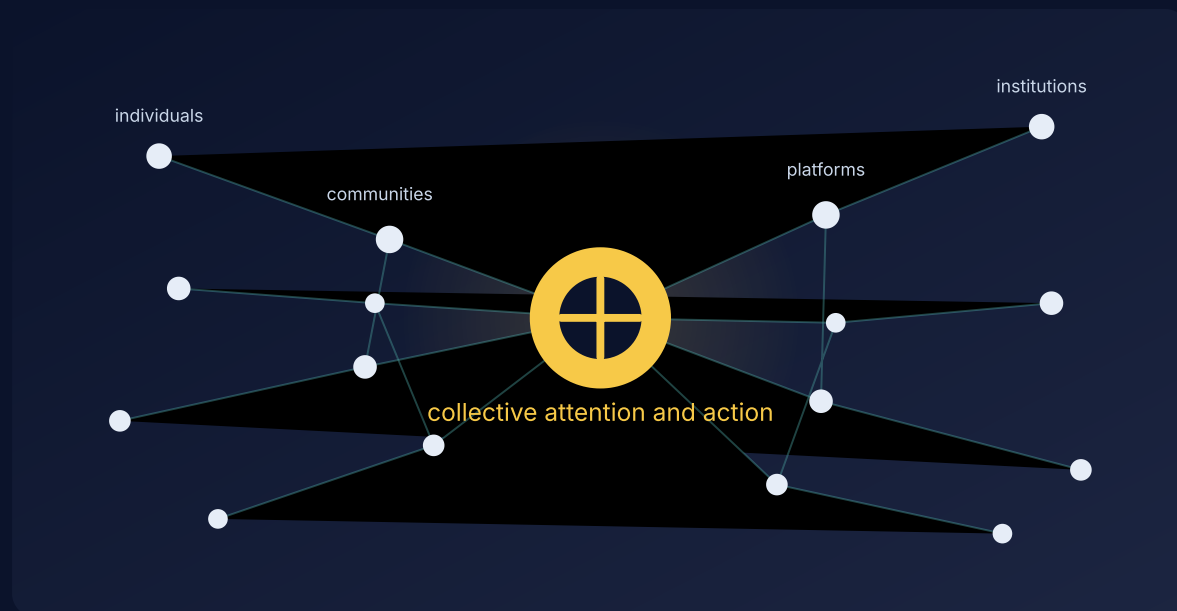


A SYSTEMATIC GUIDE TO MODERN COLLECTIVE LIFE

THE MASS

Society, Psychology, Media, Power, Culture, Markets, and Digital Networks



The mass is neither merely a crowd nor merely a number. It is a historically produced relationship among people, emotions, organizations, media systems, economic conditions, narratives, and power.

The American Newspaper <https://americannewspaper.org>

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Scope and analytical position

This report treats "the mass" as a variable social formation rather than a permanent type of irrational person. A mass can be dispersed or physically assembled, passive or active, manipulated or self-organizing, destructive or constructive. Its qualities depend on the structure of communication, the distribution of resources, the credibility of institutions, the availability of organization, the intensity of emotion, and the possibility of correcting error.

The central argument is conditional. Individuals are more likely to surrender independent judgment when they face uncertainty, emotional arousal, informational monopoly, identity threat, social sanctions, time pressure, and unaccountable leadership. Collective judgment improves when participants possess diverse information, relative independence, decentralized knowledge, fair procedures, reliable aggregation, and institutional mechanisms for criticism and revision.

Contents

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Conceptual definitions | 2. Historical formation |
| 3. Major theorists | 4. Mass psychology |
| 5. The mass and political power | 6. Media and propaganda |
| 7. Mass culture and consumption | 8. The digital mass |
| 9. Elites and the mass | 10. Case studies |
| 11. MASS-10 framework | 12. Comprehensive assessment |

Method. The report combines conceptual history, classical social theory, social psychology, media theory, political economy, and comparative case analysis. Contemporary cases are used as diagnostic illustrations, not as partisan endorsements or moral equivalences.

01

Conceptual definitions

What is a mass, and what is it not?

Definition. In the broadest sense, a mass is a large aggregation of persons treated as a collective. In the stronger sociological sense, it is a population of relatively dispersed individuals who are weakly connected to one another yet oriented toward common objects, messages, symbols, identities, events, or institutions. They can act in parallel without direct face-to-face coordination because communication systems, organizations, markets, and political structures connect them.

The word derives through French *masse* and Latin *massa*, originally referring to a lump, bulk, or undifferentiated body. That material metaphor entered social and political vocabulary: many separate persons appear as one body when viewed from the standpoint of rulers, administrators, media producers, parties, firms, or intellectuals. The metaphor is analytically useful but dangerous because it can erase internal differences of class, race, gender, region, education, ideology, and motivation.

Two meanings that must be kept separate

Numerical meaning: a great many people, considered in aggregate.

Structural meaning: a modern social formation created by large-scale institutions that standardize experience, connect strangers, distribute common messages, and make populations governable, measurable, mobilizable, and marketable.

1.1 Comparison with neighboring concepts

Concept	Core meaning	Distinguishing feature	Typical example
Mass	Large, often dispersed population oriented to common stimuli or institutions	Weak direct ties; mediated connection; scale; potential standardization	A national television audience, a consumer market, an online political wave
Crowd	People physically co-present in a bounded place	Mutual visibility, immediate interaction, short time horizon	A rally, panic, festival, queue, riot
Public	Persons discussing or attending to a common issue	Issue orientation, communication, possible deliberation	A public debating monetary policy or school reform
People	A political or cultural collective imagined as a whole	Can mean demos, common people, or ethnocultural community	"We the People"; the people against a ruling bloc
Citizens	Persons with formal membership and rights in a polity	Legal status, duties, claims, participation	Voters, jurors, rights-bearing residents
Nation	An imagined political-cultural community linked to territory and history	Shared symbols, memory, institutions, sovereignty claims	The French nation, the Korean nation
Populace	The population or common inhabitants of a place	Descriptive and often status-neutral or lower-status connotation	The urban populace
Majority	A numerical relation in which one side exceeds half or exceeds others	Counting rule, not a psychological or social form	Electoral majority, survey majority
Public opinion	The measured, expressed, or inferred distribution of views	Attitudes about issues; often mediated by polls and discourse	Approval ratings, issue preferences
Consumers	Persons positioned as buyers or users of goods and services	Market role, purchasing power, segmentation	Smartphone buyers, subscribers

Concept	Core meaning	Distinguishing feature	Typical example
Audience / spectators	Persons attending to a performance or message	Reception role; can be active interpreters and participants	Film viewers, sports fans, podcast listeners

These categories overlap. A crowd at a campaign rally can be part of a national mass electorate; citizens can become audiences; a consumer segment can become a boycott movement; a public can crystallize into an organized association. The important question is not which label is absolutely correct, but which relational properties are present: co-presence, communication, legal status, common identity, organization, deliberation, measurement, and capacity for action.

1.2 Aggregation versus social formation

The aggregation view begins with methodological individualism: a mass is the sum of many individual choices. Polls, ratings, market demand, election returns, and click counts appear as aggregate outcomes. This view is indispensable for measurement, but it can hide the processes that make preferences possible in the first place.

The structural-formation view asks how institutions produce common horizons of attention. Industrial employment synchronizes time; cities concentrate strangers; schools standardize language and civic knowledge; censuses and statistics make populations legible; national markets standardize goods; newspapers and broadcasting create simultaneous attention; parties and unions organize interests; advertising shapes desire; platforms rank visibility. The mass is therefore not simply found. It is assembled, represented, counted, narrated, segmented, and governed.

1.3 A relational definition

A precise working definition is: **a mass is a large-scale, internally differentiated population whose members are linked more by shared orientation, mediated signals, institutional categories, and parallel behavior than by dense direct relationships.** This definition allows multiple forms: the electoral mass, the consumer mass, the national mass, the audience mass, the protest mass, the financial mass, and the networked digital mass.

Analytical warning

Calling people "the mass" often reveals the observer's position. Elites may use the term to imply ignorance and passivity; populists may invoke "the people" to claim unity and moral purity. Both moves can erase disagreement inside the population.

02

Historical formation

From premodern peoples and crowds to industrial, broadcast, and digital masses

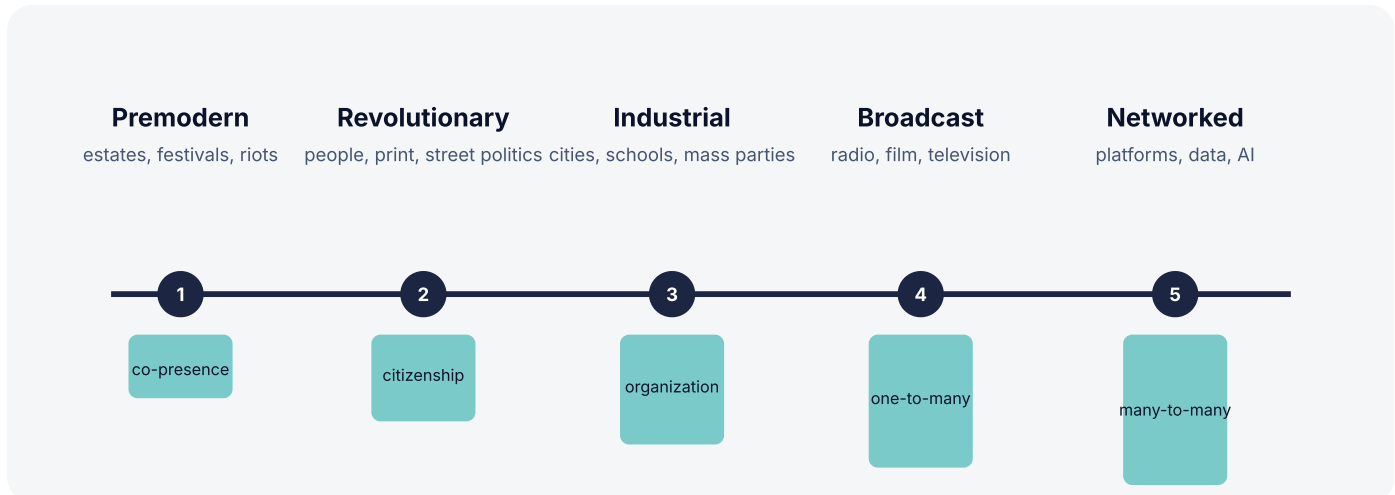


Figure 1. The dominant form changes from local co-presence to national organization, one-to-many broadcasting, and data-driven many-to-many networks.

