

Introduction to Media and Society

INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND SOCIETY

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

Pressbooks



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This book is an adaptation of five open textbooks:

- [Media & Society: Critical Approaches](#) by R. Nichols, A. Nutter, E. Moore. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 4.0 license](#). Chapters from Media and Society: Critical Approaches used include Chapters 1-4, 6, 7 and 8.4.
- [Media, Society, Culture and You](#) by Mark Poepsel and Leanne Page. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 4.0 license](#). Chapters in this book from Media, Society, Culture and You include: Chapter 1: Media, Society, Culture and You, Chapter 2: Digital Culture and Social Media,
- [Humans R Social Media](#) by Diana Daly; Jacquie Kuru; Nathan Schneider; Alexandria Fripp; and iVoices Media Lab. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 4.0 license](#). Chapters in this book from Humans R Social Media include: Old to New Media, Wellness, Algorithms: Invisible, Irreversible and Infinite, and Equity and Gender.
- [Technology, Media Literacy and the Human Subject](#) by Richard Lewis. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike](#)

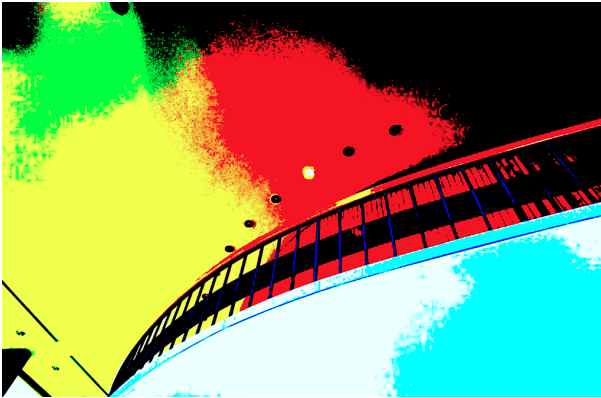
[4.0 license](#). Chapters in this book from Technology, Media Literacy and the Human Subject include “Situating Media Literacy” and Introduction: Problematizing our Relations with Media Technologies, pp 1-26.

- [The American Journalism Handbook](#) by R. Zamith. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike 4.0 license](#). Chapters in this book from The American Journalism Handbook include: Conceptual Foundations, Journalism Economics, Preparing a News Story, Media Effects, Influences on Journalistic Media and Future of Journalism

Selected chapters from the five books were combined, reorganized, and edited for accessibility, but no material changes have been made to them.

Because the books use different citation systems, this adapted version leaves each system in place.

PREFACE AND OVERVIEW



Balcony
in
Dunham
Hall,
home of
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Communi
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Southern
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Universit
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Edward
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illustratio
n by the
author.

Preface

Media, Society, Culture and You grew out of an experiment in

developing and employing open educational resources (OER) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Professors from various disciplines were encouraged to find or develop texts to replace or supplement course materials. Because the field of mass communication changes so rapidly, the author of this text decided to “go all in” on OER materials and develop, write, and edit the first version of this electronic textbook with plans to update it at least once per year. The text was initially built in iBooks Author and released on the Apple iBooks platform.

Students were given tablet computers, and they took part in a sort of OER experiment. They offered feedback on the organization of the text, the subject matter, and the tone of the writing. Students also commented on the pros and cons of using a digital textbook. They appreciated the approachable language but did not use embedded videos or other embedded content much. In an effort to make the text work for students, outside content is usually linked to rather than embedded in this version. Concepts are explained clearly in early chapters and repeated for reinforcement later on. Chapters are kept relatively short, but links lead down various intellectual paths for curious readers to follow. The author thanks those students for their thoughtful input over the course of four semesters on the early versions of this text.

