

CHAPTER 2

Introduction to the General Framework

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In the previous chapter, I critiqued the current state of mass media research as being stuck on a plateau where the further generation of research findings is beginning to contribute more to clutter than to knowledge. I argued for a shift in thinking and practices from a Generating-Findings perspective to a more Mapping-Phenomenon perspective. The purpose of this book is to provide a general framework to guide such an evolution. In this chapter, I take the first steps in addressing that purpose by presenting an overview of the lineation general framework.

In order to introduce this lineation general framework in as parsimonious a manner as possible, I use the metaphor of a bicycle wheel to illustrate the structure and

function of scholarly fields. The three major components of a bicycle wheel are the central hub, the spokes radiating outward from the hub in all directions, and the rim. Each of these three is essential. The hub consists of a shared core set of ideas about what the phenomenon of scholarly interest is—in this case, the mass media. The spokes are the many lines of research that work off the hub. And the rim is a series of ideas that unify the entire enterprise into a whole. In this chapter, I will elaborate each of these features—the hub, the spokes, and the rim—of the wheel to introduce the main ideas of this general framework for mass media thinking and research.

The Hub

The hub is the set of shared axioms in a field. By the term *axiom*, I mean an assumption that must be accepted as a foundational premise. It cannot be tested to determine its ultimate truth in any objective manner. Instead, axioms are either accepted as beliefs or they are not. Scholarly communities are strong to the extent that scholars share a common set of beliefs about their phenomenon of interest.

One kind of axiom is definitional—that is, it is concerned with the meaning we attach to our terms and how widespread the acceptance of those meanings is. Another form of axiom is philosophical in nature; that is, it refers to matters of ontology (i.e., the nature of our phenomenon of interest) and epistemology (i.e., our abilities and limitations to perceive and understand that phenomenon).

Problems in the Hub

The mass media scholarly field exhibits two hub-type problems. First, there is a lack of clarity on the focal construct of *mass media*. Second, there is a fragmentation of worldviews. Each of these problems seriously undermines the formation of a scholarly community.

Focal Construct Problem. In new fields, scholars begin conducting research without a clear or a shared conceptualization of their focal phenomenon. They struggle to build this conceptualization in a hermeneutic process of trial and error. Each exploratory study adds a bit more understanding about which definitions seem to work better than others. Eventually, one definition emerges as being a more useful definition than others that have been tried. The more that scholars recognize the superior utility of this one definition, the more that the field can progress efficiently. A shared definition for the focal phenomenon more clearly directs future thinking and research as well as making it easier to integrate the insights from all that scholarly activity into a systematically growing knowledge base (for a discussion of the importance of explicating focal constructs, see Chaffee, 1991).

We are at a point where we need a clear, shared definition of mass media. However, there seem to be several terms used to characterize our phenomenon of

interest, and scholars seem to operate as if there were a shared definition when there is not. This is a serious problem.

There appear to be several terms for the focal phenomenon—*mass communication*, *mass media*, and *media communication*, to name a few. Each of these terms is contested. To illustrate, the British sociologist John Thompson (1995) observed that “it has often been noted that ‘mass communication’ is an infelicitous phrase. The term ‘mass’ is especially misleading. It conjures up the image of a vast audience comprising many thousands, even millions of individuals. This may be an accurate image in the case of some media products, such as the most popular modern-day newspapers, films and television programmes; but it is hardly an accurate representation of the circumstance of most media products, past or present” (p. 24). Other scholars also struggle with addressing the criterion of audience size. For example, Webster and Phalen (1997) argued that in order to be a mass, the audience “must be of sufficient size that individual cases (e.g., the viewer, the family, the social network) recede in importance and the dynamic of a larger entity emerges” (p. 9). However, we are still left with the question of *how large* an audience needs to be in order for individual cases to recede, so we are still caught in the quantitative trap. Most scholars would agree that a PBS broadcasted documentary that reaches 5,000 households in a viewing market is an example of a mass media message, but it is likely that these same scholars would not consider the 10,000 fans at a stadium watching a high school football game as an example of a mass media message. Thompson concluded, “So if the term ‘mass’ is to be used, it should not be construed in narrowly quantitative terms” (p. 24).