2.1 Premodern societies: peoples, estates, congregations, and crowds

Premodern rulers governed subjects through households, villages, estates, guilds, churches, military levies, and local notables. Most ordinary people lived within dense face-to-face communities rather than anonymous national societies. Collective action nevertheless occurred in food riots, tax rebellions, religious pilgrimages, festivals, urban mobs, peasant uprisings, and military mutinies. These were often morally structured, not random: participants defended customary prices, sacred norms, local privileges, or communal subsistence.

The absence of modern mass communication did not mean the absence of large collective identities. Religions, empires, dynasties, and languages connected distant populations. Yet communication was slower, literacy more restricted, and political membership usually corporate or hierarchical rather than individualized and equal.

2.2 The French Revolution: the people become sovereign

The French Revolution joined three forms that would shape modern politics: the juridical idea of a sovereign people, the physical force of crowds in streets and assemblies, and the communicative power of pamphlets, newspapers, clubs, songs, festivals, and symbols. "The people" became the ultimate source of legitimacy, but no institution could simply display a single popular will. Competing factions claimed to represent it. The modern paradox was born: popular sovereignty required representation, while representation created opportunities for leadership, mediation, exclusion, and manipulation.

Revolutionary mobilization also demonstrated the power of political ritual. Flags, uniforms, calendars, martyrs, public festivals, and national enemies translated abstract principles into emotional identity. Conscription and total war expanded the state's capacity to mobilize bodies and resources on a national scale.

2.3 Industrialization and urbanization

The Industrial Revolution uprooted populations, concentrated workers, standardized labor time, and expanded transport and commodity markets. Cities brought strangers into proximity while weakening some traditional bonds. The factory, railway, department store, boulevard, and tenement produced a new social experience: dense interdependence combined with anonymity.

This environment generated both anxiety and organization. Conservative observers saw an unstable urban mob; socialist and labor movements saw a class capable of solidarity. Trade unions, mutual aid societies, cooperatives, mass parties, and newspapers converted dispersed workers into organized constituencies. The decisive contrast was not rational individual versus irrational mass, but unorganized exposure versus durable institutions.

2.4 Literacy, schooling, suffrage, and the nation-state

Rising literacy expanded the reading public. Compulsory education standardized language, historical memory, civic categories, and disciplined time. Universal or expanded male suffrage, followed later by women's suffrage, transformed subjects into voters. Political parties had to recruit, educate, identify, and turn out millions. Bureaucracies used censuses, identity documents, public health systems, and statistics to classify populations. National armies and public ceremonies deepened the imagined community of the nation.

Mass democracy therefore emerged through a double movement: inclusion and administration. More people gained rights and voice, while states and parties acquired more sophisticated means of monitoring, categorizing, persuading, and mobilizing them.

2.5 Mass production, mass consumption, and popular culture

Industrial production lowered unit costs and made standardized goods available to broad populations. Department stores, mail-order catalogs, branded packaging, installment credit, and advertising helped create the consumer mass. Consumption became more than material acquisition: it signaled status, gender, modernity, taste, and belonging.

In the United States, large domestic markets, commercial advertising, Hollywood cinema, recorded music, spectator sports, chain stores, and later suburbanization linked national identity to consumer aspiration. Popular culture could integrate immigrants and regions into common symbolic worlds, while also reproducing racial, gender, and class hierarchies.

2.6 Newspapers, radio, film, and television

The mass press created daily simultaneity: millions encountered the same headlines, scandals, wars, and advertisements. Radio added the intimacy of the voice and the capacity for real-time national address. Film combined narrative, celebrity, spectacle, and visual standardization. Television brought political leaders, consumer goods, wars, sports, and domestic ideals into the home.

Broadcast media had high entry barriers and scarce channels. Gatekeepers possessed unusual agenda power, but common exposure also created shared reference points. The broadcast mass was more synchronized than today's fragmented digital public, yet audiences were never simply inert. They interpreted messages through family, class, religion, race, region, and local discussion.

2.7 Fascist and communist mass mobilization

Fascist regimes fused charismatic leadership, nationalism, militarism, racial or civilizational myth, spectacle, party organization, propaganda, and coercion. The mass rally staged unity and leader devotion while excluding and persecuting designated enemies. Communist regimes mobilized through party cells, unions, youth organizations, literacy campaigns, planned media systems, mass ceremonies, and narratives of class struggle and historical progress. Both forms sought to penetrate civil society and reduce autonomous organization, though their ideologies, social bases, and institutional structures differed.

Totalitarian mobilization was not merely persuasion. It combined belief, opportunism, surveillance, career incentives, fear, denunciation, ritual participation, and the destruction of alternative associations. Arendt's central insight was that atomized individuals could become especially vulnerable to movements promising total explanation and belonging.

2.8 Cold War propaganda systems

During the Cold War, states built international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, covert influence, public information campaigns, educational exchanges, and psychological operations. The conflict was ideological and infrastructural: capitalism and communism competed to define freedom, modernity, development, race, peace, and prosperity. Domestic commercial media and state security institutions sometimes aligned, but they were not identical; each bloc contained internal disagreement and changing levels of censorship.

2.9 The networked and AI-mediated mass

The internet reduced publication costs, enabled transnational communities, and allowed users to produce, remix, distribute, and verify information. Social media turned attention into a continuously measured market. The mass became visible through trends, follower counts, likes, shares, search rankings, and real-time price movements. It also became micro-segmented: each user could inhabit a partially personalized media environment.

Generative artificial intelligence adds a further transformation. Synthetic text, images, audio, and video lower the cost of persuasion and deception; recommendation systems can tailor messages; conversational systems can become personalized intermediaries. At the same time, AI can widen access to translation, analysis, education, and creative production. The decisive issue is governance: provenance, accountability, auditability, market concentration, and the distribution of AI capabilities.

Historical form	Primary social space	Communication	Dominant narratives	Typical mobilization
Premodern local collective	Village, estate, church, marketplace	Oral networks, ritual, rumor	Custom, faith, subsistence	Local riot, pilgrimage, revolt
Revolutionary people	Nation, club, assembly, street	Pamphlet, newspaper, song	Sovereignty, rights, enemies	Revolution, conscription
Industrial mass	City, factory, class, party	Mass press, rail, telegraph	Labor, class, progress	Strike, mass party, union
Broadcast mass	National household audience	Radio, film, television	Nation, consumption, ideology	Election, propaganda, consumer boom
Networked mass	Platformed transnational users	Search, social media, messaging	Identity, virality, participation	Hashtag movement, meme stock, online mob
Synthetic mass environment	Humans plus automated and generated content	AI agents, deepfakes, personalized systems	Authenticity, trust, optimization	Hyper-personalized persuasion, automated amplification

03

Comparison of major theorists

Competing models of irrationality, imitation, representation, culture, and power

The classical literature on masses is divided by a basic tension. One tradition emphasizes regression, suggestibility, manipulation, and elite rule. Another emphasizes communication, public reasoning, organization, and the possibility of democratic learning. A third examines how capitalism, culture, and media manufacture needs and reproduce hierarchy. No single theory is sufficient because each isolates a different mechanism.

3.1 Crowd, imitation, and unconscious identification

Thinker	Key work	Core claim	Analytical value	Main limitation
Gustave Le Bon	<i>The Crowd</i> (1895)	Crowds produce anonymity, contagion, suggestibility, emotional unity, and lowered critical judgment. Leaders influence through affirmation, repetition, and prestige.	Recognizes emotional synchronization and leadership effects.	Treats crowds too uniformly; relies on elitist and racialized assumptions; underestimates norms, goals, and rational coordination.
Gabriel Tarde	<i>The Laws of Imitation</i> ; public theory	Social life spreads through imitation, opposition, and invention. Modern publics are dispersed readers connected by media rather than physical proximity.	Anticipates diffusion, influencers, network cascades, and mediated publics.	Can reduce structural conflict to interpersonal transmission; less attention to institutions and material inequality.
Sigmund Freud	<i>Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego</i> (1921)	Group cohesion arises through libidinal identification: members identify with one another through a shared attachment to a leader or ideal.	Explains emotional bonds, leader worship, and symbolic identification.	Difficult to test; may overgeneralize from psychoanalytic concepts.
Elias Canetti	<i>Crowds and Power</i> (1960)	Crowds seek discharge from the fear of being touched and experience equality through density; power is linked to survival, command, and transformation.	Rich phenomenology of crowd types, symbols, and command.	More literary and anthropological than causal; categories can be impressionistic.