This Apple system of textbook creation and dissemination was useful but somewhat cumbersome. *Media, Society, Culture and You* now appears on the Rebus Community plat-

form, which provides intuitive access to both readers and authors

A key benefit of writing a web-based OER introductory mass communication textbook is that it can be edited and updated often. The task of keeping up with changing communication technologies demands a user-friendly, open-access platform. Evolving information and communication technologies (ICTs) have streamlined the editing process since that first OER experiment a few years ago. Technological evolution has in some ways made writing and editing this textbook fun. The ability to add images, draw references from news and popular culture and update the text frequently gives the author a great deal of freedom and control. On the other hand, rapidly evolving ICTs influence the subject matter in the field of Mass Communication in such a way that the text *needs* to be updated almost constantly.



Mark Poepsel, author of *Media, Society, Culture and You*, public domain. Source: [photo by Tom Atwood, SIUE](#).

Throughout the writing, reviewing and editing processes, serious efforts have been made to give this text the appropriate balance of breadth and depth for an introductory course. Readers can use the annotation tools included on this text platform to suggest future amendments and edits. Professors and instructors using this text are strongly encouraged to do the same. Additionally, they should feel free to contact the author with suggestions for new topics

to cover or areas of the text that could benefit from more in-depth treatment.

This book is relatively informal in tone. It uses contemporary examples to demonstrate how the field of Mass Communication is changing as a whole and what this means for mass media production and consumption. [Mass-mediated messages](#) — usually professionally selected and produced messages on topics meant for widespread dissemination — directly influence culture and can have lasting effects on social policy and the development or erosion of social structures. It matters

how changes in mass communication are managed and how media users — a category that includes most of the people on the planet — learn to recognize and respond to those changes. This age of rapid change in the field of Mass Communication calls for a combination of generalized critical thinking, media literacy, and technology literacy.

Consequently, this text has one foot in a traditional introductory textbook structure and the other in the field of frenetic, constant change of online publishing. What can we do with the glut of available information on networked platforms but select what is most important, carefully explain concepts, and provide clear and meaningful examples of how these concepts are put into practice?

It is the author's hope that topic selection, explanation, and use of examples have been done in a way that provides foundational knowledge for students who, as citizens, will need to know how to use mass media products and how to think critically about them for the rest of their lives.

Whether students reading this text ultimately go to work in the Mass Communication field or not, they will be swimming in seas of information. Much of that information will have been managed at some point or another by a mass media professional. Students, please let this be a helpful framework of thought for you, as well as a toolkit for understanding your role in the communication networks that envelop us all.

Chapter Overview

1. Media, Society, Culture and You
2. Digital Culture and Social Media
3. Media Literacy and Media Studies Research
4. Film and Bricolage
5. Television through Time
6. Music Recording, “Sharing,” and the Information Economy
7. Radio Broadcasting, Podcasting, and “Superbug Media”
8. Digital Gaming
9. Newspapers and Digital News
10. Advertising, Public Relations, and Propaganda

The primary concern of this text is to explain how the mass media shape and are shaped by society and culture. Readers should be concerned with the possible effects of mass mediated messages on citizens and consumers, and they should ask what consumers and professionals may do with the messages and platforms of distribution available in our networked communication systems.

Society and culture shape and are shaped by the messages that appear in the mass media

This text aims to briefly explain the history, structure, and influence of several major mass media channels. Before the era when networked communication technologies took hold, book publishing, film, radio, television, recorded music, newspapers, and magazines were each industries unto themselves that together made up the field of mass communications. Now, all of these media have converged on digital platforms.



A young boy uses his mother's iPhone while waiting to serve as ring bearer at his aunt's wedding. Source: author.

It is still one field, but these media types and channels are all simultaneously accessible (barring censorship) by everyone with access to the network.

Most of us access the mass media in multiple ways. We may use “over-the-air” systems such as radio and antenna television to supplement our media consumption. Most in the developed world also have broadband internet access, advanced mobile phone and data connectivity, and cable television. We can access networked communication technologies during all of our waking hours, and [many of us come close to doing so](#).

But even before the internet and mobile phones connected

people to broadband networks, “old” information and communication technologies connected the world. Globally networked societies did not emerge over the previous two generations. We have been [developing an electronically networked globe](#) since the invention of the telegraph in the mid-1800s.

In this text, we will look at how mass communication theory provides context for network convergence. We will analyze separate media channels in the appropriate historical frames, and we consider contemporary issues and possible futures for the [network society](#).