The term *mass* has been used by sociologists to refer to a particular kind of society, which has implications for how communication from the media takes place. Here, *mass* refers more to the qualities of the audience than to the size of the audience. For example, Lowery and DeFleur (1988) defined mass communication not in terms of the size of the audience but in terms of the quality of the audience as being a “mass society” due to the influences of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Other sociologists have argued that people in the modern mass society were becoming both isolated and alienated from other members of society because increasing technology was making people into machines. Thus, a mass audience was one with no social organization, no body of custom and tradition, no established set of rules or rituals, no organized group of sentiments, and no structure or status roles (Blumer, 1946; McQuail, 2000). J. Thompson (1995) extended this idea by saying that mass “suggests that the recipients of media products constitute a vast sea of passive, undifferentiated individuals. This is an image associated with some earlier critiques of ‘mass culture’ and ‘mass society,’ critiques which generally assumed that the development of mass communication has had a largely negative impact on modern social life, creating a kind of bland and homogeneous culture” (p. 24).

But this conception of the audience was discredited as research revealed that audience members exhibit customs and rituals in media exposures and that they rely on social networks of opinion leaders to discuss issues they encounter in the media. People are interpretive beings, and not every person is affected by a particular media message (Cantril, 1940). Furthermore, it was later shown that the people

who were affected were not all affected in the same manner, nor did they all react in the same way. Therefore, the term *mass*, which connotes a large-size audience or a particular kind of audience, is an adjective with ambiguous meaning. J. Thompson (1995) continued, “If the term ‘mass’ may be misleading in certain respects, the term ‘communication’ may be as well, since the kinds of communication generally involved in mass communication are quite different from those involved in ordinary conversation” (p. 25).

The term *mass media* also has an ambiguous meaning because it is typically defined in an ostensive manner by exemplification rather than through a formal statement that highlights the critical elements that are needed in such a classification scheme. For example, Traudt (2005) defined mass media as “the range of print, electronic, and filmic opportunities supported by multiple platforms for presentation and consumption” (pp. 5–6), although he acknowledged that such a definition is too simple. Also, Turow (1989) defined mass media as “the technological devices used in mass communication” and defined mass communication as “the industrialized production and multiple distribution of images through technological devices” (p. 454). And Janowitz’s (1968) definition is “technological devices (press, radio, films, etc.) to disseminate symbolic content” (p. 41).

Defining mass media by channel has become an even more serious problem with the digitization of messages because the same message can move seamlessly through different channels, which raises the question about why a message would not be regarded as a mass media message if it is a DVD of a family’s summer picnic but then does become a mass media message when shown on *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. Clearly, there is more to the definition than channel. The problem of defining the mass media ostensibly by channel is that the definition does not provide a decision rule that could be used to classify messages consistently as being either mass media or not mass media. This lack of a decision rule indicates that scholars do not agree on what is the critical essence of a mass medium—that is, what do all the ostensive examples have that other channels lack?

None of the above mentioned ideas has served as a clear classification element in defining a mass audience. There have been convincing criticisms to eliminate each one of them (for a good review of this criticism, see Webster & Phalen, 1997). Therefore, a definition cannot rely on channel or on audience type or size. Thus, we have a good idea now about what the mass media are not, but we as yet lack a clear articulation of critical characteristics of the mass media that captures their essence and can be used as a classification rule. Even so, the terms *mass communication* and *mass media* are commonly used by scholars.

Arguably, the best definition of the mass media to date has been provided by J. Thompson (1995), who defined it as “the institutionalized production and generalized diffusion of symbolic goods via the fixation and transmission of information or symbolic content” (p. 26). He said there are five key elements of this definition: “the technical and institutional means of production and diffusion; the commodification of symbolic forms; the structured break between production and reception; the extended availability of media products in time and space; and the public circulation of mediated symbolic forms” (p. 26). However, this definition is not without its problems. One problem is with the commodification

of content. Of course, the mass media commodify their content, but so do non-mass images. One example is getting a family portrait at Sears. This photographic image is a commodity advertised and sold for a profit, but it is a private message, not one available to the masses. Another problem with Thompson's definition is the institutional means of production. There are many examples of entrepreneurs starting magazines, book publishing houses, and Internet software firms who had very few employees and a decidedly noninstitutional approach but who created messages that would be considered mass media. Perhaps Thompson regarded his list of five characteristics as each being nonnecessary—that is, none is necessary, but the more that these five characteristics are present in an example, the more that example is likely to be regarded as a mass medium. Perhaps, but he does not specify this.

Worldview Problem. By fragmentation of worldviews, I do not mean only that scholars are operating under different worldviews. By *fragmentation*, I mean that scholars are either fighting worldview battles or ignoring the differences. As could be seen in the previous chapter, both of these conditions persist. Ignoring the thinking of scholars who operate from a different worldview creates a low ceiling of understanding. And while fighting the battles over worldviews is better than ignoring worldviews, these debates usually take effort away from making more progress in explaining our phenomenon itself.