3.2 Mass society, representation, and elite democracy

Thinker	Key work	Core claim	Analytical value	Main limitation
Jose Ortega y Gasset	<i>The Revolt of the Masses</i> (1930)	The mass person is not simply poor or numerous but self-satisfied, entitled, and unwilling to recognize standards or minority excellence.	Diagnoses anti-expertise and complacent majoritarianism.	Conflates cultural hierarchy with social analysis and risks aristocratic contempt.
Walter Lippmann	<i>Public Opinion</i> (1922)	People act on "pictures in their heads" formed within a pseudo-environment. Complex society exceeds direct experience, so stereotypes and expert mediation are unavoidable.	Foundational account of mediated perception, agenda construction, and cognitive limits.	Can slide toward technocratic pessimism and weak democratic participation.
Edward Bernays	<i>Propaganda</i> (1928)	Organized persuasion and the "engineering of consent" coordinate mass society by shaping symbols, associations, and opinion leaders.	Clarifies public relations as planned social influence.	Normalizes elite manipulation and treats democratic consent instrumentally.
Joseph Schumpeter	<i>Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy</i> (1942)	Democracy is competition among elites for votes rather than direct realization of a coherent popular will. Voters choose teams under limited information.	Realistic about leadership, organization, and voter attention.	May reduce democracy to periodic selection and understate participation and deliberation.

Thinker	Key work	Core claim	Analytical value	Main limitation
Hannah Arendt	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> (1951)	Mass society emerges from atomization, loneliness, loss of class and associational ties, and susceptibility to total ideology and movement organization.	Connects social isolation, propaganda, organization, and total domination.	Her historical generalizations and distinctions among classes, mobs, and masses remain debated.

3.3 Culture, public communication, distinction, and spectacle

Thinker	Key work	Core claim	Analytical value	Main limitation
Adorno and Horkheimer	"The Culture Industry" in <i>Dialectic of Enlightenment</i>	Commercial culture standardizes products and consciousness, offering pseudo-individuality while reproducing passivity and domination.	Powerful critique of commodification and industrialized entertainment.	Can underestimate audience interpretation, pleasure, subcultures, and creative reuse.
Herbert Marcuse	<i>One-Dimensional Man</i> (1964)	Advanced industrial society integrates opposition by producing false needs, technological rationality, and comfortable conformity.	Links consumption, administration, and narrowed imagination.	Sometimes overstates social closure and underestimates new conflicts.
Jurgen Habermas	<i>The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere</i>	Democracy requires spaces where private persons debate public matters through reasons; commercialization and state-media power can distort communication.	Provides a normative standard for deliberation, inclusion, and communicative legitimacy.	Early model idealizes bourgeois publicity and underrepresents exclusion and multiple counterpublics.
Pierre Bourdieu	<i>Distinction</i> ; fields and capital	Taste is socially structured. Cultural capital, habitus, and fields convert class position into apparently natural preferences and judgments.	Explains stratification within mass culture and the authority to define legitimate taste.	Structural emphasis can make agency and cultural surprise harder to see.
Jean Baudrillard	<i>Consumer Society</i> ; simulacra	Consumption organizes signs and distinctions; media signs can precede or replace stable referents, producing hyperreality.	Illuminates branding, symbolic consumption, and reality shaped by representation.	Highly abstract; can blur empirical differences between deception, fiction, ritual, and ordinary mediation.
Guy Debord	<i>The Society of the Spectacle</i> (1967)	Social relations are mediated by images; lived experience becomes representation and commodity spectacle.	Connects capitalism, attention, image politics, and passive contemplation.	Totalizing style can understate participatory and nonvisual social relations.
Herman and Chomsky	<i>Manufacturing Consent</i> (1988)	Media output is shaped by ownership, advertising, sourcing, organized pressure, and dominant ideology rather than only direct censorship.	Offers an institutional political economy of news selection.	The original filters require updating for fragmented digital media, subscriptions, platforms, and partisan ecosystems.

3.4 Synthesis: five analytical families

Family	Main question	Representative theorists	Best used for
Crowd psychology	What changes in intense collective situations?	Le Bon, Freud, Canetti	Arousal, identification, contagion, command
Public opinion and elite competition	How is a complex polity represented and governed?	Lippmann, Bernays, Schumpeter	Campaigns, polling, expertise, public relations
Mass society and totalitarianism	How do atomization and organization enable domination?	Ortega, Arendt	Loneliness, anti-elite resentment, ideological movements
Critical theory and spectacle	How do capitalism and culture shape needs and consciousness?	Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Debord, Baudrillard	Advertising, entertainment, consumer identity, image politics
Public sphere and social distinction	When can communication be democratic, and who is heard?	Habermas, Bourdieu	Deliberation, exclusion, taste, cultural authority

04

Mass psychology

Mechanisms of conformity, contagion, error, intelligence, and solidarity

Mass psychology should not assume that joining a group automatically destroys the self. People enter collective situations with prior identities, moral norms, interests, and expectations. Group behavior changes because the informational and normative environment changes: people observe others, infer what is true or acceptable, experience shared emotion, and anticipate rewards or sanctions.

4.1 Core psychological mechanisms

Mechanism	How it works	Illustrative form
Anonymity and deindividuation	Reduced visibility of the individual can weaken accountability, but it can also strengthen adherence to a salient group norm.	Masking in a violent mob or disciplined anonymity in mutual aid.
Emotional contagion	Facial expression, voice, rhythm, imagery, and repeated exposure synchronize affect.	Fear during panic; hope at a movement rally.
Imitation and social proof	When uncertain, people use others' behavior as evidence.	Buying a trending product; joining a queue.
Conformity	People align to gain acceptance, avoid sanctions, or because they believe the group knows better.	Public agreement despite private doubt.
Obedience to authority	Legitimate or feared authorities shift responsibility and define acceptable action.	Bureaucratic compliance; movement discipline.
Group polarization	Discussion among like-minded participants can move average views toward a more extreme version of the initial tendency.	Partisan forums or investor communities.
Groupthink	Cohesive decision groups suppress dissent, overlook alternatives, and mistake unanimity for correctness.	Closed leadership circles.
Confirmation bias	People seek, remember, and interpret information in ways that protect prior beliefs and identities.	Selective news sharing.
Cognitive simplification	Complexity is reduced to vivid binaries, stereotypes, slogans, and causal stories.	Heroes versus traitors; one-cause explanations.
Scapegoating	Frustration and threat are displaced onto a visible out-group represented as the cause of diffuse problems.	Minorities blamed for economic insecurity.
Moral panic	Institutions and media amplify a condition into a threat to fundamental values, often through folk devils and exceptional measures.	Crime panics or youth-culture scares.
Rumor and conspiracy diffusion	Ambiguity, importance, distrust, and repeated peer transmission sustain unverified claims.	Election rumors, secret-cabal narratives.
Hero worship	A leader becomes the symbolic solution to uncertainty and the embodiment of group dignity.	Charismatic politics or celebrity devotion.
Fads and collective enthusiasm	Visible adoption and fear of missing out create positive feedback.	Fashion, collectibles, speculative assets.

4.2 When independent judgment is most likely to collapse

1. **High uncertainty:** participants lack reliable information and cannot verify claims independently.
2. **High arousal:** fear, rage, humiliation, euphoria, or sacred enthusiasm narrows attention and accelerates action.
3. **Identity threat:** disagreement is framed as betrayal of the group rather than a dispute over evidence.
4. **Informational enclosure:** one leader, network, or platform dominates interpretation and discredits external sources.
5. **Visible unanimity:** dissent is hidden, punished, or algorithmically buried, creating the illusion that everyone agrees.
6. **Time pressure and irreversibility:** people are told to act immediately before verification is possible.
7. **Diffused responsibility:** individuals feel less personally accountable because action is collective or commanded.
8. **Unaccountable leadership:** leaders can escalate rhetoric without bearing proportional costs.
9. **Material dependence:** employment, status, safety, or belonging depends on conformity.
10. **Weak corrective institutions:** journalism, courts, scientific bodies, opposition parties, and internal review lack credibility or access.

4.3 Conditions for collective intelligence

Collective intelligence is not the opposite of emotion. Shared concern can motivate information gathering, sacrifice, and mutual aid. The key is whether a group can preserve diverse knowledge and correct errors while coordinating action.

Condition	Meaning	Why it improves judgment
Diversity of information	Participants possess different evidence, experiences, and models.	Prevents a single blind spot from dominating.
Relative independence	Initial judgments are formed before social pressure converges.	Reduces herding and informational cascades.
Decentralized knowledge	Local actors can act on context-specific information.	Improves adaptation and detection of failures.
Reliable aggregation	Votes, markets, deliberation, peer review, or forecasting combine information under known rules.	Turns distributed knowledge into a decision.
Dissent protection	Minority reports, anonymous channels, and opposition rights are protected.	Makes hidden information visible.
Accountable leadership	Leaders can be questioned, replaced, and sanctioned.	Limits opportunistic escalation.
Verification and provenance	Claims can be traced to evidence and independently checked.	Reduces rumor and synthetic deception.
Error correction	The group can revise positions without loss of identity or status.	Prevents commitment traps.
Shared pro-social norms	Solidarity includes restraint, reciprocity, and protection of outsiders.	Channels energy into constructive action.

The central distinction

A crowd is not irrational because it is collective. It becomes epistemically weak when social influence overwhelms independent information and error correction. A group becomes intelligent when organization preserves diversity while enabling coordination.

4.4 Fear, anger, hope, and moral emotion

Fear heightens vigilance but can produce avoidance, authoritarian demand, and rumor seeking. Anger increases certainty and action readiness but can reduce attention to risk and complexity. Humiliation intensifies status restoration and revenge. Hope expands perceived possibility and sustains long-term participation. Compassion can widen solidarity, while moral outrage can expose injustice or become punitive performance. Political actors therefore compete not only over beliefs but over the emotional interpretation of events.