Note of Thanks

Initially, when the author developed this text for Apple’s iBooks platform, it was a solo effort. Not only was this a research and writing project, it was a publishing project as well. When this text was available on Apple’s platform, the review process was a black box. It was an isolating experience. It has been a blessing working with the Rebus Community.

After Rebus agreed to publish this text and provide a platform facilitating online editing and peer review, the writing and editing process changed from being a tedious personal slog to a collaborative effort with unnamed reviewers and helpful project managers. A big thank-you is warranted for Apurva Ashok and Elizabeth Mays for their help in finding reviewers and editors from across the Rebus Community. Leanne Page

worked as a copy editor on this text providing helpful, cheerful insights for every chapter. Any mistakes that snuck through the process are the author's.

Thanks to my wife, Gabriela Renteria-Poepsel, to my son, Sammy, and to my family for their support in the process of developing this text. As the world of networked communication continues to grow and to influence our lives more and more, let us remember that tangible personal relationships are the most rewarding.

Media Attributions

- Dunham Hall Balcony at SIUE by Mark Poepsel
- Mark A. Poepsel, Ph.D.

PREFACE: ABOUT THIS BOOK

Welcome to an evolving world, and an evolving “book”. This is a textbook on social media, new media, and participatory culture. What makes this book special is that the book itself is participatory, drawing on the insights and artistry of those immersed in social media cultures. We believe in channeling students’ “[funds of knowledge](#)” as we teach about social media technologies, because what students know about social media is essential in connecting with students in order to teach them, and in helping all of us learn about this ever-evolving digital world.

Reuse this book, and more



Diagram illustrating the 5 Rs of Open Educational Resources (OER).

Humans R Social Media (HRSM) is an Open Educational Resource. That means it is designed not only for free access, but so anyone can do with it what are called the 5 R's: Reuse, Remix, Revise, Retain, and Redistribute. For students, a great part of using Open Educational Resources (OER) in a course is that OER are usually free of cost.

For instructors, using OER gives them an opportunity to adapt a book for their own course without creating an entirely new book. There are also even more [collaborative possibilities with OER](#) that we are exploring with this book.

We would love to know what you think of *Humans R Social Media*. Do you have an idea for a chapter? Do you see an error that needs to be fixed? Is there content that is outdated or offensive you'd like to alert us to? Are you interested in becoming more involved in editions of this book in the future? [Fill out our survey](#) to help us see HRSM from your perspective.

New in this edition

This edition of HRSM is designed to be exciting for students, accessible for all learners, and socially aware. We remain rooted in the Americas with a particular focus on English-speaking cultures in the United States, though we hope to invite broader perspectives as we move this book toward open governance. For now, we hope you enjoy and learn from this book including preexisting content and revisions including those listed below.

Chapter Overviews and Key Points

We have added text boxes at the top of some chapters with overviews including chapter section headings, and lists of key points in the book.

Glossary term updates

Glossary terms are still listed at the end of each chapter—now in alphabetical order, rather than order of appearance—and they are also listed all together at the end in [Core Concepts \(a Glossary\)](#).

Student insights updates

We have updated how we integrate student content to be more

accessible and interactive for readers. Our Student Insights text boxes have been updated to be expandable and include transcripts of any spoken content. You will also find more audio and video stories and more graphics than in any previous version of HRSM.

Galleries of iVoices student work

In this edition, we are presenting culminating work from our producing project, [iVoices Media Lab](#). With iVoices, original HRSM author Diana Daly worked with teams of mostly undergraduate students in a media lab, producing imagery, audio, and video stories about their experiences with social media technologies. In this edition of HRSM, we present some of that work. This includes new audio, visual, and graphic student content integrated with the HRSM book text, and our Galleries at the end of the book.

How we've made *Humans R Social Media* and the current edition



Information is always in motion, so this book is changing too.

I began writing this book on my own in 2017, and have updated it since as often as I could. (Future updates to this book will look different—[read more about that here](#).) The social media landscape changes so quickly, it's wise to question whether any book on the subject can remain relevant. One answer to this question is that any book or knowledge source remains relevant longer when it's dynamic, or embracing of continuous change.

