Ferment in the Field” issue of the *Journal of Communication*, *Rethinking Communication* (Dervin, Grossberg, O’Keefe, & Wartella, 1989), and the 1993 “Ferment in the Field II.” The 1983 “Ferment in the Field,” which includes 35 essays by 41 authors from 10 countries, was the first major forum to bring the paradigm debate into mainstream consideration by communication scholars.

*Rethinking Communication* (Dervin et al., 1989) is a two-volume publication of 60 papers delivered at the 1985 annual meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), where 80 scholars participated in sessions dealing with paradigms used by communication scholars. In the first volume of *Rethinking Communication*, the editors explained that their call for papers for the ICA conference said, “Clearly, among us we have charted some radically different paths to scholarship. The diversity is so great, the positions sometimes so intense, the

commitments so in opposition that it might be easy to conclude that the field is quickly moving toward a state of incompatibilities” (p. 9). The editors finished their call for papers on an optimistic note, saying that it was their hope that the papers would go “beyond polemics in the sense that they transcend superficial differences and polarities and allow us to gain a greater understanding of the fundamental ways in which we differ and the ways in which some of our differences may not so much differ as enrich” (p. 9). However, looking at the five major essays and the 24 commentaries in which scholars reacted to the ideas in the major essays, it appears that the former was achieved to a much higher degree than the latter. The five major essays each critiqued what they called the dominant paradigm of a social scientific, quantitative approach to studying communication. In the 25 commentaries published in that first volume, the authors either supported some of the ideas in the five major essays or argued against them. There were no attempts at synthesis. Instead, the set of 30 essays presented two themes: in the words of the editors, “first, the challenge to established lines of authority in social science generally and American communication studies in particular; and second, the development of an extraordinary pluralism of theoretical and methodological viewpoints” (p. 14).

The second volume of *Rethinking Communication* is subtitled *Paradigm Exemplars* and consists of 30 chapters written by communication scholars, each of whom typically focused inwardly on his or her own research interests and presented a brief summary of what he or she produced as findings on a small part of the overall communication phenomenon. Few scholars attempted to relate their work to a particular paradigm in any extended manner (Hay, McPhee, and Murdock), and a few acknowledged a paradigm while arguing that it was very difficult or impossible to relate their work to an established paradigm (Marvin, Schwichtenberg, and Sillars). These essays have been characterized by the editors as showing “the fractious nature of the debates among different perspectives in the field” and that as the field became more fragmented, “genuine dialogue among positions had become increasingly rare” (Dervin et al., 1989, p. 13).

These forums were very successful in demonstrating many issues in the paradigm debates. However, with no synthesis or summary chapters, they left readers in the midst of a controversy. Clearly, divergence of thinking was valued over convergence.

The debates are not limited to the deep issues of paradigms but also range over more concrete issues such as how the phenomenon of mass media is to be defined, what constitutes an effect, the nature of audiences, and content. These debates are important because they illuminate essential issues of defining a scholarly field. However, they are not useful if they remain scattered and fail to move toward a convergence of thinking.

***Conceptualizations of the Mass Media.*** There continues to be a debate about how the mass media should be conceptualized. Many people define them by *size* of audience (J. Thompson, 1995; Webster & Phalen, 1997). Some point out that the mass media should be defined in terms of the *kind* of audience (Blumer, 1946; Lowery & DeFleur, 1988; McQuail, 2000), but others disagree (Cantril, 1940). And some scholars define the mass media primarily in terms of a channel of distribution of

messages (Janowitz, 1968; Traudt, 2005; Turow, 1989). This lack of agreement among scholars sets up confusion about what our focal phenomenon is. There are also debates about the facets of the mass media phenomenon and their nature—especially the facets of effects, audiences, and content.

*Media Effects.* As for the effects facet, there are some scholars who conceptualize media influence as being powerful and others who conceptualize it as weak. For example, Fortunato (2005) pointed out that there are “two dichotomous perspectives of mass media effects. A more direct effects perspective contends that mass media messages are powerful in influencing the audience. The indirect, or limited effects, perspective where the uses and gratifications theoretical model is grounded, contends that mass media messages are not an overwhelming influence and are only one potential factor in influencing behavior as the message is interpreted by the individual audience member” (pp. 32–33).

*Nature of Audience.* There has also been a long-standing debate about whether the audience is active or passive (Biocca, 1988; Eastman, 1998; Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Power, Kubey, & Kiousis, 2002; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961). To illustrate this point, Power et al. (2002) said there have been two schools of thought. One is the passive audience perspective, which includes the S-R approach, Payne studies, the Frankfurt school of critical theory, cultivation theory, and spiral of silence. The other is the active audience perspective, which includes uses and gratifications, poststructuralist influence, and the Birmingham school of cultural studies.

*Meaning in Content.* Another debate is concerned with the issue of whether meaning resides in the media text or in the mind of the audience members. Experimental psychologists place the locus of meaning in the texts they select for their treatments. In contrast, critical and cultural scholars argue that meaning resides in the audience (S. Hall, 1980; Radway, 1984). For example, S. Hall (1980) argued that television programs do not have a single meaning but instead are what he called “open texts,” which are subject to different readings by different people. H. Newcomb (1984) reinforced this position by saying that messages do not speak for themselves and that we cannot predict a viewer’s response by looking solely at the message or text. Instead, it must be understood that viewers constantly interact with the messages in a kind of dialogue. As H. Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) pointed out, there is usually a wide diversity of opinion about any given show, and even those people who share a common reaction to a particular program often have very different reasons for doing so. They explained that viewers bring “values and attitudes, a universe of personal experiences and concerns” to the texts, and by so doing, a viewer “examines, acknowledges, and makes texts of his or her own” (pp. 69–70). These multiple readings of television shows are made possible because viewers are individuals who bring different values and social histories to the task (Allen, 1987).

