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THE CONSEQUENCES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Cultural and Critical Perspectives
on Mass Media and Society

Kirk Hallahan

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For Jean and Jenna

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Foreward

This book is a brief survey of contemporary ideas about the cultural impact of mass media on society.   The use of *consequences* in the title reflects the fact that most cultural researchers prefer this term (instead of *media effects*) to describe media's influence on human experience.

During the past 30 years, culture has emerged as a major theoretical framework in which to investigate media. Chapter I examines how media influence culture generally, as suggested by various contemporary media scholars and others. Chapter II then focuses on *critical-cultural theories* about the nature of media power and its potentially negative influence.

This book can adopted as a supplementary text in introductory mass media courses along with a survey text such as Joseph R. Dominick's *The Dynamics of Mass Communication* (available from McGraw-Hill). It also can serve as a foundational text for other assigned readings in advanced courses dealing with mass media and society, communication theory, or cultural studies.

Students are encouraged to focus thoughtfully on the main ideas, not attempt to merely memorize details. Important concepts and names appear in boldface and are defined in italics. The abridged Subject Index lists the page with the primary discussion of each topic. Sidebars throughout the text, set off with sans serif type, provide insights that supplement the main text.   The Notes section cites quoted materials and guides students to other pertinent sources.

Special thanks go to colleagues Kenton Bird, Donna Rouner, Marty Traynor and James Van Leuven, all of Colorado State, for their encouragement and assistance in this project. I also want to acknowledge Dennis Davis, Lana Rakow and Stephen Rendahl, who helped me crystalize many of these ideas during the time I served on the faculty at the University of North Dakota. This project also would not have been possible without the able assistance of Marge Byers, Bart Grange and editor Ken Hruska of McGraw-Hill.

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Updates

Updates and additional information on topics contained in *The Consequences of Mass Communication* can be accessed online via the World Wide Web at **http://lamar.colostate.edu/~hallahan/consequences.htm.**

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I
Mass Media and Culture

Imagine the time is January 2001 -- the beginning of a new millennium and a new century. For a class assignment in anthropology, you've been asked to select 100 items for a time capsule intended to portray life in the United States during the 20th century.

What would you include?

Some of the items might be inventions that have shaped our way of life.   You might choose, for example, *the automobile, the airplane, the refrigerator, the electric range and the microwave oven* -- all significant 20th century inventions. Other objects related to mass media might include *the television, the transistor radio, the personal computer, the compact disc and the video cassette.*

You also might consider images that portray the American way of life. Chances are you would rely heavily on the media as a source because media images are so plentiful and because so much of what we know about life is what we see portrayed in the media. For example, you might choose to include movie clips featuring stars in representative films from different decades of the century: Charlie Chaplin in "Modern Times," John Wayne in "The Sands of Iwo Jima," James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause," or John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever."   Each of these film classics is said to capture the spirit of its time.

Of course, you probably don't want to overlook television.   Which TV shows best exemplified American life during the second half of the 20th century? Some options might be "Leave It To Beaver," "The Brady Bunch," "All in the Family," and "Married with Children."   However, you also could consider "Melrose Place," "Beverly Hills 90210" or "The Simpsons" -- if you thought these shows, in fact, represented America.

Your sampling of media content wouldn't be complete without articles and photos from some representative print media. However, the images you select

will vary dramatically, depending upon whether you choose from *Life, Mechanix Illustrated, Playboy, Ms., Rolling Stone* or *National Enquirer.*

This little anthropological exercise underscores the important role that media play in our lives. Among all of the ways that media influence humans, probably none is more important nor pervasive than their cultural consequences.

This book examines the role of media as cultural institutions in modern society that operate to shape what we know and how we know it, and thus define human experience itself.   From a cultural perspective, media content is not merely news, advertising or entertainment. Instead, it is the cement that binds together the many diverse people in modern society.   Similarly, the influence of media is not limited to understanding the experience of reading the newspaper or watching television, or the direct effect of these activities on behavior. Media subtly influence the very nature of how we communicate with others, thus altering basic human relationships in modern society. Sociologist Michael Schudson sums up the societal impact of media this way:

> *The greatest effects may not be measurable influences on attitudes or beliefs produced by media but the range of information the media make available to individual human minds, the range of connections they bring to light, the particular social practices and collective rituals by which they organize our days and ways. The media … are more important, not less important, than popular opinion would have it, but rarely in the ways that popular views assume. The media organize not just information but audiences. They legitimize not just events and sources that report them but readers and viewers. Their capacity to* publicly include *is perhaps their most important feature. That you and I read the same front page or see the same television as the President of the United States and the chair of IBM is empowering; the impression it promotes is equality and commonality.*[1]

What is Culture?

The term *culture* often is difficult to define because it is used in at least two distinct ways in modern society.

If someone is interested in aesthetics, culture refers to everything that is *refined* or *the very best that society has to offer, especially in fine arts* -- dance, drama, literature, music, and the visual arts. In this sense, culture is an elitist term.

However, anthropologists and sociologists define culture more broadly: **culture** is *everything that goes on around individuals as part of everyday living.*

 Just as biologists use the culture within a Petri dish to allow microorganisms to grow and to multiply, culture is what nourishes and sustains us in everyday living.

Culture is a property of a **society** or *group of people who live together*; a culture is shared by everyone and does not belong to any single individual. Within a society, there is often a **general culture** that binds everyone in a society. However, there can also be one or more **sub-cultures**, usually based on demographic or linguistic characteristics, which bind certain groups together *within* the general culture.   A case in point: youth culture.

Culture has three distinct dimensions:

□ **Beliefs and values**.   **Beliefs** are *ideas people hold to be true*; **values** are *judgments about what is good, important, desirable or pleasing*. People who live within the same culture tend to share generally similar beliefs and values. Beliefs and values guide our daily actions as well as our reactions to new ideas.
 Ideology is sometimes used to describe *the overriding system of beliefs and values shared by people within the same culture*. While the term is most frequently used in a political context, an ideology can represent *any* set of beliefs and values that people consider to be true or important.

□ **Rituals and customs.** People who share the same culture engage in certain **rituals**, *common and routine behaviors that come to be associated with that culture*. Rituals can be *formal ceremonies* termed **rites**. Examples include weddings and funerals, high school and college graduations, first communions and Passover seders.   However, rituals also can include going to the baseball game, attending the Senior Prom, or primping for hours in front of the bathroom mirror to perfect the newest popular hairdo. Some of these common activities are **media rituals**, such as watching TV, reading a favorite book, or walking down the street with a blaring boom box. When people engage in these same actions over time, rituals become **customs** or *behaviors expected to be observed by people in the society*. Customs are part of the cultural heritage of a society.

□ **Cultural artifacts** represent *anything that is an expression of a culture and can be observed*. Artifacts include gestures, actions, words, images, languages, handmade crafts or manufactured goods. Virtually all forms of media content are cultural artifacts. Artifacts reflect the beliefs and values, as well as the practices and rituals, of the people who produce or use them. Artifacts are one of the principal ways people experience culture, and thus artifacts are a convenient way to study culture. Certain visual images come to be associated with particular cultures, and are referred to as **icons**. Physical objects that become the target of passionate devotion are labelled **idols**. The

U.S. postage stamp that featured Elvis Presley is an example of an icon that commemorates the rock 'n' roll idol.[2]

The Social Construction of Culture

People learn about their culture many ways. These include undergoing formal training in school or church, engaging in cultural rituals, and using cultural artifacts. Individuals also learn about their culture through a process of **social learning**, or *the observation and emulation of behaviors by others*. The mass media are especially important in social learning because media portrayals provide role models for what people think happens, or ought to happen, in everyday life. Through the examples they provide, media help define culture. As young children, learning about culture takes place as part of **socialization**, or *the process of learning how to be a fully participating adult within society*. Adults learn about cultures that are different from the ones in which they were raised through a process termed **acculturation.**

The culture within a society is *dynamic* and *ever-changing*, continuously shaped and re-shaped through the actions and interactions of people. The mass media are major forces in cultural processes by facilitating and extending this human interaction. In doing so, media are both quicker and more pervasive in stimulating cultural change than face-to-face contacts alone.

Social scientists have recognized the importance of human interaction and communication for most of the 20th century. The trend began in earnest with **symbolic interactionism,** a humanist movement within sociology in 1930s that emphasized how human behavior could be explained by the interpretation of symbols and the interaction *within* and *among* individuals.[3] Before that time, social scientists focused primarily on *stimulus-response models*, based on early psychological experiments, and used *structural-functional theories* to analyze events. Human behavior was explained as the result of either *external factors* (such as economic or political power) or *internal forces* within humans (such as heredity, instinct, or Freudian sexual drives).

Cultural theorists recognize that communication and culture are intertwined. Most of them reject the conventional **transmission model of communication** that portrays communication as the mechanistic sending of a message from a source through a channel to a receiver. As an alternative, for example, James W. Carey proposed a richer **ritualistic model of communication** that focuses upon how *people are drawn together and share collective meaning*. He defines **communication** itself as the *process through which culture is created, modified and transformed,* or what he terms the "celebration of shared beliefs." Instead of communication being used to control others, Carey's ritualistic model stresses how communication creates communality.[4]

Media, Signs and Symbols

Researchers who study communication and culture are especially interested in the way that groups of people use signs and symbols.[5] **Signs** are created by people to *represent particular ideas and can take various forms: gestures, sounds, visuals, or written text*. Signs are organized in **codes** or **languages**, which are *systems of signs that enable members of a society to communicate*. We commonly think of a language as a particular set of verbal signs, such as found in the English language. Other sign systems include smoke signals, Morse code, the American Sign Language for the deaf, and the American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) computer language. Language itself can serve as a distinguishing characteristic of a culture.

Signs are not important in themselves. What makes them interesting to observe is their **meaning**, or *the way that the people interpret or make sense of signs*. A sign becomes a **symbol** when it carries *meaning recognized by members of a culture or subculture*. People in two different cultures can see the same sign -- a word or an image, for example -- and draw quite different interpretations because the sign represents different ideas symbolically. Like culture itself, symbolic meanings can change over time, and can shape our perceptions of the world. Symbols and meanings, including those found in media messages, are important because they help us define our **identities**, or *our self-perceptions of who we are, our role in society, and our worth vìs-a-vìs others*. Individuals enjoy personal identities, but people within a culture commonly share a **collective identity** that helps to bind members of a culture together and fortify the culture.

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The Creation of Meaning: Three Key Concepts

The idea that people derive individual meanings from media messages is one of the most important concepts within cultural studies and goes by several names:

Interpretivism suggests that people can look at the same message and focus on different aspects to draw different conclusions about the message's meaning. Artisans, for example, often want to leave the meaning of their work "open to interpretation" by the viewer or listener.

Relativism is the notion that there is no absolute truth. Rather,

all knowledge is situationally determined and is dependent upon the persons involved and the circumstances under which it is created. Thus, ethical truth can vary between individuals and groups, and no one is necessarily wrong.

Constructionism, also known as **social reality theory**, suggests that people actively develop different views of the world and how it operates. People don't necessarily act based upon actual conditions in the real world, but instead on what Walter Lippmann termed "the pictures in our heads." Objective reality (if it exists) is different from social reality, which is created by audiences based on their experiences (whether obtained from media or elsewhere).[6]

Symbolic Gatekeeping and Caretaking

If communication is viewed as the process of exchanging signs and symbols, the importance of the mass media can be understood in terms of *their role in disseminating the symbols important to a society*.

Traditional views of the functions of media, based upon the transmission model of communication, would suggest that media operate as **cultural gatekeepers.** Media provide **exposure** to certain symbols and thus visibility for the people, events and ideas those symbols represent. Media can also confer status on particular symbols through the prominence and frequency they give them, suggesting that certain ideas are important and others are not. This process can be explicit, such as when a critic recommends a movie. However, this process can be more implicit; media can endorse an idea by merely devoting attention to it. Finally, media set the cultural agenda for a society. The **agenda-setting** metaphor says media *tell people what to think about, not necessarily what to think*. The result is that people are primed to act upon and to talk with others about the ideas on their minds at any particular time. Thus, media prompt and shape the interactive process in which culture is created.

Media also serve as **cultural caretakers** of the symbols important to a society -- along with schools, churches, libraries and arts institutions. In this role, media are entrusted to preserve a society's symbols, and to protect and use them responsibly. When audiences are critical of media content, they generally complain that symbols important to them are absent from public exposure, or have been usurped by symbols representing competing beliefs and values, or have been used inappropriately in media portrayals. Understanding these deep-rooted symbolic meanings for audiences helps explain why media content has become such a passionate issue for many groups in modern society.

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Alternate Views of the Influence of Media on Culture

The idea that media *regulate* or *control* culture has been rejected by several contemporary writers. Jon Katz suggests that media don't create our culture, but merely offer a picture of it. He writes: "The media don't render our culture smart or dumb, civilized or raucous, peaceful or violent. They mirror the state of the existing culture."[7]

Similarly, a provocative alternative to control has been suggested by Douglas Rushoff, who says that media represent a datasphere or **mediasphere** that is an extension of the planetary ecosystem and serves as the breeding ground for new ideas in our culture. He uses the metaphor of a virus to describe the process of how new ideas spread within our society like an uncontrolled infection. He explains:

Media viruses spread through the datasphere the same way biological ones spread through the body or a community. But instead of traveling along an organic circulatory system, a media virus travels through the networks of the mediasphere. The "protein shell" of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero -- as long as it can catch our attention. Any one of these virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed. Once attached, the virus injects its more hidden agendas into the datastream in the form of ideological code--not genes, but a conceptual equivalent we now call "memes." Like real genetic material, these memes infiltrate the way we do business, educate ourselves, interact with one another--and even the way we perceive reality.[8]

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Media and Storytelling

A second major way media impact culture is through **storytelling**.

Stories, or narratives, are an integral part of every culture.[9] The importance of storytelling in western civilization can be traced back to ancient Greek myths and epics as well as Teutonic sagas. Today, the importance of stories is just as evident when anthropologists and folklorists study native peoples around the world, ranging from African tribes to North American Indians living in urban settings.

A **story** is an *account about incidents or events involving people within the society*. Sometimes termed myths, legends or folklore, stories can take the form of first-person accounts of the speaker's personal experience, or dramas that depict complex relationships involving others. Storytelling is one of the principal ways in which cultures are created and preserved. Characters and plots become readily familiar to people within cultures. Stories often feature **heroes** and **heroines**, *protagonists who become larger-than-life figures and whose feats people strive to duplicate*. Stories also involve **villains**, or *antagonists whose ideals, words or actions people detest because they differ from their own*. The storylines serve as models for how people should act, or should not act. Stories are told and retold to celebrate shared beliefs and values and to transmit these beliefs and values to future generations.

Media can shape culture through the straightforward conveyance of data, facts, or information. However, stories are especially effective in cultural processes because they *involve* audiences by entertaining them and by challenging them to make sense of the story's symbolic meaning. Much entertainment fare, for example, centers around the portrayal of fictional incidents that provide object lessons about the society's beliefs and values. In a similar way, many advertisements use stories to dramatize the cultural benefits of products. Storytelling even extends to media reports about real life events; we read *news stories* in print media and watch and listen to *broadcast stories* in television and radio. Reuven Frank, former NBC director of news, summarized the importance of effective storytelling in reporting this way:

> *Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction or drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and end. These are not only the essentials of drama, but they are the essentials of narrative.*[10]

How Media Producers Tell Stories

Media writers, editors and producers must be knowledgeable about the culture of the audiences they want to reach, including the symbols and stories familiar to them. Take comedy, for example. Comedians tell jokes about everyday events, people and ideas. Humor works because comedians create little stories that put these already familiar ideas together in clever, thought-provoking ways and make associations audiences hadn't thought of before.
Media stories usually can be identified as being of a particular **genre**, or easily *identifiable class of story*. TV situation comedies, B-western movies, Harlequin romance novels, TV commercials, documentaries, video games, newspaper feature stories, magazine travel stories, music videos and even contemporary porno films are all examples of genres. The style and content of these each follow the storytelling and other conventions that are unique to the genre.

Genre is a useful organizing principle for producing much media content. Genres provide a formula for how particular types of stories should be told. We disparagingly describe many works as *formulaic* when the conventions and narrative techniques commonly associated with a particular genre are taken to the extreme, with little or no creative variation. Genre also is helpful for audiences, who often approach specific media content with expectations about what they are going to see or hear. Non-generic content is often difficult to understand, requires more effort and reduces audience enjoyment.

Media producers routinely draw upon familiar stories within particular cultures. **Adaptations** involve borrowing works found in other, established media. The earliest movies, for example, adapted stories that appeared originally as plays and novels. **Remakes** involve reproducing works that have already have been produced in the same medium, but with a different treatment and different actors. For example, at least a dozen filmed versions of William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" have been produced in the past century. **Sequels** are popular ways familiar stories are elaborated upon by telling what happened after the original version ended. Finally, **spinoffs** involve new stories that are based, at least in part, on already familiar situations, but feature their own central characters and storylines.

Familiar storylines often appear in unexpected and subtle ways through a process termed **framing**, or *the use of culturally resonating themes with which people can readily identify*.[11] A **frame** operates like the border of a picture to focus our attention on a message in a particular way by incorporating certain elements and excluding others. For example, a news story about a upstart company competing with an established giant corporation might use a frame that draws upon the Biblical story of David versus Goliath. Most of us know

the story of how the youthful and courageous warrior killed the giant, well-armored Philistine using a sling-shot.   Similarly, many romances involve a Cinderella framing in which a young girl finds her Prince Charming. The details vary, but the story is essentially the same. As with the use of genres, framing helps media producers create messages easily and efficiently, and enables audiences to grasp quickly the essence of the intended meaning. Frames work as a metonym, *a device that reveals a portion of the picture around which the audience fills in details*. The effect of framing can be embellished through narrative techniques that reinforce the frame in the minds of the audience. These can range from strong visual images to verbal imagery achieved through devices such as similes and metaphors. Indeed, media stories -- in news, advertising and entertainment alike -- often reflect a relatively small handful of underlying, easily identifiable, culturally resonating themes found within a particular culture.

Media Technology and Culture

Media alter the way societies communicate -- and thus how culture is constructed -- in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most fundamental influence stems from **technology**, or *the use of different physical devices to create and distribute symbols*.

When humans first began to communicate, they were left to their own devices. Technology was unnecessary.   Human communication began with crude forms of **nonverbal communication**, in which early peoples waved their hands and moved their bodies.   However, as humans recognized the limitations of gestures, and as people began to associate specific sounds with different ideas, the spoken word emerged as a more efficient means of communication. **Oral communication**, which began somewhere between 100,000 B.C. and 70,000 B.C. enabled people to express complex and abstract ideas with great specificity, while freeing up the hands to do other things while they talked.

With the advent of **visual communication**, in which people produced graphical images to record information and express ideas, humans began to use physical means other than their bodies to communicate.   The earliest artifact of human communication, found in Hungary and dating back to about 45,000 B.C., is a small oval plaque carved out of a wooly-mammoth tooth and inscribed using a sharp rock. Archaeologists believe it was created by Neanderthals, who were known to use animal bones, antlers and skulls as symbols. Subsequently, humans have employed an array of more sophisticated tools to communicate. For example, by about 27,000 B.C. humans used charcoal and paints made out of clay and red ocher to create sophisticated cave paintings that depicted animal life. With the subsequent advent of **textual communication**, technological

innovations evolved.   Humans began to write by first dragging a stick through mud. They later formed and dried the mud into small, portable clay tablets. Sticks were succeeded by seals, and later by an array of other writing instruments.   The medium used to transmit messages also changed rapidly, as clay tablets were replaced by papyrus, parchment and eventually wood-pulp paper.[12]

Media technologies alter human communication by employing different **representational codes** or sign systems -- gestures, sounds, visuals or written text -- in different combinations. At the same time, each uses different **presentational codes** that add meaning to the representational signs, and thus alter the way a message might be interpreted by an audience. Oral communication alters the human voice through rhetorical devices such as volume, pitch, tone, rhythm and mnemonic techniques, such as alliteration and repetition. Visual communication relies upon vastly different presentational codes: color, texture, light and perspective. Finally, textual communication gains meaning through the manipulation of the text, including the shapes, sizes, justification, and spacing of characters, well as their positioning (or layout) on the surface in which they appear.