This edition of *Humans R Social Media* is a culmination of work by the iVoices Student Media Lab ([visit iVoices here](#)), funded by the Center for University Education and Scholar-

ship, the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and the iSchool at the University of Arizona. The goal of iVoices is to integrate student voices including narratives and media into instruction about technologies, and – beginning in Fall 2022 – to broaden our understandings of youth and new media experiences through research and scholarship.

Students hold extraordinary knowledge and experiences in our social media-saturated world, as I learned when I began inviting student perspectives in the Social Media and Ourselves podcast ([visit the podcast here](#)). Then our iVoices student Media Lab workers helped design assignments and train students in the large General Education course I teach, to produce media based on their experiences with technologies. Our team of iVoices interns training in Library and Information Science then carefully described, tagged, selected, and integrated student stories and media into the textbook. This edition you are reading now is the product of this extraordinary collaborative effort.

I am thrilled to broaden this book to include more student stories and media, and just as thrilled that you are here to read and share it. Throughout the book *Humans R Social Media*, you can find personal stories in video, audio, and writing. by students in the course the book was first designed for. In most chapters of the book, these student stories are presented as Case Studies followed by thought-provoking questions, to which readers are invited to respond. Case studies are

frameworks for learning from life in the social sciences, and these stories offer opportunities for observation and analysis.

A Note on Impermanence



Information can be impermanent, like sand on a beach.

Many books pretend permanence. This one is unusual in acknowledging that books today – indeed any written information today – will not hold steady value for long. The value of this webbook is directly proportional to the human attention it can manage to sustain.

All informational content today, and particularly online content, is comprised of structures built on shifting foundations. Books, and especially online books, are like the New Jer-

sey beaches I grew up on. On those beaches it is easy to forget that the sands beneath treasured the boardwalks and evening bingo games are [drifting](#) into the sea, to settle on ocean floors and other shores.

In the case of this book, the sands on which it is built are always shifting and changing; some of the channels that will suck them away fastest are already in view. First, we will lose the hyperlinks, as one, then a few, then many links lead to disappeared pages; indeed I wouldn't be surprised if a link or two is already broken today on the first day of publication. Second, the platform on which this book is published could be compromised. (We hope not. As an Open Educational Resource drawn from open source development, Pressbooks has an advantage over other proprietary platforms. But things happen.) Third and last, this book's truths will be cast into doubt as new information emerges around situations about which I've written.

I will do my best to keep this book relevant through all of these shifts. And I hope readers will find my writing voice human enough to contact me and [alert me when something has slipped out of place](#).

How to read this book

Today *Humans R Social Media* is technically a “webbook”, currently hosted on Pressbooks. It is designed so that the menu

– a stack of lines icon – at your upper left will drop down to show you the book’s major Parts, which can then be expanded with a + sign to show you the chapters within each part. The arrows at the bottom also help you navigate to the next chapter.

Below is more information on Pressbooks if you need it.

<https://guide.pressbooks.com/chapter/what-is-a-web-book/>

You can learn the most about social media through this text if you perform, as you read, some critical self-reflection – that is, intense inward examination – of your own use of online social networking technologies. What do you do online, and why? Really? What makes that a good idea? Is it possible it’s not a good idea? Why does that process look as it does? Can you envision it working differently? I invite you to critically engage with the content covered in this book. To examine social media critically, you will need to challenge your own beliefs and practices, as well as social norms, institutions, corporations, and governments.

More about the Student Insights case studies

In our iVoices Media Lab days, we trained students to produce media stories and content, and then offered them the opportunity to openly license their work for future use. We depended

on interns to organize all of that student content. Below, one of them introduces a story that made her smile.

Integrating hundreds of stories into a textbook can be a tedious process, but sometimes, student stories like this one grab your attention.

