

Theory and Research in Mass Communication

By Jennings Bryant and Dorina Miron

Writing about the state of the art of mass communication theory and research evokes vivid images of those unfortunate on-site reporters for The Weather Channel who get stuck doing stand-up live shows right after the hurricane has subsided, or the snow has stopped, or the funnel cloud has disappeared, which, of course, always happens the very moment the director switches to the remote feed. What habitually results is beleaguered and bediggled reporters who look and sound like blithering idiots trying to describe and explain something that no longer exists. Like volatile stormy weather, at some level changes in mass communication theory and research occur almost too rapidly and unpredictably for even the best-intentioned reporters to chronicle and explain accurately.

Some very good reasons for these challenges to precise descriptions and explanations of mass communication exist, and many of them are tied to changes in the media that contribute content and context to the processes, effects, systems, and institutions we study: For example, (a) all of the media of mass communication are undergoing dramatic changes in form, content, and substance (e.g., Levins, 1997), which are explained only partially by the notion of convergence; (b) newer forms of interactive media, such as the Internet, are altering the traditional mass communication model from that of communication of one-to-many to communication of many-to-many (Li, 1998); (c) media ownership patterns are shifting dramatically and sometimes ruthlessly in ways that tend to disregard the entertainment, informational, educational, political, and social needs of consumers and that potentially cause major problems for their host societies (e.g., McChesney, 2004); (d) the viewing patterns and habits of audiences worldwide are changing so rapidly as to be almost mercurial (e.g., consider the transition from children's bedrooms to children's media rooms; Rideout, Foehr, Roberts, & Brodie, 1999); (e) the very nature of the primary unit in which most media consumption takes place—the family—is undergoing remarkable changes in its own right that mark-

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Mass Communication Research And Theory

Liyong Dong



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