Related to the debate over where meaning resides is the debate about the nature of human language. This debate focuses on beliefs about whether language is denoted shared meaning or is made up of individual interpretations. The famed

French linguist and critical scholar Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) viewed language as a structured system of symbols that have shared meanings among a common linguistic community. He viewed linguistics as “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” (p. 15). Barthes (1968) followed up on this position in his examination of how the mass media promulgate what he called systems of signification, which are widespread sharings of meaning. In contrast, Volosinov (1986) reacted against what he called the “abstract objectivism of Saussure” and argued that in the everyday world, language is a living thing that changes shape and meaning given different contexts. In his work, Volosinov focused on how people struggle over establishing meaning in everyday language. Other critical scholars—most notably Morley (1992) and Radway (1987)—are aligned with this position. Both Morley and Radway argued that individual interpretation is important and that individual interpretations are influenced in large part by the context in which the messages are experienced.

*Development of the Field.* Media scholars have also debated conceptions about the traditions that have shaped the history of media effects research. Pietila (1994) said there are three: mass communication research (a social science approach to effects), the New Left (media’s dependency on economic, political, and ideological forces, which leads to problems of social power and equality), and the cultural version (a symbolic process that produces meaning). Jensen and Rosengren (1990) saw five traditions: effects research, uses and gratifications research, literary criticism, cultural studies, and reception analysis.

## Large, Fragmented Literature

Now in the early 21st century, the published research literature that examines some aspect of the mass media has grown to a very large size and covered a great many topics. This is a positive outcome of the Generating-Findings perspective. However, there is also the negative characteristic that the literature is fragmented. This criticism has become more prominent over the past two decades (C. R. Berger, 1991; Hardt, 1992; Jensen & Rosengren, 1990; McQuail, 1989; Pietila, 1994; Power et al., 2002). This literature continues to be plagued by little synthesis across studies, little programmatic research, many theories but with a small proportion of the literature that is theory-driven research, and little translation of ideas and methods from other fields where they were originally developed for other purposes.

*Many Studies.* There are about 6,200 articles published in scholarly journals on the topic of mass media *effects* (W. J. Potter & Riddle, 2006). Therefore, it is likely that the literature on all facets of the mass media (not just effects) comprises more than 10,000 studies. Furthermore, this should be regarded as a very conservative estimate when we consider that scholarship is published in other communication journals as well as journals from contiguous fields, such as psychology, sociology, political science, education, and marketing. There is also a considerable amount of media scholarship published in books and another large body of work that is presented at professional conferences and not published in books or journals.

Even this very conservative number of 10,000 scholarly pieces is a huge number, considering the amount of effort required to design, conduct, and publish a single study. This is powerful evidence that the phenomenon of the mass media has been of great interest to researchers. But there are also other problems besides its large size that confront readers trying to understand the main ideas in this literature.

**Definitional Variation.** A significant barrier to understanding when reading many studies on a particular topic is the variation in the way scholars will define key terms. For example, when I looked at the definitions for the term *media violence* in the published literature, I found quite a variety (see W. J. Potter, 1999). Some of these definitions included verbal acts, while most did not; some included accidents, while others required intentional acts; some had to be depicted on the screen, while others could be implied. It is likely that many other commonly used terms—such as *audience*, *message*, and *child*—also exhibit a wide variety of meanings across studies.

Another example of definitional confounding is with the term *flow*. Raymond Williams (1974) used *flow* to refer to how people experience a sequence of messages in a medium, such as television. He explained that television programs do not exist as discrete entities in the minds of viewers. Rather, a kind of flow across texts is the central experience of the medium (p. 95)—a fact that accounts for much of television’s critical significance. This is when the audience member continues an exposure while having one message replace another and where a message is interrupted by other messages. Thus, to Williams, *flow* is an endless random juxtaposition of different texts. H. Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) picked up on this idea but referred to the elements as “viewing strips.” In contrast, Csikszentmihalyi (1988) used the term *flow* to refer to a psychological state of being swept away by a task where the person loses a sense of time and place in the pursuit of a highly engrossing goal. Other scholars have referred to the same idea but use a different term, such as *transportation* (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2006; Green & Brock, 2000). These are all important scholars dealing with very interesting ideas; however, the definitional confounding substantially increases the costs to readers and serves to slow down the sharing of meaning.

Definitional variation is not limited to the few examples I illustrated in the above two paragraphs. There are many examples.

**Little Synthesis.** There are few published efforts at synthesizing parts of this very large literature. In our recent content analysis of the mass media effects literature (W. J. Potter & Riddle, 2006), we found only 47 articles out of the 936 we examined that could remotely be regarded as synthesis pieces. Most of these ( $n = 36$ ) were stand-alone narrative reviews, many of which were fairly descriptive and did not ascend to the standard of synthesis. The other 11 published articles were meta-analyses, which provide the beginning steps of synthesis but often do not complete the synthesis task.