4.5 Antagonistic identity and the common enemy

A mass becomes easier to mobilize when the boundary between "us" and "them" is morally charged. Leaders condense diverse grievances into a common enemy: an elite, minority, foreign power, corporation, bureaucracy, ideological faction, or corrupt system. This can clarify responsibility and coordinate action, but it can also simplify causation, suppress internal disagreement, and justify collective punishment. The analytical task is to separate evidence-based accountability from scapegoating.

05

From dispersed grievance to collective action

A step-by-step model of mass formation and mobilization



Figure 2. A general sequence from private grievance to coordinated behavior. Each stage has gatekeepers and failure points.

5.1 The transformation sequence

- 1. Latent condition.** Economic loss, status anxiety, discrimination, corruption, cultural change, institutional failure, or symbolic insult creates dissatisfaction. Many experience it privately without perceiving a collective pattern.
- 2. Recognition.** Testimony, journalism, statistics, viral images, or interpersonal conversation reveals that the experience is shared. Private trouble becomes a public issue.
- 3. Attribution.** Narratives identify causes, responsible actors, victims, and possible remedies. Competing entrepreneurs fight to define whether the problem is structural, moral, foreign, elite-driven, or caused by an out-group.
- 4. Emotional synchronization.** Repetition, vivid events, music, ritual, images, and leader speech align anger, fear, grief, pride, or hope. Emotional intensity raises attention and lowers participation thresholds.
- 5. Identity crystallization.** Symbols, slogans, hashtags, uniforms, flags, shared language, and enemies turn parallel concern into a felt "we." Identity reduces coordination costs but can harden boundaries.
- 6. Organizational brokerage.** Parties, unions, influencers, religious networks, local organizers, online moderators, donors, and media connect otherwise separate clusters. They provide calendars, logistics, funding, expertise, and strategic choices.
- 7. Threshold cascade.** Early participants make action visible. As perceived support grows, people with higher participation thresholds join. Polls, attendance numbers, price charts, trending lists, and endorsements accelerate or inhibit the cascade.

8. **Collective action.** The mass votes, protests, strikes, riots, donates, buys, sells, boycotts, shares, harasses, or creates. Repertoires depend on institutions and learned models.
9. **Counter-mobilization and state response.** Opponents frame the movement, platforms moderate content, firms adapt, police intervene, courts rule, and political elites co-opt or repress. Outcomes are interactive, not unilateral.
10. **Feedback and memory.** Success produces institutionalization and myth; failure can generate demobilization, radicalization, fragmentation, or tactical learning. Narratives of victory and betrayal shape the next cycle.

5.2 Different endpoints

Endpoint	Defining feature	Key variables
Social movement	Durable claims-making network with organizations, identity, and repeated action	Leadership balance, coalition breadth, repression, institutional access
Riot	Rapid localized collective violence or property destruction under high arousal and weak control	Trigger event, policing, rumors, crowd composition, opportunity
Revolution	Mass defection from an existing regime combined with elite fracture and alternative authority	State capacity, military loyalty, organization, legitimacy crisis
Election campaign	Periodic competition to convert attention, identity, resources, and turnout into votes	Party structure, candidate image, media, rules, money, mobilization
Fandom	Affective community organized around cultural objects and personalities	Platform affordances, participatory norms, identity, parasocial bonds
Boycott	Coordinated withholding of purchases to impose economic or reputational costs	Substitutes, visibility, organizational clarity, duration, firm response
Consumer frenzy	Accelerating demand driven by scarcity, status, virality, and social proof	Supply constraints, resale markets, influencer attention, FOMO
Financial mania	Positive feedback among price, narrative, attention, leverage, and social identity	Liquidity, leverage, market structure, platform design, exit asymmetry

5.3 Why some grievances never become movements

Severe grievances do not automatically produce collective action. People may lack a common interpretation, trust, organizational resources, visible opportunities, protection from retaliation, or belief that action can work. They may also be divided by race, religion, occupation, geography, or competing narratives. Elites often maintain power not by persuading everyone, but by keeping grievances fragmented, individualized, or mutually antagonistic.

06

The mass and political power

Sovereignty, mobilization, representation, and the paradox of mass democracy

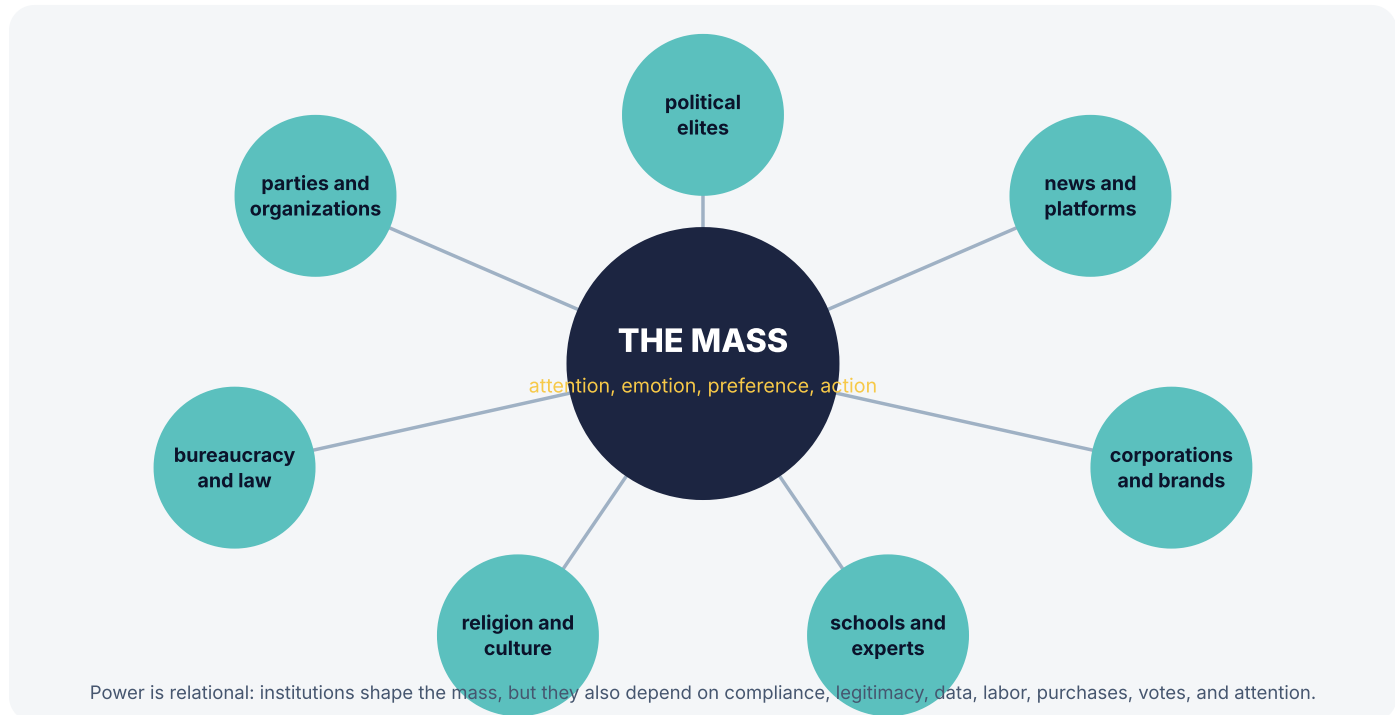


Figure 3. Institutions shape mass attention and behavior, but institutional power also depends on mass cooperation and legitimacy.

6.1 The mass as sovereign and governed object

Modern democracy declares the people sovereign, but the people cannot rule continuously as a single assembled body. Sovereignty is translated through constitutions, elections, parties, legislatures, courts, administrations, media, interest groups, and public opinion. This translation is necessary and contestable. Whoever controls the categories, agenda, timing, and channels of representation can influence what the "popular will" appears to be.

The paradox is therefore structural: the mass is the source of legitimacy and simultaneously the target of campaigns, public relations, propaganda, polling, segmentation, and disinformation. Democracy cannot eliminate mediation; it can only make mediation more plural, transparent, accountable, and revisable.

6.2 Does a genuine will of the mass exist?

A single, stable mass will rarely exist before political processes. Individuals hold multiple, sometimes contradictory preferences. Outcomes depend on question wording, issue salience, available alternatives, voting rules, coalition structure, media frames, and sequence. Polls do not merely discover opinion; they also publicize categories, create perceptions of momentum, and encourage strategic behavior.

This does not mean all public will is artificial. Material interests, moral commitments, historical memories, and lived experiences constrain political construction. A better formulation is that collective will is **formed through structured interaction**. It is neither pure discovery nor unlimited invention.

6.3 Populism, charisma, nationalism, and class politics

Mode	Mobilizing claim	Strength	Risk
Populism	A morally pure people confront a corrupt elite.	Makes exclusion and oligarchy visible; simplifies coalition building.	Can deny pluralism, treat opponents as illegitimate, and personalize institutions.
Charismatic leadership	An exceptional leader embodies collective destiny and breaks routine constraints.	Coordinates fragmented supporters and communicates urgency.	Weakens succession, criticism, and institutional limits.
Nationalism	A shared nation deserves sovereignty, security, recognition, or renewal.	Creates solidarity across local divisions.	Can exclude minorities, invent enemies, and militarize identity.
Class politics	People sharing economic position organize against exploitation or inequality.	Links private hardship to structural power and durable organization.	Can flatten nonclass identities or become bureaucratized.
Identity politics	Groups mobilize around recognition, discrimination, memory, and rights.	Makes invisible harms and unequal status politically legible.	Can fragment coalitions or encourage competitive victimhood when detached from institutions.
Culture war	Symbolic disputes represent deeper struggles over authority and social change.	High emotional clarity and media visibility.	Displaces material policy, intensifies antagonism, rewards outrage entrepreneurs.