As part of the intern team in 2021, I was part of multiple phases of integration including tagging student media. I had been working for hours on tagging when I stumbled across this audio clip. Even though I love this story because it highlights how stepping away from social media can be as impactful as being on social media, it really made me smile for another reason. Most of the audio disruption we get is a result of static noise or technical difficulties. Imagine my laugh of surprise when I recognized the familiar sound of a cat purring! It made me so happy, I just had to share it with the other members of our team. It was such a special, endearing thing to find, we even made “cat purring” a tag in our tagging system. ~ Randi Baltzer, iVoices Intern, Spring 2021

Stories like the one Randi found are in textboxes like the one just below. Look out for them, learn, and enjoy.

Student insights: My

experience with a social media cleanse (audio by Noe Becerra, Fall 2020)



Graphic of author.

<https://unr.press-books.pub/intromediasociety/?p=60#h5p-1>



An interactive H5P element has been

excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://unr.press-books.pub/intromediasociety/?p=60#h5p-1>



An interactive H5P element has been

excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=60#h5p-343>

Respond to this case study: This creator describes going on a social media cleanse. What is the purpose of this type of exercise, and how does calling it a “cleanse” shape the expectations for this type of lifestyle change? Have you stopped using social media in this way, and if so, what did you learn?

About the sections in this book

The Intern Series Part 3: War
Of The Worlds — And a bit

about the Social Media and Ourselves podcast episodes

You will sometimes find an episode embedded in chapters of this book from the media including podcast [Social Media & Ourselves](#). This podcast was produced with members of iVoices Media Lab including Diana Daly, Gabe Stultz, and Jacquie Kuru from 2021 to 2022. Here's one episode we produced, to give you a feel for it.



*One or more interactive elements has
been excluded from this version of the
text. You can view them online here:*
[https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasoci-
ety/?p=60#oembed-1](https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=60#oembed-1)

The Intern Series Part 3: War Of The Worlds

Release Date: July 1st, 2021

iVoices intern Randi Baltzer explores the differences in communication and connection between the tangible world and the digital world through student stories and her own experiences. Theme music and music backtracks by Gabe Stultz. Produced by Diana Daly, Jacquie Kuru and iVoices Media Lab.

[LISTEN](#) • [LISTEN WITH TRANSCRIPT](#)

Respond to this podcast episode...How did the podcast episode “The Intern Series Part 3: War Of The Worlds” use interviews, student voices, or sounds to demonstrate a current or past social trend phenomenon? If you were making a sequel to this episode, what voices or sounds would you include to help listeners understand more about this trend, and why?

About each chapter's Core Concepts

This book contains a glossary of terms interspersed throughout the book and also listed at the bottom of specific chapters.

Please think beyond the specific definitions given to the meanings of these concepts, and try to understand what they mean in your own words.

About each chapter's Core Questions

There are questions in each chapter that will help you process what you are learning and express yourselves.

A. Qualitative questions are asked first at the bottom of each section.

Some of our qualitative questions prompt you to consider situations and stories from your own experiences with technologies. Users make sense of technologies personally, ideologically, and culturally. This does *not* mean youth or any other users are “digital natives,” as there is no such thing as a digital native! But the sense you make of technologies in your own familial and cultural ways is a valuable form of knowledge that belongs to you. Honor it by thinking seriously about the questions asking you to reflect on your tech lives.

Other qualitative questions at the bottom of these

chapters ask you to think imaginatively. In these scenarios, you have the power to manipulate the past, the future, or both. Think deeply about social media decisions, their impacts, and your potential power in these.

B. Multiple-choice and other interactive questions are also asked at the bottom of each chapter. Use these to test how well you have comprehended what you've read.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=60#h5p-111>

About our Related Content

In our Related Content sections, we embed content published in openly licensed publications including *The Conversation*. Most of these are articles by authors unaffiliated with *Humans R Social Media*, but we believe their work offers important perspectives on topics discussed in the chapter.