I am not arguing here that everyone should have the same worldview. Instead, I am arguing that scholars need to exhibit a broader base of cooperation. By this, I mean that we need to stop arguing about which worldview is best and learn to respect the full range of worldviews as being a strength in our field. We need to access the insights being developed by scholars across the range of worldviews with their many different methods and approaches. By rising above the worldview turf battles, we can gain a broader perspective on our phenomenon and learn useful things about our phenomenon from scholars working from different worldviews than our own.

Developing the Hub

The first step in evolving toward a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective requires a careful explication of the field's focal construct as well as its major constructs. Until this can be accomplished, the hub will be weak, and the lines of research that flow from the hub will serve more to increase clutter than to increase knowledge of our phenomenon.

Defining the Focal Phenomenon. The definition I propose for the mass media has two conditions, each of which is necessary but neither of which is sufficient. The first condition is the technological production of messages such that they can be made available to a large number of people at the same time. This reflects J. Thompson's (1995) definitional element of the mass media's ability to transmit a message simultaneously to a wide range of people over space and time. This definitional element is necessary to rule out face-to-face communication where immediate

feedback is available from another human. My second definitional element is that the mass media are organizations (not necessarily institutions or commercial businesses, although they often are) that distribute their messages *with the purpose of creating and maintaining audiences*. The key idea here is that they are not interested in creating a one-time audience, such as what a concert promoter might do. Instead, their goal is more ambitious. Mass media have the clear intention of conditioning audiences for repeat exposures. To me, this is the key definitional element that has been missing in the literature thus far.

Thus it seems useful to define the mass media as *technological channels of distributing messages by organizations with the purpose of creating and maintaining audiences*. Notice that the definition of mass media is not keyed to the size of the audience or to particular channels, which are the key definitional elements that are used in everyday language. Nor is it keyed to the qualities of the audience, which were important to sociologists in the first half of the 20th century. Instead, the lineation definition is keyed to *how* the channel is used. The focus is on the sender. In order to be a mass medium, the sender must be an organization (and not an individual), and the sender's main intention is to condition audiences into a ritualistic mode of exposure—that is, the mass media are much less interested in coaxing people into one exposure than they are in trying to get people into a position where they will be exposed regularly to their messages. When an organization uses a technological channel of communication to create and *maintain* an audience, it is a mass medium. Thus, *mass* media are not interested in creating an audience for a one-time message exposure; *mass* media want to preserve their audiences so they can maintain their revenue streams and amortize their high initial costs of attracting the audience the first time over the course of repeated exposures.

Using the intention of the sender of a message is key because it sets up a line of thinking that has great explanatory power for all facets of the mass media phenomenon. It explains many of the strategies used by media organizations, why messages are constructed the way they are, the experience of the audience during exposures, and the eventual effects on the audience members.

Defining Four Facets. Now that we have the core, formal definition of mass media, we can elaborate this by considering the major components of the phenomenon. Lasswell (1948) provided a strong foundation for the consideration of components with his classic series of questions: Who says what to whom in which channels to what effect? The components suggested in these questions are very useful in categorizing the mass media research over the past six decades, and with one exception, they will continue to be useful into the future. That one exception, I would argue, is the component of channel. With cable TV, then with computers, and especially with digitization, the idea of channel has faded into a background issue at best.

The lineation general framework identifies four major facets—mass media organizations, mass media audiences, mass media messages, and the mass media effects. Notice that I do not refer to these four as categories or components of the phenomenon because those words imply parts such that the phenomenon can be taken apart and each part examined separately. Instead, I use the word *facets* to suggest

the four are all sides of the same thing, much like a diamond has different facets. Of course, writing in a book is a linear format, so I must develop each of these four one at a time. But I am planting the idea early in this book that to understand this general framework's system of explanation, the mass media phenomenon needs to be regarded as multifaceted—that is, it has different sides, but those sides are really of the same essence. Those facets might initially appear different because each presents a different face. It is not quite accurate to say that the four components “work together” or that one component influences the others. It is more accurate to think of all four as being the same thing, simply a different perspective on the same thing.

In this section, I define the four facets in a particular way that makes them somewhat different from how other scholars have defined these terms. Because these definitions are different and because those differences are so important to this general framework, their definitions are carefully delineated in this section.