By *synthesis*, I mean that the literature on a topic is critically analyzed to reject faulty findings and bring forth credible findings into a second stage where those credible findings are organized into groups and the groups of findings calibrated by importance. In this step, it is important to realize that there is great definitional variation across studies using the same terms. Therefore, scholars need to be careful in grouping studies into like literatures without first conducting a careful critical analysis of definitions.

Then, once the literatures are grouped, we need a calibration of which literatures have produced not only the most insights about the phenomenon but also insights that are the most important in revealing the nature of the mass media. Finally, the synthesizer assembles the calibrated findings into a structure such as an outline, model, or graphic that presents a fresh construction that illuminates the structure of the findings as a mapping device—in this case, an explanation of “the how” or “the why” of some aspect of the mass media phenomenon.

As the mass media literature grows, it is crucial that careful syntheses be undertaken. Without this synthesis work, all findings—faulty and valid—will be regarded as equally important. The literature stays fragmented and fairly descriptive. There is little building of more probing insights into the nature of our phenomenon that is achieved in the synergies of juxtaposing various findings together in a system of explanation. Until we are able to organize our literatures into a unified system through synthesis, we will have to labor in a field with scattered findings, thus making it very difficult to choose the most important areas to work on and to access the full set of best thinking when conducting a literature review.

*Little Programmatic Research.* In *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*, Lowery and DeFleur (1988) argued that the “study of mass communication has been particularly unsystematic.” They elaborated this point by saying that scholars “almost never coordinated their efforts or built upon the results of previous research” and that many of the questions guiding the research “were not theoretically significant” (p. 3). This condition persists today. Scholars who publish many studies typically will do a study or two on one topic and then move on to another topic, publish a few studies on that topic, and then move on to another topic. Few scholars identify themselves with a particular theory or programmatic line of research and are defined by it.

I think of this as a kind of “honeybee” approach to research, where scholars are busy bees whose attention is attracted by so many interesting topics (flowers in bloom). They flit from one topic to another as they make their way across the field of flowers. The positive aspect of this “honeybee” nature of the research is that many topics get explored. Also, the travels of the bees have an effect of cross-pollinating topics with ideas and methods from other topics.

However, there is a limitation to this honeybee approach. While flowers benefit from the cross-pollination and can grow on their own, research topics need scholars to stay in one place and build a system of explanation on each topic. To the extent that scholars spend time trying out lots of different topics, the field stays thin—that is, there are few places where scholars conduct programmatic research that builds depth. Now, after at least half a century of largely Generating-Findings research, it would seem to be time to begin concentrating our efforts in the areas that are the most important and start building depth of explanation through more extended lines of programmatic research.

*Little Theory-Driven Research.* A key characteristic of Generating-Findings research is a low level of theory in guiding the design of studies. Instead, most studies are question driven. This is understandable in new scholarly fields where there may not be many—or any—theories available to guide the design. Thus, using the inductive

approach, scholars develop theories in their empirical work. Over time, a great many theories get developed, as can be seen with mass media study.

However, now that we have developed perhaps several hundred theories over the past six decades of research, a sizable proportion of our literatures continues to ignore these theories. Scholars who examine various aspects of our literatures frequently have observed that the use of theory is at a low level and that there needs to be a more explicit use of theory both in the generation of empirical research studies and in the interpretation of results (Shoemaker & Reese, 1990; Stevenson, 1992). Also, in their survey of major scholars in the field of mass communication, So and Chan (1991) reported that 63% of respondents thought that the theoretical development should be a lot better.

These opinions seem to be supported by a low level of theory use in the published literature. For example, in an analysis of published literature on mass communication from 1965 to 1989 in 8 competitive peer-reviewed journals, W. J. Potter, Cooper, and Dupagne (1993) found that only 8.1% of 1,326 articles were guided by a theory and provided a test of that theory; another 19.5% were tests of hypotheses, but these hypotheses were not derived from a theory. A similar pattern was found in an analysis of studies published in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, when Riffe and Freitag (1997) reported that only 27.6% of the studies used an explicit theoretical framework, and there was no change in this percentage over the 25-year period they examined, from 1971 to 1995. Similar findings were reported by Kamhawi and Weaver (2003), who examined all articles published in 10 communication journals from 1980 to 1999 and found that only 30.5% specifically mentioned a theory. Likewise, our analysis of mass media effects articles published in 16 journals from 1993 to 2005 found that only 35.0% of coded articles featured a theory prominently (W. J. Potter & Riddle, 2007).

**Many Theories.** It is ironic that with so little theory-driven research, we still have a very large number of theories in the mass media literature. Table 1.1 lists in alphabetical order what I have found to be some of these theories in my perusal of media theory books and from my review of the past 5 years of the mass media published literature in eight journals. This list, which contains more than 150 theories, reveals a great variety of explanation. A few of these theories are widely known; others are relatively unknown either because they are new or because they have yet to be discovered by many scholars. Some are formal systems of explanations that have generated many hypothetic-deductive tests, while others have been generated from an inductive process in a single study. While most focus their explanations on a small piece of the overall mass media phenomenon, a few are broader and would qualify as middle-range theories (Merton, 1967). Some have been constructed by social scientists working in media studies or related fields (such as psychology, sociology, political science, economics, anthropology, business, or education), while others have been created by humanistic scholars working in fields such as film studies, comparative literature, linguistics, feminist studies, ethnic studies, and art. Some of these explanations display the term *theory* in their titles, while others are referred to as models, hypotheses, or effects. Of course, I am using a broad conception of theory. I have been willing to include in my list any systematic explanation based on ideas (concepts and constructions) that seek to organize, predict, or explain some aspect of a phenomenon.