Acknowledgments

The above caveats notwithstanding, this book has value, truths, and evidence of the interaction of people with people and with technologies and information. The University of Arizona's School of Information and College of Social and Behavioral Sciences were the incubators for insights in this book, and students and graduate assistants in the class Social Media and Ourselves helped it grow. Many thanks to the University

of Arizona iSchool, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Center for University Education and Scholarship, along with Ellen Dubinsky of UA Libraries, Amy Song of Pressbooks, our partners at UA Digital Learning, and especially to Open Pedagogy specialist Cheryl Cuillier of UA Libraries, for supporting this work and the project and labor behind it.

For audiovisual content, I am indebted to spectacular repositories offered via Creative Commons, Wikimedia Commons, Flickr, Pixabay, and especially the excellent online publication *The Conversation*. I am indebted to open source developers of platforms like Pressbooks, and the University of Arizona Libraries for negotiating their use for faculty at UArizona. I am especially grateful to the Center for University Education and Scholarship, which has funded this book's migration to Pressbooks and its opening of authorship to students. This edition of *Humans R Social Media* has been developed with plans for the future thanks to Nathan Schneider and Hibah Ahmad and the Media Economies Design Lab.

I would especially like to thank the many students who have made this edition of this book possible. This includes those who worked with iVoices as interns or employees including Loren Aguilar, Lizette Arias, Randi Baltzer, Duo Bao, Crystal Brannen, Rose Bridges, Kaitlin Danielle Butler, Paige Carlson, Priscilla Castillo, Jordan Confrey, Zixuan Deng, Regan Elliott, Adam Fehse, Alexandria Fripp, Emily Jo Gammons, Arielle Garcia, Maria Jose Garcia, Abhiman Gupta, Lindy Hanson, Nadari Hockenhull, Neruda Hogrelius, Kailey Hurley, Molly

Ingram, Shruti Jagadish, Jennifer Joyce Jones, Arianna Jones, Kristine Kelley, Jacquie Kuru, Anna Leach, Ryan Lenhart, Nuzhat Mastura, Jennifer McKernan, Kathryn Millar, Matt Ricker, Taylor Robeson, Gabriella Shriner, Kali Ann Stecker, Gabe Stultz, Eduardo Tocco Linares, Vanessa Jasmine Torrez, Brian Um, Liz Vilchynska, Mario Villa, Sam Winn, Gabby Worrell, and Wonkyun Yim. I am also indebted to the hundreds of students who openly licensed content created in iVoices media lab sessions.

My work in this book is dedicated to my son and daughter, whose navigation of social media today is a continuous inspiration; and to Andre Newman, a friend lost too soon. ~ Professor Diana Daly

This work was sponsored in part by the University of Arizona Center for University Education and Scholarship.



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Education Scholarship

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Attributions

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- [Understanding Media and Culture](#) by University of Minnesota ([Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#))
- [Media Studies 101](#) by Media Texthack Team ([Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#))

Chapter-level attributions are provided at the beginning of each chapter.

WHY MEDIA MATTER

SITUATING MEDIA LITERACY

2. Situating Media Literacy

Literacy, meaning alphabetic literacy, is no longer the keynote of Western culture. That is to say that capital-L Literacy is obsolete, having been done in when we killed the reading public, the ground of literacy. As with the Hydra (once her head was lopped off, new heads sprang up in its place), so with Literacy: now we see dozens, nay entire litters of (small-'l') little literacies springing up spontaneously here and there with evident abandon. (McLuhan, 2009: 9)

It seems that everywhere we look in the modern Western world we see information and communication technologies being used, mediating our lives every day. We have become so accustomed to living with these extraordinary technologies that they have been rendered ordinary.

New devices and technologies, after a brief though sometimes painful learning curve, begin to disappear from the center of our attention

as we navigate the world *through* them. While media literacy focuses on educating people in order for them to become more aware and adept at consuming, using, and creating media content for specific outcomes (Aufderheide, 1993), it primarily attends to the content of the messages—both intended and unintended—especially concerning how human subjects are represented (Jolls & Wilson, 2014).

This chapter situates media literacy within the broader fields of communications and education. I investigate current ways of defining media literacy and call for an expansion of media literacy in order to include the medium and the context within which the messages are enacted. While more than a cursory overview of media literacy, this chapter will not exhaustively explore the field in its entirety. Rather, I give an overview of some of the current and historic aspects of media literacy and point out important areas that it often does not include. This provides a setting to bring in a framework and instrument of transdisciplinary concepts that can be used to enhance the field.