Media organizations are entities that compete for talent and other resources so as to construct audiences by providing messages with high perceived entertainment or informational value. A general framework purporting to explain the mass media must recognize the media organization as an integral facet of the phenomenon. Unfortunately, this facet is overlooked in much of our scholarship. Not only is the literature on the mass media organizations far smaller than the literatures on media audience, content, and effects, but the industry perspective rarely shows up in those other literatures. For example, the effects literature is largely critical of the media industries. This is not to say that media organizations should not be criticized. But there is a difference between reasoned criticism that builds from an understanding of an industry's goals and criticism that flows from the critic's personal preferences and lacks an understanding of the nature of the industry itself.

Media messages are developed using formulas to attract and hold the attention of the targeted audience members in a way to condition those audience members for repeat exposures. Media messages use standard formulas in the production of stories so as to make those stories easy to follow. Audience members use the formulas to tell them what the message will be about and how to process the information in that message.

Media audiences are collections of individuals who are exposed to particular media messages. Typically, an audience for a particular message is a niche, that is, composed of a set of individuals sharing a key characteristic that is tied to the message. Audience members look for value in messages—that is, they quickly and automatically make assessments of their costs compared with the benefits. Costs are money, time, and psychic energy. Benefits are primarily utility of information and emotional reactions.

Media effects are changes brought about by the media either in individuals or in larger social structures. On an individual level, a media effect is what an audience member experiences during exposure to a media message or as a consequence of that exposure. The experience can be the acquisition of some element from a media message, so the experience can add something new to the individual. The experience can also do something—trigger, alter, or condition something that already exists within the individual person. On a more macro level, a media effect can add or alter something in society, the public, or an institution.

Primitive Terms. There are many primitive terms that I am leaving undefined in the belief that scholars reading this would share the same meanings for these terms. These are terms where the everyday meaning, which is shared by most people, is the meaning that is used in this theory. Thus, there is no special—or technical—meaning for these terms when used in this theory.

There are too many primitive terms to list them all. The following list will provide some examples: newspapers, magazines, books, radio, news, fiction, advertising viewing, reading, listening, children, adolescents, adults, characters, perpetrators, victims, and weapons.

Audience-Defined Terms. There is a group of terms I label *audience-defined terms*. These are terms that are best not defined by researchers or theoreticians. These are terms that are often used in everyday language by all people. People have a clear, intuitively derived meaning for these terms, although sometimes it is difficult for them to articulate what that meaning is. But they know it when they see it.

It is also interesting to note that for each of these terms, there is likely to be a range of meanings in the general population. That is, not everyone defines the term precisely the same way. For example, think of the term *attractiveness*. Most people, whether they are social scientists or couch potatoes, know what this means to them. However, the meanings of attractiveness differ substantially across individuals. What a 14-year-old boy thinks is attractive is most likely something very different than what a 35-year-old woman thinks is attractive. Also, a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, a 5-year-old girl hugging teddy bear, a gay Olympic gymnast, and a poor migrant worker from a Third World country are all familiar with the concept of attractiveness but are likely to have very different definitions for it.

What is important for this general framework is the recognition that this type of concept exists and that many examples of this concept are essential for the explanatory propositions presented in later chapters. Although these terms are important, I prefer that they be treated descriptively, not prescriptively—that is, I am arguing that we as researchers need to inventory the variety of meanings so we can understand how they are used in common, everyday language in the general population. Once those receiver definitions are described, those meanings should be related to the influence process outlined in Part V of this book. But rather than have these definitions imposed by me or any other media scholar, it would be much more useful for researchers to inventory the various meanings of each of these terms and then try to test that variety of meanings in the propositions where the term appears. This is one of the ways in which this general framework respects the interpretive nature of an individual's meaning making.

The Spokes

The spokes are the lines of scholarship, each spoke indicating a different topic area that extends knowledge about the mass media. The longer the spoke, the more thinking and research are building up on that topic.

Spokes are extended most efficiently when there is a system of explanation—like a theory—that is used to guide the design of empirical studies and the

integration of the findings of those studies into a body of knowledge. Also, efficiency is gained when the research is programmatic—that is, when a scholar commits to a topic and carefully learns where a topic’s frontier of knowledge is and then exerts his or her effort at that point where it will have the greatest payoff in generating fresh insights by building efficiently from the strongest work on that topic while correcting the documented weaknesses. In contrast, when research is exploratory in nature, it is less like a metal spoke supporting a rim and more like a frayed piece of twine where tiny threads of studies sprout off in all directions and suddenly break off.

