

Lovesick teenagers in countries such as Pakistan and Iran sit in crowded cybercafes to socialize, flirt, and explore fantasies that could get them arrested if acted upon. But it all takes place online, largely anonymously, and is considered harmless if titillating fun by the teens and young adults.

The Internet may have opened up new communication channels for teens in socially restrictive cultures, but it has also opened the floodgates to mass communication from around the world. China suffered on the stage of global public opinion shortly before the Beijing Olympics when it renegeed on a promise to open access to the entire Internet for foreign journalists. China, like some other countries, bans various websites that are deemed harmful to the state or to the morals of the people.

Just as the Internet can be a socially liberating tool for interpersonal communication and simultaneously a politically liberating—or threatening—tool of mass communication, it can also be used to rapidly spread rumors and hate. “At its best, the Internet can educate more people faster than any media tool we’ve ever had,” wrote journalist Thomas Friedman. “At its worst, it can make people dumber faster than any media tool we’ve ever had.”<sup>1</sup> He cited the lie circulated over the Internet and widely believed in the Muslim world that four thousand Jews were warned not to go into the World Trade Center on September 11. The Internet’s aura of “technology” gives it unquestioned authority for many people while it provides a forum to meet others who share their views.

Mass media, computer networks, and telecommunications are converging to change the very definition and role of mass communication and the communications professions. This book is about understanding that convergence.



T

he media of mass communication have long played a fundamental role in people's lives. The media inform, persuade, entertain, and even sell. Media can provide companionship. They can shape perception. They are fundamental to an informed and educated public.

We will examine the nature of mass communication and how it is changing in the so-called digital age, the age of computerization of the media in a world connected by electronic networks. Far more than just a technological change, this change is cultural, social, and economic. Journalists, public relations professionals, advertising practitioners, and content creators, as well as media consumers, are facing a new world of media symbols, processes, and effects.

Few communications technologies better encapsulate the fundamental aspects of convergence than the telephone. The history and evolution of the telephone as a communications device touch on almost every important issue that we are dealing with today in terms of the Internet and digital media. Furthermore, the phone continues to be at the heart of some of the most innovative changes taking place in how we communicate with each other and how we interact with the world and with media.

## Telephony: Case Study in Convergence

Consider one aspect of the cell phone today—the fact that it is mobile. This mobility has important repercussions for a wide range of activities. First, we are no longer tied to a specific place when making or answering a phone call. The question “Are you at home now?” when calling someone on a land line does not make sense—of course they are home, otherwise they would not be able to answer the phone.

By being able to communicate anywhere and any time, you are able to coordinate with others in a much more fluid and spur-of-the-moment fashion than in the past. Prior to widespread use of cell phones, if you had a sudden change of plans (or change of heart) regarding a planned meeting with someone, you had very limited ways to let them know you would not show up. Coordinating meeting times and places among several people in a group took much more planning and did not allow for last-minute changes. Also consider how much more we talk on the phone when we have it with us than when we had to be in a certain place to use it. This makes us more likely to call someone and share information on the spot than if we had to wait to get home to make a phone call. However, it also can mean that we are less likely to interact with those around us as we talk to distant others.



## The Nature of “Intermass” Communication

Even before the Internet era, scholars were asking how mass media and interpersonal communication affected each other.<sup>2</sup> Where is the dividing line between interpersonal and mass communication in your media world?

1. Do you have a MySpace, Facebook, or other social-networking site page?
2. When did you create the page? Why?
3. How often do you update or add content to the page, and what prompts you to do so?
4. How would you feel if your professor or a potential employer visited your page?
5. Have you ever created a blog? What was it about?
6. Have you ever created a website? How many page views did it receive at its peak?
7. Have you ever responded to spam (unsolicited email advertising messages)?
8. Are you typically on the Internet when you watch TV, or do you use the Internet to find information on your favorite shows?
9. Do you typically text message or chat online with friends watching the same program?
10. Have you ever uploaded music or other content to file-sharing sites?

If you're like most college students, you will have done many if not most of these activities. This shows that the line between interpersonal and mass communication for you is a blurry one indeed. If you have created a page on a social-networking site, created a blog or website, or uploaded music to a file-sharing site, then you were essentially participating in mass communication, even if the reasons for doing any of these were profoundly personal or you only intended to share your site with friends.

Our familiarity with the phone belies its revolutionary character from a communications perspective. Before the phone, people could not talk directly to others whom they could not physically see. If there was an emergency, the only way to inform the proper authorities was to physically go to where they were and let them know. The phone played a major role in changing our patterns of communication with each other and thereby changing social relations. But it was the telegraph, not the telephone, that first revolutionized our speed of communication.