Media technologies shape communication in other ways:

☐ Each medium limits the overall size of messages, and thus determines the number of signs and symbols that can be included. For example, the amount of information on a printed page is determined by the number of words or pictures that can be read legibly.

☐ Each medium follows special **media conventions** or rules for message construction. The convention for a book in western cultures calls for pages to be organized from left to right, from top to bottom, with the contents organized in numbered chapters.

☐ Each medium dictates **routines** that people follow to access messages. Early broadcasters found it convenient to produce shows in 15-minute increments. Today, based on that legacy, we expect TV shows to begin on the hour or half-hour, and we organize our lives to watch particular programs. In a similar way, because of the complexity of printing and distributing newspapers, most of us are used to getting our daily newspaper only once a day. However, that routine might change as printed newspapers convert to electronic delivery via computer.

Technological Determinism

The nature of communication in a particular culture varies based on the media technologies found within the society -- a theory known as **technological determinism**.

Canadian communications scholar Harold Innis, working in the early 1950s, was the first to suggest this idea. He did so by examining the historical role of communication in ancient civilizations. He found that the predominant form of communication in different societies had significant consequences for their cultures.

In ancient Sumeria, beginning around 3,100 B.C., the predominant form of communication was the clay tablet, which Innis characterized as being "time-biased." Permanent, weighty, subject to breakage, and cumbersome to transport, clay tablets favored a centralized and rigid social system.

Innis contrasted clay tablets to the "space-biased" medium of papyrus, which became the predominant medium of communication in ancient Egypt only a few centuries later. Papyrus, a reed-like vegetation that grew plentifully along the Nile River, was dried and pounded into long sheets by the Egyptians. Papyrus scrolls proved far superior to clay tablets because they were durable yet transportable. The nature of the medium led to a "lightness" in communication that enabled people to be more expressive, and encouraged a far larger number of people to communicate in writing. This trend resulted in the rise of a sizeable priestly class, which allowed Egyptian civilization to thrive and grow. Meanwhile, Sumeria languished as a civilization because its mass communication was concentrated in the hands of a few.[13]

Marshall McLuhan, a media guru who received widespread popular attention in the 1960s, is the best known advocate of technological determinism. However, instead of ancient civilizations, McLuhan focused his attention on differences in human communication as people became accustomed to broadcasting instead of printed or textual media. **Print culture** had begun with the advent of alphabetic languages in around 1,100 B.C. and exploded with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century A.D.[14]

McLuhan's ideas can be summed up in his often-quoted catch phrase that "the medium is the message." His basic thesis was that the *impact of media is rooted in the experience of using a particular medium*, not its content. Modern audiences can obtain the same information through different sources. But, according to McLuhan, the real impact is based upon whether audiences obtain the information by watching or listening to it on television or radio, or by reading it in a newspaper, magazine or book.

McLuhan argued that media are "the extensions of man" and alter human perception itself. He described the wheel as an extension of the foot, clothing as an extension of the skin, and electric circuitry as an extension of the central nervous system. McLuhan argued that oral cultures relied primarily upon the ear: for them, *hearing* was believing. But with the invention of writing, and later printing, the primary sensory device for humans became the eye. It was only then that *seeing* became believing.   He argued that different media fundamentally change our views of the world by bringing out different modes of thought or ways of perceiving the world.

McLuhan also differentiated between what he called hot media and cool media. **Hot media** -- such as books, newspapers, magazines and movies seen in a theater -- do not maintain a sensory balance and *require little imagination or involvement on the part of the audience*. By comparison, radio and television -- along with interpersonal exchanges, telephone conversations and cartoons -- are **cool media**, which are low in definition and therefore *require audiences to become involved in interpreting the message.* (Interestingly, McLuhan's ideas run counter to subsequent ideas about media involvement. Some psychologists suggest that television and radio are actually *low involvement* media because people can pay little attention or do other things while watching, but still understand the action and and derive meaning.)[15]

More than just about any other cultural theorist, McLuhan argued that the media have drastically altered the way we experience the world. More recently, and in a somewhat less modest vein, David Altheide and Robert P. Snow have suggested that the cultural impact of media can be explained in the way media have superimposed rules for how we see and interpret social affairs in general. They describe these rules as **media logic**, or *the unique way in which media present and transmit information, including how material is organized, the style of presentation, and the grammar of media communication.*[16] The result is that we live in a **media culture** in which *we see and hear everything as if it might appear to us through media.*[17]

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**Some of the Subtle Cultural
Consequences of Print Culture**

Johann Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable type in Germany in 1446 has been termed one of the world's greatest inventions. The printing press made information easily accessible at low cost and impacted the cultural landscape in pre-Renaissance Europe in a variety of ways.

Among the many subtle changes was the disengagement of words from discourse. For the first time words took on meaning in themselves, outside of conversations or stories. Written communication led to the advent of lists, indices, titles, labels, and captions. Dictionaries also became a requirement so meanings of words would be standardized. These were unnecessary in oral cultures.

Similarly, the printed book led to the notion that ideas could be owned and should be attributed to individuals. Whereas the stories shared in an oral culture belonged to everyone, the printed book soon gave rise to the ideas of citation and copyright.   People also became curiously aware that much of what they wrote was borrowed unintentionally. This linkage to the ideas of others is referred to as **intertextuality**.

Perhaps, most importantly, reading began as group activity, but evolved into an individual pursuit.   This gave rise to the more general cultural values related to individuality, creativity, perspective and point of view -- ideas not generally associated with oral societies. Reading also required concentration and quiet.   Privacy emerged as a valued commodity, leading to the creation of separate rooms in homes conducive to reading, contemplation and other individual activities. This reinforced the pervasive emphasis on individualism in western cultures.[18]

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Media Technologies and the Quality of Life

We live in a culture that celebrates technology.   Some argue that modern society is a **technocracy**, in which we *apply scientific method and technology to solve problems in all areas of life* without regard to the cultural consequences. The relentless pursuit of technological enhancements leads to a fascination with technology for its own sake, regardless of whether it is needed.[19] Today, Neil Postman argues that we have already crossed the fine line from a mere technocracy into a **technopoly**, where *technology is deified, and it is allowed to extend its influence into all aspects of life*.[20]

With the rapid-fire invention of modern media technologies, some critics wonder whether all the new technology is necessary, or has enhanced the quality of our lives. In 1854, American writer Henry David Thoreau was probably the first to question the value of new media technologies when he observed in *Walden*, "We are in a great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph

from Maine to Texas … but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing to communicate."[21] Today, media critic George Gilder observes:

> *From the personal computer to the fiber-optic cable, from the communications satellite to the compact disc, our generation commands the most powerful information tools in history. Yet the culture we have created with these machines is dreary at best. Why doesn't our superb information technology better inform and uplift us?*
> *This is the most important question of the age. The most dangerous threat to the U.S. economy and society is the breakdown of our cultural institutions -- in the family, religion, education, and the arts -- that preserve and transmit civilization to new generations. If this social fabric continues to fray, we will lose not only our technological prowess and economic competitiveness, but also the meaning of life itself.*[22]

Others concur.[23] Clifford Stoll is a modern-day computer nerd-turned-philosopher in the tradition of Henry Thoreau. He rejects industry-generated hype about what new communications technologies can do. Instead of spending time with media, he recommends traditional pursuits, such as hiking, biking, and visiting friends, families and neighbors. He writes:

> *Once television promised to bring the finest entertainment into our homes. Instead we find a cultural wasteland. In the same way, I suspect the ballyhooed information highway will deliver a glitzy, non-existent world in which important aspects of human interaction are relentlessly devalued.*[24]

Transforming Space, Time and Relationships

Another major way that media have impacted modern society involves changes in our cultural concepts of space, time and human relationships.   **Space** relates to the *spatial or geographic distance between people.*   **Time** means the *temporal order that governs interactions, i.e. whether we communicate on an instantaneous or delayed basis.* **Relationships** refer to *the affinity humans share with others*.

In oral societies, where the spoken word was the predominant mode of communication, time and space were fixed.   To communicate required the communicants to be situated in the same location at the same time. It was

likely that the people communicating shared common experiences, beliefs and values -- and thus could construct similar meanings from the exchange.

One of the subtle consequences of written communication -- first with the written manuscript and then the printed book -- was that space and time were no longer fixed. Easily transportable communication allowed messages to be dispersed widely. Indeed, the printed book had a liberating effect by removing people from the domination of the immediate and the local.[25]

As part of his theories about media technology, Harold Innis (see page 12) contended that the emergence of large political empires was possible because political leaders were able to control communications over large geographic territories, and that the limits of empires were determined by communication technology. Whereas oral communication lent itself to small democratic societies, where political power was diffused, Innis believed that written communications were ideal for authoritarian rule because the written word was final and not open to challenge, firmly imbedded on papyrus, parchment or paper. He argued that improved communication and transportation were responsible for the rise of the great Egyptian, Greek and Roman Empires. He applied his same thesis to explain the later emergence of the great English, French, Dutch and Austro-Hungarian empires in 1500s and 1600s.[26]

While the written world opened up new cultural vistas, there could be a lapse of hours, days or months between the time a written message was produced and when it was read. Thus, the printed word inserted both spatial and temporal distance in the communication process. But with the advent of electronic media, space and time were collapsed once again.

The electronic revolution began with the advent of the telegraph in 1844. The telegraph represented the first time that electricity was applied to communication. When invented, the telegraph allowed someone in Washington to send a message to Baltimore, 40 miles away. A person could then respond immediately, eliminating the inconveniences and inefficiencies stemming from spatial distance or temporal delays.[27]

Social Significance of the Telegraph

Samuel F. B. Morse's telegraph ranks among the most important innovations in communications history and served as a model for communications technologies that came later. The telegraph was the first time America "wired the nation" to communicate large volumes of information. Subsequently, the nation would string complex networks of copper-wire lines for

telephones, coaxial cable for television, and fiber optics to carry both TV and phone messages. When the U.S. Congress

declined Morse's offer to purchase and operate his system, the telegraph established the precedent for the private ownership of telecommunications in the United States, a pattern followed by both telephony and broadcasting. Finally, the telegraph's system of dashes and dots was the precursor to the 0s and 1s that make up modern computer languages.

James W. Carey suggests the telegraph marked the beginning of modern communications because, for the first time, communication was separated from transportation. The telegraph also altered our cultural lives dramatically. For example, our expectations changed about the urgency of information. People wanted information *now*, and readily recognized the benefits of timely information.

The telegraph spurred the growth of transportation, especially the railroads, which used telegraphic messages to improve their schedules and reroute shipments around delays. The modern futures and stock markets also emerged. With the advent of standardized grading and pricing, it was no longer necessary for buyers to inspect goods in advance. Instead, they could simply order them by wire. Finally, the telegraph necessitated the creation of the first system of standardized time zones in the U.S. (adopted in 1883) because people needed to know the exact time in distant cities.[28]

In the news arena, the invention of the telegraph coincided with the advent of the modern wire services. As Associated Press and Reuters correspondents adopted the new technology, newspapers devoted more space to national and international coverage.   News dispatches were short and pithy to avoid excess charges and possible downed lines. Thus, the use of telegraphic dispatches contributed to the rise of the *inverted pyramid* (in which the most important facts are included at the beginning of the story, followed by increasingly less important details) as a format for writing news stories -- a convention quickly adopted by local writers so that stories in the same paper would read alike. Other subtle differences for news included less use of colloquial language and less biased reporting about politics as the wire services attempted to serve client newspapers with divergent political viewpoints.[29]

Media and Changing Social Relationships

"What hath God wrought?" was the first message sent on the telegraph. Since that first message, cultural theorists and others have pondered the cultural implications of electronic communications.

The telegraph was part of the sweeping societal changes that took place in the 19th century with the rise of industrialization and urbanization -- trends that would alter interpersonal relationships dramatically. In large numbers, people left their hometowns for factory jobs in cities, where they were often isolated from their extended family and life-long friends. A whole new system of social organization emerged, which German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies termed **gesellschaft**, or *society* composed of remote yet interdependent relationships largely based on self-interest. This new modern way of life was in sharp contrast to the **gemeinschaft,** or *folk community*, which had characterized social relations until that time.[30] Emile Durkheim, another early sociologist, worried that people suffered from **anomie**, a *sense of remoteness* which resulted in stress and a dangerous breakdown in moral standards and values.[31] Indeed, various 19th- and 20th-century philosophers and literary figures would devote considerable attention to this **alienation** or the *sense of detachment felt by many in modern life*.

What role did media play in the social revolution of the 19th century?

While the telegraph facilitated long-distance, instantaneous communication, it did little to tie people together in the same sense that modern telephone advertising extols callers to "reach out and touch someone." Ordinary folks rarely used the telegraph, except to communicate with far-away families in emergencies. The first major device that facilitated interpersonal communication was the telephone, which was invented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1877. Yet, the early history of telephony suggests the telephone's use was limited to affluent people who used the phone primarily for business purposes -- doctors, merchants and factory owners. (Long distance calling was not promoted until the mid-20th century, following the invention of switching equipment that could connect exchanges in distant cities.)[32]

During the period people congregated in cities, print culture continued to be the predominant mode of mass communication. Significant changes took place in print media during the 1880s and 1890s, as many newspapers and magazines expanded their offerings to quench the thirst of transplanted urban dwellers. Innovations included the advent of the halftone (which permitted the widespread use of photographs), more human-interest reporting (including sensationalism and "yellow journalism,") and a greater emphasis on entertainment fare (including the modern sports page and comics).[33]

Newspapers and magazines became a primary tool for acculturating immigrants from abroad and from the rural United States into the cultural life of cities. However, many cultural historians argue that large city newspapers, such as Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, merely pandered to the lowest common denominator in society in order to boost circulation. In doing so, newspapers might have actually exacerbated the sense of detachment felt by urban dwellers. While sensationalized reports were entertaining, newspaper coverage about far-away events or sensationalistic human behaviors didn't reflect what was happening in people's everyday lives, and rarely provided a link to familiar things from their past.

Marshall McLuhan contends that the highly abstract, rigid and highly linear nature of the print media also contributed to people's sense of remoteness. Modern society would not be liberated from factors such as anomie and alienation until the advent of radio, and later television. According to McLuhan, the broadcast media allowed people to feel *connected*, primarily because radio (and later television) used oral communication that enabled people to *feel* what was happening for themselves. This had a **retribalizing effect**, recapturing the *essential communal nature of human beings*. McLuhan explained:

> *Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. This is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.*[34]

Bringing People Together?

McLuhan is best known for his popular metaphor, **the global village.** McLuhan contended that broadcasting -- first radio, later television -- *shrank the world by drawing people closer together once again*. After more than 500 years of distance created by print, broadcasting marked a fundamental realignment of human relationships.[35]

McLuhan's notion of the global village is most often considered a positive consequence of the electronic age, but not everyone agrees. Whereas McLuhan contended that the broadcast media drew fragmented souls together, Professor Joshua Meyerowitz contends that broadcast media continue to *insert distance* between people in the same way as print media. Meyerowitz argues that the

electronic media affect social behavior -- not through the content of their messages -- but by *reorganizing the social setting in which people interact*. By bringing many different types of people to the same "place," electronic media blur many of the formerly distinct social roles and alter the "situational geography" of social life. Television, for instance, is a virtually classless medium that de-emphasizes the differences between rich and poor in real life.

According to Meyerowitz, the process includes the undermining of group locations, which weakens people's once-strong relationships and connections to a social "place." He argues that the physical segregation of the past actually works to create unity and cohesiveness. However, new media such as TV, radio and telephone homogenize people by allowing people to experience and interact with others far away. While such actions might seem attractive, Meyerowitz points to an unintended -- and potentially harmful -- effect of people losing their sense of identity. He suggests that constantly exposing people to ways of life they cannot hope to participate in doesn't provide escape. Instead, it makes people feel *more isolated*.[36]

Communication and Community

Questions of space, time and relationships have focused attention on **community** as a central concept in cultural media studies. Raymond Williams, one of the leading figures in cultural studies in Britain, observed, "Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community."[37]

Traditionally, community has been used to define a collectivity of individuals in a particular geographic place. Sociologists at the University of Chicago in the early 20th century helped popularize community as a romantic ideal in American intellectual thought. In their studies of groups within the urban environment, numerous "Chicago School" researchers examined how people who lived in the same locale shared characteristics forged through daily interaction and nurtured by community schools, churches and newspapers.

Today, the emphasis has shifted from geography to culture. In part, this trend reflects how modern communications and transportation have collapsed space and time, thus making it impossible to define community in any concrete terms short of the entire universe. British anthropologist A.P. Cohen describes communities as "symbolic constructions" defined by the culture its members share. Just as major arteries define neighborhoods in a city, symbolic communities delimit boundaries through shared symbols, language, meanings, ideologies and identities that distinguish people within the community from those outside.[38]

Mass media impact culture by creating communities. Some cultural theorists, for example, define audiences as **interpretive communities** that come into being around a shared pattern of media consumption.[39] Referring to audiences in this way is logical because the root word of community is *communis,* the same Latin root for *communication* and *communal*. Use of the term community in this context dates back to the emergence of the *scientific community* during the Renaissance. Then, discoveries reported in printed books drew together people from all other Europe with interests in such diverse fields as astronomy, botany, medicine, chemistry and physics.   Similarly, groups in modern society with only limited personal exposure to one another refer to themselves as communities: *the black community, the Latino community, the medical community, the educational community*.

A contemporary illustration involves the Internet. Howard Rheingold argues that the interactive nature of computer-mediated communication draws people together in the same way that geographic place once did. He coined the term **virtual community** for *people who communicate regularly with one another online*.   Users are bound together by common interests, share common symbols and language, feel a camaraderie, and act as if they were friends -- even though they might have never seen one another and are not likely to do so.[40] Douglas Rushoff (see page 7) explains this phenomenon by observing that humans have already conquered geographic space; now media provide the only place for civilization to expand. Media are the last remaining frontier and have created places as real and seemingly open as the globe was 500 years ago.[41]

Living Life Vicariously through Media

The rise of modern media has been accompanied by a litany of concerns about the impact on traditional forms of human interaction. One example can be found in the trend futurist Faith Popcorn describes as **cocooning,** in which *people enshrine themselves in their homes*. People can work at home (telecommute), order groceries and take-out food, and obtain essential services such as mobile pet grooming and dry cleaning pick-ups and deliveries. Meanwhile, these entrenched individuals can keep in touch with others via TV, phones and facsimile, CDs, books, newspapers and magazines.[42]

Spending endless hours at home working only exacerbates the feeling of alienation associated with modern society, say some social critics. Over-dependence upon media can be compared to a walling off from awareness in which people can become adrift in mental space.[43] Media now provide the primary social stimulation for some people, who create **parasocial relationships**, in which they *know and relate to people who they see or hear*

in the media as if these media acquaintances were people in real life. Indeed, some people acknowledge that they know more about -- and care more about -- the personal problems of soap opera stars, or feel a closer affinity to a newscaster, than they do with their neighbors next door.

