

# MASS COMMUNICATIONS: "NARROWCASTING" AND PLURALISM

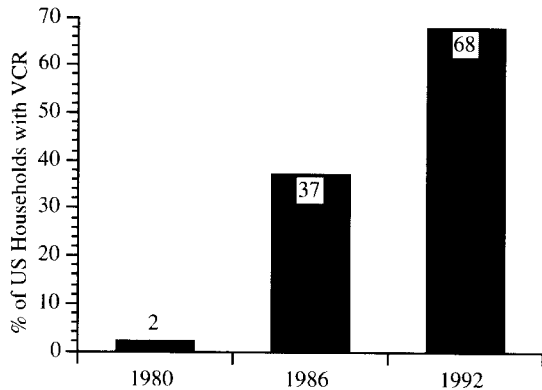
**Editor's Note:** As recently as a quarter century ago, many students of American mass culture and communications assumed that concentrating resources and expanding audience reach represented the future as it had the immediate past. By the 1960s the US had fully entered the age of television, and TV seemed to encapsulate these conditions. The big three television networks dominated the scene, together claiming 95 of every 100 viewers, reaching audiences of unprecedented size, and generating massive revenue.

Today, things look very different, of course. We now look back on a quarter century when the great instruments of mass communication have been evolving rapidly in ways which make audiences more fragmented and specialized and mass cultural products more numerous and diverse. In television, this is the age of cable and VCRs—developments which have enormously increased viewers' choices. The big three networks have seen their audience shares plummet. "Narrowcasting" is the big story in radio—as proliferating stations target highly segmented listening audiences.

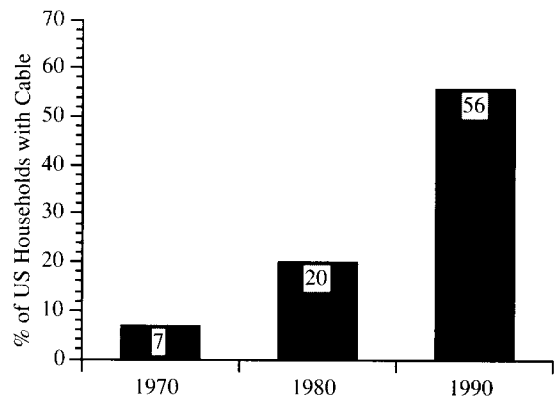
The computer has revolutionized publishing, encouraging a vast expansion of the number of magazines, journals, and newsletters. Some magazines of general interest, such as Reader's Digest and National Geographic, still reach very large and heterogeneous audiences, but most of the growth and action is in the area of magazines and newsletters of special interest. A friend likes to sum up this development by joking that we have gone from "Life" to "People," then on to "Us," and now to "Self."

**Cont.**

## More Households with VCRs and Cable

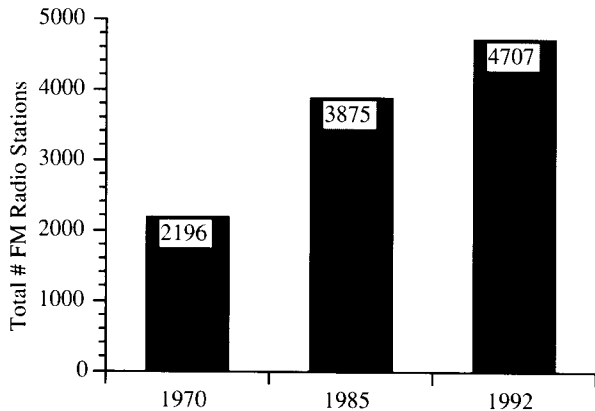


**Source:** Surveys by the Roper Organization, July 7-13, 1980; September 20-27, 1986; and February 2-22, 1992.

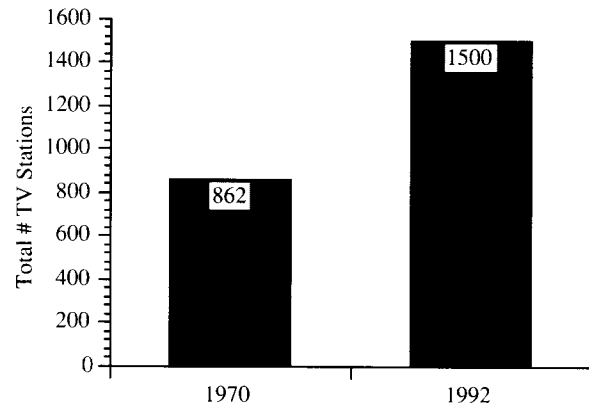


**Source:** Television Bureau of Advertising, *Trends in Television*, annual.

## More Radio and TV Stations



**Source:** Radio Advertising Bureau, *Radio Facts*.



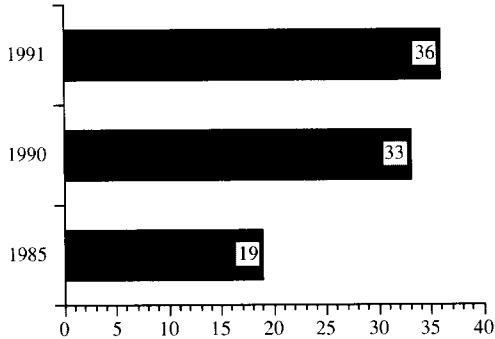
**Source:** Television Bureau of Advertising, *Trends in Television*, 1992.