The telegraph was the first means of electronic communication, using a series of dots and dashes on a keypad to spell out words. This was a cumbersome way to communicate that took special training to code and decode messages, but at least information was transmitted much faster than it could be before. Entire industries were created out of this dramatic change in communication; the newswire services such as Reuters and Associated Press are examples.

Telephones adopted the principles discovered with telegraphy but allowed voice to be transmitted. Although Alexander Graham Bell is the inventor of record for the telephone in 1876, others were also working on how to transmit voice electronically through wires, and there is some evidence that Bell's invention may have borrowed liberally from existing patents by inventors trying to build similar devices. Still, after years of lawsuits, it was Bell who won out. This parallels the many

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suits and countersuits seen today as companies claim patent infringement on Internet or software inventions and technologies.

Regardless of who can claim credit for inventing the telephone, it was easier for the general public to use than the telegraph. Even so, it was not immediately thought of as an interpersonal communication device, largely because it was expensive and difficult to connect every single household to the telephone network. This parallels the “last mile” issue we see today regarding broadband, or high-speed, Internet connections coming directly into homes and touches on the importance of networks in our communication environment. It also highlights how new communications technologies often do not have “obvious” uses that seem apparent much later—how they may be used or adopted is very much an open question that relies not only on the technology itself but on a range of economic, social, and cultural issues at the time.

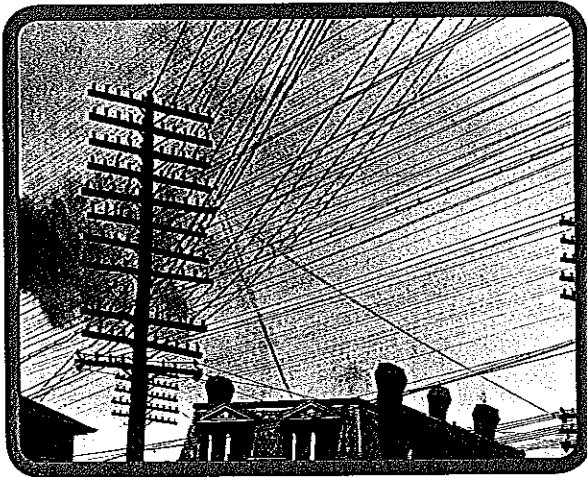
Despite the dramatic changes to communications the phone would bring, it was initially either ignored or thought of as simply a novelty when it was unveiled by Bell in 1876. Once some technological improvements were made, however, making it easier to hear and increasing the number of voices that could be carried on a single wire, the telephone became more widely accepted. The ring of the telephone was a death knell for most telegraph companies, just as later media technologies rendered earlier technologies from which they were built obsolete, changing entire industries.

Initially, especially in Europe, the telephone acted as a kind of early radio. Wealthy patrons paid a fee to listen to music performances that were sent along the wires, and some public venues would pipe in sermons or performances for their patrons.<sup>3</sup> For several years in Budapest, Hungary, Telefon Hírmondó delivered news over the telephone, with subscribers dialing in at certain times to listen to someone reading the news of the day. A similar service was also tried in 1911 in Newark, New Jersey, but only lasted for a few months before closing.

Delivering news over telephone wires therefore is not something new with the Internet, and it also shows how long before video recorders or TiVo were used that people recognized a desire for information and entertainment “on demand” by the public. What was still missing at that time was a business model that could support a business like telephone newspapers. This issue is commonly dealt with today by media companies that need to see a return on investments before they are willing to experiment with new ways of doing business.

Although the telegraph really was the first electronic network, the rise in popularity of the telephone made it a much more visible network for the general public, with masses of wires strung along telephone poles, cluttering the landscape. The decision whether to make the telephone a government-run agency or a private enterprise was an important crossroads, and the choices made in Europe (government) differed from those made in the United States (private enterprise). These choices had profound repercussions even into the twenty-first century that have influenced the development and perceptions of the control and use of the Internet. This shows how new technologies often inherit and carry with them the baggage of historical decisions made much earlier.

In the United States, local telephone companies also sold their own phones, which were often incompatible with other telephone systems. We see this issue



As the telephone network spread, telephone lines started to clutter the landscape.

today with the various IM services, most of which are not compatible with each other, and with problems between different browsers or computer operating systems.

In response, the U.S. government granted one company, AT&T, a monopoly on the telephone system. This too had important repercussions for later developments in telecommunications. Just as the monopoly telegraph company Western Union had done nearly a hundred years earlier when it became apparent the telephone was a threat to its business, AT&T tried to hamper the development of a new kind of network that would potentially hurt its business. The network that was needed for development of the Internet was not compatible with the system that AT&T used. Even though AT&T realized the new network was more efficient, the telephone company feared losing dominance and initially refused to adopt it.