**Table 1.1** Theories Explaining Some Aspect of the Mass Media Phenomenon

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ABX balance model (T. Newcomb, 1953)
Advertising and social change (Berman, 1981)
Affective aggression model (A. A. Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995)
Affluent society (Galbraith, 1976)
Agenda building (G. E. Lang & Lang, 1983, 1981/1991)
Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993)
Associative network model (J. R. Anderson, 1983)
Attitude construct approach (Fazio, 1990)
Audience as commodity (Jhally & Livant, 1986)
Audience flow (Eastman, 1993)
Audience polarization (Webster & Phalen, 1997)
Automatic activation model (Fazio, 1990)
Availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973)
Availability-valence model (Kisielius & Sternthal, 1984)
Buffering hypothesis (M. H. Davis & Kraus, 1989)
Capacity model (Fisch, 2000)
Catharsis (Aristotle; Freud, 1922; S. Feshbach, 1961)
Channel repertoire (Ferguson & Perse, 1993; Heeter, 1988)
Channel theory of publication (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1982)
Character affiliation theory (Raney, 2004)
Civic engagement (Putnam, 2000)
Coalition model of agenda building (Protess et al., 1991)
Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)
Cognitive response theory (Greenwald, 1968)
Communication/persuasion matrix model (McGuire, 1986)
Conservative/moralist theory (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985)
Consumer culture theory (Ewen, 1976)
Cue theory (L. Berkowitz, 1965)
Cultivation (Gerbner, 1969; Gerbner & Gross, 1976)
Cultural imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Schiller, 1969)
Culture of narcissism (Lasch, 1978)
Decision-making models (Ryan & Peterson, 1982)
Diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1962, 1986; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971)
Direct effects model (Lasswell, 1927)
Disinhibition effect (Bandura, 1994)
Disposition theory (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976)
Distribution of knowledge (McQuail & Windahl, 1993)
Double action model of gatekeeping (Bass, 1969)
Drench hypothesis (Greenberg, 1988)
Elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981)
Elite pluralism theory (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Key, 1961)
Empathy theory (Zillmann, 1996)

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*(Continued)*

**Table 1.1** (Continued)

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Encoding-decoding model (S. Hall, 1980)	
Exchange model of news (Sigal, 1973)	
Exchange theory (Solomon, 1989)	
Excitation transfer theory (Zillmann, 1983)	
Exemplification theory (Zillmann, 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000)	
Expectancy value model (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985)	
Fraction of selection (Schramm, 1954)	
Frame analysis (Goffman, 1974, 1979)	
Framing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Scheufele, 1999)	
Free market model of media (DeFleur, 1970)	
Gatekeeping (White, 1950)	
Genre theory (Kaminsky, 1974)	
Global village (McLuhan, 1964)	
Gratification seeking and audience activity model (Rubin & Perse, 1987)	
Gravitation theory (W. J. Potter, 2005)	
Hegemony theory (Gramsci, 1971)	
Heuristic processing model of cultivation effects (Shrum, 2002)	
Hidden persuaders (Packard, 1957)	
Homogenization hypothesis (Bagdikian, 2000)	
Imitation (N. E. Miller & Dollard, 1941)	
Indirect effects model (Cartwright, 1949; Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947)	
Information flow theory (D. K. Davis, 1990; Greenberg & Parker, 1965)	
Information model of advertising (cited in Jeffres, 1997, pp. 279–281)	
Information seeking (Donohew & Tipton, 1973)	
Integrated model of media enjoyment (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004)	
Integrated response model (R. E. Smith & Swinyard, 1982, 1988)	
Interpretation by social class (Morley, 1980)	
Interpretive resistance theory (Carragee, 1990)	
Knowledge gap theory (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970)	
Law of double jeopardy (McPhee, 1963)	
Least objectionable programming (Klein, 1971)	
Levels of processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972)	
Limited-capacity model of mediated message processing (A. Lang, 2000)	
Market power model of advertising (cited in Jeffres, 1997, pp. 279–281)	
Marketplace model (Webster & Phalen, 1994)	
Marxist theory (McQuail, 1987)	
Mass audience (Blumer, 1946)	
Media access (Westley & MacLean, 1957)	
Media as culture industries (Hay, 1989; Jhally, 1987)	

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Media culture (Altheide & Snow, 1979, 1991)  
 Media enjoyment as attitude (Nabi & Krmar, 2004)  
 Media entertainment theory (Mendelsohn, 1966)  
 Media flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Sherry, 2004)  
 Media-public relationships (McQuail & Windahl, 1981)  
 Media system dependency (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1975)  
 Medium is the message (McLuhan, 1962, 1964)  
 Medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994)  
 Message construction (Shoemaker & Reese, 1990)  
 Mood management (Zillmann, 1988)  
 Motivated attention and motivated processing (Nabi, 1999)