Critics charge that over-reliance upon media also leads to members of modern society becoming **spectators**, rather than participants in the events around them. People are content to sit in their houses and let the world come to them through the tube -- the so-called **couch potato syndrome**. As such, people in modern society are less likely to develop first-hand knowledge about the world. Mitchell Stephens argues:

> *Television viewers live in a world of mediated reality. Increasingly they talk and think about people they have not met, places they have not been. Television has, in McLuhan's terminology, "extended" dramatically our access to news but, as cars weaken the legs they have "extended," reliance on television news may have weakened our ability to hear and tell our own news. We borrow facts, perceptions, even opinions from newscasters, and we borrow the newscasters themselves -- with whom we fancy ourselves being on a first-name basis -- as surrogate busybodies, surrogate friends. It is important to remember, as we allow one of these well-known, well-dressed personalities to present our news, that the exchange of news has not always been a spectator sport, that the pursuit of news once encouraged even nonjournalists to move, observe, investigate, remember and talk, that for an individual to be fully informed, it was once necessary to leave the house.*[44]

Not everyone agrees that today's reliance upon media is all bad. Some evidence suggests cocooning and telecommuting have had positive effects because people who spend less time commuting, or in far-away offices, have taken advantage of their new-found time to get to meet neighbors and become involved in their communities. Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates contends that the people who now engage in several hours of television watching will be better off as they replace some of their passive entertainment with interactive entertainment and communications made possible with the computer.[45]

Douglas Rushoff describes contemporary media as a "culture-wide dance" and that the audience is as much a part of it as any newscaster or TV personality. Ordinary citizens have produced some of the most memorable coverage seen in the media, such as the footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination and the video tape depicting the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. Audiences are also the producers of content such as the vignettes on

"America's Funniest Home Videos." Audience involvement reached the level of "participatory spectacle" with the O.J. Simpson murder trial in Los Angeles. First, thousands of Los Angeles residents who watched the famous freeway chase on television realized that O.J. was going to pass by their homes. They ran into the street to cheer O.J. on. In the process, they also ran in front of the cameras and onto their television screens, which only added to the drama of the event. Then, during the trial, the coverage dealt as much with audience reactions and opinions as with the principals in the case.[46]

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Have You Hugged Your TV Today?

Media have been accused of shutting off audiences from other people. Now there's research that suggests people treat their television sets and computers as companions and proxies for other humans -- and treat them just like real people.

Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass of Stanford University report findings from a series of studies that have shown people act toward television sets and computers in ways that are "fundamentally social and natural." People talk to them, treat them as teammates, and often assign gender roles to them. Media demand attention, evoke emotional responses as if they were other human beings, and even threaten their owners if it appears that they are invading the owner's personal space.

The researchers say such reactions should be expected. They are the automatic, reasonable outcomes of years of thinking about relationships in terms of human interaction and of our desire for simplicity in our complex lives.[47] This trend also is an example of the principle of "high tech/high touch." Futurist John Naisbitt suggests that people will compensate for the impact of high technology through activities that emphasize human relationships.[48]

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Media Use as a Cultural Ritual

Using the media is an important part of life in modern society. To understand the impact of mass media on contemporary culture, consider the extent to which media have penetrated the homes and everyday lives of Americans:

□ Virtually all American households (99%) own television sets, with 70% owning more than one set. Some 88% of homes are equipped with a video cassette recorder, while two-thirds subscribe to cable, providing a wide array of viewing choices. The average American household has the television set on 7-1/2 hours a day, while the average household member watches slightly less than 3-l/2 hours daily.

□ There are about 600 million radio receivers in the United States -- about six sets for every household, including radios in virtually every car sold since the 1970s. The average American listens to radio 3-l/2 hours a day, and 5-1/2 hours on weekends.

□ Ninety percent of all households have the capability of playing recorded music, whether in the form of compact discs, cassettes or albums.

□ Some 94% of all Americans read at least one magazine each month, while about 22% of Americans read a magazine on any given day. Just over half of all American households (54%) subscribe to a daily newspaper, while about 69% of American adults are regular newspaper readers. On average, readers of newspapers spend about 25 minutes a day learning about the day's events.

□ About 7% of the U.S. population goes to the movies in any given week (about 19 million people). Meanwhile, one in four Americans now visits a video rental store each week. Nearly one in four families also own a camcorder, which allows them to produce their own videos.

□ Book reading remains popular. About 22% of all Americans report reading or referring to a book on a typical day.

□ About 40% of all households (50% of households with teenagers) now have personal computers, with about half of these equipped with a modem that allows access to dial-up bulletin boards or the Internet's World Wide Web.[49]

Media Adaptability

People in modern societies are heavy users of media, although media use varies considerably from person to person. Retirees, and others who spend more time at home (such as very young children), tend to be the heaviest media users. However, as a ritual in our everyday lives, each individual follows a strikingly similar pattern of media use from day to day. For many people, it would be impossible to enjoy a morning cup of coffee without a newspaper, or to cook dinner without television.

People assimilate new media into their daily lives through a process termed **media accommodation**. Today, modern communications technologies are being adopted in some of the most remote parts of the world. Peoples in many of the world's poorest nations want to own televisions, personal computers and the like. Some critics argue that this trend is a **cultural intrusion** that destroys indigenous ways of life in other cultures. However, media accommodation theory suggests that different people and groups use media different ways. In watching television programs, for example, people
in these other cultures don't necessarily derive the same meanings as might be found in the culture where the programs were produced. Instead, they often integrate what they see and hear with their own cultural experiences. Similarly, the folk media already in these less developed societies are every bit as influential as television or computers in shaping the culture.

People often incorporate media into their lives in ways not intended originally. To illustrate, few people in the 1930s or 1940s envisioned television's role as the "electronic babysitter." Similarly, following the advent of television, radio was transformed from a medium that people listened to in their living rooms to one enjoyed in their cars. The popularity of car radios in the United States accompanied the broader changes that were taking place in society. Commuting times increased with the rise of the suburbs. People were enticed to drive with the creation of the nation's interstate highway system. And, America saw the advent of the two-income, two-commuter family. All of these trends meant people were spending more time in automobiles.[50]

With 168 hours in a week, people must find time in their busy lives to use media. While Marshall McLuhan pointed out that cool media can be enjoyed while doing other things, one of the most important cultural consequences for society evolves around the **displacement** of other cultural activities. Critics are particularly concerned with the toll that media use has taken on family life and on other cultural activities.

Impact on Family Life

In the earliest oral cultures, people worked and lived together in extended families. Cultural activities often involved gathering together around a campfire after a day of hunting to discuss events of the day, tell stories of the past, or celebrate rituals. This communal lifestyle was eventually replaced with monogamous marriages, separate living quarters for nuclear families, and the settlement of towns.

Media have had positive and negative consequences for family life.

The advent of new media often brings people together.   During the 1500 and 1600s, for example, people rarely read by themselves. Instead, reading became another group activity. When the Victrola was introduced in the early 1900s, families listened together to recordings in their parlors. (The record player was superior to the piano, which had been introduced in the mid-1800s as a musical household instrument, because it required no skill to play.) A similar pattern occurred in the 1920s, when radio brought music, drama and information shows directly into homes. When television was invented, it was quickly christened the "electronic hearth."   In the aftermath of World War II, the early years of television had a particularly profound role in bringing families together. It was during the early years of television, in 1954, that *McCalls* coined the term "togetherness." Family television viewing became a complex cultural affair, complete with various artifacts: the frozen TV dinner, the printed TV program guide, and the TV table. It even necessitated creation of a whole new room in homes: the family room. (Family rooms would be succeeded by the home entertainment theater!)[51]

Today, television, radio and computers seem to have a divisive effect on family life. While TV viewing is still a family activity, at times family members often are dispersed in different rooms of the house, thanks to the plentiful number of media appliances in homes and the abundance of entertainment fare targeted to the tastes of different family members. In recent years, psychologists and counselors have reported a high incidence of marital problems involving "Internet junkies." The personal computer is a media appliance designed for individual use. Jealous spouses complain that their significant others spend endless hours in front of computer screens, instead of paying attention to them.

In fact, media often have competed with other aspects of family life. Consider, for example, the effect that the rise in print literacy had on reading. As individual reading became popular, people withdrew from family activities to read. And, the theatrical motion picture (at least before the VCR) was a medium enjoyed exclusively *outside* the home. Historically, motion picture theaters have thrived upon the desire of family members to get out of the house. Today, teenagers are the largest segment of theater audiences and use "going to the movies" as an excuse to be with friends and away from parents.

Impact on Other Activities and Institutions

The rise of the nuclear family, later coupled with trends such as industrialization and urbanization, was followed by the creation of a variety of specialized institutions that served the special needs of individuals. Evidence suggests that a number of these institutions have suffered as modern media,

especially television, have sapped audiences' time and attention.

☐ **Churches.**   Although most Americans say they believe in God, religious institutions have witnessed a general decline in membership and participation. Various explanations have been proffered related to the media: Religious radio stations and TV evangelists enable people to worship without leaving home. Media also have usurped the role of churches as a source of enlightenment and as a forum for the discussion of moral issues. People can take advantage of many more forms of leisure, unlike their ancestors, who attended church to socialize and hear the latest community gossip. Finally, many churches have been slow in adopting a style of worship similar to the flashy, fast-paced, entertainment-oriented fare found on television.[52]

☐ **Fraternal and community groups.** When the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1835, he was struck by the propensity of Americans to join organizations.[53] During the 18th and 19th centuries, a variety of religious, fraternal and community organizations were formed that became the center of social life. Today, Americans continue to be joiners, but generally participate in a fewer number of more specialized organizations. Why? Social observers cite the hectic pace of today's lifestyle, self-interest, and the increased TV viewing during evenings, when many groups meet.

Political scientist Robert Putnam highlighted this trend when he observed that Americans, in increasing numbers, are "bowling alone." Statistics show the number of people who go bowling rose by about 10% during the early 1980s, but the number of people who bowled in organized leagues decreased by 40% during the same period. Putnam argues we should be concerned about his somewhat whimsical statistic because it represents a loss of **social capital** or the *value that a society derives from civic engagement and the sense of connectedness among its citizens*. Such social capital can only be created when people engage in social activities with others outside of their families.[54]

☐ **Political parties.**   Political parties were created to facilitate discussion of issues, to educate the public, and to get voters out to the polls. Today, membership and participation in both the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States is declining. Why? Modern media, particularly television and now computers, allow candidates to communicate directly with voters. The old, elaborate system of localized meetings and block, precinct, and ward captains became too expensive and inefficient. However, the lack of one-on-one contacts might explain why voter participation -- as measured in political knowledge and election-day turnout -- is so low.[55] Media also have replaced political parties in their important role of determining the viability and likelihood of candidates running for offices, especially the presidency.

□ **Taverns and coffee houses.** For centuries, the town market, the city park and the local pub served as community gathering points. Around the early 1700s in England, people gathered in coffee houses. Later, during the period around the French Revolution, public discussions were centered in the fashionable salons of Paris. People spent hours talking about events of the day, and newspapers and magazines were often read aloud or posted for everyone to read. With the exception of cafes in the smallest towns scattered across America, this tradition of a community meeting place is on the wane. In large cities, people go out to eat or drink with family or friends, but rarely engage in conversations, not to mention debates, with complete strangers.[56]

□ **Schools.** Media pose a particular challenge for schools. By the time that a student graduates from high school, he or she will have spent 13,000 hours in school and 20,000 hours watching TV. These lopsided numbers alone suggest that media have eclipsed schools as an institution for learning in modern society. While personal instruction continues to be required to master the 3 Rs, students often see and hear more about the world through the media than in the classroom. Schools have responded by adopting more participatory and experiential instructional methods, and by infusing technology into the classroom. Yet, like churches, schools are losing in their struggle to capture the imaginations of students.[57]

□ **Sports**. Recreational pursuits developed in the late 1800s -- especially football, baseball and basketball -- have been transformed as a result of media exposure. Media have become promotional vehicles for athletic teams, with highly paid professional athletes treated as media stars. Professional sports clubs have structured their operations so that their incomes from television and radio broadcasts are more than the gate receipts from attendance at the games themselves. For many fans, watching or listening at home has replaced the thrill of playing in or attending games in person.[58]

Selected Cultural Issues

Cultural and Information Overload

With an abundance of media fare readily available upon demand 24 hours a day, we are flooded with information and cultural artifacts Some would say we suffer from an abundance of riches, so that people in modern societies have become victims of **cultural and information overload**.

Consider the difference between today's modern, media-dominated society and the simpler life before the advent of alphabetic language or printing. In oral societies, conversation and storytelling were the primary modes of communication. With limited capabilities to use visual or textual communication, the upper limit on cultural knowledge was defined by what people could remember.

Literary scholars and others interested in oral traditions believe that early peoples were keenly aware of the limits of memory. Many of the mnemonic devices used by storytellers in the great Greek epics, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey,* were intended to help the storyteller remember the words of the stories.   Similarly, archaeologists and art historians believe that the earliest artifacts of visual communication were actually created as a form of recordkeeping. Any self-actualizing desire for artistic expression was overshadowed by the practical need for **extrasomatic memory**, the *ability to preserve information outside of the human body*.[59]

The emergence of written communications -- first with hand-written manuscripts and later with books printed using movable type -- dramatically changed the number of cultural resources available to individuals. The magnitude of the change is evident by looking at the number of books printed during the first 50 years after Gutenberg (a period that ended in 1500 called the Incunabula). Some 35,000 different titles were printed in Europe, representing nine million volumes. The market was flooded by a rapidly expanding book printing trade, which quickly expanded its offerings from religious tracts in Latin to secular works in the **vernacular**, or *the everyday language spoken in a particular region*, such as German, French or Italian.

An immediate and pressing need was to organize it all. Title pages were added to books to make them quickly identifiable. Networks of book peddlers quickly emerged to facilitate distribution. And, larger cities soon saw the rise of the modern lending library -- an institution whose antecedents can be traced to the ancient Greeks. Knowing *how to access* information has subsequently become more important than knowing information.[60]

The modern information deluge really began between 1750 and 1800. It was during this period that people stopped reading "intensively," i.e. reading and re-reading the same works, such as the Bible and religious devotionals. Instead, people started to read "extensively," i.e. people read a much wider range of materials, especially newspapers and magazines, which they read only once. It was about this same time that reading became an individual pursuit, rather than a group activity.[61]

Consequences of Cultural and Information Overload

While many people today yearn for simpler, earlier times, the volume of cultural and other information is likely to rise unabated. Estimates suggest that the extant information in the world now doubles every eight years. And the pace is quickening.

We live in what has been called an **information society**. In 1900, only one in eight individuals was employed in occupations related to the production of information. However, by the middle of the 20th century, fully half of all workers made their living through information and cultural pursuits.[62] Futurist Alvin Toffler describes the emergence of this information-based society as the **third wave of civilization.** The first wave was built around agricultural production. The second wave was represented in industrial production. The third wave witnessed the rise of the service economy based upon the creation and exchange of information.[63]

What are the consequences of cultural overload?

One concern is a fear of **cultural illiteracy**, a lack of *familiarity with cultural artifacts in a society*. In an effort to rectify this problem, for example, in 1987, E.D. Hirsch Jr. and his collaborators thought it was necessary to compile an inventory of the names, places and ideas that represent the essence of American culture that every literate person should know.[64] Another concern is **fragmentation**, *the destruction of cultural unity in society resulting from a lack of interaction or from significantly different patterns of communication*. Because people are less likely to have been exposed to the same set of messages, it is less likely that people will share common beliefs and values.[65]

A third problem is **information anxiety**, a *lack of confidence in using cultural resources*. Computer phobia, the fear of using computer technology, is an example. Richard Saul Wurman argues that information anxiety is not a simple malady; people must learn to cope or become immobilized. As a graphic designer, he suggests that one solution is to make information more user-friendly. The irony, of course, is that people today have access to more information than ever before, but are less willing or less able to take advantage of it.[66]

Finally, cultural overload can cause individuals to lose their sense of **self-identity**. Kenneth J. Gergen argues that the demands placed upon people in contemporary society -- from family, friends, work and media -- have caused them to doubt who they are as individuals. Individuals are involved in a myriad of seemingly incoherent and disconnected relationships. Gergen explains, "These relationships pull us in myriad

directions, inviting us to play a variety of roles so that the very concept of an authentic self with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all."[67]

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Coping with the Cultural Tide

How do audiences handle the staggering number of symbols and messages that confront them daily? People in modern society have perfected a variety of coping strategies.

Skimming. People **browse** print media, only scanning headlines and glancing at photographs. They also **graze** television programs, watching only short segments before switching channels (usually when interrupted by a commercial). Media technology has facilitated the process. The TV remote control permits **zapping**, which enables people to change channels without getting out of their chairs. Similarly, the video cassette player permits **zipping**, or fast-forwarding tapes through uninteresting parts.

Schemas. People don't process messages piecemeal. Instead, they mentally organize their knowledge and experience about a particular topic using a cognitive structure known as a schema. Schemas can be based upon people, objects or events. When people process information, they continuously compare symbols and messages with their extant knowledge and invoke a particular schema when they are trying to make sense of information. They pay less attention to new information that is consistent with the schema they have chosen to use to process information on a particular topic and attend more to inconsistent messages.

Selectivity. People don't devote the same amount of cognitive energy to all messages, and use different strategies based on their involvement in a particular topic. If a topic is highly relevant or has consequences for them, audiences process a message effortfully or systematically. However, if a topic is of little perceived importance, people will short-circuit the process. Instead of digesting all the arguments logically or rationally, audiences make judgments using a simple cue (or heuristic) within a message.

In all these of these cases, symbols play a key role in triggering audiences responses. Symbols gleaned from the media can signal us to read an article further, or can prompt us to turn the channel. Symbols prime us to use particular schemas, and thus to examine messages in particular ways. And symbols contain those heuristic cues (such as the image of a popular athlete in an ad) that can simplify decision-making. Studying these strategies provides valuable linkages between behavioral research on media effects and cultural studies by suggesting the mechanisms through which people make sense of their overloaded world.[68]

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Literacy in the Electronic Era

One benchmark of a culture deals with **literacy**, the *degree to which people in a society are conversant with the symbols and language system within a society*. Traditionally, in a print-oriented culture, a **literate person** is someone who *can read and write*.   More narrowly, a literate person is versed in the **literature** or *body of printed cultural artifacts within a culture*.

Basic Literacy Skills

About one-fifth of all Americans -- the figure varies in other major nations around the world -- are now **functionally illiterate,** or *lack basic reading and writing skills such as those required to complete a form or read instructions on the job*.

American history books extol a high literacy rate as a distinguishing characteristic of the nation's early settlers. In fact, however, the early Puritans maintained a principally oral culture. Reading was not required in most daily affairs, except for devotions. Public and church records suggest that only half of New England men and one-third of the women could sign their names in the 17th and early 18th centuries. And literacy rates were considerably *lower* in other regions of the colonies. It was not until well into the 1830s that widespread public schooling produced high levels of reading proficiency in the United States.[69]

Television and Literacy: Attacking the Messenger

One of the favorite explanations for the declining reading literacy rate today is the advent of television, which began nationwide operation in 1946.

Among the dozens of complaints lodged against television is its negative impact on people's motivation and ability to read. Robert McNeil, retired anchor of PBS's "News Hour" sums up the problem as follows:

> *If American society is to maintain some pretense of being a mass literate culture, then far from reversing the appalling statistics of functional illiteracy, I think the struggle is to prevent them from growing worse. … Literacy may not be a human right, but the highly literate Founding Fathers might have not found it unreasonable or unattainable. We are not only not attaining literacy as a nation, statistically speaking, but also are falling farther and farther short of attaining it. And, while I would not be so simplistic as to suggest that television is the cause, I believe it contributes and it is an influence: for the dull it is a substitute, for the bright it is a diversion.*[70]

At least four different explanations have been suggested about the influence of television on literacy.[71]

One contention is that television has taken time away from reading as a leisure pursuit, just as it has a negative consequences for participation in other cultural activities (see pages 26-28). This **displacement theory** is readily evident in examining the statistics on media use.   American adults average 30 hours or more of watching television every week, but less than two hours a week reading to their children and only 38.5 minutes a week engaged in meaningful conversation with their children. American children themselves, on average, read less than four minutes a day for pleasure.