6.4 Election campaigns as mass-production systems

Campaigns transform citizens into targetable segments. They combine voter files, fundraising, polls, field operations, televised events, endorsements, advertising, influencer networks, and algorithmic distribution. A modern campaign must solve four problems: define the election, identify persuadable and mobilizable groups, allocate scarce attention and money, and convert support into lawful participation.

Political advertising often uses identity and emotion because detailed policy is costly to process. Negative messages exploit loss aversion and threat; positive messages offer efficacy, dignity, and belonging. Yet campaign effects are constrained by prior partisanship, social networks, economic conditions, candidate performance, institutions, and events. Persuasion is not mind control.

6.5 Polarization and the division of the mass

Polarization can be ideological, affective, social, geographic, or informational. Affective polarization is especially important: people may dislike and distrust the opposing camp more strongly even when policy positions do not move equally far apart. Media entrepreneurs, parties, and platforms can benefit from clear antagonism because it raises attention, loyalty, and donations. The mass is then organized less around shared programs than around negative identity.

Media and propaganda

How attention, agendas, emotions, and consent are organized

Media power rarely works by dictating a single belief to everyone. It works by allocating visibility, repetition, credibility, categories, and emotional emphasis. The strongest effects often concern what people attend to, how they interpret uncertainty, which identities become salient, and what actions appear normal or possible.

7.1 Core operating principles

Mechanism	Definition	Primary effect
Agenda-setting	Repeated prominence makes some issues seem more important than others.	Issue salience and policy attention.
Framing	Selection of causes, moral evaluations, metaphors, victims, and remedies organizes interpretation.	The same event appears as crime, protest, disorder, injustice, or strategy.
Gatekeeping	Editors, institutions, platforms, and users decide what enters or exits a communication channel.	Controls visibility and source diversity.
Priming	Recent and prominent considerations become standards for judging leaders or events.	Evaluation shifts toward security, inflation, corruption, or competence.
Repetition effect	Familiar claims become easier to process and may feel more plausible even without stronger evidence.	Slogans, talking points, repeated rumors.
Bandwagon effect	Perceived popularity changes behavior through social proof, strategic alignment, or desire to join winners.	Poll momentum, trending products, rising assets.
Spiral of silence	People conceal views they believe are socially isolated, making the apparent majority look larger.	Public conformity and hidden dissent.
Manufactured consent	Institutional filters shape permissible debate and normalize elite priorities without continuous direct censorship.	Ownership, advertising, official sourcing, organized pressure.
Propaganda	Systematic symbolic action designed to shape perception and conduct for political ends.	State campaigns, movement media, wartime messaging.
Censorship	Suppression, licensing, blocking, intimidation, or removal limits access and expression.	Legal bans, platform removal, self-censorship.
Information overload	Excess volume raises dependence on heuristics, trusted brands, influencers, and ranking systems.	Confusion, fatigue, shallow scanning.
Entertainment-oriented communication	Politics is formatted as conflict, personality, suspense, humor, and spectacle.	Higher attention but reduced policy depth.
Personalized recommendation	Ranking systems predict engagement and tailor exposure to users.	Fragmented agendas, reinforcement, discovery, microtargeting.
Surveillance capitalism	Behavioral data is captured, predicted, and monetized, creating incentives to optimize attention and influence.	Targeted advertising and platform dependence.

7.2 Agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping as a chain

These mechanisms are best understood sequentially. Gatekeeping determines the available pool; agenda-setting determines prominence; framing supplies interpretive structure; priming affects later judgments; repetition and social proof consolidate attention; feedback metrics then influence future gatekeeping. In digital media, the chain is recursive because user reaction becomes input to ranking.

7.3 Propaganda is not simply false information

Propaganda can use truth, half-truth, omission, repetition, selective context, emotional symbolism, and strategic ambiguity. Its defining feature is organized persuasive purpose under unequal communicative conditions. Effective propaganda often attaches itself to real grievances and familiar values. Fact-checking alone may fail when belief serves identity, belonging, or distrust of institutions.

7.4 Censorship and the politics of visibility

Censorship includes more than state prohibition. It can arise through ownership pressure, advertiser risk, legal threats, harassment, platform moderation, payment infrastructure, search demotion, and self-censorship. Conversely, unlimited visibility is not a neutral solution: harassment, spam, bot amplification, and coordinated deception can drown out ordinary speech. Democratic governance must distinguish lawful dissent from manipulation while preserving due process, transparency, and appeal.

7.5 Information overload and strategic confusion

A contemporary propaganda strategy may seek not to make everyone believe one claim but to make verification feel impossible. Flooding the environment with contradictory narratives produces cynicism: all sources appear biased, all evidence contestable, and withdrawal seems rational. This "liar's dividend" also helps genuine misconduct survive because authentic evidence can be dismissed as fabricated.

7.6 Algorithms: amplification without a single intention

Algorithmic effects can emerge without a central ideological plan. Engagement-based systems may privilege novelty, outrage, identity affirmation, and emotionally legible conflict because these signals predict attention. The outcome is shaped by platform objectives, model design, user networks, advertiser incentives, content suppliers, and strategic actors. Evidence on echo chambers is mixed: some users encounter more diverse views online, while highly engaged partisan clusters can become strongly segregated. The correct claim is conditional, not deterministic.

Practical media analysis

For any mass message ask: Who selected it? Who paid? What alternatives were excluded? Which emotion is activated? Which identity is made salient? What behavior is requested? What metrics reward its spread? Who can correct it?

08

Mass culture and consumer society

Standardization, participation, desire, distinction, and identity

Mass culture refers to cultural goods produced and distributed at large scale: film, television, popular music, sports, celebrity news, fashion, advertising, reality programming, digital creators, brands, and platform-native formats. Consumer society links identity and social participation to the acquisition and display of commodities, services, experiences, and signs.

8.1 How desire is socially organized

Advertising rarely creates desire from nothing. It attaches products to existing motives: status, sexuality, security, convenience, rebellion, care, authenticity, nostalgia, belonging, and self-improvement. Brands condense these associations into recognizable symbols. Repetition and social proof make consumption appear normal, while scarcity and exclusivity create distinction.

Celebrity and influencer culture personalize aspiration. A product becomes credible when embedded in a narrative of lifestyle and intimacy. Parasocial relationships can generate trust and emotional investment, although audiences also understand performance, negotiate meanings, parody commercial messages, and punish perceived inauthenticity.

8.2 Taste and class consciousness

Bourdieu shows that taste is not merely personal preference. Education, family background, occupational position, and social networks shape what feels natural, refined, vulgar, adventurous, or respectable. Cultural capital enables some groups to define legitimate taste and convert it into educational and professional advantage. Mass markets do not erase class; they reorganize class through brands, niches, experiences, and the capacity to display informed choice.

8.3 The critical theory argument

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that industrial culture standardizes form while selling pseudo-individuality. Formulaic genres, stars, and predictable pleasures train adaptation to the existing order. Marcuse adds that affluent consumption can integrate opposition by satisfying manufactured needs. Debord emphasizes spectacle: social relations and political conflict are experienced as images to be consumed. Baudrillard highlights sign value: goods are purchased for differences and codes, not only utility.

8.4 The participation and resistance counterargument

Audiences are not blank surfaces. Fans interpret, remix, subtitle, archive, criticize, organize charity, create alternative identities, and pressure producers. Popular culture can provide shared language across class and national boundaries. Subcultures repurpose commodities; marginalized groups create counterpublics; humor and memes can expose authority. The same platform can standardize attention and enable creative participation.

Domain	Standardization / passivity thesis	Participation / resistance thesis
Film and television	Industrial formulas and concentrated ownership narrow representation.	Viewers reinterpret narratives; independent production and fan communities create alternatives.

Domain	Standardization / passivity thesis	Participation / resistance thesis
Music	Labels and platforms optimize predictable hits and mood categories.	Scenes, remix cultures, and global fandoms build new identities and solidarities.
Sports	Commercial spectacle channels conflict into consumption and loyalty.	Clubs create civic belonging; athletes and fans can mobilize political claims.
Fashion and brands	Status competition and planned obsolescence reproduce inequality.	Style enables self-fashioning, subcultural code, and symbolic refusal.
Reality television and influencers	Intimacy becomes monetized performance; visibility rewards conformity.	Creators bypass old gatekeepers and cultivate niche communities.
Fandom	Commercial devotion supplies free labor to cultural industries.	Fans coordinate knowledge, translation, fundraising, and political action.

8.5 Consumer boycotts and buycotts

Consumer action politicizes market choice. A boycott withholds demand; a buycott directs demand toward approved firms. Effectiveness depends on clear targets, available substitutes, reputational sensitivity, organizational persistence, and whether the action reaches investors, distributors, employees, or regulators. Symbolic victories can matter even when direct financial effects are uncertain because brands depend on identity and legitimacy.