Neo-associationistic model (L. Berkowitz, 1984)  
 Neo-mass audience (Webster & Phalen, 1997)  
 Network model of political priming (Price & Tewksbury, 1997)  
 News content theory (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)  
 News diffusion (Greenberg, 1964)  
 News factory (Bantz, McCorkle, & Baade, 1980)  
 News frame theory (Tuchman, 1978)  
 News selection (Gans, 1979)  
 Newsworker socialization (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978)

One-dimensional man (Marcuse, 1964)

Parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rosengren & Windahl, 1989; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1990)  
 Play theory (W. Stephenson, 1967)  
 Pluralistic ignorance (Allport, 1935)  
 Political socialization theory (Graber, 1988)  
 Politics of signification (S. Hall, 1982)  
 Polysemy theory (J. Fiske, 1986)  
 Power elite theory (Mills, 1957)  
 Priming (L. Berkowitz, 1984; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002)  
 Principled reasoning theory (J. M. McLeod, Sotirovic, Voakes, Guo, & Huang, 1998)  
 Profit-driven logic of safety theory  
 Program choice theory (Steiner, 1952)  
 Pseudo-events blur reality (Boorstin, 1961)  
 Psychodynamic model (DeFleur, 1970)  
 Psychological conditioning (Klapper, 1960; Skinner, 1974)

Rally effect (Coser, 1956)  
 Reasoned action theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975)  
 Reception paradigm (E. Katz, 1987)  
 Resource dependency theory (Turow, 1984)  
 Revealed preferences (Mansfield, 1970)  
 Ritual model of communication (Turner, 1977)

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*(Continued)*

**Table 1.1** (Continued)

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Selective exposure (Freedman & Sears, 1966; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944)
Selective gatekeeping model
Selective perception (Klapper, 1960)
Semiotic theory (Baudrillard, 1983)
Social cognitive theory of mass communication (Bandura, 2001)
Social construction of meaning (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lippmann, 1922; Mead, 1934)
Social construction of media technologies (Douglas, 1987)
Social identity (Meyrowitz, 1985)
Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973)
Social norms theory of enjoyment (Denham, 2004)
Sociological model of mass communication (Riley & Riley, 1959)
Sociology of news theory (Schudson, 2003)
Spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991)
Star theory (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000)
Storage battery model (S. T. Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
Storage bin model (S. T. Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
Synapse model of priming (S. T. Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
Technological determinism (Fischer, 1992)
Technological drivers (Neuman, 1991)
Television trivialization of public life (Postman, 1985)
Third-person theory (Perloff, 2002)
Transactional model (Graber, 1988; J. M. McLeod & Becker, 1974)
Transmission model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949)
Transportation model (Carey, 1975a, 1975b)
Transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000)
Two-step flow (E. Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)
Uses and dependency model (Rubin & Windahl, 1986)
Uses and gratifications (E. Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Lasswell, 1948; Rosengren, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985; C. R. Wright, 1960)
Videomalaise (M. J. Robinson, 1976)

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This points to a pattern of thin theory development—that is, few theories are introduced in a theory piece but then show up in multiple tests where they are shaped and refined. For example, Kamhawi and Weaver (2003) found that only three theories were mentioned in as many as 10% of their analyzed articles. These patterns led Kamhawi and Weaver to say that “theoretical development is probably the main consideration in evaluating the disciplinary status of the field. As our field grows in scope and complexity, the pressure for theoretical integration increases. It seems that scholars in the field should be developing and testing theories to explain the process and effects of mass communication” (p. 20). Also, in our study of mass media effects literature (W. J. Potter & Riddle, 2007), we found 144 theories in those

published studies, but only 12 of these theories were mentioned in 5 or more studies in our sample of 936 published research articles. The remaining 132 theories were spread out over 168 articles.

**Little Translation.** There is little translation of ideas into mass media research from other fields. While importing ideas into a field can be a good thing—by expanding the pool of ideas to consider and tools to try—it can also be a problem if those ideas are not adapted well to the specific needs of the importing field. Media scholars are more likely to import ideas from other social sciences than to cite other media scholars in communication. To illustrate this point, Reeves and Borgman (1983) studied nine core communication journals. They reported that communication scholars are dependent on journals outside of communication, with communication journal articles exhibiting five cites of other journals for each cite they receive. In a subsequent bibliometric analysis and network analysis of citations in 20 communication journals from 1977 to 1985, Rice et al. (1988) found that for all communication journals, the average impact ratio was .43, which was the lowest impact ratio among 10 social science fields. A ratio of 1.0 means that the articles published in a journal received an average of one citation per year subsequent to their publication. So an impact ratio of .4 means that the articles a journal published this year will receive an average of one citation every 2.5 years. This indicates that compared with other social sciences, communication scholars are much less likely to cite the work of other scholars publishing in their journals. This pattern gives greater weight to the conclusion that the degree of programmatic research is lower in communication than in other fields.

I am *not* arguing that we need to invent all our own ideas, especially when contiguous fields offer so many great ideas that have usefulness for mass media scholars. However, I *am* arguing that when we import an idea, we typically need to transform it in some way to fit the purpose of explaining some aspect of the mass media, and this usually requires some translation. These translations serve to tailor the constructs for our own purposes. Over time, we need to cite more of our translations in proportion to the untranslated constructs from other fields. Also, over time, we will find that we have special needs for mapping arcs that are different from other fields, and therefore there are no constructs we can import. In these cases, we need to develop our own constructs. But doing this requires greater attention to our own special mapping arcs, and in order to do this, we need more programmatic research to develop greater sensitivity to our own special challenges.