Issues of government regulation and private enterprise, monopoly powers, and business interests at the expense of the public interest are still very much with us today. Regulations lobbied for by telecommunications companies and passed by lawmakers can have direct implications for what telephone services we get and what we can do (and pay for) with our cell phones today. How much we pay for services, what companies charge and how they set up payment plans, and a variety of other business decisions are influenced by the laws and regulations that have been created, sometimes as a result of industry lobbying efforts.

Just as payment amounts and methods may influence how we use the telephone, social and cultural factors play an equally important role in determining whether a technology is adopted. With almost any new technology, people do not know how to act or interact with it. There is a story that in the early days of the telephone a farmer came to town to place an order for supplies. The store clerk told him to place his order directly with the company over the phone, so the farmer dutifully wrote out his order, rolled it up carefully, and then jammed the rolled note into one of the holes of the phone handset and waited.

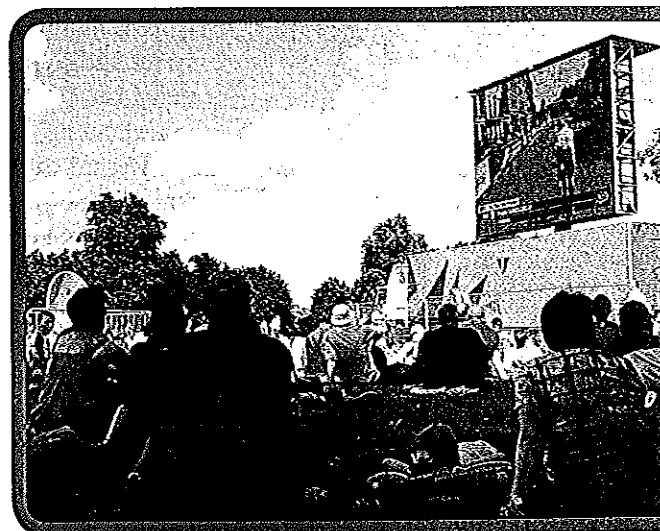
If this seems too silly to be true, consider your own reactions when you are given a friend's phone to use or have to use a remote control that you are not familiar with. The variety of functions seen in phones today stretches the very definition of "phone" compared to even twenty years ago. For young people today, it would seem odd to have a phone that does not take pictures or contain an address book or video games. This can be seen in some of the complaints about the Apple iPhone, which cannot show video.

In short, the phone is continuing to evolve as a multifunctional communications device that connects us to the world of information through the World Wide Web as well as to our friends. It provides an almost seamless interface between interpersonal and mass communication, as we access the Web from it to read reviews on a restaurant we pass by, and as we snap a photo while in the restaurant and upload it to the Web or even post our review on the spot, after which it can be seen potentially by millions of people.

All these aspects of the development and use of the phone, ranging from the technical, legal, and regulatory to the economic, social, and cultural, touch on the



Today's cell phones typically have a variety of functions that have nothing to do with traditional functions of the phone.



Mass communication often brings the public together, providing people shared topics of conversation, news about the world, and entertainment.



notion of media convergence. But as we will see, “convergence” is a debated concept and has multiple layers of meaning. We will start to unpack these layers and will define it to show how it encompasses some of the most dramatic transformations taking place in communications today.

## Three Types of Convergence

convergence

.....  
The coming together of  
computing, telecommunications,  
and media in a digital  
environment.

Although scholars still do not agree on an exact and complete definition of the word, convergence is known broadly as the coming together of computing, telecommunications, and media in a digital environment. It is important to study and understand convergence because what would seem like technology or media issues have had profound influences on our economic, social, and cultural lives.

The confusion and disagreements around the definition of the term indicate the far-reaching consequences of the changes taking place in mass communication today. Indeed, they speak to the fact that there are many forces changing in ways that we do not yet have adequate descriptions for, nor do we fully understand yet how these changes will affect us. For now, the term “convergence” seems to come closest to encompassing many of these forces.

We can look at three main categories of convergence as ways to frame our understanding of the changes taking place today in the media industries: technological convergence, economic convergence, and cultural convergence. As you will see, these three categories actually overlap in many respects.

### ■ ■ ■ TECHNOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE

Perhaps the most easily visible aspect of convergence is the rise of digital media and online communication networks. Technological convergence refers to specific types of media, such as print, audio, and video, all converging into a digital media form. Such types of convergence are becoming increasingly apparent in news organizations, for example, where today’s journalists often need to be able to tell stories in text, audio, video, and even interactive media.

Digital media often change the very nature of their traditional counterparts and affect how we use and perceive them. For example, although you can look at reading a book on Kindle as simply “print online,” the fact is that a Kindle book alters the reading experience. One obvious way is that because of its storage capacity you can easily carry many books in one device, allowing you to move back and forth between books or to cross-reference passages quickly. Furthermore, you are able to change the text size to make reading more comfortable for you, look up words with a built-in dictionary, annotate and index sections, and even purchase new books on the spot through a wireless Internet connection.