09

The digital mass

From passive audience to producer, distributor, monitor, investor, and political actor

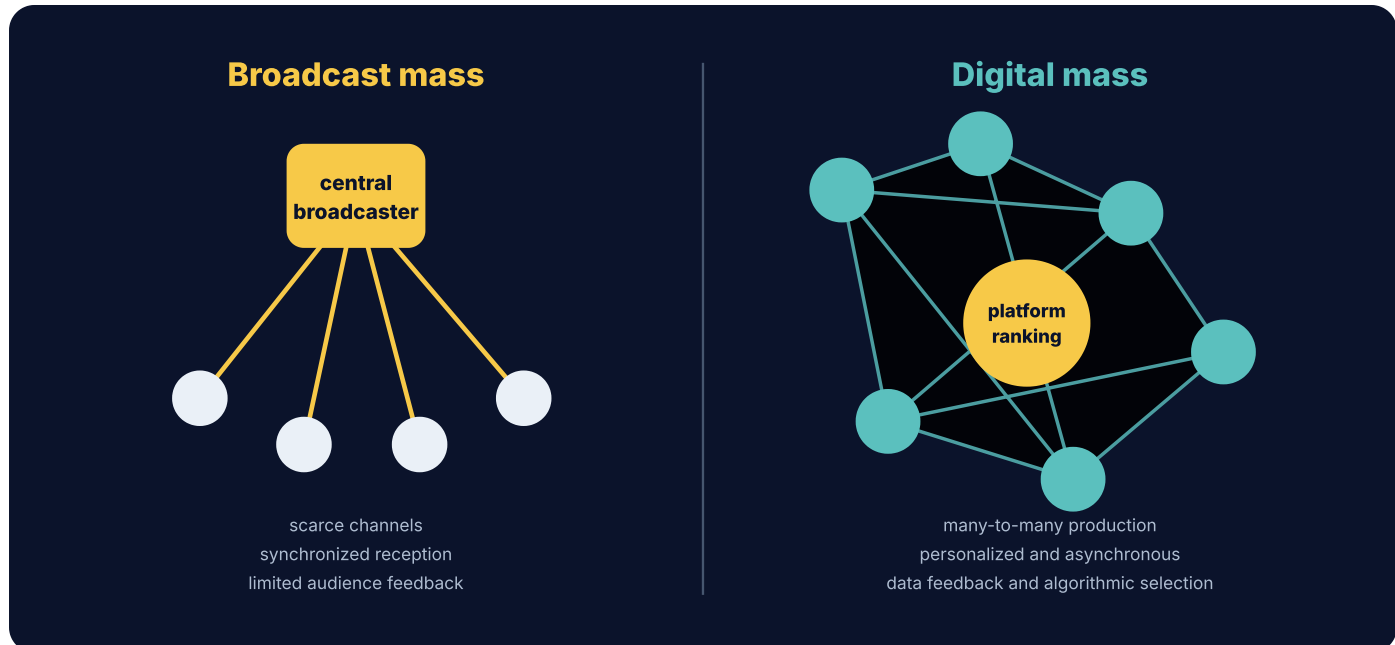


Figure 4. Broadcast systems synchronize large audiences; digital systems personalize exposure and feed user behavior back into ranking.

9.1 What is structurally new?

Dimension	Broadcast mass	Digital mass
Publication cost	High and institutionally controlled	Low for basic content production and distribution
Communication pattern	One-to-many	Many-to-many, one-to-one, and algorithmically assembled
Temporal form	Scheduled and synchronized	Continuous, asynchronous, real-time, persistent
Audience role	Primarily reception and limited feedback	Production, remix, curation, commentary, verification, coordination
Measurement	Ratings, circulation, surveys	Clicks, views, watch time, shares, follows, conversions, network graphs
Segmentation	Broad demographic categories	Behavioral micro-segments and personalized feeds
Gatekeeping	Editors, broadcasters, distributors	Platforms, algorithms, creators, moderators, users, payment systems
Geography	Mostly national or regional	Transnational and language-bridged
Memory	Ephemeral broadcasts and archives	Searchable persistence plus rapid deletion and context collapse
Automation	Limited	Bots, recommender systems, synthetic media, AI agents

9.2 Memes, hashtags, and viral content

Memes compress interpretation into repeatable form. They are persuasive because they combine recognition, humor, identity, and low-cost reproduction. Hashtags create searchable publics, name grievances, and coordinate attention. Virality is not equivalent to majority support: a small, highly active network can dominate visibility, and platform metrics can be manipulated. Nevertheless, visible acceleration changes perceptions of what is important and possible.

9.3 Bots, coordinated behavior, and synthetic media

Bots can automate posting, amplification, harassment, and apparent consensus. Coordinated human networks can produce similar effects without automation. Deepfakes and generative AI reduce the cost of plausible fabrication, personalized propaganda, and content flooding. The danger includes not only belief in false media but generalized distrust of authentic evidence. Provenance standards, watermarking, forensic tools, source reputation, and legal accountability are partial defenses, not complete solutions.

9.4 The attention economy

Platforms compete for time and behavioral data. Content that reliably triggers attention can receive distribution advantages even when it harms deliberation. Creators adapt to metrics, producing shorter cycles of novelty, conflict, outrage, and identity affirmation. Users are not merely consumers; their reactions are labor-like inputs that train rankings and generate advertising inventory.

9.5 Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and radicalization

A filter bubble refers to personalization that limits exposure without the user's full awareness. An echo chamber is a social structure in which beliefs are repeated and outside sources are distrusted. Algorithmic radicalization is the claim that recommendation pathways progressively expose users to more extreme content. These mechanisms occur in some contexts, but they are not universal. Selection by users, offline identity, partisan media, network homophily, and elite cues can be as important as algorithms. Research and policy should identify specific pathways rather than treating "the algorithm" as a single actor.

9.6 Online mobs, harassment, and cancel culture

Networked sanction can expose abuse that formal institutions ignored. It can also produce disproportionate punishment, mistaken identification, context collapse, and permanent reputational damage without due process. "Cancel culture" is an imprecise political label covering different practices: criticism, boycott, deplatforming, employment consequences, coordinated harassment, and institutional accountability. Analysis should separate lawful criticism from coercive intimidation and assess proportionality, evidence, procedure, and power asymmetry.

9.7 Generative AI and the coming synthetic public sphere

Generative AI can help citizens summarize policy, translate documents, analyze data, and create media. It can also generate persuasive variants at scale, impersonate trusted voices, automate astroturfing, and target narratives. The emerging synthetic public sphere therefore requires provenance: users need to know whether a message was produced by a person or machine, for whom, under what authority, with which data, and how it can be challenged.

10

Elites and the mass

Organized minorities, unorganized majorities, consent, resistance, and institutional counterweights

10.1 Why organized minorities often rule

Mosca, Pareto, and Michels emphasize a durable asymmetry: small groups can coordinate, specialize, monitor one another, accumulate expertise, and act continuously, while large populations face time constraints, free-rider problems, internal diversity, and high coordination costs. Bureaucracies and parties require leaders, staffs, records, finance, and communication systems. Organization produces power beyond numerical size.

This does not mean elites are omnipotent or unified. Political, economic, military, bureaucratic, professional, cultural, and technological elites compete. They require labor, taxes, purchases, votes, data, legitimacy, and obedience from broader populations. Elite projects fail when factions split, institutions lose credibility, or organized mass resistance raises the cost of rule.

10.2 Forms of elite influence

Elite or institution	Primary resource	Mass-shaping mechanism	Dependency on the mass
Political leaders and parties	Office, lawmaking, patronage, campaign organization	Agenda, rhetoric, coalition, policy, symbolic leadership	Votes, activists, compliance, legitimacy
Bureaucracies	Expertise, records, procedure, implementation	Classification, eligibility, enforcement, administrative knowledge	Taxes, cooperation, information, professional trust
Corporations and finance	Capital, employment, ownership, investment	Prices, wages, advertising, lobbying, product ecosystems	Consumers, workers, investors, public infrastructure
News organizations	Visibility, verification routines, reputation	Selection, framing, sourcing, investigative exposure	Audience attention, subscriptions, advertiser or donor support
Advertising and public relations	Research, creative production, media buying	Association, repetition, targeting, opinion leaders	Credibility, cultural resonance, measurable response
Religious organizations	Moral authority, ritual, community networks	Meaning, discipline, charity, identity, leadership	Belief, participation, donations, volunteer labor
Educational institutions	Credentialing, knowledge, professional formation	Curriculum, classification, expertise, socialization	Enrollment, trust, funding, social legitimacy
Cultural industries	Intellectual property, celebrity, distribution	Taste, aspiration, narrative, spectacle	Fans, consumers, creative labor
Platform companies	Infrastructure, data, ranking, moderation	Recommendation, access, metrics, behavioral design	Users, creators, advertisers, developers, regulatory permission

10.3 Mass support: belief, obedience, indifference, and acquiescence

Rule can rest on active enthusiasm, habitual obedience, material dependence, fear, perceived inevitability, fragmented opposition, or simple inattention. Indifference is politically consequential: when the costs of participation are high and alternatives unclear, nonaction stabilizes power. Consent is therefore a spectrum rather than a binary state.

10.4 How mass organization reduces the disparity

Large populations gain durable power when they create organizations that solve coordination problems. Labor unions pool dues and bargaining power; parties aggregate interests and contest office; civil society organizations preserve expertise and continuity; cooperatives align ownership with membership; professional associations create standards; social movements produce networks and narratives; independent media reduce informational dependence.

Institutional design	Problem addressed	Democratic safeguard
Dues-funded membership organizations	Dependence on wealthy patrons	Transparent budgets and member control
Federated local-national structure	Scale versus local knowledge	Subsidiarity and recallable delegates
Protected internal dissent	Leadership oligarchy and groupthink	Minority reports, competitive elections, term limits
Independent research and media	Information monopoly	Open data, source transparency, public-interest funding
Collective bargaining and co-determination	Individual worker weakness	Representation rights and enforceable contracts
Participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies	Distance between citizens and administration	Random selection, facilitated deliberation, public response
Coalition organizations	Fragmentation among groups	Negotiated common programs and conflict-resolution procedures

10.5 Against elite contempt and populist romanticism

The elitist error is to define the mass as inherently ignorant and irrational while exempting elites from bias, conformity, corruption, and groupthink. Expertise is real, but elite institutions can become insulated, self-serving, and systematically wrong. The populist error is to imagine the people as morally homogeneous and always wise. Majorities can support exclusion, misinformation, and punitive policies; "the people" can be constructed to exclude inconvenient citizens.