A spoke becomes stronger when there is a tight intertwining of theory and testing extended programmatically over time. The more scholars are concerned with testing a theory, the more convergent will be their research efforts and the greater the extension of a spoke. The value of a scholarly field to other scholarly fields and the public is usually traceable to the length and strength of its spokes, more so than the number of its spokes (i.e., lines of different research).

Problems With the Spokes

Many lines of mass media research have been started. In looking at the totality of this research, there appear to be two characteristics that have limited its usefulness. One is the lack of balance across lines of research, and the other is that some lines seem to be stuck in an exploratory phase.

Balance. Within the overall phenomenon of the mass media, certain topics have attracted more attention of scholars than have other topics. On the broad level, when we organize the phenomenon into four facets (mass media organizations, content, audiences, and effects), the facet of effects has received a great deal of attention. The facets of content and audiences have received a fair amount of attention, but the facet of the industry has received much less attention from scholars. So there is an imbalance of understanding across these four facets.

There is also an imbalance within facets. The effects literature is largely based on testing immediate effects. Also, it is focused on changes. Effects that take a long time to manifest themselves (such as 2 weeks or longer) as well as effects that manifest themselves as reinforcement of already existing cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors rarely are examined.

Within audiences, there has been a good deal of work on self-reported motives for exposure and on audience flow in television viewing. However, there has been much less research on exposure states and what attracts individuals into different exposure states, how individuals make exposure decisions in those states, and how people are affected in different states.

Within content, there has been a good deal of research looking at certain characteristics of news stories on television and in newspapers but not in other media. There has also been a good deal of research looking at sex, violence, and demographics (gender, ethnic background, occupations), but other characteristics of media content largely have been ignored. Also, there has been very little work on determining the storytelling formulas across media and genres.

This criticism of imbalance focuses concern less on past practices and more on the future. That is, it is understandable that a field with very limited research resources has not apportioned those resources in a balanced manner; instead, generating any kind of insight into the nature of the media has been likely to make a contribution. But if the field is to mature well, it needs synergies of explanation across facets, media, and topics. The more balanced the research is across these dimensions, the stronger can be the synergies of explanation.

Stuck in the Exploratory Phase. Recall from the previous chapter that the thesis underlying this book is that mass media scholarship needs to move out of an emphasis on the exploratory perspective and more into emphasizing an explanatory perspective. The way this translates into this spoke metaphor is that when scholars operate from an exploratory perspective, they keep trying to reinvent the wheel, and because their energy is limited, they continually invent a wheel inferior to the one that already exists. More literally, when a line of research already has a critical mass of studies, it is a far more efficient use of resources when scholars undertake the less difficult and more valuable work of fixing problems found in past empirical work than when they start with a relatively blank page and try to design a study from scratch.

Developing the Spokes

The lineation general framework focuses attention on a series of “spoke tasks” to guide thinking and practices more toward a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective. Most primary among these tasks is for scholars to work from a common set of key constructs.

Another task is for designers to deduce empirical tests from theoretical propositions or from promising findings in the existing literatures. For reasons of efficiency in using our precious limited resources and effectiveness in getting the greatest increases in understanding out of our research efforts, we need to test theories and continually modify them as our primary guidance tools for building the spokes. For a good treatment of how to develop theories, see Shoemaker, Tankard, and Lasorsa (2004).

There needs to be more critical analysis of our growing research bases from time to time. This is why meta-analyses as well as narrative analyses of the literature are so important. We need to criticize the theory and research, force the theoreticians to alter their existing theories, and even construct additional theories to provide competing explanations. All of this activity contributes to the strengthening and lengthening of a spoke.

We also need to achieve more balance. That is, we need much more work in the understudied areas so as to build our understanding of the full nature of our phenomenon. When one area is not well understood, the context for understanding all other areas is limited.

The strength of our scholarly field lies in its spokes. Over the past six decades, scholars have begun many spokes. While the lines of research on many of these spokes are still at an exploratory stage and have not progressed very far, many spokes have moved into theory, attracting a lot of scholars who have provided

critical analyses and additional testing. As that additional testing of theories progresses, we need to refine our theories and ask more of them. A theory that organizes thinking is a very useful tool in the exploratory phase of research. But as we develop each spoke more, we need to have more predictive theories that show relationships between two or more variables. Then we need more research with representative samples so we can move beyond examining *whether or not* X will occur and instead examine *how often* X will occur, how *powerful* X is compared with Y and Z, and how *widespread* X is. And eventually, we need to develop the explanatory features of theories to guide the testing of multiple factors in complex sets of relationships to address the questions of *how* and *why*. This will require thinking about larger sets of variables (Chaffee, 1977; Hyman, 1955) as well as the structure of how the variables work together (M. Rosenberg, 1968).