If most of these activities, such as looking up a word you don’t know in a dictionary, seem like things that exist already with printed books, that is because they are. The difference is that you can do these activities within a single device rather than carrying a separate dictionary with you, or permanently marking in a book, or having to go to a store or library to get another book by the same author. Activities that used to be separate or cumbersome are now easier and folded into the media experience. It is not simply a matter of convenience—these changes fundamentally alter how we interact with our media. We may be far more likely to look up a word in Kindle than if we had to walk to the shelf to get the dictionary, for example.

The music, television, and film industries, which we will look at in later chapters, provide other examples of how our media use changes thanks in part to changes in technology.

This form of convergence is very relevant today for communications professionals, but it is not the only way to think of convergence. The changes that come from new technologies also affect business models and established industries, which often see the upstarts as threats to their dominance. Sometimes, these upstarts become larger and more powerful than established companies; Google is a case in point. Because of the importance of networks in today's world, it is often advantageous for a company to control not only media content but the means of distributing that content through the networks, which is part of what economic convergence is about.

### ■■■ ECONOMIC CONVERGENCE

Economic convergence refers to the merging of Internet or telecommunications companies with traditional media companies, such as AOL with Time Warner. Traditional media companies have grown fewer and much larger in the past fifty years, and this process is also sometimes called convergence. This, however, would be better defined as consolidation, or the process of large companies merging with each other or absorbing other companies, forming even bigger companies.

An aspect of this process of consolidation does include economic convergence. Entertainment companies may own news stations; large corporations traditionally outside of the media business, such as GE, may purchase media companies like NBC. This can result in conflicts of interest when corporate parents don't want some aspects of their businesses covered in the news or when a news outlet gives prominent coverage to a movie coming out that happens to be from the studio also owned by the corporate parent. The latter occurred in 2000, when *Time* magazine made a cover story out of Stanley Kubrick's last movie, *Eyes Wide Shut*, starring Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, which also got prominent play on other Time Warner media news outlets such as CNN's *Larry King Live*. The movie was from Warner Brothers studios.

Economic convergence also has important repercussions for the nature of the media, telecommunications, and computing industries. A telecommunications company that also owns a media company can bolster the user experience for its own content at the expense of content from other companies by doing something as simple as speeding up transmission of its content and slowing that of other content. It could also control the type of content its customers see by blocking material from certain websites.

This is not happening because of the Internet, as there are many historical examples of media owners censoring content that they did not like or did not agree with for one reason or another. But what makes this issue bigger and more prominent is the combination of consolidated media giants and ever bigger audiences. In other words, more people may have fewer real choices than ever before, despite the explosion of channels and media content.

But it is part of the nature of interactive media and the Internet to break down some of these traditional barriers between media producers and the audience, and audiences today potentially have more power than ever before. A kind of cultural shift is taking place, still in fits and starts, in which the relationship between the audience or public and media producers is changing.

consolidation  
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The process of large companies  
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# CONVERGENCE CONTEXT

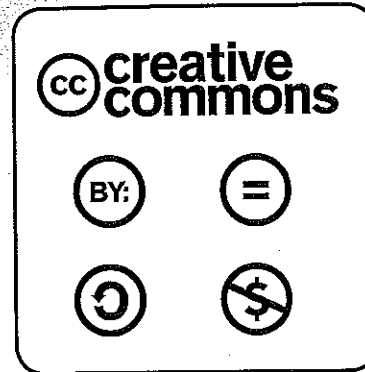
## User-Generated Content: Creativity or Piracy?

**W**ith the ease of copying and altering digital content, almost anyone can take media content and make it into something different. Two or three popular songs from different artists can be combined and made into a new song; an artist's paintings can be manipulated digitally and mixed with one's own work.

Is this kind of content creation original art or is it copyright infringement, since it relies on preexisting art owned by someone else?

Some make arguments that almost any creative work has been influenced by previous works encountered by the artist and that digital content simply makes it easier to make "mash-ups" of content. They argue that notions of copyright—essentially a government-granted monopoly to the content creator (or owner of the copyright, as is often the case with recording labels where the artists don't own the copyright)—is anachronistic in the digital age and increasingly stifles creativity through steep licensing or copyright fees. Copyright reduces the amount of creative material in the public domain, thus reducing the pool of works freely available.

However, copyright is still a cornerstone of media industries and a fundamental way in which media companies gener-



ate revenues. It is hard for most media industries, especially in entertainment, to envision a world with no copyright that would still allow them to create the kind of content they do.