A second argument suggests that television has altered the way people think. In keeping with McLuhan's argument that television is a cool medium, this **alternative information processing** explanation suggests that there's nothing wrong with television per se. New-age media advocate Camille Paglia argues that television is simply different from print. She explains that the generations who were reared on music and visual media process information using different senses than their ancestors:

> *When I wrote my book, I had earphones on, blasting rock music or Puccini and Brahms.   The soap operas -- with the sound turned down -- flickered on my TV. I'd be talking on the phone at the same time. Baby boomers have a multilayered, multitrack ability to deal with the world.*[72]

A third theory emphasizes **short-term gratifications**. Television competes with more effortful forms of learning, such as reading, by providing short-term, easy-to-obtain alternatives. Robert MacNeil, for example, contends that

television has shortened the attention spans of people in modern society. In a similar vein, Neil Postman contends television is deleterious because it stresses *entertainment* and de-emphasizes logical thinking:

> *As typography once dictated the style of conducting politics, religion, business, education, law and other important social matters, television now takes command. In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to one another, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions, they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials. The world is not only a stage, that stage is … Las Vegas.*[73]

The final theory proposes a *positive* relationship between TV and literacy. Evidence suggests that television watching actually can *enhance* learning by stimulating the acquisition of new knowledge. This **interest stimulation** theory posits that adults and children who see information on TV are spurred on to pursue information -- from TV, books, magazines, computers and personal sources. This the intent of much of educational programming found on the Public Broadcasting System.

Redefining Literacy

Beyond basic skills, literacy also involves familiarity with the great works or narratives that have been shared by peoples within a culture over time. The English language's literary tradition begins with Chaucer and Shakespeare and continues through great 20th century writers such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Pearl S. Buck and the like.

Sven Birkerts argues eloquently for the importance of books and reading. He describes literature found in the printed book as the "repository of our collective speculation." He describes the demise of reading as "slipping over a crucial threshold" in which we are "poised on the brink of what may prove to be a kind of species mutation."[74] He concurs with Mark Crispin Miller, who suggested that television works to eradicate the idea that there was ever a pre-TV culture.   While motion pictures and television have made the great stories of our culture accessible to many, both contemporary critics agree that seeing them on a screen and reading them in a book are simply not the same experience.[75]

If literacy is defined in terms of knowledge of print literature, there is little question that a fundamental shift has resulted as people have acquired a

greater knowledge of, and greater proficiency in consuming, electronic media fare. More Americans are familiar with the antics of "I Love Lucy" than with the classic narratives of English literature. But, at the same time, television watchers are probably more knowledgeable and sophisticated than their ancestors about topics ranging from world affairs to safe sex.

Henry J. Perkinson suggests that television also has made our society and culture more *moral* by focusing on the *relationships between people*. He explains that we pay less attention to the detailed content of shows and more to the patterns of relationships between people. We don't remember what they said, but how they related to one another. In a similar vein, Joshua Meyerowitz suggests that electronic media emphasize feelings, appearance and mood, rather than straight-line, rational thought.[76]

The shift from print to electronic media requires broading the modern definition of literacy. People need to be proficient in using (and deriving meaning from) oral, visual and written communication -- in electronic and non-electronic forms. This gives rise to the need for formal **media literacy** training, designed to equip people to be successful in an increasingly complex media culture.[77]

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What People Say About TV's Importance

Western cultures continue to put a premium on the written word. In most legal systems, for example, written contracts carry greater weight than oral agreements. However, the bias favoring print is undergoing significant change. Consider the trends reported over the past 20 years by the Roper Organization, a leading polling firm.

In early 1997, Roper asked Americans where they get most of their news about what's going on in the world today. Some 69% reported television. This compares to 37% for newspapers, 14% for radio, and 5% for magazines. Similarly, the same survey group was asked which medium they would tend to believe more if given conflicting or different news reports. Television was rated the most believable by 53% of respondents, followed by newspapers, 23%; radio, 7%; and magazines, 4%. Only 12% had no preference.

These results reflect steady increases in television's role as the medium people both rely upon and find most credible. The

results pose provocative questions about the future of print and the central role of television, despite all the complaints about television's content and its negative influence.[78]

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Commodification of Culture

As a social construction, everyone participates in the creation of a society's culture. However, workers in media and in the arts, who earn their livelihoods through the creation and dissemination of symbols, play particularly prominent roles in the cultures of most societies.

An issue of continuing concern in modern societies is the pronounced influence that media have on cultural expression. Cultural theorists don't view books, magazines, TV shows, movies and the like as ordinary cultural artifacts. Instead, they disparagingly refer to them as **cultural commodities,** *products that are researched, designed, packaged and promoted to maximize consumer interest*.

As **commodity** suggests, these cultural works are mass produced and often can't be distinguished from one another. In part, this is because the mass media are voracious users of content. Media organizations must find ways to produce and replenish volumes of material on a monthly, weekly, daily or even hourly basis. And, because media are business institutions, they must produce or acquire materials cheaply and efficiently. This leads, critics contend, to a willingness to sacrifice artistic or literary quality. Comedian Ernie Kovacs summed up the problem when he described television as a *medium* because it was neither rare nor well done.[79]

Folk, Elite and Popular Culture

This **commodification** of cultural expression is a concern to some critics, who suggest that media-produced artifacts pose a threat to the full range of other cultural pursuits.

At risk on one end of the cultural continuum is **folk culture.** Folk culture includes those rituals, customs, and artifacts that originate within an indigenous native population. Folk culture is often developed out of necessity by ordinary people in living out their everyday lives and is enjoyed for its own sake. Folk culture is usually not shared with others on any kind of a commercial basis, except for tourist businesses in areas where folk cultures thrive.[80]

The negative consequence of popular culture on folk culture centers around the fact that individuals who might otherwise engage in *producing* folk culture spend their time *consuming* media-produced popular culture. Instead of reflecting the indigenous expression of culture, popular culture is packaged slickness that often appropriates bits and pieces of folk culture and weaves them together to create an attractive package that serves as substitute for the real thing. Thus, popular culture can work to subvert legitimate indigenous cultures, exploiting them for profit.

At the other end of the spectrum is **elite culture**, also referred to as **high culture**. Unlike folk culture, the production of elite culture is quite deliberate. Artisans -- painters, sculptors, playwrights and actors -- use their finely honed talents to express ideas they consider important. Most fine artists undergo years of specialized training and often must practice long hours to perfect their craft. Their primary audience is composed of connoisseurs, or people familiar with and appreciative of the artisan's skill because, as with folk art, the commercial value of their work is limited. So, artists often must depend upon financial support from patrons to underwrite the cost of their work.

The impact of popular culture on the fine arts is subtle, too. Art museums, symphonies, libraries and theater groups are probably more numerous than ever before. But, they nonetheless feel competition from the popular arts for the attention and financial resources of audiences. Arts institutions are keenly aware of the need to market exhibits to broader audiences, and sometimes choose to sponsor projects based more on market value, rather than artistic value. In a similar way, projects are pursued based upon having an interested patron or sponsor. Thus the economic rigors that are a part of popular culture have begun to influence fine culture.

Most media content has come to be called **popular culture**, *forms of artistic expression situated squarely between folk art and fine art*. Popular culture icons and artifacts are all around us -- ranging from singers such as Madonna to movies and TV shows such as "Star Trek." Popular culture also can be seen in a variety of non-mediated, mass produced artifacts in our society, ranging from major sporting events to rock concerts, circuses, fairs, expositions and special events such as the Rose Parade. Popular culture is also evident in products ranging from McDonald's Big Mac to Nike sports shoes.[81]

Popular culture content shares a variety of common characteristics. Popular culture is:

□ Created for the expressed purpose of making money; artistic or literary expression is a secondary consideration.
□ Designed for large, mass audiences, usually from the middle and lower

classes (although upper classes might enjoy it).
- □ Easy to understand, requiring little prior knowledge or familiarity with techniques used to create it.
- □ Produced using themes, ideas, storylines, formats, authors or players already familiar to the general public.
- □ Heavily promoted, usually through advertising and publicity.

Criticisms of Popular Culture in Perspective

Criticism of popular culture began in the 1930s, most notably among a small group of scholars who began their work at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. The Frankfurt School, as these critics would come to be known, coined the term **cultural industries** to describe media organizations and popularized the term **mass culture**. They intentionally drew parallels between media and the manufacturing processes used to produce mass consumer goods. They chided the media producers of their era for creating pre-digested fare for the lowest common denominator in society.[82]

The debate about popular culture resumed in earnest in the 1960s. Sociologist Dwight Macdonald launched the argument when he characterized much of the then popular culture as **kitsch,** a German word that roughly translated means *garish* or *trashy*.[83] Several years later, critic Susan Sontag took the opposite position and became a leading advocate of the pop intellectualism that legitimized the "pop art" prevalent during the period. Sontag argued that popular culture was just as valuable to understand as the fine arts, and that popular culture was worthy of intellectual inquiry. Sontag believed that the mass media provided important access to fine culture for millions, through programs such as the weekly radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera. She also argued that media could narrow the gap between folk and fine art.[84] In considering the popular culture debate, it's important to remember that the profit-incentive is not new, but has motivated owners since the modern mass media began. Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of modern printing, was known to be driven by the prospect of making great sums of money. He went to great lengths to keep his process a secret until he could exploit it to the fullest.

Early plays produced by the Greeks, and later by Shakespeare, were performed for audiences of ordinary folk, who paid a modest admission for the privilege. And in book publishing, the staple of many early book publishers were **chapbooks**, which were the precursors to the modern paperback. These volumes were produced on cheap rag paper and shared around by ordinary folks until the volumes became worn out. Instead of fine literary works, chapbooks were *books of pleasure*. Titles were devoted to cookery, tales of highwaymen, fortune telling and witchcraft. Many included licentious material that would make many contemporary pornographic materials seem pale by

comparison.

Similarly, popular content has always been a part of news. Sensationalism can trace its origins to at least the lst century A.D., when newsheets posted in the Roman forum devoted space to two of the favorite topics of the day -- crime and divorce. In 1690, *Publick Occurrences*, the first newspaper printed in the United States, included a sordid report that the King of France "used to lie with his 'Son's Wife'." This explains, in part, why the paper was shut down by authorities after its first issue.[85]

While we are taught to revere the works of certain early artisans, it is important to recognize that many so-called classics -- paintings, musical works, plays and books -- were only the tip of the cultural iceberg during their times. Michelangelo's paintings and Mozart's symphonies were enjoyed by the patrons who paid for them, but not by ordinary people. Most popular culture artifacts from history have been destroyed, while so-called classics that were the products of elite culture were stowed away in places they would be preserved. This could lead to a mistaken conclusion that artistic expression has been destroyed by modern media. In fact, kitsch has been around for centuries.

Commercialism in Media Content

Closely related to the commodification of cultural products is the intrusion of commercialism into our daily lives. One of the biggest cultural criticisms is the belief that media feature too much **commercial content**, i.e. *explicit and implicit messages that encourage us to buy products and services*.

Our lives are being overtaken by commercialism in the information and entertainment media -- and in other aspects of modern life as well. The average American sees between 1,500 and 3,000 commercial messages every day. Commercialism is evident in the replacement of public streets by malls, which John Fiske has coined modern-day "cathedrals of consumption." The trend is also rampant in corporate sponsorships of public activities ranging from entertainment and sporting events to charitable fund-raisers, museum exhibits, schools programs -- and even highway maintenance programs.[86]

Today, it is increasingly difficult to separate our *cultural lives* from our *consumer lives*. **Consumption**, *the acquisition and use of goods*, has become an important part of popular culture and cultural expression. This trend is prompted, in part, by the heavy prominence of commercial messages in the media.

Living in An Advertising-Dominated World

Advertising supports media operations and provides useful information to consumers, but also is an integral part of modern culture. Advertising:

□ Shapes our collective beliefs and values about consumption and the relative value of various cultural artifacts
□ Reinforces cultural rituals and customs, such as holiday gift-giving
□ Represents cultural artifacts with which we become familiar in our daily lives in the form of commercials, jingles, logos, etc.
□ Creates desires for the other cultural artifacts that ads promote.

At the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen argued that **conspicuous consumption**, or *lavish and wasteful spending to gain social prestige*, had become a predominant value and ritual in modern society.[87] About the same time, German sociologist Georg Simmel explained that new urban dwellers used consumption to maintain a sense of identity to deal with the pressures of urban life. Consumption allowed people to "activate a sham individualism through the pursuit of signs of status, fashion, and marks of individual eccentricity."[88]

The rise of today's consumer culture accompanied industrialization and the rise of the modern mass media. During the 19th century the economies of industrialized nations saw a distinct shift take place -- from an emphasis on *industrial production* in the first half of the century to a celebration of *consumer consumption* in the second half of the century. This trend reflected the emergence of brand-name packaged goods, of national markets made possible by the railroad, and of modern retailing techniques where stores attractively displayed and individually priced merchandise.[89]

Modern advertising emerged during this same period. Advertisers quickly learned to address people as individuals, and played heavily upon anxieties and desires for social acceptance. A therapeutic ethos evolved in which maintenance of the self and self-improvement became lifetime pursuits. As a result, some social critics would argue that cultural values in modern life came to centered around **materialism**, *the celebration of possessions*; **hedonism,** *the pursuit of pleasure*; and **narcissism**, *self-centered indulgence*.[90]

Contemporary advertising continues to shape our cultural beliefs and values by telling us to look fashionable, to be slim and attractive, and to do whatever is necessary to be popular. Advertising involves a relentless playing on our emotions that threatens the whole notion of self. Advertising bombards us with messages saying we should be someone *other* than who we are. Instead of finding an identity within ourselves, advertising urges us to find happiness through what we buy, where we shop, and how we are seen by others.[91]

Celebrities: The Commercialization of Artists, Actors and Athletes

A particularly insidious form of commercialism centers around the emergence in modern society of **celebrities**, *people who enjoy widespread recognition in a culture due to the high visibility they enjoy in the media*. Some celebrities are private individuals who achieved fame for an outstanding feat. Others are politicians who gain visibility by running for public office. However, most celebrities enjoy special status as a result of their occupations as artists, actors or athletes appearing in the media. In the end, all celebrities have something to sell.

Celebrities are commodities packaged in much the same way that media products are created. However, upon attaining celebrity status, these individuals become commercial entities in themselves. Celebrities use their standing with the public to command huge salaries and other forms of financial consideration -- including book advances, royalties, and endorsement fees. Celebrities, and their employers, then leverage their prominence to promote audience interest in everything from movies to sports.[92]

The problem has been exacerbated with the rise of **celebrity endorsements**, in which prominent celebrities lend their name and image to commercial products. Celebrities appear in TV commercials and print ads for various products, and make personal appearances on behalf of their sponsors. They also promote products by wearing clothing (such as the cap bearing the Nike "swoosh" always worn by the young golfer Tiger Woods) or by putting their names on brands (such as Paul Newman's condiments and Elizabeth Taylor's perfumes). Every time audiences see the celebrity, they make the commercial connection.

Every culture celebrates heroes, who are the personification of the ideals of that society. The commodification and commercialization of celebrities began in with the American circus in the 1840s and 1850s. P.T. Barnum lured small-town audiences by featuring the likes of Tom Thumb (an extremely short person then exploited as a "midget") and Jenny Lind ("the Swedish Nightingale"). The emergence of baseball contributed to the trend as well, as fans started to follow the records of individual players. This process was aided by the advent of sports coverage and technological innovations, including the

use of the telegraph to report scores and details on how local teams played in games away from home. The creation of personality cults was aided also by the invention of the halftone, which allowed for the plentiful use of pictures in newspapers and magazines.

Celebrities became an integral part of modern culture with the movies. Motion pictures allowed audiences to see actors close-up on a big screen and to relate to them intimately. Movie producers quickly learned that audiences were attracted to particular players, such as Rudolph Valentino, in the early 1920s. As a result, "the star system" was created. Studios promoted individual actors through extensive publicity campaigns and advertising. Actors and actresses became commercial properties unto themselves.[93]

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Fan Culture

People in modern societies have become enamored with celebrities and often live their lives vicariously through a celebrity's actions. Indeed, a **fan culture** prevails, wherein some audience members become avid followers of not only celebrities, but other popular culture vehicles -- TV and radio shows, rock bands, movies, and sports teams, to name a few.

The term **fan** is derived from fanatic. The serious fan represents the most visible and vocal part of an audience. Serious fans buy the most tickets to performances and learn everything there is know about the subject of their adoration. They also engage in a wide range of rituals as expressions of their interest: Fans wear special outfits, proudly display icons and insignias, collect memorabilia, join clubs, attend conventions, and faithfully follow news and publicity reports.

Fans are sometimes ridiculed or pathologized by others for their sometimes extreme behavior. Yet, fans are not victims of exploitation. Being a fan allows audience members to be active participants (not merely spectators) in a culture. Fandom is a special manifestation of the sense of alienation that people feel in modern society. Passionate allegiance to a celebrity or other form of popular culture is a way to bond with others. Fans share their excitement with others who have similar interests -- as part of a community.[94]

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Other Forms of Media Commercialism

Commercialism has crept into the information and entertainment portions of media in other ways.

By providing models of behavior we emulate, motion pictures and TV and radio shows can shape cultural values and practices quite unintentionally. In 1934, for example, Clark Gable appeared in the film "It Happened One Night." In one scene, he took off his shirt and revealed a bare chest. Almost immediately, the sales of men's undershirts plummeted. The incident is an example of a media-induced **fad**, a *short-term spike in interest in (or rejection of) a particular cultural ritual or artifact*. Fads can involve anything, but often center around the latest hair styles, fashions, foods, entertainment, and home furnishings seen in the media. Fads result from the widespread and enthusiastic interaction of humans, rather than any orchestrated promotional effort. The level of emotional contagion that is created often borders on hysteria, but soon dissipates.

Today, **product placements** involve *product manufacturers purposefully arranging for their product to appear in movies or television shows*. Movie producers and TV game show producers now charge manufacturers to feature their products as a way to defray production costs. Few people, for example, don't recognize Reese's Pieces, a peanut butter candy, as being the earthly treat enjoyed by the alien visitor in "E.T., The Extra-Terrestrial."

Newspaper and magazines routinely carry news announcements and feature stories that tell audiences how to take advantage of products and services. Often, however, these are only thinly veiled advertisements supplied by public relations representatives. While practical information about products is justified by editors because it's of interest to audiences, newspapers and magazine use these items to create a conducive editorial environment for advertising. With increased frequency, newspapers and magazines create **special advertising supplements** or *sections devoted to ads for specific types of products*. They then fill the surrounding editorial space with **advertorials** or *articles that appear to be legitimate editorial matter, but actually are promotional puff pieces* supplied by the advertiser or written by the media about the advertiser or its products.

Television now sports several **shopping channels**, which have melded commercial messages into program-length entertainment shows. The Home Shopping Network and QVC promote merchandise 24-hours-a-day so that viewers, who are being entertained in the process, will order featured products using 800-telephone numbers. **Infomercials** are *full-length programs about particular products that appear on other networks or individual stations and*

solicit purchases under the guise of entertainment or information. Talk shows are populated with movie stars, book authors, inventors and others selected by producers because of their news or entertainment value. However, the real incentive for guests to appear is to generate publicity for their latest endeavor by giving a **plug**, or *commercial mention that is not paid for.* The message is almost always the same: the audience should see the film, read the book, buy the product or support the cause being promoted by the guest.

Blatant commercialism is also evident in the **merchandising tie-ins** between media and manufacturers of various products, including clothes, toys, cereals, as well as fast-food retailers. In 1929, Walt Disney was approached in a hotel lobby by a paper manufacturer who wanted to feature Mickey Mouse on the cover of school tablets. Since then, media have entered into **licensing agreements** to have merchandise bear images of cartoon characters, rock bands, TV programs, movie stars, video games and the like. Toys with some type of a media tie-in routinely are among the top 10 selling items each year. Sales of such licensed merchandise totalled a whopping $16.7 billion in 1995. In turn, toys such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have inspired cartoons, movies and television series. Media exposure and merchandising work synergistically to both promote audience loyalty and sell products, thus making it difficult for audiences (especially children) to tell where merchandising ends and entertainment begins. The importance of such tie-ins is evident in the fact that the largest producers of entertainment fare have opened retail stores selling licensed merchandise direct to consumers.