In summary, spokes will grow most efficiently and effectively when designers of research studies work from a common set of constructs and work from clear, conceptual definitions of key terms; when researchers use tried and tested measurement instruments; and when researchers are guided by a clear picture of what has been tested and what has not thus far in a research program. When researchers work off of common definitions, designs, and measurement instruments, their findings can be clearly positioned at the cutting edge where they will make a salient contribution to knowledge. Findings from exploratory studies have no such “cutting-edge” context—that is, they cannot be interpreted in the context of a program of research.

When there are many examples of programmatic research that have moved substantially beyond the initial exploratory stage, the longer and stronger are the spokes. And a field is more mature when the lines of research cover the entire span of the phenomenon. But to achieve a full set of lines of research, a field needs to have a group of committed scholars who work from a common conception of their focal phenomenon and who understand the broad context of findings across all the areas of research when they design their own research and write about the importance of their own findings.

The Rim

The rim serves three functions in this metaphor. First, the rim defines the perimeter of the field. This serves to give the field greater definition. Second, the rim provides a target point for lines of research. And third, the rim presents a series of ideas that are shared by scholars in the field. The rim displays high-profile ideas that are integrated into a set that gives coherence to the scholarly community, not just one line of research.

Each line of research feeds its important findings into the rim, and when those ideas are carefully assembled into a meaningful flow where each idea dovetails into the next, the set provides a solid context for each individual idea. For example, a line of research into a particular media effect is better guided when it is shaped by the knowledge gained about lines of research in other media effects. Also, this line of effects research becomes stronger when it is guided by findings about the media organizations, the formulas in the messages, and characteristics of audiences, all of which come from lines of research (spokes) in other areas of the wheel.

Problems With the Rim

The biggest limitation of the current research field, I believe, lies in an underdeveloped rim. That is, there is not enough integration of findings across lines of research. This serves to make the research appear idiosyncratic and fragmented rather than as converging into an integrated body of knowledge.

The nature of mass media scholarship has been fragmentary throughout its history. This is one of the reasons that I chose the metaphor of diverging spokes of a wheel to characterize it. The individual lines of research will always diverge; that is the nature of lines of research. They need to follow their own path because each has a different challenge than other lines of research. They will each have their own unique need for different methods and will follow a different path of speculation and testing. While each line of research needs to diverge from others, this does not necessarily mean that the field can never be more than a collection of fragmented scholarly areas. This fragmentary state of the field can be avoided if there is a sharing of findings and a use of those findings across all lines of research. Without this rim of sharing, it is difficult to see coherence in a field. For this reason, we have difficulty describing to other social scientists the big picture about our scholarly field. We also have difficulty describing to the public the map of our scholarly field or the list of most important research findings and speculations. Instead, when asked what our field is about, we typically describe the one piece about which we are most familiar, as if this one spoke were the entire wheel.

The phenomenon of the mass media is a complex system with many dynamic parts. The more we understand the interrelationships among the parts of the system, the more we can understand the value and function of each part. Of course, each of us needs to focus our attention most of the time on progressing with our one line of research. But to really understand the nature of our spoke, we need to compare and contrast it with other spokes. And even more important, we need to develop more of a sense of a scholarly community by considering more the nature of “wheelness.”

We need to counterbalance the necessary movement toward specialization in developing a line of research with a movement toward seeking a broader understanding about our full phenomenon. Specialization is unavoidable as scholars build out their lines of research; in fact, progress in our understanding on a topic requires this. However, unless those studies are grounded in a context broader than one topic path, the findings from that line of research will not tie back into a larger system of understanding. Building such a larger system of understanding is the purpose of a scholarly community. The more we are able to build a common understanding of our focal phenomenon, the stronger our community will be to its members. Also, strong communities present a clear identity to others, thus making them attractive to the next generation of scholars as well as current scholars working in related fields.