Creative Commons has made a range of "copyleft" contracts for content creators that help ensure creative works remain in the public domain. Under the various contracts, content creators allow their content to be used by anyone for free, but they may make certain stipulations, such as that they must be credited or that the content can only be used if it isn't sold. One common stipulation within the community, however, is that people using the content must allow it to remain free for public use.

**Web Link >>>**  
Creative Commons  
[www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org)

### ■ ■ ■ CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

The term "culture" is often a loaded word, and its definition is even harder to pin down than the term "convergence." The notion of culture can refer to anything from a long-standing tradition or heritage shared by a group of people to a specific professional group's particular way of seeing the world or behaving—as with, for example, "newsroom culture."

Here we will refer to culture as something that characterizes the practices, beliefs, and values that interact with and influence each other in creating a shared worldview, or way of understanding the world, among a group of people.

From this definition, one aspect of cultural convergence comes from the process of globalization of media content. Cultural convergence occurs, for example, when an HBO series like *Sex and the City* becomes wildly popular among female office workers in Thailand, or when a Mexican telenovela, or soap opera, gets high ratings among audiences in Russia. The popularity of such shows across a



variety of cultures demonstrates that there is some aspect to them that foreign audiences identify with or aspire to and indicates that there may be more in common between a young professional in Bangkok and one in New York City than would first appear.

But we can also look at cultural convergence from the perspective of how we consume, create, and distribute media content. The shift from a largely passive and silent audience that consumes media produced by large-scale media companies to an audience with nearly equal ability to produce and distribute its own content is one of the major themes of this book and a crucial aspect of cultural convergence.

A central premise of this kind of convergence is that although there will continue to be “mass communication,” in the sense that media companies and others will continue to produce messages for large audiences, frequently audiences may receive messages tailored to each individual, and audiences are empowered to become much more active in their engagement with communication than they have been. Furthermore, what was traditionally considered interpersonal communication, such as an email, can be distributed through online networks in the same way that mass communication can, making the dividing line between interpersonal and mass communication increasingly hard to distinguish.

Whether audiences will become more active in media production or not remains open to debate, although there are many examples throughout the book that substantiate this trend.

## Convergence and Communications

In this book we will focus on aspects of convergence and how it relates specifically to media or mass communication, only touching on some of the larger issues around culture, media economics, and technological changes, which are beyond the scope of this book.

It is clear that the changes brought about by convergence, however one defines it, have dramatic implications. Within the larger framework of the three types of convergence we see, these implications fall into five areas:

1. The content of communication
2. The audience and communications organizations
3. The structure of communications organizations
4. How communications professionals do their work
5. The global audience

These five implications are recurrent themes throughout this book.

### ■■■ CONVERGENCE AND CONTENT

Stories told in a digital, online medium can make connections with other types of content much more easily than in any other medium. This is done primarily through the use of **hyperlinks**, or clickable pointers to other online content. For example, advertisements in a digital, online environment permit visitors to click on interactive ads or even images of products that can be purchased directly online. Or, in entertainment programming, hyperlinked content allows a viewer to explore a story in a nonlinear narrative, where the outcome of a story may be unchanged, but the path to get there is determined by the links the user chooses to click.

hyperlink  
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clickable pointer to other  
online content.

#### digitization

The process in which media is made into computer-readable form.

Moreover, it is increasingly possible to obtain content on demand. In the traditional media world, news, entertainment, and marketing information was broadcast or published on a schedule solely determined by the publisher or broadcaster. Children growing up in an on-demand media world of YouTube, podcasting, and TiVo may quickly become frustrated with traditional radio or television, where they cannot control what they watch or listen to, or how many times.

**Digitization** is transforming both how and when media organizations distribute their content. They no longer distribute content solely through traditional channels but instead deliver it via the Internet, satellite, and a host of other digital technologies. They are increasingly making that content available twenty-four hours a day, with news organizations updating the news almost continuously, and to a worldwide audience.

The production cycle and process is similarly being transformed by digital technology. In fact, the transformation may be even deeper in terms of media-content production. Whether in Hollywood motion pictures, television shows or news, books, magazines, newspapers, or online, the process of producing media content is rapidly becoming almost entirely digital. Movies are shot using digital cameras and edited on computers. Reporters working for television, radio, newspapers, or any other news operation capture their raw material with digital devices as well, editing their stories digitally. Even book authors typically write on a computer, with words increasingly remaining digital throughout the entire production process.



Digital technology has allowed more people to create professional-quality videos and other media content.