It's not easy to know what to make of these vast changes. The nation's total mass cultural product is clearly more pluralistic. Mass communication is being increasingly democratized—in the sense that after a long period when the players got bigger and bigger, it's now possible for very small players to get in and flourish. At the same time, as historian Paul Jerome Croce points out in the accompanying article, there is a danger of our breaking into many self-contained communications and cultural worlds, each growing increasingly remote and isolated one from the others.

However we assess these developments, it's evident that advances in technology are contributing to a vastly expanding individualism and individualization in mass communication and mass culture. And, this progression has by no means yet run its course.

—ECL—

## Number of Channels Available to Average Viewer Has Doubled in the Last Six Years



Source: Nielson Media Research, *Television Audience 1991*.

## The Prime Time TV Audience is Increasingly Fragmented

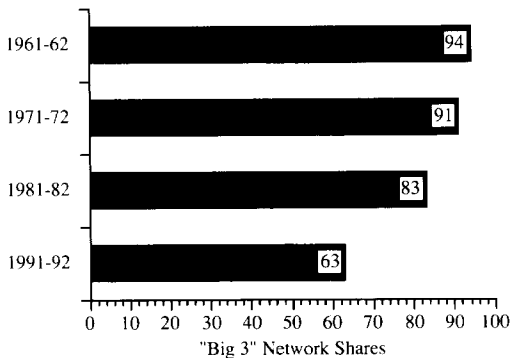
(Number of Households Viewing Each Broadcast and Cable Network, Prime Time Averages, September 16, 1992-August 23, 1992)

Source: Nielson Media Research. These data were made available through the courtesy of NBC. **Note:** In addition to the above 16 broadcast and cable networks, the following received significant (at least 100,000 households) audiences: Family Channel, Nickelodeon, Discovery, Arts & Entertainment, Disney, Headline News, Black Entertainment, Weather Channel, FNN, and VH-1. Approximately 130 others together were viewed by roughly 2.7 million households, prime time average.

### Network

### # Households (in thousands)

CBS	11,328
NBC	10,776
ABC	10,223
Fox	6,908
IND (Independents)	4,881
PBS	1,934
HBO	1,474
USA	1,382
TBS (Turner Broadcasting System)	1,289
ESPN	1,197
TNT	1,013
CNN	665
LIF (Lifetime)	553
SHO (Showtime)	553
CMX (Cinemax)	461
MTV	368



## And Network Audience Shares Plummet

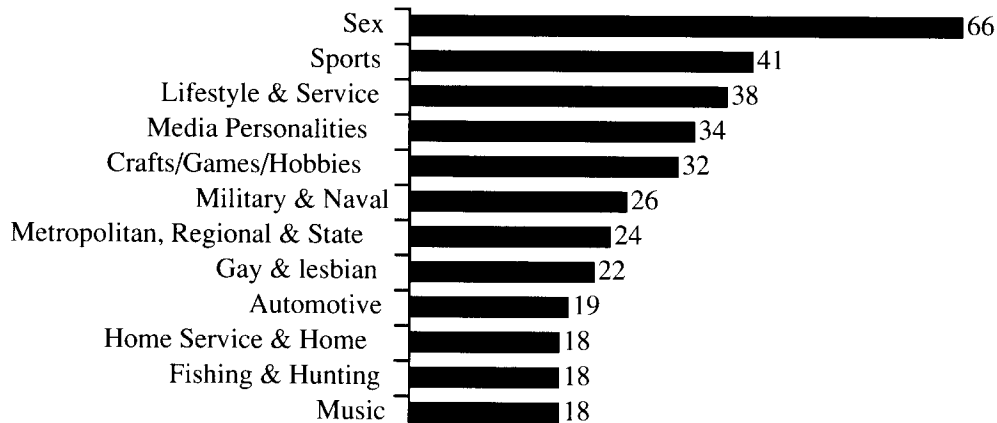
Source: Nielson Media Research, figures for traditional seasons.

Note: The data shown represent the average prime-time shares of the TV viewing audience received by the three major networks (CBS, NBC, ABC) in the four viewing seasons shown.

## Magazines Proliferate and Become Increasingly of the "Special Interest" Variety

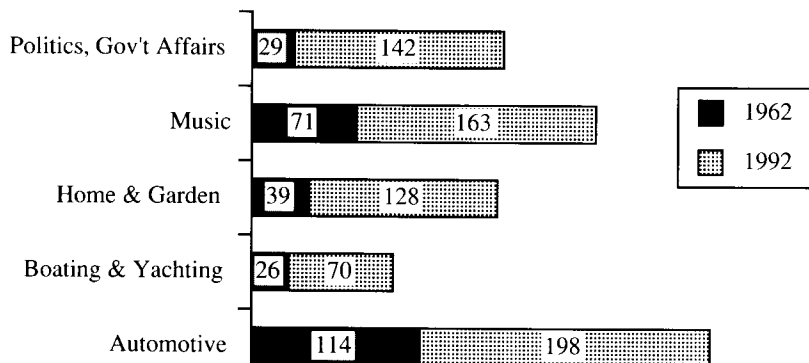
**541 New Consumer  
Magazines Established  
in 1991 Alone**

### Subject Areas Where Most New Magazines Were Established in 1991



Source: *The Magazine Handbook*, No. 64, 1992-93.

### Growth of Magazines, in Selected Areas, 1962 and 1992



Source: *N.W. Ayer & Son's Directory: Newspapers and Periodicals*, 1962; and *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, 1992.