Media and Postmodernism

How does contemporary media content relate to other, more general trends in cultural expression in our society? One way to summarize many of the ideas in this chapter, and to link the media with other aspects of contemporary culture, is to look closely at the current movement known as **postmodernism.**

Postmodernism is the latest in a succession of literary and artistic styles that have dominated cultural expression over the past several centuries. Others have been Baroque, Rococo, Realism and Modernism.[95]

As the name suggests, postmodernism followed the Modern movement, which began in the late 19th century. Modernism was rooted in philosophical beliefs in individualism, the ability to improve the quality of modern life, the triumph of good over evil, and the belief that progress can be achieved through rational thought and the application of science and technology. These underlying premises shaped much artistic expression during the first half of the 20th century. Modernism's influence can be seen in the functional designs of

buildings by architects, abstract expressionism in painting, and the lean, unembellished prose popular in much 20th century literature.

By contrast, postmodernism challenges many of modernism's assumptions. French social theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard was the first one to synthesize many of the ideas now associated with postmodern thinking. Instead of the infallibility of objective science, Lyotard stressed relativism, the idea of limits, and the impossibility of attaining perfection in human affairs.[96]

Postmodernism rejects the notion that there is a single, objective truth upon which people should (or can) agree. The major question in the postmodern era is no longer, "Is it true?" Instead, we more often ask, "How does it look? How does it feel?" Postmodernism also emphasizes the importance of collectivities (the emphasis is on community) instead of the modernist preoccupation with the individual.[97] Postmodern philosophy throws doubt onto the very concept of the self as someone with real and identifiable characteristics. In today's postmodern era, people exist in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction.[98] Similarly, postmodernism recognizes the global nature of our existence, and the irrelevance of geographic, political or societal boundaries.

Identifying Postmodern Expression in Media

In examining cultural artifacts, how might you spot postmodernism at work? Postmodernism:

□ **Stresses style, splashy spectacle, and surface detail** in lieu of the rational thought and functional, straight-line design Postmodern expression features what French social theorist Jean Baudrillard termed **hyperreality**, or *messages that simulate reality but remain at a surface level because there is no longer substance behind the image*. He coined the term **simulacra** to describe the *prevalence of mass artifacts for which there are copies but no originals*. Examples include films, television and computerized images.

□ **Celebrates fragmented, seemingly disjointed, expression**. In particular, postmodern communications feature a technique termed **pastiche** (called **bricolage** by the French), *combining in one artifact the work of disparate styles or ideas and images from different periods in time*. This juxtaposition results in what many describe as a hodgepodge of ambiguous and schizophrenic images.

□ **Acknowledges the central role of commercial culture and consumer consumption.** Social theorist Fredric Jameson describes postmodern society as a period of **late capitalism**, in which multinational corporations are responsible for producing or sponsoring most information and entertainment, making it

virtually impossible to separate commercial and noncommercial symbols and language.   Thus media imagery (such as a pictures of stars) and commercial imagery (such as product illustrations or corporate logos) are inserted in unexpected locations. We decorate buildings with murals and wear t-shirts and sweatshirts bearing such markers. With each use, audiences derive new meanings.

Where is postmodernism evident?

In art, ideal examples are Andy Warhol's numerous still-life paintings and lithographs of Campbell's Soup cans. Recently, one of his "pop art" classics from the 1960s sold for a cool $5 million. In fashion, bluejeans were once work clothes made from cheap denim fabric for miners and farmers. Today, name-brand fashion jeans are worn with fine silk tops and expensive jewelry to swanky events. Similarly, a contemporary fad is for women to wear men's old sports coats, layered with fancy buttons, handkerchiefs and decorative frill from the past. In architecture, new buildings sport unexpected round and curved lines, filigree and unparallel construction. Flat and shiny reflective glass is used on the surfaces of buildings to reflect the edifice's surroundings in sharp contrast to the building's depthless design.

What about postmodernism in media?

Contemporary magazines are filled with ads featuring postmodern layouts, such as those for Benetton clothing stores featuring incisive social commentaries. Elsewhere, montages or collages combine the face of Madonna superimposed on the portrait of the Mona Lisa.   Indeed, Madonna (the "Material Girl") might be the ultimate postmodern personality because her outrageous behavior appears to be all on the surface.

Contemporary music -- especially heavy metal, hip-hop and gangsta rap -- blares out to make a statement utilizing forms of expression that can be characterized as postmodern. The beat and the music take precedence over the lyrics, which are often difficult to follow and are subject to wide interpretation.

Television is often considered the perfect medium of postmodern communications. Viewers are exposed to a dizzying, rapid-fire succession of news, entertainment shows, promotions and advertisements. Audiences switch effortlessly between different classes of content found on different channels. In particular, music videos, which combine elements of rock music with sophisticated visual production techniques, are probably the best illustration of postmodern expression. The ambiguous images, the pastiche art, the superficiality, and the subtle commercialism found in music videos are all hallmarks of postmodernism.

In a similar way, the Internet's World Wide Web organizes information in a highly nonlinear fashion. Web pages feature flashy graphics and hypertext that lead users from document to document as if through a maze. The "truth" users discover will vary based upon the particular web sites or pages that they access. Meanwhile, the words and images users see don't really exist, except as digital bytes on a computer hard disk somewhere out of reach.

Questions for Discussion

1.   Is media content an art form?   Why?

2.   Consider the impact of computer-mediated technology five years from now. How might our culture change?

3.   Do you think that the mass media have destroyed American culture? If so, how?

4.   What would American culture be like if television had never been invented?

Suggested Readings

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II
Critical Perspectives
on Media and Society

In May 1992, viewers of television's "Murphy Brown" series witnessed one of the most usual media events of the decade. The final episode of the season centered around the long-anticipated arrival of a baby. The mother was the divorced newscaster, played by actress Candice Bergen, whose character became pregnant out of wedlock.

In a speech the next day, U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the then-highly rated sit-com's finale as an affront to "family values." He called it "a bad example … that mocked the importance of fathers." The show's producers defended the episode, saying it merely illustrated a woman's right to make a lifestyle choice. And when the show returned in the fall, viewers saw a formal on-camera editorial response, delivered by Candice Bergen in her fictional newscaster role.

The idea of a *fictional* TV character debating a *real-life* politician was bizarre, to be sure, and dramatizes the difficulty of separating mediated reality from real life. Moreover, the incident illustrated how the media have become a battleground. As British cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall has observed, the mass media serve as a public forum in which groups struggle to define social reality.[99]

While the kinds of cultural consequences examined in Chapter 1 are important in their own right, some of the most provocative issues dealing with the impact of media on society center around the power of the media to shape beliefs and values. Critical theorists argue that citizen-audiences must be watchful of excessive media influence, and work actively to reform and mitigate the power of the media. This activist approach comprises the critical perspective examined in this chapter.

Media, Social Change and Stability

Fundamental to critical studies of media is the fact that media stimulate *social change* while at the same time they help maintain *social stability* within a society.

Media and Social Change

As sources of news, information and entertainment, media continuously alter our culture by featuring new ideas and forms of expression that are outside the mainstream. Take music, for example. Ragtime in the 1900s, jazz in the 1920s, rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, and gangsta rap in the 1990s were all harshly condemned by detractors of their day as the work of the devil. When Elvis Presley first appeared on Ed Sullivan's popular television variety show in 1957, the cameras would only show him from the waist up. Elvis's swiveling hips were judged too outlandish for family viewing.

Is exposing people to new or radical ideas wrong? Traditionalists complain the media devote excessive attention to political agitators, social crusaders, disenfranchised minorities, quack inventors, and outlandish entertainers, all of whom they say are intent upon challenging accepted thought and behavior. For these ideological conservatives, the media emphasize conflict and negativity, instead of promoting what's right about society.

Media workers ardently defend their role in social change. After all, "new" is the root of the word "news."   One of the principal functions of the media is to provide **surveillance** over the environment and thus make audiences aware of new ideas and impending change.[100] Media defenders also point out that social change does not come from the center, but from the *fringes of society*.
Media and Social Stability.

The counter-argument is that the media don't do enough to effect much- needed improvements in society. Instead, media work to maintain the status quo.

Groups outside the mainstream complain they are often ignored, **trivialized**, **marginalized** or labelled as **deviants**. Examples includes minorities, special interest groups, cults and political activists.[101] The extreme case involves terrorists, who purposefully use violence, destruction or hostage-taking to gain attention, and thus are the targets of harsh media criticism.[102] Media coverage can shape the fate of all these groups, even those that are relatively benign. Take the example of the student protest movement in the 1960s. The media were credited for the rise of the Students for a Democratic Society as the leading opponent to the Vietnam War. But later negative coverage was a factor

in the demise of the SDS.[103] Media were also instrumental in thwarting the women's movement during this same period. When leaders of the movement were interviewed by the press, provocative quotes were often taken out of context and were often balanced with demure, conventional reactions from mainstream officials who trivialized women's complaints.[104]

Journalists fancy themselves as **watchdogs** over other institutions, particularly government. But critics contend that the press behave more like **lapdogs** in the arms of powerful interests in society. In particular, media ignore deep-seeded problems in society that cannot be blamed on someone or fixed quickly. And in some instances, media actually act as **guard dogs** that staunchly protect particular powerful special interests.[105]

Media as Economic Institutions

One explanation for the media's conservative nature is that media are business institutions.   Instead of arbiters of culture, media owners perceive themselves as **creators of audiences**. The business of media involves linking advertisers (and newsmakers, to a lesser degree) to audiences created through attractively packaged entertainment and information fare.[106]

In addressing controversial topics, media fear jeopardizing their relationships with the three key constituencies upon whom they depend:

□ **Audiences**.   If media content reflects viewpoints that are radically different from the audiences they serve, the result could be lower readership, listenership or viewership. Thus most mass media cater to the mainstream concerns of their audiences and of society as a whole. An example can be found in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It was not the "liberal" press of the South, but northern newspapers that raised public consciousness about the issue, while safely removed from the consequences of their actions The editorial positions of most southern newspapers reflected the local, then-prevailing values of their communities.

□ **Advertisers**.   Similarly, media feel pressure to avoid controversy that would disrupt relations between advertisers and consumers. While editors bristle at overt interference by advertisers to gain positive coverage or squelch negative coverage, a 1991 survey showed that fully 50% of editors had been the targets of direct efforts to influence editorial judgments in some way.

□ **Sources**. Media feel pressure to maintain close relationships with their sources of information.   If they recklessly offend government officials, executives of key corporations, celebrity entertainment and sports figures, or other prominent people, they could be denied access to these sources in the

future. As a result, they would be at a competitive disadvantage in obtaining news or creating programming.

These external pressures are not necessarily the result of deliberate or explicit actions by these groups. Media sociologists suggest that workers are socialized on the job to know which kinds of messages will be well-received by audiences and advertisers (and by the workers' bosses) and what kinds of unsettling topics to avoid.[107]

The Illusion of News

W. Lance Bennett surveyed the news production research and found four ways that current media production practices distort or bias the news. All four are ways that the urgency of public concern is minimized and the status quo is preserved.

Personalized News.   Media tend to frame news stories around individuals, a practice that allows the audience to project their own feelings and fantasies into public life. News directors contend that it's easier to talk about a topic such as inflation in terms of the impact on one's pocketbook, rather than in terms of macroeconomics. The effect is to turn the news into a gigantic soap opera where audiences are absolved of blame for social problems because someone else is responsible.

Dramatized News. Stories are often chosen for their dramatic values. Thus, effective storytelling takes precedence over which stories are told. Media prefer stories that are highly visual or easy to report. The result is often a trivialization of the news. For example, election coverage mostly involves **horserace reporting** about who's leading in a poll in a particular day, or about day-to-day campaign tactics, rather than issues. This trend is also termed **episodic framing** of news, because it focuses on day-to-day episodes, rather than **thematic framing** that attempts to get at underlying issues that cannot be reduced to compelling images or drama as easily.

Fragmented News.   News has become capsulated reports of events -- snapshots of what's happening the world. In individual stories, journalists fulfill the obligatory norm of balanced reporting by supplying opposing viewpoints, but abandon any attempt to connect one story to another. As a

result, audiences lose context because isolated stories don't add up to a meaningful explanation that helps the audience make sense of events.

Normalized News. If news deals with disruption to the status quo, many reports dwell on how things are being returned to normal. Experts or elites are used to explain problems -- and what's being done to correct them. The message: The government (or other responsible experts) can be trusted to make things right. For example, if minorities have a legitimate concern, their complaints will be heard by the proper officials. Audiences are told everything will be handled -- there's no need for citizen concern or involvement.[108]

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The Symbolic Nature of Media Power

Whereas many behavioral researchers believe that the effects of media are often quited limited, critical-cultural theorists begin with the premise that the power of the media is enormous and is vested in the media's ability to manipulate the symbols important in a society.

Various institutions in society exert different forms of power. Government exercises political power, banks control financial power, and the military manages a society's coercive power. John B. Thompson suggests the analogy for the power accorded the media is **symbolic power**, which he defines as *any expression that conveys information or symbolic content to intervene in and influence the course of public action or events.*[109] Wheras Francis Bacon equated knowledge with empowerment when he observed in 1597 that "knowledge is power," critical-cultural theorists argue that media use their power to create and disseminate knowledge for purposes of social *control*.[110]

Media Content as a Form of Social Control

The roots of critical thinking about media power can be traced to **Karl Marx** (1818-1883), the father of modern socialist thought.

Marx was a German political economist who developed his theories about social organization in the mid-19th century. The period was one of enormous and volatile social change in Europe.   Unlike other social theorists who condemned urbanization and industrialization, Marx said these trends were not inherently bad. Instead, he said the real problem rested in the ruthless capitalist owners,

who exploited workers in their quest for profit. Marx was a utopian, who didn't call for the restoration of the old order. Instead, he envisioned a new form of social organization that abolished social class.

One of Marx's fundamental premises was that elites maintained power through their *control over culture*. For example, he described religion as the "opiate of the masses." Marx used **ideology** to refer to the *false set of beliefs and perceptions the ruling class attempted to impose on lower classes to make the lower classes cooperate in perpetuating the power of the upper class*. In a often-cited quote, Karl Marx and collaborator Friedrich Engels explained:

> *The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force in society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.*[111]

Marx called upon proletarian workers to rise up against their bourgeois oppressors. He argued that elites would never willingly surrender power, so power had to be seized. Today, **neomarxists,** *less militant followers of Marx*, call for recapturing control of the media, but fall short of his call for violence. How do powerful media interests (and other major institutions in a society) exercise control over culture?

One explanation is media engage in a conspiracy to control the beliefs and values within a society. This is the approach suggested in political novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. In both books, media were instruments of totalitarian governments used for official propaganda and thought control. However, a conspiratorial explanation is difficult to reconcile with today's highly competitive, free-market environment.

Another explanation centers around the constraint of resources. The argument is that powerful media entities deliberately exclude other voices through their economic clout, political connections and operational practices. Media are able to stifle new entrants into the field and obtain preferential treatment by governments in areas such as taxation, postage rates, broadcast licensing, and the assignment of official government advertising contracts.

While the constraint explanation is more plausible than conspiracy, the most compelling argument can be found in the writing of neomarxists who argue that dominance is not the direct result of anything that elites do. Instead, power is vested within the audience's tacit acquiescence to the elite's actions. Large institutions in society (not just media) operate through a process of

hegemony, or the *control by a dominant class over subordinates, who willingly consent and whose actions reinforce acceptance of that dominance over them.* In the case of media hegemony, audiences unwittingly assimilate the predominant ideology found in media content. Audiences accept the ideology unquestioningly, think that it's right, and assume there are no alternatives.[112]

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Censorship, Propaganda, and Distortion

Do the news media deliberately bias news coverage? Several contemporary media critics offer different theories as to how the press might collude with other powerful institutions to only provide certain information to the public. Their arguments illustrate the kinds of the concerns voiced by media critics.

Censorship. Each year, Project Censorship at Sonoma State University in California identifies 25 stories shrouded from public view. During 1996, the most overlooked story deemed to deserve greater attention involved the rising risk to the world from nuclear proliferation in space. Project executive director Peter Philips suggests that such neglect is the result of three forms of censorship. Ideological censorship involves stories that run counter to the beliefs, values or political agendas of media owners. Marketplace censorship stems from media protecting advertisers against derogatory stories. Public relations censorship results from an over-dependence on government and corporate news sources, which have a self-interest in what information reaches the public.[113]

Propaganda. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky suggest that media inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behavior of society through a series of five filters. Their propaganda model suggests that media content is thus expunged of anything that challenges the Establishment. Their five filters include: 1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit orientation of media firms, 2) advertising, as the primary income source of media, 3) reliance upon sources who are funded or approved by agents of power, such as government and business, 4) the use of negative feedback or "flak" by influentials to keep media in line ideologically. Lastly, because their main interest was foreign affairs reporting, they identified 5) an overriding opposition by western nations to communism in any form, which skews

coverage of most international events.[114]

> **Distortion**. Michael Parenti, a leading critical school press scholar, also agrees that the press functions as conduits for powerful interests and thus slights the underprivileged and underclass. He focuses on eight specific practices used by media to misrepresent the news: 1) omission, 2) selectivity, 3) placement, 4) labeling, 5) lies and face-value transmission (taking a source's information without verification), 6) false balancing, 7) auxiliary and deceptive embellishments (such as headlines and photographs), and 8) dwelling upon surface details instead of substance (which he termed the "greying of reality").[115]

Critical-Cultural Theory: Media Ideology and Dominance

Marxist thinking has led to the emergence of a growing and vocal movement among researchers interested in media's consequences for society. **Critical-cultural theory** examines the *cultural impact of media within a Marxist framework centered around the concepts of ideology and dominance*.

During the 1930s, the Frankfurt School of Critical Thinking (see page 38) was the first group of researchers to apply Marxist ideas to the study of media. They viewed the commodification of popular culture as a form of social control by elites. Later, in the 1960s, critical researchers in the University of Birmingham in England launched a program of cultural research that focused on the media's dominance over Britain's working class. More recently, critical-cultural studies in the United States have addressed questions related to media and gender, and media and race.

Critical-cultural studies entail three separate, but interrelated approaches. These involve examining: the political economy of the media, the dominant ideologies found in contemporary media fare, and alternative meanings that might be derived by audiences from media content.[116]

Political Economy of the Media

As the term suggests, **political economy** involves understanding the structure and operation of media in terms of economics and the political environment in which media operate.

Media are a part of the power elite within most societies, with close links to government and other powerful interests. One area of concern is the make-up of media owners and managers. Today, most major media are owned by corporations and operated by corporate managers who travel in social circles with executives from other corporations. Thus, their concerns and interests tend to reflect those of their wealthy peers, not the public at large. This problem is exacerbated by the increased concentration of media ownership, resulting in a lack of diversity of viewpoints among owners about political and social issues (see pages 68-75).

Another area of interest to critical researchers is the nature of the media work force. The demographic profile of media workers better matches that of the rich and powerful in society than the audiences they serve. The majority are college-educated whites who grew up in middle-class environments. Most managers are middle-aged males. While media organizations in recent years have hired more women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and people with physical disabilities than in the past, critical theorists argue that the absence of more minorities, especially in managerial roles, reinforces the dominance of America's white, male majority over other groups.

Media owners and workers strive to establish and maintain close relationships with powerful interests. Sometimes this is because media personnel were born into the Establishment. For example, ABC correspondent Cokie Roberts is the daughter of the late Hale Boggs, a powerful senator from Louisiana. Others marry into positions of influence, such as NBC reporter Andrea Mitchell, who became the wife of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Allen Greenspan in early 1997. Still other reporters came to their media jobs directly from government. Such cozy relationships raise ethical questions about whether insiders can ever be critical of government officials, or can avoid infusing their own partisan views into their coverage. Moreover, these close relationships suggest that only dominant ideologies will be represented in the media, regardless of the person's position on any particular issue.

The way that news is gathered also contributes to elite ties. When reporters are assigned to a **beat**, they are expected to become experts in their assigned area of specialization. They spend all of their time on the topic to which they have been assigned. As a result, reporters become insulated from other perspectives and begin to accept the validity of the beliefs and values of the organizations and people they cover regularly. Reporters also must get to know and to ingratiate themselves with sources who can provide locatable, reliable and dependable quantities of news. Reporters thus can become dependent upon sources, who make it easier for them to do their jobs. Sources often provide an invisible **information subsidy** that reduces the cost of gathering the news.