#### ■ ■ ■ CONVERGENCE AND THE AUDIENCE

Mass communication was largely one-way, from the source of a message to the receiver, or audience. The audience was relatively large, heterogeneous, and anonymous. Audience members had relatively few means by which to communicate either with each other on a mass scale or with the creators and publishers. Audiences in the age of convergence can communicate via email, online forums, and other interactive media more easily and quickly with each other and with those who create and publish mass-communication content. In addition, they can create the content themselves and reach far larger audiences for much lower costs than they could have with traditional media. They are generally not anonymous, as they can be tracked through user names or IP addresses.

Mass-communication organizations can keep detailed and automatically updated records on their audiences by tracking their paths within their websites through intelligent software agents and programs known as cookies. Cookies allow a website to recognize when a previous user returns and to offer personalized content. Cookies provide invaluable information for media organizations to better understand an audience's media behaviors, preferences, and habits.

Of course, the same ability that media companies have to track users is shared by any website creator with cheap or free tools. Surveillance is an increasingly powerful tool that is necessary to optimize content and to give advertisers a high

#### cookie

Information that a website puts on a user's local hard drive so that it can recognize when that computer accesses the website again. Cookies are what allow for conveniences like password recognition and personalization.

# CONVERGENCE CULTURE

## Mapping Sex Offenders

The role of surveillance in our society becomes especially important when the public has easy access to data that used to be stored only in institutions. It strikes close to home when there are sites that let users type in an address or zip code and see on a map where registered sex offenders live and work. Such sites include not only the addresses of the offenders but their pictures and information such as offense, year released from prison, and

personal attributes like height, weight, and identifying marks. Users can sign up to receive email alerts when a sex offender registers or changes address in their neighborhood.

Such sites have been lauded by parents groups

and child-safety organizations, yet they also raise some thorny ethical questions regarding rights of privacy and the potential for vigilante justice. One such case occurred in Evansville, Indiana, in early 2008 when would-be vigilantes tried to burn down the house of a registered sex offender—except they set fire to the wrong house.

Cases like this one reveal the power of personalized and localized information in surveillance when combined with easy access.

**Web Link >>>**  
*Family Watchdog*  
[www.familywatchdog.us](http://www.familywatchdog.us)

**Web Link >>>**  
*Vision 20/20*  
[www.thevision2020.com](http://www.thevision2020.com)



return on their investment. But of even more importance is how audiences are able to communicate with each other, largely circumventing the traditional media channels and in some cases even challenging them in terms of popularity and ability to reach an audience.

### Distribution Alters the Balance of Power

Digital media make it easier than ever for the public to create and distribute media content, whether it is an original drawing done using illustration software, an animation or video, or a song sampled and mixed from current hits by famous recording artists. Writing and music have led the way in media consumers creating content—especially music, where remixes of previously recorded (and copyrighted) material are common.

Audiences are increasingly active in their communication with each other and with the creators of mass-communication content. This gives them much greater

#### viral marketing

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Spreading news and information about media content through word of mouth, usually via online discussion groups, chats, and emails, without utilizing traditional advertising and marketing methods.

#### peer-to-peer (P2P)

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A computer communications model in which all users have equal abilities to store, send, and accept communications from other users.

control over what media they consume and shifts some of the power away from media organizations. Through **viral marketing**, or the online equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising, a popular website, product, or piece of content can potentially reach millions of online users in a very short time, all without corporate promotion or advertising dollars. The success of **peer-to-peer** (or P2P) file-sharing programs shows how an Internet audience shifts the balance of power away from media organizations, even though those organizations created and provided that content in the first place.

Audiences aren't willing to wait for the evening news or the next day's paper for developments in a breaking story. Audiences can get their information and entertainment from literally thousands of sources around the world. Audiences aren't content to sit back and listen in silence to what the media report; they actively seek the most recent information through blogs, instant messaging, and other informal communication channels. There have been cases of employees finding news of their company's planned layoffs through certain websites hours before the company officially announced the layoffs.

#### Audience Fragmentation and *The Daily Me*

These changes are not without some dangers, however. Actively choosing the media you want to see, hear, or read can narrow the scope of news items or entertainment that you may encounter by accident, that unintentionally inform or entertain. Former MIT Media Lab director, the late Michael Dertouzos, called the specialization of news to one's specific interests "The Daily Me." This phenomenon could fragment audiences into small groups of like-minded individuals who do not interact with other groups or with society as a whole and choose to receive only the news and information that reinforce their beliefs and values. Media fragmentation has already been a trend in analog media, and digital media can easily accelerate that trend. Cass Sunstein, law scholar and author of *Republic.com* and *Infotopia*, voices similar concerns over the social effects in a democratic society when media audiences become increasingly fragmented and stop discussing social and political issues of common public interest. However, personalization and localization of news does have benefits in potentially getting the public to become more engaged in news and in helping people become better informed about current events.