In summary, it appears that the field of mass media research is fragmented for several reasons. There is an ever expanding literature, but because so little of it is programmatic or theory driven, there is great difficulty in synthesizing the major findings across studies. The low level of theory-driven research is especially troublesome because there are many theories available for media researchers to use. However, there is not a core set of theories that has had a strong impact on the development of the field. C. R. Berger (1991), writing about the field of communication research in general, said, “The traditionally high level of fragmentation manifested by the field seems to be increasing as the field expands. Although specialization is almost

an inevitable consequence of growth, the fact that there is no particular theoretical paradigm or touchstone theory around which communication researchers might organize their efforts is a least one source of concern” (p. 101).

### **Critique of the Generating-Findings Perspective**

The field of mass media scholarship has accomplished a great deal in its Generating-Findings phase. The scholars who have created the literature about the mass media and who have conducted empirical studies have laid down a good base for a scholarly field by identifying key concepts, arranging them in predictive relationships, and providing tests for many of those possible relationships. Much progress has been made.

My critique of the Generating-Findings perspective is not intended to denigrate any of that effort or any of the results of those many studies. Every bit of it contributes to our understanding of the mass media in its own way. My critique is based on the perception that this literature has reached a critical mass that allows us to move on to a more challenging stage of thinking and research. While some scholars have already moved onto this stage, the character of our literature remains largely in the Generating-Findings phase. If we continue with the methods, assumptions, and debates that have been so useful in the past, the marginal utility of these efforts will dwindle to a nonproductive point. We cannot continue to do the same things and expect to continue making progress. Furthermore, I argue that continuing to generate the same type of studies will further clutter our literature. We need to shift our perspective to overcome the problems that are increasingly crippling our efforts with fragmentation. We need to regard the concepts and methods from other scholarly fields more as tools that need to be translated into our purposes; in so doing, we will need to hybridize some of them in order to extend their usefulness to us. And perhaps most important, we need to shift from inductive processes to deductive processes that cluster around theories and provide rigorous programmatic tests of them that continually shape their mapping precision through falsification as well as support. This will orient us toward convergent thinking more so than wandering around in divergent topic seeking. Convergent thinking will foster a sense of shared purpose as we consolidate our scholarly resources to address our most pressing challenges of explanation. And when we work together with a common set of assumptions, definitions, and purpose, we will achieve the traction we need to make much more substantial progress.

The Generating-Findings activity has been an essential initial step in building a scholarly field. However, we have now produced a large number of ideas and findings; adding to that mass can only overwhelm new scholars and fragment existing scholars into smaller and smaller camps that find it harder and harder to understand what scholars in other camps are doing.

## **Mapping-Phenomenon Perspective on the Mass Media**

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It is time to shift away from a predominantly Generating-Findings perspective, where we spend most of our resources in generating more ideas, assumptions, definitions,

and findings. We have reached a critical mass of thinking and research findings. It is time to shift toward a predominantly Mapping-Phenomenon perspective. While there are many examples of scholars who have been operating from much more of a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective for years, these scholars are a small minority. The dominant perspective has been Generating-Findings.

In this section, I will highlight five major characteristics of what I mean by a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective. These include shaping our findings into knowledge, getting past categorical thinking, focusing on depth over breadth, favoring convergence over divergence, and focusing on the big picture.

## Shaping Findings Into Knowledge

The primary scholarly work in a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective is identifying the most important findings in our existing literature and organizing them in a way to extend their power of capturing the essence of our phenomenon. In this calibration process, we need to begin with an analysis of existing definitions for key terms, so we can weed out the less useful definitions and further explicate the more useful ones. We need to make a critical assessment of existing theories, so we can focus on deducing stronger tests from their key propositions, use the results of those empirical tests to pare away faulty predictions, and extend the theory's predictive power by synthesizing additional propositions. We need to background methods as tools that are useful only insofar as they can access various parts of our phenomenon of interest and foreground strong conceptualizations.

## Getting Past Categorical Thinking

The diversity of worldviews, scholarly traditions, methods, and conceptualization of key ideas has been a strength—not a weakness—in the development of the field up to this point. The phenomenon of the mass media is complex, and the examination of that complex phenomenon benefits from the thinking from many different perspectives. I believe that our literature is stronger because it contains research from humanistic scholars as well as a full range of social scientific scholars.

The problem with the debates is not the diversity of thinking but the compartmentalization of that thinking. While the debates have offered the potential to expand the thinking of individual scholars, the debate format is limiting because of its polarizing effects. Debates tend either to turn off readers, who then fail to take the opportunity to learn, or to persuade readers to side with one position and thereby demonize other positions. If we are to take advantage of the full range of great ideas, we need to respect and understand all those ideas and then see if we can unify ourselves through a synthesis of the best ideas. In short, we need to get beyond the debates that foster categorical thinking.