A conditional perspective is stronger. Mass behavior improves with education that teaches evidence and argument, economic security that reduces panic and dependence, plural information systems, trustworthy institutions, accountable leaders, and organizations that protect dissent. It deteriorates when insecurity, humiliation, isolation, disinformation, unaccountable charisma, and coercive institutions converge.

Condition	Likely constructive effect	Likely danger when absent
Education and media literacy	Greater verification and tolerance for complexity	Susceptibility to slogans and fabricated expertise
Economic security	Longer time horizons and lower threat sensitivity	Scapegoating, zero-sum politics, desperation
Institutional trust with accountability	Acceptance of evidence and legitimate decisions	Cynicism or blind obedience
Plural media environment	Competing frames and corrective information	Monopoly or chaotic overload
Strong membership organizations	Coordination and leadership accountability	Atomization or leader cults

Case studies

Applying the framework to campaigns, movements, markets, boycotts, fandoms, and conspiracies

The cases below are analytically diverse. They are not morally equivalent. Each illustrates a different pathway through which attention, identity, organization, media, and power produce collective behavior.

11.1 The 2024 United States presidential campaign: segmented mass democracy

The 2024 presidential campaign combined national party organizations, candidate-centered leadership, television and digital advertising, podcasts and influencers, voter files, fundraising networks, social platforms, polling, and legal electoral institutions. Official results compiled by the Federal Election Commission recorded 155,238,302 votes and an Electoral College result of 312 to 226. FEC reports also recorded \$4.4 billion in independent expenditures across presidential and congressional contests during the 2023-2024 cycle.

MASS-10 dimension	Application
1 People	A formally equal electorate divided by party, class, race, religion, gender, education, region, generation, and media use.
2 Affect and identity	Partisan loyalty, fear of the opposing coalition, economic anxiety, national pride, cultural resentment, and democratic concern.
3 Leaders and organizations	Candidates, parties, PACs, donors, field operations, advocacy groups, local officials, and volunteer networks.
4 Media and algorithms	Television, digital ads, social platforms, podcasts, creators, search, messaging, and partisan news ecosystems.
5 Conditions	Inflation perceptions, immigration, foreign policy, abortion, institutional trust, and post-pandemic social change.
6 Narratives and symbols	Restoration, freedom, threat, competence, democracy, border, economy, law, and national identity.
7 Mobilization	Advertising, rallies, door-knocking, fundraising, endorsements, microtargeting, early voting, and turnout operations.
8 Power relations	Large donors and platforms possessed asymmetric resources, but votes were institutionally aggregated by state rules.
9 Behavior	Voting, donating, volunteering, sharing, persuading, protesting, and disengaging.
10 Outcomes	Leadership selection, coalition realignment, policy mandate claims, continued polarization, and institutional feedback.

Interpretation. This was neither a pure expression of an already formed popular will nor a simple product of manipulation. Campaign organizations constructed choices and salience, but they operated within durable identities, material conditions, constitutional rules, and voter agency. The case shows why mass democracy is mediated by organized minorities while still dependent on mass participation.

11.2 Black Lives Matter protests in 2020: decentralized mass mobilization

The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 became a high-emotion focusing event because video evidence connected an individual death to an existing narrative about policing and racial inequality. Hashtags, local organizations, established activist networks, news coverage, celebrity statements, and interpersonal discussion transformed grief and anger into demonstrations across the United States. ACLED data identified the movement as the dominant source of U.S. demonstration activity in 2020 and found that the overwhelming majority of demonstrations were peaceful, while also documenting counter-mobilization, armed presence, and differential state responses.

Mechanism	Observed role
Shared experience	Long-standing reports of unequal policing and discrimination supplied latent grievance.
Trigger and evidence	A vivid recorded event reduced ambiguity and synchronized attention.
Narrative	"Black Lives Matter" linked a specific case to structural injustice and dignity.
Identity and symbols	Names of victims, murals, kneeling, signs, and hashtags created portable memory.
Organization	A decentralized ecology of national networks, local groups, community organizations, and spontaneous participants.
Network effects	Visible demonstrations lowered participation thresholds and encouraged local replication.
Counter-framing	Opponents emphasized disorder, policing, or ideological threat; supporters emphasized rights and accountability.
Outcome	Agenda change, organizational growth, policy debate, backlash, and uneven institutional reform.

Interpretation. The case challenges the idea that a mass requires a single leader. Distributed leadership enabled rapid scale and local adaptation, but it also complicated negotiation, message control, and durable institutionalization.

11.3 GameStop in 2021: financial-market mania and counter-elite identity

In January 2021, GameStop and other "meme stocks" experienced extraordinary price and volume movements as bullish narratives spread through social media. The SEC staff report emphasized the role of individual investor attention, short interest, options activity, retail brokerage systems, payment for order flow, market makers, and temporary trading restrictions. The event fused financial speculation with memes, community identity, distrust of hedge funds, and a moral narrative of retail investors confronting Wall Street.

Mechanism	Application
Narrative compression	"Retail versus hedge funds" converted complex market structure into a morally legible conflict.
Social proof	Screenshots of gains, rising prices, and participation posts created visible momentum.
Positive feedback	Attention increased buying; price increases validated the narrative; media coverage attracted more attention.
Identity	Holding became a badge of solidarity, making exit potentially feel like betrayal.
Platform infrastructure	Online forums organized interpretation; broker apps reduced transaction friction; market plumbing constrained execution.

Mechanism	Application
Elite dependence and conflict	Short sellers, market makers, brokers, clearing systems, regulators, and retail investors were interdependent rather than simply two opposing camps.
Outcome asymmetry	Early and late entrants faced different prices and risks; collective identity did not eliminate individual exit incentives.

Interpretation. GameStop demonstrates the digital mass as investor and market actor. Collective attention can expose structural issues and move prices, but financial markets convert solidarity into unequal gains and losses because timing, capital, leverage, and liquidity remain uneven.

11.4 The 2023 Bud Light boycott: brand identity and decentralized consumer sanction

The Bud Light controversy became a national boycott after a promotional partnership was framed by conservative influencers and media as a symbol of broader cultural conflict. The product itself mattered less than the brand's perceived position within identity politics. Videos of product rejection, calls for substitution, retailer visibility, celebrity commentary, and repeated coverage made participation observable. AB InBev's 2023 reporting acknowledged severe U.S. performance pressure and a decline in U.S. revenue, while the wider political meanings remained contested.

Mechanism	Application
Symbolic trigger	A limited marketing act was transformed into a statement about corporate values and social change.
Network brokers	Influencers, partisan media, entertainers, and political actors amplified the boycott.
Low-cost participation	Consumers could substitute another product and publicly display the choice.
Identity market	Beer choice became a signal of group loyalty rather than only taste or price.
Corporate vulnerability	A mass-market brand depends on habitual purchase and broad cultural acceptance.
Feedback	Sales reports and empty-shelf imagery were used as proof of collective efficacy, sustaining attention.
Long-term question	Boycotts can alter brand strategy, but effects depend on persistence, substitution, distribution, and counter-consumption.

Interpretation. Consumer sovereignty becomes political power when individual switching is coordinated and visible. Yet market signals do not automatically reveal a coherent moral majority: they reflect intensity, purchasing patterns, media visibility, and available substitutes.

11.5 BTS ARMY: transnational fandom as distributed organization

BTS fandom illustrates how affective attachment can produce sophisticated collective capacity. Fans translate content, coordinate streaming and voting, archive information, moderate communities, organize fundraising, and support charitable or political causes. The network is transnational, multilingual, and partly self-governing. Its power comes from repeated participation, shared symbols, emotional identification, digital skills, and the ability to convert attention into measurable cultural and economic outcomes.

Mechanism	Application
Affective bond	Music and parasocial attachment create durable motivation and identity.
Distributed labor	Translation, data analysis, tutorials, fundraising, archiving, and promotion are performed by fans.
Ritual and metrics	Release dates, streaming goals, hashtags, and rankings synchronize participation.
Norms and discipline	Communities teach procedures and sanction behavior that threatens group reputation.
Cultural participation	Fans do not merely consume; they create interpretations, art, social ties, and public campaigns.
Power tension	Fans can pressure companies and institutions, but their unpaid labor also benefits commercial rights holders.
Constructive potential	Transnational solidarity, charity, language learning, and political engagement.
Risk	Harassment, rivalry, metric obsession, identity enclosure, and commercialization of intimacy.

Interpretation. Fandom refutes the image of the mass audience as passive. It is a hybrid of audience, community, volunteer organization, market force, and political network.

11.6 QAnon: participatory conspiracy and the manufacture of hidden knowledge

QAnon began in 2017 with anonymous posts presented as privileged clues about a secret struggle against a powerful cabal. Followers collectively interpreted ambiguous messages, produced explanatory videos and graphics, connected unrelated events, and migrated across platforms as moderation increased. The conspiracy offered moral certainty, insider status, community, and a total narrative that transformed disconfirming evidence into proof of secrecy or betrayal.

Mechanism	Application
Ambiguity	Cryptic posts invited endless interpretation and user participation.
Epistemic identity	Followers became researchers who "did their own research," turning belief into status and vocation.
Narrative totality	Complex events were integrated into a single hidden-cabal explanation.
Hero and enemy	A political leader was cast as secret defender; opponents became existentially evil.
Gamification	Clue solving, countdowns, predictions, and community recognition sustained engagement.
Platform ecology	Image boards, social platforms, video channels, messaging services, and influencers moved content across audiences.
Immunization against refutation	Failed predictions were reinterpreted, timelines extended, and critics classified as agents or deceived outsiders.
Outcome	Mainstream political influence, family conflict, harassment, and links to some acts of violence and extremism.