Giving the audience a chance to talk back and interact with journalists, as well as provide news coverage themselves, is another important development in keeping journalists accountable. A mistake in a story can be publicly countered or corrected in the discussion section of the story and, if shown to be correct, can then be incorporated in a revised version. These trends may help slow or even reverse the steady decline in credibility suffered by U.S. news organizations during the past quarter century, though it has yet to be seen. This is just one example of how the nature of the relationship between audiences and media organizations is changing in a world of converged media.

### ■■■ CONVERGENCE AND COMMUNICATIONS ORGANIZATIONS

In the preconverged world, centralized media organizations created and published or broadcast content on predetermined schedules. A newspaper was printed and distributed within a certain period of time; a television broadcast appeared within a given time slot. "Centralized" media organizations are ones where content produc-

tion and distribution, as well as marketing and other functions, are controlled by a central unit or individual. Internet-based media can be less centralized. Many divisions may determine the design or content of individual web pages of a website. Web-based media are certainly not exempt from the economic consolidation of all mass media, but the nature of the Web permits more flexibility and adaptability in publishing or webcasting content.

Although there are many public service media, most media companies throughout the world try to make a profit. Many media companies are among the most profitable private enterprises in the world, with average profit margins often in excess of 20 percent a year—double the average for other industries.

Concentration of media ownership, or consolidation, has been a growing trend, and the same process is taking place in the digital media world. Convergence is in some ways fuelling media consolidation by leading traditional media giants such as Time Warner to join with an online colossus such as America Online, giving rise in 2001 to the short-lived AOL Time Warner, which later jettisoned AOL as a separate unit and reverted once again to Time Warner after plummeting stock prices and executive shake-ups.

However, the trend is clear; analog and digital media are rapidly being consolidated into the hands of a few, very large, very powerful and very rich owners, an economic structure referred to as an **oligopoly**. These media enterprises today are increasingly likely to be part of large, global media organizations publicly owned and accountable to shareholders whose main interest is the financial bottom line. The problem of centralized control of access and content can become especially acute as traditional telecommunications companies, such as Verizon or Comcast, which serve as main Internet service providers, partner with or are part of a media company that has a vested interest in promoting its specific content over that of rival media companies.

This practice has greater implications than simply the kind of media content that audiences may receive; it can fundamentally alter the types of jobs that communications professionals may do and even the standards of those professions.

## ■■■ CONVERGENCE AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

With all the changes brought to mass communication because of convergence, it is obvious that the way communications professionals do their jobs will also change. Just as print, video, and audio become absorbed as types of digital media, so the divisions will disappear between print and electronic journalists and between advertising and public relations professionals. Newsrooms increasingly expect reporters to know how to use video and audio to tell stories as well as to write effectively. Advertising and public relations professionals will have to learn how to best attract the attention of a public that encounters ever more media and in which the public is more active than in the past.

Just what constitutes a television or radio receiver, or TV or radio programming, is in a state of flux. Once it was simple. Radio programming was what a listener heard on a radio. Today, however, there are radio stations that transmit their programming via the Internet and listeners tune in via their computer. Moreover, these radio stations can include images, graphics, text, and video. For example, some Voice of America radio reporters have been trained in digital video shooting and editing and can now be “VJs,” or video journalists, webcasting their stories visually as well as through audio. With little more than a small digital video camera

### oligopoly

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An economic structure in which a few, very large, very powerful and very rich owners control an industry or collection of related industries.

## Olympic Mascots of the Apocalypse

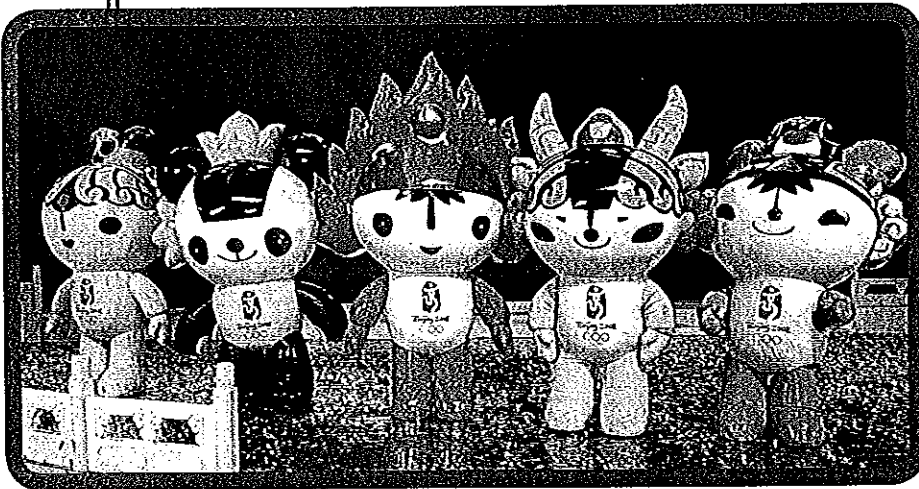
**L**ike other countries that have hosted the Olympics, China created cutesy Olympic mascots amid much fanfare and media hype about what the mascots were supposed to symbolize. It is also no surprise that such mascots lend themselves well to being marketed as stuffed dolls, key chains, and other memorabilia.