Developing the Rim

What should be the rim ideas? These ideas should be the key tenets of the lines of research in each of the four areas, that is, the shared ideas of scholars working in a quadrant. However, they also need a unifying element—that is, they need to be

linked strongly to the ideas in the other three areas. I mined the literatures for these ideas; I did not create them. However, in this lineation general framework, I do more than simply describe them. My intention is to synthesize a set of ideas. The challenge of synthesis lies in calibrating the importance of existing ideas, such that some of these ideas are brought into the foreground while others are moved to the background context, and the foregrounded ideas then work together as a set to explain the phenomenon of the mass media.

We also need to lengthen the arc of explanation. A great deal of the thinking about the mass media has a short arc. By this, I mean that theories, researchers, and even the public will fixate on a small piece of the overall mass media phenomenon, such as one type of effect, and attempt to link that effect to a particular media message or type of content. As for research design, individual studies usually need to have a short arc to make their designs manageable. But findings from these studies are building blocks that acquire more meaning when they are assembled into larger structures that bridge over a greater span of the phenomenon.

To explain media effects, we need to know more about media messages, not just the surface patterns of counts of characters (gender, ethnic background, or age) or acts (violence, sex), so that we can illuminate the formulas that structure messages for producers as well as for audiences. To explain messages, we need to know more about the mass media organizations. To explain the organizations, we need to know more about the audiences that are the markets for the organizations' messages. Thus, the more we know about one of these facets, the better able we are to understand the nature of the other facets. Therefore, it is useful to incorporate all facets into one system of explanation.

It is understandable why there is a short arc in the exploratory phase. We cannot sketch out the big picture until we have the pieces. Ultimately, we are forced to use a hermeneutic process that requires us to generate elements before we can look for patterns across elements, but to generate those elements, we need to be guided by the big picture. Which comes first, the recognition of pattern or the creation of elements? To do one, we really need the other to preexist. Thus, getting started in a new area of knowledge is very difficult. It is more useful in the early stages to generate elements, and thus the research has a shorter arc. Progress is slow at first, but it can speed up as there are more elements that can contribute to the recognition of consistent patterns. To make progress on this task, we need to move beyond a Generating-Findings perspective and into a Mapping-Phenomenon perspective.

We have reached a point in the exploratory phase where there are many elements available. Now we need to turn more of our attention toward looking at patterns across those elements, that is, to think with longer arcs. Thus, a broader framework for mass media scholarship can have great value. By articulating patterns across the full arc of the phenomenon, we can develop a more complete map of knowledge. And such a map will have great value in guiding the generation of particular research studies that would have the greatest ability to falsify (or confirm) the initially tentative reading of patterns.

The lineation general framework presents a line of thinking that reflects the main ideas from each of the four mass media facets and links them all together into a single thread that cycles back to the beginning (see Table 2.2). This is the rim. The ideas in this rim provide a "table of contents" of the major ideas that will be developed in the subsequent chapters of this book.

Table 2.1 Defining Terms*Focal Construct*

Mass media—organizations that use technological channels to distribute messages for the purpose of creating and maintaining audiences.

Key Facets

Media organizations—entities that compete for talent and other resources so as to construct audiences by providing messages with high entertainment or informational value.

Media audiences—collections of individuals who are exposed to particular media messages; typically, an audience for a particular message is a niche (composed of a set of individuals sharing a key characteristic that is tied to the message).

Media content—messages that are developed using formulas to attract and hold the attention of the targeted audience members in a way to condition those audience members for repeat exposures.

Media effects—on an individual level, a media effect is any change in a human exposed to a media message. Change includes baseline alterations, fluctuations from the baseline, and reinforcing the baseline. On a macro level, a media effect is the change on a larger social structure such as culture or an institution.

Information—that which is sent from mass media organizations through the mass media channels to the audiences.

Media messages—the units of information.

Vehicle—that which delivers the media messages. For example, television is a medium, and programs (*Evening News*, *ER*, etc.) are the vehicles; newspaper is a medium and the *New York Times* is a vehicle.

Viewer-Defined Terms

Attractive

Bad/good

Consequences

Pain/harm

Successful/unsuccessful

Reward/punishment

Graphic/explicit

Hero/villain

Humorous

Justified

Negative/positive

Offensive

Real/fantasy

Table 2.2 Line of Thinking Defining the Rim

Mass media organizations are structures of people and other resources that perform aesthetic, sociological, and political functions. However, the most primary function is an economic one.

- Economic—at their foundation, all mass media organizations are economic, that is, they are primarily motivated to engage in resource exchanges to increase their value to their owners.
- Political—mass media organizations seek power to enhance their ability to control economic exchanges and keep the balance of power on their side in all negotiations.
- Sociological—mass media organizations structure the activities of people in certain ways so as to achieve their fundamental goal; they exhibit these values in the selection, training, and rewarding of individuals.
- Aesthetic—mass media organizations must construct messages of a certain type to attract and maintain audiences.