Let's not debate whether the quantitative or the qualitative approach is better; both provide valuable and essential tools. There needs to be a confluence of ideas rather than a drawing of lines between camps. There is far more commonality in our thinking than we have been giving ourselves credit for. I made this point in my book *An Analysis of Thinking and Research About Qualitative Methods* (W. J. Potter,

1996), and I am not alone in this assessment. For example, in their book titled *Mediamaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*, Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998) laid out two fundamental models of communication: the transmission model and the cultural model. After contrasting the two models, they said, “Although many scholars assume that the transmission and cultural models of communication contradict each other—that they have to choose one model or the other—we disagree. We believe that each model has something important to say about the complexities of communication in the contemporary world; the usefulness of each model depends on our particular questions about communication. Thus we prefer to think of the two models as complementary perspectives” (p. 25). Gerbner (1983) concluded the “Ferment in the Field” issue of the *Journal of Communication* with a call for respect for all kinds of research. He argued that all are important. For example, he used the analogy of a three-legged stool, saying it is foolish to argue which of the three legs makes the stool stand up. “If the implication is that the other sections (or legs) are somehow less significant or even dispensable, the statement becomes misleading and harmful” (p. 357).

Rather than participate in the debate about whether the audience is active or passive, it would be far better to work for a synthesis (Livingstone, 1993; Power et al., 2002; Webster & Phalen, 1994). For example, Livingstone (1993) wrote about the danger of taking either side in this debate when she said, “If we see the media or life events as all-powerful creators of meaning, we neglect the role of audiences: if we see people as all-powerful creators of meaning, we neglect the structure of that which people interpret.” There are times when audience members are active and other times when they are passive. The key to advancing our understanding of audiences is to get beyond the debate about which of these positions is more descriptive of the audiences and instead focus our resources on finding out why the audience is passive at certain times and active at other times.

Let’s not debate whether media effects are powerful, weak, or nonexistent. They are all three, depending on the effect and the conditions. It is hard to believe that any scholar who reads a sizable portion of the media effects literature can seriously take a polar position on this long-standing debate about whether media effects exist. Let’s not get trapped by categorical thinking but instead examine the full spectrum of effects.

The locus of meaning has been the topic of serious debate for decades. But again, it seems like there should be a range of options for considering where the locus of meaning lies, ranging from purely in the text to purely in the mind of the audience member. When we allow for a range of positions, we will most likely find that meaning typically emerges from the middle positions. The symbols in texts carry common meanings; if not, communication would not be possible. However, people have the ability to significantly alter the sender’s intended meaning by translating the media messages through their own experiences.

Let’s get beyond the jargon that separates scholars into differing camps. Let’s get beyond the denial that both sides do not have limitations. And let’s move from conflict that generates heat of argumentation to discussion that generates more light to illuminate the darker corners of our phenomenon. To the extent that the debates continue, they will limit our chances to progress as a scholarly

field. Debates reinforce a fractiousness of scholars into camps who feel they must compete. The camps foster categorical thinking as a way of creating camp identity and loyalty. We need to get past the inclination in a Generating-Findings field to create camps and move to a higher level of thinking to pull the best from each camp and create a national identity around the idea of generating more powerful and insightful explanations about the phenomenon of the mass media.

## **Focusing on Depth Over Breadth**

In shifting into the Mapping-Phenomenon phase, we need to focus our attention on a few topic areas and marshal our limited resources to make progress in deepening our explanations. We have identified a lot of the who, what, and where. Now we need to focus on addressing the questions of how and why. This will require much more analysis of the current literature than putting forth reasoned speculation about mapping mechanisms. The tests of these mechanisms need to conform to a set of definitions and shared meanings to build a genuine program of mapping research.

I am not arguing that we reduce the number of questions by ignoring many of them. Instead, I am arguing that we need to calibrate and organize. Calibrate the importance of questions in order to identify the most important ones. Then organize the other questions hierarchically as subsets of the most important questions. All questions that we have dealt with in the past are still important to examine, but not all questions are equally important. We need to organize our research efforts by first organizing our thinking about what is most important.

## **Favoring Convergence Over Divergence**

To develop this depth, we need scholars who will build more on the work of others. This requires a focus on convergence of sharing definitions, assumptions, and procedures.

An effect of convergence is the bringing together of scholars into a more unified field. The more we share a common understanding of the nature of our phenomenon and how best to go about constructing explanations for it, the more we will share a sense of community and hence achieve a higher scholarly profile. Kuhn (1970a) provided a definition of a scientific community that can be applied usefully to any scholarly community: “Bound together by common elements of their education and apprenticeship, they see themselves and are seen by others as . . . responsible for the pursuit of a set of shared goals, including the training of their successors. Such communities are characterized by the relative fullness of communication within the group and by the relative unanimity of the group’s judgment in professional matters” (p. 296). Community requires convergence.

## **Focusing on the Big Picture**

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the Mapping-Phenomenon perspective is the focus on the big picture, that is, the nature of the mass media as our

phenomenon of interest. Thus, we need more thinking at the broadest level. We need more macro-level theorizing.

I am not arguing that individual empirical studies are not important; to the contrary, the individual studies are essential. But when scholars design their individual studies and get down in the micro details of their one topic, their decisions will be much better if they keep in mind how their study fits into the map of the overall phenomenon. By carefully positioning their study in the design stage of the research, they can more clearly direct their eventual findings to the part of the overall Mapping-Phenomenon system where those findings will have the most impact. Without such positioning in the design, the findings easily can get lost in the clutter of a fragmented literature. This is why programmatic research is so important; each new study is clearly positioned along a developing path. This is why theory testing is so important; each test is clearly positioned as making a contribution in shaping a particular part of an identifiable system of explanation. This is why critical reviews of the literature are so important; they provide a map of a particular topic area. And at the most macro level, this is why a general framework is so important; it can provide the global map of the phenomenon.