However, the five Fuwa, or "good-luck dolls," created for the 2008 Beijing Olympics became seen as harbingers of bad luck after a series of unfortunate accidents. This change in perception by the Chinese public was largely because of the enhanced power of Chinese citizens to communicate directly with each other through blogs, chat rooms, and mobile phones, free of state-run mass media outlets that stick to the party line and are careful about presenting anything that would put the government in a bad light.

An earthquake in Sichuan Province earlier in the summer that killed approximately seventy thousand people was connected to the panda Jing Jing, as Sichuan is where pandas come from. Earlier in the year, extensive flooding was pinned on Bei Bei, the fish. Protests in Tibet that were suppressed harshly were associated with Ying Ying, the Tibetan antelope, and the various protests worldwide during the torch relay were blamed on Huan Huan, the fiery red mascot. A swarm of locusts coming from Inner Mongolia and heading to Beijing was enough to convince many Chinese that Ni Ni, the flying mascot, completed the curse.

The government ordered state-run media to not report on the topic or refer to any "Fuwa" curses, but with so many communication channels open to the people now, it was impossible to

suppress such beliefs. The implications of this change in communications dynamics goes far beyond any supposed curse regarding Olympic dolls; it could have repercussions for the Chinese government if dissatisfied citizens used these same communication tools to challenge government authority or to criticize government policies.



and a laptop computer with video-editing software, journalists can now shoot, edit, and produce a professional-quality news-video segment.

But in order to take advantage of digital media, new skills will have to be learned and it will be more important than ever that the fundamental principles and ethics of each profession are not abandoned in the march toward the digital environment. As noted above, this is no easy order given the pressure by corporate parents to blur the lines between news and entertainment, or news and promotion.

**INTERNATIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES**



## ■ ■ ■ CONVERGENCE AND GLOBAL MEDIA

Content is much more fluid, dynamic, and rapidly transmitted throughout the globe in an online environment. However, this is not without its dangers, as events in distant places can have far-reaching repercussions to others because of the reach of global media and instantaneous communications. False rumors about companies or company leaders, such as the email in late 2008 that falsely claimed that Steve Jobs had had a heart attack and that sent Apple's shares down for much of the trading day, demonstrate the power and danger of rapid global communication.

The Internet enables audiences around the world to participate in a global dialog about the world's events and issues and can bring individuals into direct contact with each other though they are separated by thousands of miles and political and cultural boundaries. It is not clear what the net effect of this sea change in communication will be, but it is clear the foundation is being laid for a more connected and engaged global public. However, this does not mean that increased connectivity and engagement among people will naturally lead to rational discussions or debates. It is likely the opposite will occur as people from different cultures discover that what they take as cultural "common sense" may be considered heresy by someone else. Consider the amount of vitriol seen in many discussion groups even among people who are from the same culture but who have differing opinions.

Global economic, political, and cultural influences also are reshaping media, just as they have ever since Gutenberg printed his first Bible in 1455. Governments, both domestic and international, regulate most media in an attempt to shape or control them or their content. This is true whether in the analog or digital worlds of media. Broadcast media have traditionally been subject to extensive government regulation, whereas print media in the United States have been relatively free of government regulation, with strong legal independence established in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Yet, in the digital, online realm, even "print" media organizations could become subject to greater government regulation, whether in the United States or internationally. As newspapers move from the analog to the digital world and their products reach a global audience, they are finding themselves increasingly subject to international rules, regulations, and restrictions foreign governments place upon the Internet. Libel and obscenity laws differ widely between countries, raising the question of whose version of libel should be used when an article published on the Internet libels someone according to that person's local laws. Likewise, should Internet communication be considered under telephone regulations, since many people access it through telephone lines, or regulated according to the cable industry, since it is also available through cable modems? These are just some examples in which digital technology and convergence has sped ahead of our current legal framework.

So far we have discussed how convergence has been changing the media industries and their business models, the issues communications professionals have faced that are brought by new technologies, the nature of the relationship between media producers and audiences, and legal matters that have yet to be addressed. You have gotten a glimpse of the powerful transformations taking place today in mass communications and the media and will see even more examples in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

But before we can move forward we have to take a step back and look at what mass communication itself is and even how media scholars theorize how communication works. We will then be able to use these foundations to better understand the changes taking place today.

### libel

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A type of defamation that is written and published, such as a false attack on a person's character, which damages a person's reputation.