Such subsidies can take various forms: Sources provide facilities such as press rooms, organize information, provide easy access to sources through press conferences and interviews, and even write news releases. Mark Fishman observes that the resulting "ideological character of news follows from journalists' routine reliance upon raw materials which are already ideological."[117]

Are Media Workers Elites?

Claims that the news media are out of touch with the general population are favorite complaints used by disgruntled politicians. In 1972, then Vice President Spiro T. Agnew went on the attack charging the media were "effete snobs" and "nattering nabobs of negativity." Twenty years later, Dan Quayle charged a "cultural elite" resides "in the newsrooms, sitcom studios and faculty lounges across America."

More serious social critics have made similar observations. The late Christopher Lasch included journalists among the new professional elites who are "separated from the rest of the population by a way of life that is glamorous, gaudy, and even indecently lavish."[118]

Whether claims of elitism are true depends on which media workers are being discussed. In the early 1980s, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., examined the demographic makeup of 238 journalists working at 12 of America's leading national media, all situated in the Northeast. Their findings suggest that the workers studied were overwhelmingly urban and secular, and that the content they produced didn't reflect traditional American values.[119]

By comparison, researchers David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit reported a sharply different picture when they surveyed journalists across the nation in 1992. They found that American journalists, as a whole, are more representative of the larger society than remote from it. Their typical journalist in 1992 was a White Protestant male, who had a bachelor's degree from a public college, was married, 36 years old, earned about $31,000 a year, and had worked in journalism for 12 years.

According to Weaver and Wilhoit, the journalists they studied did not differ from the general population in terms of region of residence, age, gender, marital/ family status, or income. On the other hand, they are more White (only 8% were minorities), less religious, more liberal politically, and more highly educated overall.[120]

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Dominant Ideology in Media Content

Based on the political economy of the media, critical-cultural theorists argue that *all media content* is biased in favor of the dominant beliefs and values found within a society.[121] Thus, a second way to understand media power is to examine the ideological content found in media.

Many cultural researchers draw upon the traditions and techniques of literary criticism, which usually have been applied only to serious works of literature. However, their objectives are the same as literary critics: to understand the meaning of the work under examination, and to use the work to help make the world more humane and civilized.

Following literary criticism, critical-cultural researchers use the term **text** to describe a media message, whether or not the message uses the written word. More generally, text is used to describe *any communicative or expressive artifact* through which we experience culture. A text can be another human's actions (which we "read"), writings, or media output.

Textual analysis involves a *careful and systematic examination of a how a particular text generates meaning.* Most literature courses focus on formal textual analysis. **Formalism** involves studying the how the author's construction of the message -- word choice, sentence structure, meter and rhyme, use of similes and metaphors, etc. -- influences its meaning. Contemporary cultural media studies go beyond the formal features of a message to use **semiotics**, *the study of signification,* or the ways signs are used to interpret events.

A semiological analysis of media typically includes examining the use of different kinds of signs. A sign can be **iconic**, i.e. *depict visually what it intended to represent*; **indexical** or *represents something we associate with particular idea*; or **symbolic**, which, as used in this context, is a *arbitrary sign upon which people agree about its meaning*. Thus, we can signify a fire with a picture of flames (an icon), smoke (an index) or the word "fire" (a symbol).

Semiotics also suggests that there are at least two levels of signification. **Denotation** refers to what a sign is intended to designate. "Fire" denotes the combustion of flammable materials. **Connotation** refers to additional interpretations or meanings that might be implied by a sign or that audiences associate with a sign, including judgments and emotional responses. Depending on the context, for example, fire might be used to signify terror or to conjure up feelings of warmth and comfort.[122]

To understand the ideological content of media fare involves examining the way that media manipulate icons, indexes and symbols. Media routinely use denotation to communicate basic facts, and infuse connotative meanings or culturally acquired associations that might not be manifested in the symbols themselves.

British critical theorist Stuart Hall proposes a model of cultural encoding and decoding of mediated messages. Hall suggests that **encoding** involves the creation of media texts that reflect
☐ the individual producer's professional norms and practices,
☐ the media organization's institutional relationships and procedures, and
☐ the technology used to create the message.[123]
Hall contends that media messages always have a **preferred reading,** i.e. *the way that the producer intended the message to be interpreted*. This preferred reading reflects and reinforces the dominant ideology in the culture where it was produced. (For an illustration, see the discussion of "Pretty Woman" on page 63-64).

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Ideological Biases in News

Culturally dominant values can be seen daily in just reading the newspaper or watching television news.

Media sociologist Herbert J. Gans examined the process of news work and identified eight key ideologies, or what he termed "enduring values" that are pervasive in the news. These values reflect the subtle influence of ideology on reporting and editing. How many of these can you identify in daily news reports?

☐ **Ethnocentrism** -- Viewing events from one nation's or region's perspective above all others.

☐ **Altruistic Democracy** -- A belief that all politics should be based on public interest and service.

□ **Responsible Capitalism** -- An implicit assumption that businesses should refrain from unreasonable profiteering or exploitation of workers or customers.

□ **Small-Town Pastoralism** -- The celebration of nature and smallness, including a sentimental preference for rural versus urban life.

□ **Individualism** -- An unrelenting priority on freedom of individuals against encroachments by government or needs of the greater community.

□ **Moderatism** -- Avoidance of excess or extremism; an emphasis on moderation in politics, values and culture.

□ **Order** -- Emphasis on social cohesion, avoidance of conflict, respect for political and social authority.

□ **Leadership** -- A conviction that moral, candid and competent leaders can overcome all adversity through vision, stamina and courage.[124]

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Alternative Audience Interpretations

A third tenet in critical-culture theory is that all texts are subject to multiple readings, usually *depending on the audience members' group or community membership*.   Critical theorists contend that members of distinct classes, ethnic groups, religions, regions, and genders will read texts differently.

The idea that audiences can derive different meanings reflects the fact that audiences are the products of their cultural experiences. In addition, audineces of mediated messages are active processors of messages -- not merely passive, uninvolved, or impressionable targets of messages. Using the media involves reconciling a text with personal experience. Lawrence Grossberg explains:

> *The relationship between the audience and popular texts is an active and productive one. The meaning of a text is not given in some independently available set of codes which we can consult at our own convenience. A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires. The same text will mean different things to different people, depending on how it is interpreted. … Equally important, texts do not define ahead of time how they are to be used or what functions they serve. They have different uses for different people in different contexts.*[125]

Messages in the media can vary in their levels of **polysemy,** or *openness in interpretation*.   For example, many postmodern forms of expression are highly polysemic because a single meaning might not have been intended. However, most critical theorists reject the notion that messages are devoid of ideology.

Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding (see the previous section) addresses how audiences interpret a text. Hall suggests that **decoding** is a process that is primarily dependent upon the audience's
□ cultural and political predispositions,
□ relationship to wider frameworks of power, and
□ access to alternative perspectives.

Although a preferred reading is always found in media fare, Hall suggests that at least two alternative interpretations of any media message or cultural artifact are possible.   One is a **negotiated reading**, wherein the *meaning is subtly contested*. While accepting the overall meaning, parts of the message might be subject to different interpretations. Another is an **oppositional reading,** in which the meaning derived is *contrary to intent of the text*. Such oppositional readings result in counterarguing and the rejection of the message as being untrue, i.e. inconsistent with the audience's view of social reality.[126]

In examining these alternative readings, cultural theorists focus principally on what they perceive to be the audience's defining characteristic, such as gender, race or class.   Much critical-cultural research emphasizes the **resistance** groups exhibit relative to the dominant or preferred reading that might be intended by the author.   Critical researchers suggest that alternative readings of many media texts reveal language and imagery that is often racist, sexist and class-ist. Critical researchers devote considerable effort to analyze alternative interpretations of media messages, to unmask subversive meanings, to demythologize dominant values, and to dehegemonize groups. Many studies demonstrate how particular groups have become victims of cultural repression

and oppression -- of women by men, of blacks by whites, of homosexuals by heterosexuals, and of the poor by the rich.

Critical-cultural studies are inherently political in nature. Critical theorists admit freely that the purpose of their research is to effect change in the media and to advance the cause of the particular groups they study.   Significantly, the fact that audiences "read" texts in alternative ways offsets, to at least some degree, the dominant influence of media ideology and the advantage enjoyed by elites in creating mediated reality.

"Pretty Woman" -- A Case Study in the Creation of Meaning

To examine the ideas of preferred, negotiated and oppositional readings, consider the popular 1990 movie "Pretty Woman."

Edward is a high-powered but lonely businessman (played by Richard Gere), who hires a prostitute named Vivian (portrayed by Julia Roberts) to spend a week with him at a posh Beverly Hills hotel. The two quickly recognize they are kindred spirits. As Edward observes, both "screw people for money."

As might be expected, the two fall in love. In the end, Edward goes to Vivian's apartment (in a limousine), where he climbs up the fire escape to become the prince who, she tells in the dialogue, she had always dreamed would come to rescue her.

The film is replete with many of the dominant beliefs and values found in our society, including the idealized hope that stories will always end happily ever after. Both Edward and Vivian are portrayed in the early parts of the film with the culturally dominant stereotypes associated with their roles. Edward is a stiff, emotionless businessmen in a three-piece suit. Vivian is the loose hooker, dressed in an artificial blond wig, skimpy outfit, high leather boots and flouncey red jacket.

A "negotiated reading" of the movie might suggest that it is not a love story at all -- but a psychological examination of how two people get in touch with their individual feelings. Edward is a lost soul, whose girlfriend left him and whose deceased father had abandoned him. He finds solace in a relationship with a woman, symbolized as she cradles him as they soak in their luxurious hotel bathtub. Meanwhile, Vivian

discovers herself, stepping confidently into the unfamiliar social roles into which she is thrust. Given the right opportunity in life, she learns she is capable and no longer needs to earn her living off the streets.

Several "oppositional readings" of the movie are also possible. For moral conservatives, the film is a debaucherous tale of sex for money. For the poor, the opulent settings, the extravagant shopping, and high-powered business dealings underscore the inequities in modern society. For feminists, the film is morality play that exposes the way that women are exploited in modern society and the indifference exhibited by society in general. The film's "happy ending" only reinforces the repugnant idea that women are dependent upon men.

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Media and Cultural Diversity

To understand the relevance of critical theory today, consider the current debate centered around religious values and multiculturalism. As suggested with the Murphy Brown incident at the beginning of this chapter, America is in a cultural struggle for dominance that pits groups with different values and cultural agendas against one another. In particular, many minority groups believe they are in a struggle to resist hegemonic control over them by society's cultural majority. James Davison Hunter suggests these differences run deep and might be unreconcilable. He observes:

> … *these differences are often intensified and aggravated by the way they are presented in public. In brief, the media technology that makes public speech possible gives public discourse a life and logic of its own, a life and logic separated from the intentions of the speaker or the subtleties of the arguments they employ.*[127]

The moral or religious battle involves fundamentalist groups such as The Moral Majority and The Christian Coalition, who argue that traditional societal values have been undermined by misdirected governmental legislation, liberal judicial decisions, lax educational standards, and loose standards for media content. In particular, they object to what they consider to be indecent and excessive profanity, violence and sexual content.

On the multicultural front, groups strive to not only restore **cultural pluralism**, in which *multiple groups co-exist as equals in society*, but to establish special recognition for particular groups -- women, blacks, Latinos, Asian-Americans,

Native Americans, gays and lesbians, among others.

Schools have been the focus of much of the confrontation, in part because schools are taxpayer-supported institutions with an obligation to be responsive to public concerns at the local level. In schools, religious groups have sought restoration of school prayer and meditation, while ethnic groups have won approval of multicultural curricula intended to foster self-esteem and a positive sense of identity.

Media have been targets of the same kinds of efforts. However, as private (not public) organizations, media are not subject to the same kind of political leverage. Nonetheless, groups have pressured media organizations to restore religious values and to provide a cultural portrait of a society that is far more diverse compared to what was portrayed in the past. At minimum, media have responded by attempting to demonstrate *political correctness*.

Protagonists in America's cultural wars have actively sought changes in the political economy as well as the ideological content of today's media.[128]

Among changes sought in media operations have been efforts to recruit more women and minorities, to expand minority ownership of media properties, and to challenge broadcast station license renewals when licensees failed to meet community needs. Groups have even initiated hostile ownership bids for media companies (such as the National Federation for Decency's 1985 bid for CBS).

Activist groups also have attempted to reshape media content. Advertisers have been pressured to purchase space and time in minority media outlets that they had not previously used. Religious leaders from both the right and the left, feminists and various ethnic and special interest groups have actively sought out more prominent and positive portrayals of their groups. Their actions have ranged from complaints, protests and boycotts, to highly organized lobbying efforts intended to educate media executives.

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Activist Groups Lobby The Networks

Kathryn Montgomery, in her highly readable book *Target: Prime Time*, chronicles how various religious, ethnic and other groups lobby and apply other forms of pressure on the television networks. She sums up the political opportunity presented by television as follows:

To minorities, women, gays, seniors, and the disabled,

television is a cultural mirror that has failed to reflect their image accurately. To be absent from prime time, to be marginally included in it, or to be treated badly by it are seen as serious threats to their rights as citizens.

To conservative religious groups, television is a threat to traditional values, too often a dangerous intruder into the home. Organizations including the Moral Majority and the National Federation for Decency have pressured the TV industry to stop the "tide of degeneracy" which they believe threatens to engulf the American family.

Social issue groups believe television is an electronic classroom, in which lessons are taught by the heroes of prime time. Groups such as the Population Institute and the Solar Lobby point to incidents of instant impact -- like the time Fonzie of "Happy Days" got his first library card and inspired thousands of youngsters to do the same. A number of groups have sought ways to incorporate messages about birth control, drug abuse, nuclear war, and a range of other issues into the plots of TV's nightly entertainment.

Anti-violence groups see television "murder and mayhem" as a toxic substance. They fear that continued exposure to this poison will produce a more violent society. The American Medical Association, the PTA, and others have tried to force the networks to reduce TV violence.[129]

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Have efforts to influence the media been successful? One media observer suggests that representation of minorities in media (particularly television) goes through a succession of stages: **nonrecognition** (minorities are absent), **ridicule** (minorities are subject to egregious stereotyping, such as found in "Amos and Andy"), **regulation** (minorities are portrayed in roles that unquestionably uphold predominant ideologies, such as portrayals as police officers), and **respect** (minorities play exactly the same kind of roles as others, representing both good and evil).[130]

In the 1990s, ethnic minorities are far more prominent in television prime time than they were 30 years ago, when Bill Cosby was featured on "I Spy" and thus became the first black to star on a weekly TV series. Subsequent series have been built around entire casts of various ethnic backgrounds. However, critics continue to say the situations portrayed reflect dominant cultural values more than indigenous norms and values found within the minority communities these

shows are intended to portray. Also, minorities are not always portrayed in the most favorable light, critics say.

Feminists don't all agree that improvements have been made in the portrayal of women. Elayne Rapping suggests that today's portrayals of women are more realistic and that real problems related to abuse, domestic violence and economic discrimination are finally being dealt with.[131] However, Susan Faludi says that media have presented a rash of anti-feminist themes recently, which she describes as a cultural backlash to advancements made by women in society. Portrayals of women often deal with women's difficulties in balancing the conflicts between career and personal life.[132] The issue remains important. A 1997 study conducted by Children Now, a child advocacy group, found that role stereotypes persist. Men are more likely to be shown working. Although women on TV are shown as intelligent problem-solvers, they continue to be preoccupied with romance and their looks.[133]

Some evidence suggests similar improvements in portrayals related to morality and religion. In general, Hollywood has increased the proportion of family films it produces, which now represent about 40% of all movie titles. In the aftermath of Martin Scorcese's 1988 production of "The Last Temptation of Christ," which was called blasphemous for its portrayal of a sexual Jesus, Hollywood has produced an array of films about forgiveness, hope, repentance and other uplifting themes.   People with strong religious convictions are also gaining more prominence among movie-makers and television producers. This might explain the extraordinary number of films and TV shows dealing with angels during the mid-1990s.[134]

Responses to the Diversity Movement

Moral, religious and multicultural activism is an effort to shape the cultural beliefs and values, practices and rituals, and artifacts that gain prominence in our society. While there is no question that American media have omitted or misportrayed the contributions and cultural life of various groups through the years, it is unclear how long the diversity debate can or will be sustained.

Diversity can be seen as both a foundation for and an expression of postmodern thought. However, the movement has become the target of heightened criticism in the past several years. Lynne V. Cheney, former executive director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, objects to the multicultural movement's "disdain for objective truth," which could "lead to an intellectual crisis that threatens the legal, political and moral order of our society."[135] Meanwhile, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. suggests that cultural division operates to destroy the sense of history and unity that Americans once shared. He contends that multiculturalism is not a grassroots movement, but was created by

ideologues who, given sufficient publicity in the media, could create a following. He believes that people think of themselves first as individuals and only secondarily as members of a particular ethnic or religious class.[136]

In refuting criticisms lodged against the media, Jon Katz says that America's cultural wars are pointless as they are unwinnable. He describes many of the most vocal media critics as **mediaphobes.** In whipping up hysterical, anti-media sentiment, mediaphobes seem to suggest that the way to solve societal problems is to "kill the messenger." Katz contends that Americans have surrendered the public discussion of moral values to opportunist politicians, cultural conservatives, politically correct ideologues and other "self-righteous blockheads." Instead, he challenges citizen-audiences to take the responsibility for the ethical and moral value systems found within their homes:

> *Media, new or old, don't shape the national character. They don't create the economic, racial, social and ethnic divisions of contemporary America. They don't cause poverty, traffic in guns, induce teenage girls to bear children or teenage boys to abandon them. They don't fund schools or make them ineffective or scandalously bad. Despite the many pretensions to the contrary, they don't forge our civic or political consciousness either.*
>
> *Claims to the contrary are as cruel as they are false--they keep us from seeing and treating the problems we really do face, along with their causes.*
>
> *The media can't bear all this weight. Values in the final analysis, seem to arise everywhere. They come from spiritual, educational, social--and increasingly virtual--communities.*[137]

Selected Critical Issues

Media Concentration

A growing controversy related to the political economy of the media centers around the increased concentration of media ownership in the United States and worldwide. Media concentration takes several forms:

□ **Newspaper chains** are groups of newspapers operated in different cities by the same corporation, sometimes sharing certain editorial content through company-owned wire services or syndicates.

□ **Broadcast networks**, such as ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN and WB, are national distributors of both radio and television programming. The TV

networks produce news, public affairs and sports programming, and purchase most of their entertainment fare from Hollywood studios and independent producers.

□ **Broadcast groups** are separate companies that operate most of the radio and TV network-affiliated stations around the country. They transmit network programming, but also produce other programming, particularly local news, public affairs and sports shows.

□ **Other media**. The same concentration can be seen in the book publishing, recording and motion picture industries, where the same corporation produces materials under several book imprints, record labels or studio names.

Concentration also has led to the rise of **media conglomerates**, *large corporations whose businesses cross both international and media industry lines*. Today, about 20 major media conglomerates control the majority of media operations in the United States. Media conglomeration is not limited to U.S. media ownership. Most of Europe, for example, is dominated by multinational media conglomerates. Indeed, five of the companies listed on Table 2-1 are actually based outside the U.S.[138]

Significantly, the trend toward media concentration is accelerating. The conglomerates in Table 2-1 represent the consolidation of what were about 50 major media corporations only 20 years ago. Among notable recent mergers in the United States were Disney's acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC, Westinghouse's purchase of CBS, and Time-Warner's expansion within cable TV with its acquisition of Turner Broadcasting. Consolidation is expected to continue as telephone companies, cable companies, and entertainment firms form consortia to deliver entertainment and information to consumers.

Dangers of Consolidation

Critical theorists and others argue that such concentration has dangerous consequences for society, allowing cultural domination by a handful of powerful corporate interests.