Mass media messages are tools constructed and used by mass media organizations to attract and maintain audiences.

- They attract and maintain audiences by maximizing the value of their messages.
- They maximize the value of their messages by increasing message benefits and decreasing message costs to potential audience members.
 - Benefit resources primarily include information (in the form of perceived satisfaction of increasing knowledge) and entertainment (in the form of emotional experiences), as well as the combination of the two.
 - Audience costs are the resources that individuals pay for the exposure to media messages. These costs are primarily money, time, and psychic energy.
- These messages follow certain narrative formulas that increase the probability that they will be successful in attracting and maintaining audiences.
 - When media messages are structured by simple, standard formulas, they are easier for audiences to follow, thus reducing the psychic costs for audience members.
 - However, designers of mass media content must also make small deviations from the storytelling formula, so as to generate surprise and suspense and thereby keep audiences interested in continuing with exposures.
 - Storytelling talent lies in knowing how to follow the standard formulas well enough to make processing simple for audiences AND at the same time knowing when (and how far) to deviate from the standard formulas to keep audiences intrigued.
- Each media message has a *narrative line*. This is the combination of elements in the message that signals to audience members how to make sense of that message. The narrative line contains elements about where the message is situated (in terms of genre, medium, vehicle, series, etc.), thus aiding audiences in matching meaning to those elements.

(Continued)

Table 2.2 (Continued)

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- Meaning resides in both the messages and the audience member's interpretation. Both are constantly in play, hence the crucial distinction between meaning matching and meaning construction.

Mass media audiences are constructions of individuals into continuing exposure groups.

- During media exposure, audiences are both passive and active depending on exposure state. There are four qualitatively different exposure states:
 - Attentional state—individuals are cognitively aware of the flow of messages and consciously make choices about continuing the flow, ending the flow, or switching to another flow of messages.
 - Automatic state—individuals are not consciously aware of the flow of messages; the messages exert their influence on the person through peripheral routes. This state is governed by automatic algorithms, which are learned procedures stored in a person's mind and that run automatically when a person is not actively interacting with media messages. These states have triggers that recognize certain elements in media messages that trigger a person into the attentional state.
 - Transported state—individuals are pulled so strongly into the experience of a message that they lose awareness of their real-world surroundings and time; their attention is fully consumed by the flow of media messages.
 - Self-reflexive state—individuals are in a state of hyperawareness of both the flow of media messages and their own processing of those media messages; they are highly analytical and evaluative about the flow of messages.
- Audience members continually make assessments of message value. Value is conceptualized here in economic terms as the comparison of the cost to the benefits obtained—again as perceived by audience members.
- Audience members are constantly assessing the meaning of media messages through the dual processes of meaning matching and meaning construction.
 - Meaning matching is a competency that requires the recognition of referents in media messages and matching them to learned denoted meaning in the memory of audience members.
 - Meaning construction involves the application of skills (such as analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, and synthesis) to create novel meanings.

Mass media effects are constantly occurring, although they might not manifest themselves.

- These effects can be manifest (observable in some way) or process (changes in the probabilities that a manifestation will occur).
 - These effects can manifest themselves as a behavior, a cognition, an attitude, a belief, an emotion, or something physiological.
 - These effects can be negative (harmful in some way to the individual), positive, or both.
 - These effects can be intentional or unintentional. Intention can be considered from two points of view: the mass media organizations and the individual audience member.
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- Mass media are constantly exerting an influence on individuals and macro units both directly and indirectly.
 - Media shape individuals' baselines.
 - Media can trigger fluctuations from baselines, and these sudden fluctuations can last for a short or long period.
 - Mass media are constantly exerting an influence on macro units, such as the public, society, institutions, and culture.
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Conclusion

In the next four parts of this book, I lay out the details of the general framework, according to the four facets of the mass media phenomenon: organizations, audiences, messages, and effects. The ideas I cite in these chapters come from the literatures; that is, they do not originate with me. My contribution lies in how I have organized those ideas. As I described in the Preface, I used a hermeneutic process in which I employed the skills of analysis, classification, evaluation, induction, deduction, and synthesis.

In each of the next four parts, I begin with a chapter introducing the line of thinking about that part of the mass media phenomenon, where I present the key ideas and define the major terms. The subsequent chapters in each part elaborate and extend those ideas.