Interpretation. QAnon is not simply a false belief transmitted to passive recipients. It is participatory sense-making under conditions of distrust, status frustration, algorithmic amplification, and entrepreneurial leadership. Its collaborative form increases commitment because followers help produce the worldview they inhabit.

11.7 Comparative case matrix

Case	Primary identity/emotion	Organization	Media form	Collective behavior	Outcome pattern
2024 U.S. campaign	Partisan and national identity	Parties, candidates, PACs	Hybrid broadcast-platform	Voting and turnout	Formal power transfer; polarization
BLM 2020	Racial justice and moral outrage	Decentralized movement ecology	Video, hashtags, news	Protest, donation, policy demand	Agenda change, reform, backlash
GameStop 2021	Retail solidarity and anti-Wall Street narrative	Online forums plus market infrastructure	Forums, apps, financial media	Buy, hold, sell, post	Price volatility, regulatory scrutiny, unequal gains/losses
Bud Light boycott	Cultural identity and corporate symbolism	Influencers and consumer networks	Partisan media, social video	Substitution and public boycott	Brand and sales pressure; corporate adaptation
BTS ARMY	Affective fandom and global belonging	Distributed fan networks	Social platforms, streaming	Promote, translate, fundraise	Cultural power, charity, commercial value
QAnon	Conspiratorial identity and hidden knowledge	Influencers, anonymous sources, communities	Cross-platform participatory media	Interpret, share, mobilize	Radicalization, political influence, social harm

12

The MASS-10 analytical framework

A comprehensive diagnostic model



Figure 5. MASS-10 integrates constituency, affect, organization, mediation, structure, narrative, mobilization, power, behavior, and outcomes.

MASS-10 is designed to prevent single-cause explanations. A strong analysis moves through all ten dimensions and then examines feedback among them. The framework can be used for elections, protests, riots, revolutions, speculative markets, fandoms, consumer campaigns, religious revivals, and online conspiracies.

Dimension	Diagnostic questions	Key indicators
1. People who constitute the mass	Who participates, who abstains, and who is excluded? What are the internal divisions by class, race, gender, region, age, education, occupation, and ideology?	Composition, scale, density, turnover, participation inequality
2. Shared emotions and identities	Which emotions synchronize attention? What "we" is created, and against which "they"?	Anger, fear, hope, grief, pride, humiliation, solidarity, antagonism
3. Leaders and organizations	Who interprets events, supplies resources, sets strategy, and disciplines participants?	Centralized vs distributed leadership, membership, funding, accountability
4. Media and algorithms	Which channels select, rank, personalize, repeat, and measure messages?	Ownership, gatekeeping, recommendation, moderation, metrics, bots
5. Economic and social conditions	Which material pressures and institutional changes create receptivity?	Employment, inequality, prices, status, insecurity, discrimination, crisis
6. Core narratives and symbols	How are causes, victims, enemies, heroes, and remedies represented?	Slogans, myths, images, hashtags, flags, martyrs, data visualizations

Dimension	Diagnostic questions	Key indicators
7. Methods of mobilization	How is attention converted into coordinated behavior?	Rallies, canvassing, strikes, boycotts, apps, donations, rituals, incentives
8. Power relations	Who controls coercion, capital, law, expertise, infrastructure, and legitimacy?	Resource asymmetry, veto points, alliances, dependence, repression
9. Actual behavior	What do participants actually do, beyond stated opinion?	Vote, protest, buy, sell, share, volunteer, harass, withdraw, create
10. Short- and long-term outcomes	Who gains or loses? What institutions, identities, and memories remain?	Policy, prices, legitimacy, organization, backlash, learning, demobilization

12.1 Causal loops

- **Attention loop:** media visibility increases participation; participation creates more visible content; visibility attracts institutional response.
- **Identity loop:** shared action strengthens identity; stronger identity increases willingness to act and discount outside information.
- **Market loop:** demand raises price or scarcity; price and scarcity signal desirability; more participants enter.
- **Repression loop:** coercion can deter action or create martyrs and broader solidarity depending on legitimacy and media visibility.
- **Organization loop:** successful action generates resources and institutions; bureaucracy can then preserve capacity or alienate participants.
- **Polarization loop:** antagonistic messages mobilize the base; counter-mobilization confirms the threat narrative; compromise becomes costly.

12.2 A practical scoring protocol

For comparative research, each dimension can be scored from 0 to 4, not as a moral grade but as an indicator of intensity or capacity. Analysts should preserve qualitative notes because the same score can have different meanings.

Score	Interpretation
0	Absent or negligible
1	Weak, fragmented, or episodic
2	Moderate and uneven
3	Strong and sustained
4	Dominant, highly institutionalized, or system-shaping

Examples: a movement may score 4 on emotional synchronization but 1 on organization; a party campaign may score 4 on organization but 2 on shared substantive policy; a conspiracy network may score 4 on narrative closure but 0 on evidence quality. The framework forces analysts to distinguish mobilizing strength from democratic or epistemic quality.

12.3 Evaluation criteria

Criterion	Constructive form	Dangerous form
Epistemic quality	Multiple sources, verification, revision, protected dissent	Closed information, rumor, leader infallibility, falsification immunity
Democratic quality	Inclusive membership, fair procedure, accountability, nonviolence	Exclusion, coercion, cult of personality, collective punishment
Organizational quality	Transparent resources, member voice, succession, local knowledge	Opaque funding, oligarchy, factional intimidation, dependency
Social outcome	Solidarity, rights expansion, problem solving, mutual aid	Scapegoating, panic, destructive escalation, durable polarization
Power outcome	Reduced domination and wider capacity to act	New monopoly, surveillance, repression, or exploitation

13

Comprehensive assessment

The constructive possibilities and dangers of mass society

13.1 What the mass makes possible

Large-scale collective life enables achievements that isolated individuals cannot produce: universal education, public health, democratic elections, labor rights, national infrastructure, scientific collaboration, disaster response, consumer standards, civil-rights movements, and global cultural exchange. Shared attention can reveal hidden injustice, coordinate mutual aid, discipline corporations and governments, and create identities that cross local boundaries.

Mass participation can improve judgment when dispersed knowledge is aggregated under fair conditions. Citizens can monitor officials; users can document events; investors can challenge professional consensus; consumers can punish firms; fans can build transnational solidarity; social movements can expand the moral and political agenda. The capacity to act collectively is a foundation of freedom, not merely a threat to it.

13.2 What the mass makes dangerous

The same scale can accelerate panic, hatred, speculative bubbles, authoritarian loyalty, war fever, conspiracy, and reputational destruction. Large populations are vulnerable when attention is centrally manipulated, leaders are unaccountable, institutions lose trust, economic insecurity deepens, and communication rewards outrage over verification. Network speed can compress the interval between allegation and punishment, while synthetic media can destabilize evidence itself.

13.3 The decisive variables

Variable	More constructive trajectory	More dangerous trajectory
Education	Evidence evaluation, historical knowledge, tolerance for uncertainty	Credential resentment without access to reliable knowledge
Economic security	Long-term planning, lower threat sensitivity, wider solidarity	Zero-sum competition, humiliation, scapegoating
Information environment	Plural sources, provenance, investigative capacity, transparent ranking	Monopoly, overload, hidden targeting, coordinated deception
Institutional trust	Earned trust combined with audit and correction	Blind deference or total cynicism
Organization	Membership, internal democracy, trained leadership, durable resources	Atomization or opaque leader-centered networks
Leadership	Accountable, replaceable, truth-constrained, coalition-building	Charismatic infallibility, enemy construction, escalation incentives
Rules and rights	Peaceful opposition, due process, minority protection	Winner-take-all domination, censorship, political violence
Platform design	User control, friction for virality, context, interoperability	Engagement maximization, opaque amplification, surveillance dependence

13.4 Final propositions

1. **The mass is historically made.** Industrialization, national institutions, media systems, markets, and digital platforms create the conditions under which strangers become a collective object and actor.
2. **The mass is internally plural.** Apparent unity can conceal different motives, identities, resources, and levels of participation.
3. **Emotion is necessary but ambivalent.** It can destroy judgment or sustain courage and solidarity.
4. **Organization is the bridge between number and power.** Unorganized majorities remain weak; organized masses can challenge elites but also create new oligarchies.
5. **Media do not simply transmit opinion.** They structure attention, categories, visibility, and perceived possibility.
6. **Elites and masses are interdependent.** Elites possess concentrated resources, but rule requires compliance, legitimacy, labor, consumption, and participation.
7. **Digital participation does not abolish gatekeeping.** It redistributes gatekeeping to platforms, algorithms, creators, moderators, and network effects.
8. **Collective intelligence is designed.** Diversity, independence, aggregation, verification, and error correction must be institutionally protected.
9. **No mass will is completely spontaneous or completely fabricated.** Collective preferences emerge through interaction among experience, narrative, organization, and institutions.
10. **The democratic task is not to eliminate the mass.** It is to build conditions under which large-scale publics can act without surrendering pluralism, evidence, rights, and accountability.

Concluding judgment

The mass should be understood neither as a passive herd nor as an infallible people. It is a field of collective capacity. Under accountable institutions and plural information, it can become a democratic public and an organized force for reform. Under insecurity, isolation, monopoly, and unrestrained leadership, it can become a vehicle of domination, exclusion, and self-destructive enthusiasm.

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