Among the leading critics is Ben Bagdikian, a former journalist, who became one of the first to point to the problems of newspaper chain ownership, particularly as it as contributes to the loss of competition in cities that

Table 25-1

**Major Media Conglomerates
With Operations in United States**

Media Organization	1995 Revenue $US Millions	Principal Holdings
Advance Publications	$4,855	*Parade*, Conde-Nast Publications (*Vogue, Vanity Fair, Architectural Digest*, 12 other magazines), Newhouse newspapers (26 dailies, 28 local publications), book publishing (Random House, Knopf, Crown Publishers).
Bertelsmann AG (Germany)	$14,126	Records (BMG Entertainment), book publishing (Bantam, Doubleday, Dell), 10 newspapers and 70 magazines, including *Family Circle* and *McCall's*.
Cox Communications	$3,806	Newspapers (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 17 other dailies, 7 weeklies), 6 TV**, 14 radio**, couponing, telephone books, book publishing.
Disney Company, Walt	$12,112	Motion picture and TV show production, ABC Television Network, Disney Channel, 10 TV, music and book publishing, newspapers (8 dailies, 78 weeklies, 638 shoppers) 50 trade and consumer magazines (including Women's Wear Daily). Amusement parks and retail shops. Part owner of other cable TV networks (A&E, History Channel, Lifetime, ESPN).
Dow Jones	$2,284	*Wall Street Journal, Barron's*, Dow Jones News Services and Market Services, 19 dailies and weeklies.
Gannett	$4,007	*USA Today, USA Weekend*, newspapers (91 dailies) 16 TV, 5

Media Organization	1995 Revenue $US Millions	Principal Holdings
		radio, cable operations, Gannett News Service.
General Electric*	$3,919	NBC Television Network and owned-and-operated stations.
Hearst	$2,331	16 magazines (*Redbook, Esquire*), 12 dailies, 8 TV, 6 radio, New England Cable Network, King Features Syndicate. Part owner of cable networks (A&E, History, Lifetime, ESPN).
Knight-Ridder	$2,752	Newspapers (31 dailies, 10 weeklies) Knight-Ridder News Service.
McGraw-Hill	$2,900	*Business Week*, nearly 100 other trade publications, book publishing, 4 TV (KMGH, Denver).
News Corporation (Australia)	$8,641	Fox Television Network, 20th Century Fox motion picture and TV production, newspapers (*New York Post*), magazines, couponing, satellite TV systems.
New York Times	$2,409	Newspapers (*New York Times, Boston Globe*, 20 other dailies, 8 nondailies), magazines in sports and leisure, 5 TV, 2 radio, New York Times News Service, part owner of the *International Herald Tribune.*
PolyGram (Netherlands) 75% owned by Philips Electronics NV	Not available	Recorded music (A&M, DefJam, Island, London, Mercury, Motown, Polydor, Decca, Philips labels), music publishing, filmed entertainment, Gramercy Pictures (distribution), ITC Television, MTV Asia.
Reed Elsevier (U.K.)	$5,654	Trade publications (*Variety, Publisher's Weekly*, others) book publishing. Data bases (Lexis/Nexis, (Congressional Information Service).

Media Organization	1995 Revenue $US Millions	Principal Holdings
Reader's Digest	$3,069	Magazine published in 26 languages around the world, books, music, videos, new media products.
Scripps-Howard	$1,030	Scripps Howard newspapers (*Rocky Mountain News*, 15 other dailies), television production companies, 9 TV, United Media Syndicate, Home and Garden cable network.
Sony (Japan)	$8,726*	Columbia Pictures and Tri-Star studios, Columbia and Epic records, Playstation video games. (Major electronics manufacturer).
Tele-Communications, Inc.	$6,851	Largest cable operator in U.S., with 10 million subscribers. Liberty Media subsidiary owns stakes in more than 90 cable networks worldwide (includes Discovery, BET, Home Shopping Network). Owns 9% of Time-Warner.
Thomson Corporation (Canada)	$7,225	Newspapers (109 dailies), book publishing (Gale Research), data bases (First Call and others).
Time-Warner	$17,696	Magazines (*TIME, Sports Illustrated, People,* 7 others), Warner Brothers motion pictures and records, WB TV network, cable networks (CNN, TBS, HBO, Cinemax), cable systems.
Times-Mirror	$3,448	Newspapers (*Los Angeles Times,* 10 others), Magazines (*Field & Stream*), cable systems, book publishing.
Tribune Company	$2,245	Newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, 3 others), Television stations (WGN, Chicago, KWGN, Denver, others), Tribune Media Services, 5 alternative media, direct marketing, online publishing.

Media Organization	1995 Revenue $US Millions	Principal Holdings
Viacom	$11,689	Paramount Pictures, TV syndication, Cable networks (MTV, Nickleodeon, VH1, Showtime), book publishing (Simon & Schuster, Prentice-Hall, Allyn & Bacon), 9 TV, radio in 5 markets, Blockbuster Video retail stores.
Washington Post	$1,719	*Newsweek, Washington Post*, other newspapers, part owner of the *International Herald Tribune.*
Westinghouse*	$3,333	CBS Television Network, 15 TV, 39 radio, cable television satellite services.

* Figures exclude revenue from industrial or non-media operations.
**Counts for radio and TV indicate numbers of stations.

previously had two or three newspapers. More recently, he has termed the media conglomerates the "lords of the global village."

> *The lords of the global village have their own political agenda. All resist economic changes that do not support their own financial interests. Together, they exert a homogenizing power of ideas, culture and commerce that affects populations larger than any in history. Neither Caesar nor Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt or any Pope, has commanded as much power to shape the information on which so many people depend to make decisions about everything from whom they vote for to what to eat.*[139]

Most media conglomerates evolved as the result of the natural growth of their businesses and the advent of new technologies. Reader's Digest Association, as an example, entered book publishing to market compilations of the condensed books that been a part of the magazine's format since its inception. Following World War II, many newspapers went into broadcasting as a defensive measure to protect advertising revenues and out of fear that TV might eliminate newspapers (which did not happen).

As profit-making organizations, media firms are under continuing pressure from public stockholders to increase earnings. They can do so only two ways:

either increase margins from existing operations (by charging more or reducing costs) or expand their scope of operations over a larger base. Many companies are also motivated by opportunities for **synergy**, in which the *profit-earning potential of the firm is accelerated beyond the mere additive effects of additional revenues*. For example, the high visibility of Mickey Mouse in movies, TV, theme parks, books and merchandise works to increase his overall popularity, resulting in greater overall spending by consumers on Mickey Mouse products than if he appeared only in one of these media.

Should concentration be allowed to continue?   Among key concerns that have been raised about media conglomeration are these:

□ **Concentrated control of ideas**. Although consolidation is commonplace in other businesses, media concentration dangerously restricts the free flow of information and ideas, particularly in a democracy. As Bagdikian suggests, this concentration enables executives in organizations such as Disney or News Corporation to control large segments of news as well as popular culture.

□ **Restraint of trade**. The sheer size of media conglomerates makes it difficult for independent media organizations to compete, thus barring entry for upstarts offering alternatives to mainstream ideology. Conglomerates are also in a position to collude in their pricing and distribution practices, creating unfair competition and higher costs for advertisers and, ultimately, consumers.

□ **Excessive emphasis on profits**. Large conglomerates mandate their operating units to meet profit goals. In the case of chain newspapers, for example, local managements must adhere to a few specific corporate philosophies, but day-to-day decision-making is left to local managers. However, if a unit fails to deliver on financial goals, intervention by owners can be quick and decisive. Organizations under pressure to improve profits invariably are tempted to sacrifice quality. They also tend to avoid making long-term investments that would enhance the quality of their products, and thus indirectly serve the best interests of audiences in the future.

□ **Incessant cross promotion**. When a large conglomerate owns multiple properties, the operating units can feel pressure to use or promote other corporate products or projects.   For example, virtually all Gannett newspapers carry the Gannett-produced *USA Weekend* as the supplement inserted in weekend editions. Disney's ownership of Capital Cities/ABC provides a ready outlet for its studio's creative output -- a classic case of **vertical integration**, when *a company controls both production and distribution of its products*.

□ **Reticence in criticizing other units.** A recent survey by American Society of Newspaper Editors revealed that one-third of all respondents freely admitted

that they would not run a story that was damaging to their parent firm. While such corporate loyalty is admirable, media are expected by audiences to be independent and trustworthy sources of information. Can a movie critic at an ABC owned-and-operated station freely criticize a new Disney film release that is substandard? The issue has important implications for how audiences perceive the overall credibility of media.

□ **Promotion of economic system.** Media conglomerates have a vested interest in maintaining an economic system unfettered from regulation or excessive government oversight, and thus are in a position to promote that ideology, even in cases where government action might be valuable or needed. At least one major book publisher is known to have rejected a book about corporate decision-making because the subject would not have been well received by its corporate owner.

□ **Cultural domination worldwide.** With the expanding worldwide presence of many media conglomerates, and with ever-increasing economies of scale, media conglomerates are well-positioned to squeeze out competitors. The problem is particularly chronic in foreign countries, where local media can't compete with productions from the United States. Canada and France, for example, protect their own media industries by imposing import restrictions on the amount of American-produced material that airs on their national television networks. Cultural domination by large, mostly Western-owned conglomerates whose actions often are beyond the control of national governments, has been termed **cultural imperialism** and **cultural hegemony.** In the case of Third World countries, it also goes by the term **media colonialization.**[140]

Media Costs and Access

An important economic issue related to the concentration of media ownership deals with the charges audiences will pay to access media in the future.

The predominant media structure in the United States is an **entertainment-oriented, advertiser-supported model**, in which media organizations have offered content free or at nominal cost. Benjamin Day, the founder of the *New York Sun*, the first of the penny press newspapers during the 1830s, is credited with the notion that he could sell more newspapers by reducing the cost from six cents a copy to a penny. In turn, Day foresaw that the resulting larger circulations would make newspapers attractive as vehicles for advertisers. Since then newspapers, magazines, radio, and television all follow the same pattern. In all of them, the expenses for production and distribution have been borne principally by advertisers. The alternative **pay-for-use model** of media

economics has been mainly limited to the purchase of books and recordings, and admission to motion pictures theaters.

Starting with the advent of cable television in the 1960s, a subtle shift from the advertising-supported model to the pay-for-use model has been under way. In the early 1970s, most people balked at the idea of paying $6.95 for the privilege of watching television on cable. Today, some two-thirds of American households pay monthly cable fees that can exceed $25 per month. Some pay even more for premium services, such as HBO or the Disney Channel. People also have become accustomed to TV pay-for-view services, video rentals, and time-charges for access to the Internet.

What are the social implications of this trend? One concern is severe **information inequality** -- we might become societies of information "haves" and "have-nots."[141] These groups also have been termed the **information rich** and **information poor**, respectively. The worry is that individuals with the financial resources will be able to access a far wider range of information and cultural resources, while those who cannot afford high prices will be forced to do without. Critics are concerned that this differential access to information might exacerbate class differences.

This argument is supported by research that suggests that information can create **knowledge gaps** between groups in a society. In a variety of studies, beginning with research about information campaigns, as well as the effects of children's shows such as "Sesame Street," researchers found that the availability of information had a differential effect. Although several of these efforts were intended to help economically disadvantaged groups (people with low SES, or *socio-economic status*), the effect was just the opposite: Instead of closing the gap, new information aided high-SES groups (who were not the targets of such efforts) more than it did low-SES groups (the intended beneficiaries). Thus, information can serve to widen gaps between groups.[142] As a matter of social policy, many media activists argue that communication resources should be kept affordable, so that everyone can take advantage of them. However, as consumers pay more for services directly, advocacy groups are expected to press for keeping media charges low.

Universal Access as a Right

As private enterprises, the mass media are not usually classified as public utilities. Although over-the-air broadcasters have been highly regulated because they use the public airwaves, a basic difference between media companies and utilities has been that broadcasters faced stiff competition and were not granted exclusive operating franchises. However, the technological environment is changing. If cable replaces over-the-air transmission as the primary means to

connect household televisions, possibly combined with connecting home computers to the Internet, the resulting media companies that provide this single conduit to homes would look very much like an information utility company. This utility model is already quite familiar to cable and telephone companies, which seek territorial franchises within communities to amortize the heavy capital expenditures involved in laying lines and installing equipment. The prospect of this lucrative venture has motivated many telephone companies and cable firms to form alliances to provide news, information and entertainment to people's homes. Meanwhile, other firms are pursuing their own plans to offer a full range of information services to households, using high-capacity fiber optic carrying digital signals.

Some activists contend the companies that will supply these connections to homes should be treated as utilities. Moreover, qualifying households should be entitled to **universal service**, *a minimum level of service at an affordable price*. Electric, gas, water and telephone utilities are now mandated by local regulators to offer such options to the elderly and to people on fixed incomes. The question yet to be resolved is whether media access is a right of citizenship that should be subsidized by other users for the community good? This is the rationale used today to justify below-market utility rates.

A related question is whether all individuals should be entitled to access to the Internet and its World Wide Web. Estimates by several concerns suggest that the penetration of personal computers will peak at about two-thirds of all American households by the year 2005. Growth is expected to be limited by the high cost to own and the considerable skill required to operate personal computers. However, with the advent of interactive, high definition television (HDTV), the remaining one-third of the nation could be linked easily and comparatively inexpensively to the Web. Then, virtually all households could use their TV remote controls to search for information, to order merchandise, or even to vote (see page 92). Internet access then might be considered a necessity.[143]

In announcing plans for the National Information Infrastructure, a major Clinton Administration initiative to upgrade the nation's Internet system, Vice President Al Gore emphasized that the government wanted to encourage private investment and promote competition. However, two other goals were to provide open access to the system and to avoid creating a society of "information haves" and "information have-nots." In December 1993, Gore stated:

> *The most important step we can take to ensure universal service is to adopt policies that result in lower prices for everyone. … The lower the prices, the lower the need for subsidies. We believe that the pro-*

*competitive policies we have proposed will result in lower prices and
better service for more Americans.   But we'll still need a regulatory
safety net to make sure almost everyone can benefit.*[144]

The U.S. government subsequently established a $200 million Technology
Literacy Challenge Fund, representing seed money to encourage local
communities to install the necessary hardware to provide Internet access to
schools and libraries. It also called for the establishment of a special education
rate to provide access to schools and libraries at below-market rates.

Media and Personal Privacy

With the advent of new technologies, such as computer modems and interactive
cable, an emerging concern is the potential misuse of information about people
and their media habits by media conglomerates, governments, and other
entities.[145] Many new media systems are already designed to keep records of
use for legitimate purposes, such as per-use billings. Yet, critics charge, this
information also enables people to be controlled or manipulated.

U.S. Chief Justice Louis Brandeis defined **personal privacy** as *the right to be
left alone*. He described the right to privacy as "the right most valued by
civilized men." The invasion of privacy by government is a form of
domination prohibited by the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights for
more than 40 years.

The traditional media approach to privacy revolves around the way that media
workers conduct their work. Reporters cannot intrude onto the solitude of
individuals by tapping telephone lines, planting hidden microphones, using
telephoto camera lenses, or breaking into buildings. Likewise, photographers
or TV news crews cannot barge into a hospital room, photograph inside a
private business without permission, or peer with a camera into a nude
sunbathing beach.   Privacy also has involved protection for defendants from
prejudicial pre-trial publicity, protection for citizens from disclosure of certain
confidential records held by the government, and protection for innocent crime
victims against the public release of their names (such as in cases of alleged
rape). Individuals also have the right to sell their ideas, words or likenesses for
a profit; media workers cannot appropriate them without permission.

Three key new privacy concerns pertaining to media involve the misuse of
databases, surveillance and computer crimes.

Misuse of Database Information

With the ability to compile and integrate large computer files, it is possible to know a great deal about people.   In 1971, dramatist Arthur Miller described our society's penchant to collect information as "data mania" -- another example of our modern technocracy (see page 14).

Today, it is estimated that the U.S. government has an average of 17 key pieces of information on every citizen. Among large government databases are those maintained by Census Bureau, the Internal Revenue Service, and the FBI.   In addition, there are various other major private compilers of databases, such as credit reporting services, telephone companies, and credit card issuers. *The Nation* in 1968 suggested that "Government should be allowed to know a great deal more than it does about the community it was elected to serve." However, Marshall McLuhan later would observe that such databases are "one big gossip column that is unforgiving, unforgetful, and from which there is no redemption, no erasure of early mistakes."

The power of databases lies in the ability to create **profiles** of individuals by matching data from disparate sources using a common identification code, such as a social security number. Private firms have successfully exploited this capability for commercial purposes. Customer information has been used to create sales solicitations, using data collected through electronic scanners at supermarkets or similar tracking methods. Most people find such solicitations merely annoying. But at times, individuals have found serious errors and omissions in database records, which precluded them from certain activities, such as qualifying for a bank loan. The Consumer Credit Reporting Act of 1974 granted consumers the right of access to their files (for a small fee) and obligated credit reporting agencies to correct errors.[146]

Surveillance

As media have become more interactive, it is possible for an individual's privacy to be invaded in other ways.   Telephone conversations, electronic mail, home shopping and information requests over the Internet offer a chance to spy on people.

Under the Federal Privacy Act of 1974, telephone conversations cannot be recorded unless the recording act is disclosed, and mail cannot be intercepted. The Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1987 also protects e-mail, teleconferences and certain other new media from abuses by governmental agencies. However, these laws are limited in scope, dealing with permissible government actions and what evidence can be admissible in court. None of the existing laws deals with surveillance by corporations or other individuals, except to protect spoken, personal (non-business) telephone calls. For example, most company e-mail systems belong to their owners, who can monitor traffic and establish rules for their use.

A survey by the American Management Association in 1997 found that 15% of employers store and review e-mail, and that about 10% tape and review business conversations.   Another 15% routinely videotape employees to monitor performance. (Monitoring is highest in financial industries, where 81% of firms engage in some form of surveillance.) Several organizations have taken action against employees for improper use of e-mail, ranging from sending lewd messages to conducting personal business via a company's e-mail system.[147]

In one example of misuse by the news media, reporters at the 1993 Winter Olympics used a camera to read the temporary electronic mail password assigned to skater Tonya Harding, who was under intense scrutiny by the media and the public following an attack on rival skater Nancy Kerrigan. Several reporters in Norway used the information to get access to her e-mail messages -- an action justified by one reporter as being no more questionable than reading a piece of paper laying upside-down on a desk.

Computer-Based Crimes

Finally, people have become increasingly concerned about deliberate crimes involving electronic media   These include unauthorized electronic funds transfers using stolen credit cards or personal identification codes, the manipulation of database records, and espionage by computer hackers. Similarly, people can endure physical harm from stalkers who trace the daily activities of computer users. Millions of people tie computer systems together but never realize the delicate links that connect their separate their worlds. When crimes occur, the result is distrust and paranoia -- a sense of violation and domination by technology.[148]

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Privacy and the Media Panopticon

French social theorist Michel Foucault uses the metaphor of a panopticon to describe the way that large organizations can observe people and thus dominate their lives through devices such as databases and electronic surveillance technology.

A **panopticon** is a *design for a prison that facilitates the efficient observation or surveillance of inmates by guards or supervisors from a central tower.* The intent of the design is to create a "state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."

Foucault never addressed mass media directly, but used the panoptic metaphor to explain how social institutions involved in discipline, education and rehabilitation -- including prisons, schools and hospitals -- exert power subtly by *normalizing the behaviors of the people under their control*. If people know they are being observed, they will conform.

Compared to the past, Foucault suggests that people are still subject to political domination, but that the way that power is exercised has changed dramatically. He explains that authoritarian rulers used spectacles, such as processions or executions of criminals in the town square, to encourage compliance and maintain authority. Then, "many watched a few." Today, however, the focus of attention is reversed. Bureaucratic agencies and social institutions are used to exercise control in ways far less visible than the public spectacle. Foucault observes now, "a few watch many."[149]

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Media and Governance

As powerful institutions in society, the media are integrally involved with the process of **governance**, or *how a society establishes and enforces rules to which all citizens abide*. Governance entails the exercise of political power in various forms, ranging from who decides the rules to how these rules are carried out.