## Evolving

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The question now becomes how to evolve from a predominantly Generating-Findings perspective to a more Mapping-Phenomenon perspective. The purpose of this book is to provide some guidelines for such an evolution. That is, in this book, I try to do more than point out the limitations of our current understanding about our phenomenon and criticize many of our current practices. I also show what could be done differently and highlight how those different practices (in defining terms, designing studies, and integrating findings) could greatly benefit the development of our scholarly field by substantially increasing our knowledge of the mass media, developing a greater sense of community among scholars, and giving our field a greater visibility among contiguous scholarly communities.

To be most useful in guiding a shift from a Generating-Findings perspective to a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective, we need a general framework that achieves three goals. First, it needs to guide the explication of definitions for key constructs. Almost every concept has a variety of definitions; we need to sort through the wisdom in those definitions, select the best elements, and synthesize those elements together into the most useful definition possible. Second, a general framework should provide a critical analysis of scholarly literatures on mass media so as to highlight the most useful findings. By this, I do not mean that the framework is an inventory of all the findings across those literatures. Instead, I mean that there needs to be a critical calibration of those findings such that the ones with the greatest conceptual leverage are foregrounded. Third, a general framework should offer a structure that serves to organize our understanding of the mass media phenomenon.

Beginning with the next chapter and extending through all the chapters in this book, I offer a general perspective that I call *lineation*. I believe this to be an apt

label for this general framework because lineation means the marking with lines, a division into lines, or an arrangement or group of lines. Throughout this book, you will see many allusions to lines. The crafting of formal definitions is essentially about drawing lines, that is, establishing the perimeter of the concept. What should be included and what should be excluded? With the facet of media organizations, I talk about lines of thinking. Media content is expressed as narrative lines that are analytical devices that reveal the encoding conventions and decoding triggers in each mass media message. Audience experience is expressed in terms of exposure states that are separated by thresholds, which are lines dividing qualitatively different states. Effects are expressed in terms of baselines and fluctuation lines.

With this lineation general perspective, I attempt to achieve the goals I have laid out above. First, I attempt to bring greater clarity to our major constructs by synthesizing formal definitions. Second, the lineation general framework provides a critical analysis of scholarly literatures on mass media so as to highlight the most useful findings. Some of these findings that I regard as most important are highly salient in the literatures, but others are more obscure. These choices may prove controversial, but I was guided less by popularity of findings or size of literatures than by utility of ideas as contributing to a unified system of explanation.

Third, I have attempted to shape the configuration of research findings into large-scale knowledge structures that are relatively easy for readers to understand, whether those readers are students new to the study of the phenomenon or seasoned scholars entrenched in their own perspectives. This structure adapts the familiar organization scheme of Lasswell (1948), which is organized by the questions of who says what to whom in which channels to what effect. My adaptations include demoting channel as an important question because digitization has rendered channel a background idea. Also, I prefer to think of the other four (media organizations, audiences, messages, and effects) not as a linear process but as facets of the same thing, much like a diamond with its different facets that are integral to the stone itself. When we look at a diamond, we see the facet closest to us, but we also look through that facet and see the intersection of the other facets. I argue that we should think of our phenomenon in the same way—that is, when we think about the mass media, we focus on one facet primarily, but we must contextualize that one facet by considering the influence of the other facets on it.

Undoubtedly, some readers may ask, Is the lineation general framework a theory, a paradigm, or something else? I hesitate to label it as a theory or paradigm given the wide range of definitions of these (see Dervin et al., 1989, for illustrations of this point). It has elements that would make it look like a theory to some readers (a dictionary, explanatory propositions, axioms, some operational calculus); it may not look like a theory to other readers. It has elements that would make it look like a paradigm to some readers (attention to scholarly communities, widespread assumptions and practices); it may not look like a paradigm to other readers. I will resist such labels. However, if readers feel compelled to categorize it as a theory, paradigm, or something else, I ask that they do this as a background activity and in the foreground keep their focus on matters of building a scholarly field that more effectively and efficiently increases our understanding of the mass media phenomenon.

## Conclusion

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The mass media have become an extremely important phenomenon in our culture, and they will continue to be so. For more than six decades, this phenomenon has attracted the attention of a wide variety of scholars who have produced a great deal of scholarship about the mass media. This scholarship, which has largely been Generating-Findings in nature, has brought us to a point where we have a very large inventory of ideas as well as findings from individual research studies.

We seemed to have reached a plateau in our research and thinking about the mass media. Our scholarly practices and debates that have served us well in the past are losing their power in the face of new challenges. We continue to be too dependent on Generating-Findings research not driven by theory; by sporadic, nonprogrammatic research; and by importing many ideas rather than developing our own. Also, the debates that have helped us expand our vision of the phenomenon and stimulated lots of approaches to examining it have also fostered categorical thinking that now limits our ability to synthesize creative explanations. It is time to challenge many of our assumptions about theory, about research, and especially about the mass media phenomenon itself. This book presents a lineation general framework that is intended to guide an evolution away from a Generating-Findings perspective and toward a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective for approaching the study of the phenomenon of the mass media.