A Historical Perspective

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Throughout history, the media have vied for power with other institutions in society, most notably the church and state.

In the 15th century, Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable type revolutionized culture and power relationships in pre-Renaissance Europe by making large quantities of printed matter available at low cost. Whereas written manuscripts had been a luxury that could be enjoyed by only the wealthy, the invention of printing with movable type marked the first time that Bibles, other religious tracts and eventually secular writings were made available to the ordinary person.

Only 75 years after the invention of printing, Martin Luther launched the Reformation by posting his 95 Theses on the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg in 1517. Luther's actions challenged the authority of the Holy Catholic Church, leading to the rise of various Protestant denominations. A central tenet of the Reform movement was the importance of individuals reading scriptures for themselves, loosening the stranglehold held by the Church over the Word of God. Historians believe that the Reformation would have been impossible without the widespread dissemination and easy assess to affordable Bibles and numerous religious tracts sold throughout the countryside by peddlers.[150]

The impact of printing on the Church did not go ignored by the monarchs of Europe, who then ruled with sovereign authority. In England, King Henry VIII in 1529, only 12 years after Martin Luther, banned the importation of publications from the European continent. In the same year, he created the Stationers Corporation to license English printers. Not surprisingly, only printers who supported the crown were granted the right to own presses. Thus, Henry VIII attempted to squelch **sedition** or *unauthorized statements or publications that challenged government authority*.

Alternative Models of Government-Media Relations

Depending on the political system of the nation involved, the relationship between media and government can vary greatly. These can be characterized as relationships involving **control, collaboration** or **cooperation**.[151]

☐ **Government control.** In some nations, the content of media is subject to strict government control. The **authoritarian model** of government-media relationships views the media as institutions to be used by government to perpetuate its power. In most authoritarian regimes, media are privately owned, and are free to make choices about what they will print or say. However, the government can move swiftly to impose its views whenever

necessary. Governments use a variety of techniques to make sure that only government-sanctioned content is disseminated. These include: pre-publication censorship (prior restraint), licensing, taxation, bribery, and repression against defiant media owners and workers (including torture, imprisonment and execution).

A special case of authoritarianism can be found in **communist regimes**, where the media are actually owned and operated by the state. The 1925 constitution of the former Soviet Union explicitly stated that the role of the state's press was to promote communist ideology. Vladmir Lenin, leader of the 1917 revolution, wrote that media workers should act as "collective propagandists, agitators and organizers." Communist media were allowed to criticize some governmental officials in the conduct of their duties, or in their failure to execute them effectively, thus providing a convenient scapegoat when official policies or decisions proved ineffective. But it was strictly forbidden to question communist doctrine.

With the sweeping changes that took place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries beginning in 1989, and with worldwide condemnation of totalitarian actions by governments (such as occurred in the massacre in China's Tiananmen Square in 1989), the number of nations where the government maintains strict controls over media content has dwindled. Notable exceptions today include communist nations that maintain old-style dictatorial rule, such as Albania, China, Cuba and Korea, and non-communist authoritarian regimes in nations such as Iran, Turkey, Malaysia, Nigeria, Myanmar (formerly Burma), and Singapore.

□ **Government collaboration.** In many other countries around the world today, the relationship between government and the media is collaborative, i.e. *media work closely with the government to achieve mutual national goals.* Media operate as independent institutions, with a minimum of government interference. Yet, media and government interests are closely aligned. This kind of collaborative relationship can be found in many of the former Communist bloc nations, where media organizations slowly are being divested from government control. However, in many cases, the ties are not totally severed.

This kind of collaborative relationship also is found in many emerging or Third World nations, where political and economic systems have yet to develop on a par with fully industrialized nations. For many new nations, this tradition of collaboration can be traced to the 1950s and 1960s, when the mass media were used by newly formed, post-colonial governments in Africa and elsewhere as vehicles for modernization. With the aid of Western nations and the United Nations, media collaborated with their governments in extensive programs of

public education to improve agricultural production, eradicate disease, promote family planning and increase literacy. This collaborative approach was termed the **developmental model** of mass media.[152]

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the goals have shifted from the imposition of western science and technology to the promotion of social stability, economic development, political integration, and domestic racial and ethnic harmony. While the specifics vary considerably from country to country, the main point is that the media have recognized that the achievement of national goals is in their own long-term self-interest. There's no need for state interference because media norms reflect implicit support for government development goals. National development and political stability help create a thriving consumer-based economy, which is a prerequisite for the viability of media organizations that depend upon advertising revenue.

□ **Government cooperation.** At the far end of this continuum of government-media relationships is cooperation, where *government views the media as a legitimate, independent institutions in society*. This kind of cooperative relationship characterizes democratic, free market nations, such as found in the United States, Japan and industrialized nations of Europe. The combination of constitutional guarantees of free expression, plus the economic viability of media organizations as profit-making entities, allows media institutions in these societies to be fully independent and not beholden to governments in any way. In the absence of political or economic controls over media, government must cooperate with media in order to reach citizens and promote its political agenda. In turn, media institutions can freely criticize the government and often challenge specific government actions and policies.

The idea that media should operate independently from government is rooted in **libertarianism**, the political philosophy developed in the 17th and 18th centuries that *challenged the then-prevalent acceptance of authoritarian rule* and served as the ideological foundation for modern democracy. Whereas authoritarian rulers thought that citizens lived to serve the state, libertarians believed that government was created to serve citizens. In a similar way, libertarians argued that decision-making within a society should not be concentrated in the hands of the few, but should be dispersed among the citizens. Finally, while authoritarian rules contended that it was necessary for them to reign because the people were incapable of governing themselves, libertarians put faith into people's ability to act in their own best interests.

The system of a free and independent press found within modern democracies can be traced the 17th and 18th writings of libertarians such as John Milton, John Stuart Mill and John Locke. In his classic *Areopagitica* (1644), for example, John Milton christened the idea of the **free marketplace of ideas**. He

argued the unfettered discussion of issues allows truth to emerge and enables people to discern truth from falsehoods. Libertarians view the press as institutions that *facilitate and extend the public discussion of issues*.[153] It was in that context that James Madison and other the framers of the U.S. Constitution included freedom of the press among the fundamental rights guaranteed in the First Amendment adopted in 1791:

> *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Media and Democracy Today

Contemporary political observers are not as optimistic as early libertarians about the ability of the people to govern themselves, nor about the role of the media in the process. In particular, they wonder whether modern media *impedes*, rather than facilitates, the public discussion of issues.

Democracy, as a form of political organization, dates back to ancient Greece -- a culture firmly rooted in traditions of the spoken word, interpersonal communication and debate. The **democratic** ideal is that *every citizen has a right and a responsibility to participate in public discussions and decision-making*. Yet, unlike the ancient Greeks, modern cultures feature mediated communications that rely primarily upon the written word and visual images.

Is democracy well suited for today's brave new world of electronic communication? The sheer size of the U.S. population (265 million people) makes it difficult to engage in any kind of meaningful discussion or dialogue, such as took place in the typical New England town hall meeting of the 18th century. Indeed, with three million people on the shores of the colonies at the time our nation was formed, it is doubtful whether a full democracy ever really existed at anything but the local level in colonial America. That's why our founding fathers called for a **republican** system of government, in which *voters choose elected representatives who make key decisions*, rather than a purely democratic form of government.

Lost Art of Argument

With the changing nature of media, the nature of public discourse has changed dramatically. Critics such as Jürgen Habermas use the term **public sphere** to describe the enlightened dialogue and debate that they believe characterized politics in the coffee houses of London and the salons of Paris during the late 1700s and 1800s.   They believe that logical argument, which characterized the

period known as the Age of Reason, has been destroyed as media have taken on a bigger role in the discussion of public issues.[154]

PBS commentator Bill Moyers describes today's discussion of public issues as the "verbal equivalent of mud wrestling."[155] In the same vein, Christopher Lasch laments the "lost art of argument," in which people are no longer able to engage in rational and meaningful debate. Lasch, agreeing with Habermas, points to the rise of modern advertising and public relations as reasons for the decline, but also blames the press for abdicating its role in enlarging the public forum:

> *Much of the of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit for the equivalent of junk mail. … When words are used merely as instruments of publicity or propaganda, they lose their power to persuade. Soon they cease to mean anything at all. People lose the capacity to use language precisely and expressively, or even to distinguish one word from another.*[156]

Another contributing factor is the rise of the modern television and radio **talk shows**, *broadcast programs that combine elements of public discussion with entertainment*. While talk shows appear to be forums for ordinary folks to participate in discussions, the tensions are often confrontational or contrived. Producers purposely prolong the drama, rather than work toward solutions, in order to maintain audience interest. Legitimate debate is not the purpose.[157] Critics charge that media practices have dramatically stifled political involvement and expression. The heavy reliance upon mediated communication, rather than direct contact through political parties, encourages ordinary citizens to disengage from politics. As a result, critics suggest that citizens are in less control of their destinies, and thus are subject to greater domination by political elites.

Political analyst E.J. Dionne suggests that Americans have lost faith in the system because they have lost any sense of a shared common good. Citizens consider themselves outside the debate, unable to learn or participate, and don't see any relevance for their own lives:

> *When Americans watch politics now, in thirty-second snatches or even in more satisfactory forms like "Nightline" or "The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour," they understand that politics is not about finding solutions. It is about discovering postures that offer short-term political benefits. We give the game away when we talk about*

"issues" not "problems." Problems are solved; issues are merely what politicians use to divide the citizenry and advance themselves.[158]

Meanwhile, political theorist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann suggests that people have become hesitant to express their political viewpoints. She described this phenomenon as a media-induced **spiral of silence**, in which people *avoid discussing their opinions because they fear disapproval or isolation from others*. Their reticence occurs in a spiral because when one side of an issue gets more and more exposure, but the other does not, people are less and less willing to express opposing viewpoints. Citizen hesitancy to speak up is yet another example of the dominating nature of media power.[159]

Role of the Media: Information or Debate?

Did the logical, rational public sphere of discussion really exist in the 18th and early 19th centuries? Or have decisions *always* made by a handful of aristocrats and other powerful people -- not unlike what political cynics say goes on today? Much of the criticism of the concept of public sphere focuses on whether this romanticized portrayal of public debate was accurate.[160]

However, the question also raises the issue of what the role of the media should be in modern society. Should media -- especially news, but also advertising and entertainment -- be merely providers of information? Or should media encourage and facilitate dialogue and debate?

One of the leading advocates of the information role of media was journalist Walter Lippmann, who during the 1920s helped shape much contemporary thinking about public opinion, the role of media, and public participation. Following in the tradition of the free marketplace of ideas espoused by John Milton, Lippmann argued that the role of the press should be to *supply information*. Then, acting on their own, individuals could analyze the facts and act appropriately.[161]

Reflecting modernist ideas about the rational nature of mankind, Lippmann was one of the leading advocates of **objectivity**, the idea that *media should be detached observers who don't interject opinion in their coverage*. Objectivity subsequently has became sacrosanct in modern journalism, but has been challenged in today's postmodern climate by those who would argue that objectivity is theoretically impossible. While Lippmann believed in the rational nature of man, Lippmann was among the first to recognize the public's disinterest in politics. He coined the term **phantom public** to describe *indifferent citizens who had become cynical about politics and who were willing to delegate decision-making to "experts."*[162]

Not everyone agreed with Lippmann's pessimism, or his philosophy that journalists should be disengaged, impartial observers of human events. One person who disagreed was philosopher-educator **John Dewey**. In a series of lectures in the mid 1920s, Dewey argued vehemently that conversation, debate and argument were integral to preserving democracy.[163]   Dewey described the "vital habits of democracy" as the ability to follow an argument, grasp others' points of view, expand boundaries of understanding, and debate alternative approaches that might be pursued. He saw the role of the media as leading a "great conversation" that would create a "great community." As libertarians before him, such as John Milton, Dewey felt that it was through the process of conversation -- and the posing of differing viewpoints, some of them right and some of them wrong -- that problems could be resolved.

Civic Journalism

These questions, first raised some 70 years ago, are just as burning today, and have received renewed attention as media have attempted to reexamine their role in modern democracy.

The question of participation and dialogue forms the basis for the current movement known as **civic journalism** or **public journalism**. Drawing on ideas such as those espoused by Dewey, newspaper editors have experimented in recent years with new ways to involve readers. One strategy has been to transform the methods for collecting news by going to the public and asking them about the issues of concern to them and their views on those issues.

Civic journalism reduces media dependence on official sources, and thus is a more open, less elitist, and more egalitarian approach to news gathering. Critics dismiss the trend as nothing more than "reporting by focus group," and complain about its lack of concern for objectivity. Instead of a new way to gather news, the argument goes that civic journalism is a thinly veiled way for media to impose their own opinions on their coverage.[164]

Civic journalism, as a technique, is unlikely to replace traditional reporting methods because of the high investment of time and personnel required. The news will still consist mostly of reports written on deadline about breaking events. Yet, civic journalism represents at least one effort to rectify many of the shortcomings of news reporting today.

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Media and the Doctrine of Social Responsibility

What should be the role of the media in a democracy? During the second half of the 20th century, considerable attention has been paid to the idea of **media social responsibility**.

The debate began in earnest in the middle of the century, with the controversial report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947. Under the financial sponsorship of Time-Life founder Henry Luce and Encyclopedia Britannica, University of Chicago President Robert M. Hutchins convened a group of academics to examine the role of the free press in society.

The Hutchins Commission argued that democratic societies need a free press, but that freedom of the press is not absolute. Unless the media act responsibility, limitations on the media might be justified. The Commission said that the media of the period had become too powerful in society. Instead of being a marketplace of ideas that encouraged debate, the media had become conduits through which powerful media moguls disbursed limited information.

The findings outraged Luce and other leading press officials of the time, who defended press freedom unconditionally. Yet the Hutchins Commission stimulated considerable discussion and positive changes in journalism. Among journalism innovations since the report are the creation of the op-ed page, the appointment of advocates or ombudsmen to resolve audience complaints, and the creation of press councils to review disputes. The Hutchins Commission's legacy also includes the improved education of journalists, greater self-analysis by the media, and innovations such as civic journalism.

In many ways the Hutchins Commission presaged ideas expressed by today's critical researchers. Among its key conclusions, the Hutchins Commission said that a socially responsible press should provide:
☐ A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that makes them meaningful.
☐ A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, including contrary ideas.
☐ A representative picture of all of society's groups, including

blacks and minorities, who were then badly unrepresented.
□ Coverage that challenges society's values and helps clarify
    them.[165]

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Media and Elections

Considerable attention has been paid in recent years to the media's impact on elections -- those opportunities when citizens can participate directly in governance. Critics charge that media have:

□ Eliminated the central town square and other forums for discussion.
□ Bombarded voters with far more information than they can consume.
□ Diverted public attention by offering competing information and more exciting forms of entertainment, instead of focusing audience attention on civic affairs.
□ Relegated citizens to roles as political spectators.

Critical theorists are especially concerned with how reasoned dialogue and argument has been replaced by blatant manipulation by astute politicians and their slick handlers (television and media relations consultants), while the press complacently goes along without objections.

Among the key techniques in question are:

□ **Bypassing the political press**. Candidates today routinely dodge issues and tough questions by choosing publicity venues where they are more likely to be faced with a friendly, often less-informed, compliant questioner.   This allows them to control the agenda and to get only their own views across. PBS commentator Bill Moyers says a new culture of information is evolving -- "a heady concoction, part Hollywood film and TV, part pop music, and pop art, mixed with popular culture and celebrity magazines, tabloid telecasts, cable and home video."   Jon Katz coined the term **New News** (versus the **Old News**) to describe this integration of politics into popular culture. Examples include Bill Clinton's appearance on the "Arsenio Hall Show" when he played his saxaphone during the 1992 election.[166]

□ **Staged events**. Candidates shrewdly orchestrate when and where they appear. Although they publish position papers in the form of news releases or backgrounders, candidates' preferred form of communication is the well-orchestrated event intended primarily to obtain video or photo coverage. Examples include whistle-stop airport visits or downtown rallies, where candidates give a canned talk that offers few new ideas, but still gets on the evening news. Historian Daniel Boorstin terms such publicity efforts

pseudo-events, which are *staged primarily for the purpose of gaining publicity exposure*.   The staged event is the ultimate postmodern political forum -- orchestrated with pomp, circumstance and spectacle but offering little substance.[167]

□ **Sound bites.**   When Abraham Lincoln debated Stephen Douglas in 1860, the two tangled in a verbal confrontation that lasted five hours.   In the early 1980s, the average news clip featuring a political candidate speaking was 42 seconds.   A 1991 study found that the average TV sound bite was 8 seconds -- barely two sentences in length.[168]   Political rhetoric today can be characterized as efforts to reduce complex political issues to the most simplistic form, suitable for short radio and television excerpts.   This trend reflects the growing trend toward snappy, fast-paced media action, but is not well suited to serious discussions of complex issues.

□ **Negative political advertising**.   Politicians use news and entertainment portions of the media, or what they term **free media**, to gain attention and to articulate positions on issues.   Candidates then use advertising or **paid media** to sharpen their image, get people out to polls, and woo undecided voters.[169]

Negative advertising, while disliked, has become the mainstay of political communication.   Such messages are normally targeted to pivotal undecided voters and most often focus on a single issue by raising doubts about or by attacking an opponent. Most often, attack ads are about the opponent's character, rather than positions on substantive issues.   With increased frequency, these attack ads are aired on radio, where they can be targeted to pinpointed audiences and escape the same broad visibility and scrutiny that they would receive on television or in major newspapers.[170]

At least one major ad agency ran full-page ads after the 1994 elections arguing that such communications were not "advertising."   Ketchum Communications pointed out that such distorted claims would be illegal in product advertising. Yet, such messages are permitted in political advertising in the name of freedom of speech.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a leading researcher on political advertising, has expressed concern about the relationship between political ads and the quality and truthfulness of campaign rhetoric.   She believes negative and deceptive messages have pervaded entire campaigns -- not just advertisements -- and thus shape the entire political debate.[171]   Others, however, suggest that the impact of political advertising is minimal.   Negative ads deceive relatively few people, and are a valuable source of information for many people.   Research suggests that the majority of people respond positively to messages about candidates they already like and negatively to those they don't support.[172]

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On-Line Alternatives: The Electronic Republic

Must citizens accept the slick, packaged political information found in the media today? One glimmer of hope is found in the advent of online or computer-mediated communications.

In 1992, Presidential candidate Ross Perot called for the creation of an **electronic town hall**, in which American citizens could participate in discussions and vote on important issues. Such an effort in **direct democracy** is possible because of emerging interactive technologies. Instead of being spectators, citizens could regain their role as participants by examining arguments, making comments, and then voting by phone or computer. Indeed, the effect could be to revamp the whole nominating and election process.

Several experiments already have been conducted in local communities such as Columbus, Ohio; Savannah, Georgia; and Honolulu, Hawaii. While such programs have the potential to create a more diverse and competitive dialogue, such efforts face several obstacles:

☐ Major media organizations might downplay or fight such a
     move if computer-mediated discussions threatened the
      substantial revenue now received from political
advertising.
☐ New ways to publicly finance campaigns might be needed,
     including subsidies or vouchers to people to obtain
      information from online services.
☐ All citizens would need to be guaranteed equal access to
     the technology.
☐ Some updating of federal laws pertaining to the availability
      of electronic information would be required.

Direct democracy is not perfect.   In particular, it would not eliminate the influence of special interest groups and their ability to outspend -- and thus disempower -- others. The system could be especially hurtful for minorities who can't marshal the resources to counter such initiatives and who might be the targets for unscrupulous efforts that go unchecked in a unmonitored system.[173]

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Questions for Discussion

1. What is power? From a cultural perspective, how can media be seen as having powerful consequences over audiences?

2. Is the current debate over religious and multicultural values justified? Why is the debate important?

3. Should media conglomerates be allowed to grow? What alternatives do citizens have?

4. What can be done to improve the quality of dialogue among citizens in our modern society? What changes would you make in the way media operate?

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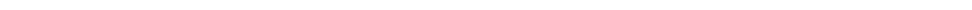84.

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