Focusing on the medium is a first step in broadening the scope of media literacy to include a broader context. While media literacy has focused mainly on media skills and representation (Jolls & Wilson, 2014; Masterman, 1989), this has left the study of the effects of the medium to outside fields such as medium theory (Meyrowitz, 1994; Qvortrup, 2006); mediatization (Adolf, 2011; Hjarvard, 2013, 2014; Lundby, 2014); media ecology (Anton, 2006, 2016; Logan, 2011; McLuhan,

1994; Postman, 1974, 2000; Strate, 2017; Van Den Eede, 2012, 2016); and even the study of the biography of things (Kopytoff, 1988; Lesage, 2013).

The next step after including the medium is to further expand media literacy to include the context within which we engage with media. I use the example of domestication theory in order to do so. By including the environment, the complexity of our media relations become more apparent, making the case for expanding our approach to media literacy to include, as Shaun Moores (2016) says, a non-media-centric media literacy. My goal is to describe the current field of media literacy, situating it at the intersection of communications and education. I make the case that expanding the focus beyond content to include the effects of the medium and context can help improve our understanding of the broader effects of media—both the drawbacks and benefits.

Communication Beyond the Transmission Model

Media literacy is a combination of media (mostly studied within the field of communications) and literacy (mostly studied within the field of education). Before delving into the literacy aspect, I explain some of the background and different approaches in the field of communications. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the dominant way of understanding communication was through the *transmission*

model, where ‘communication is a process of sending and receiving messages or transferring information from one mind to another’ (Craig, 1999: 125). Claude Shannon (1948) and Shannon and Warren Weaver (1964) developed a mathematical model in order to understand communication, reducing a complex process down into a simple and easily graspable model, which ‘is widely accepted as one of the main seeds out of which Communication Studies has grown. It is a clear example of the process school, seeing communication as the transmission of messages’ (Fiske, 1990: 6). The transmission model is the basis of information theory and has been a building block for a general understanding of the flow of information and communication.

The transmission model (see Fig. 2.1) consists of the producer of the message (information source); the transmitter that encodes the message; the conduit or channel through which the message is sent; the receiver that decodes the message; and the destination where the message arrives. In the process, there is also noise, which interferes with the clarity of the message. A common example of this model is a telephone call. The person initiating the call is the information source; their phone encodes the message; the telephone line or wireless network is the conduit; the person’s phone receiving the call is the receiver that decodes the message; and the destination is the person who hears the message. The noise is any interference: static on the line or network, noises in the background, etc.

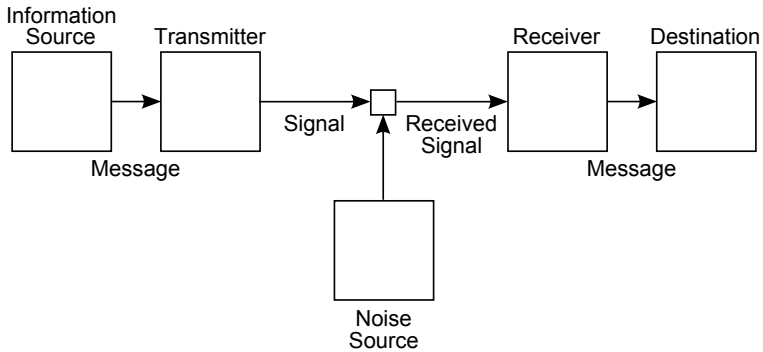


Fig. 2.1 [Transmission model of communication](#). Adapted from Shannon & Weaver (1964: 34). Image by Wanderingstan (2007), Public Domain

While the transmission model is still frequently used in information and computer sciences, it has drawn criticism from social sciences (Carey, 2008; Deetz, 1994; Pearce, 1989) as well as from media ecology for being too reductive and for approaching communication as something that occurs between autonomous—already fully established—entities rather than between relational beings. Robert Craig (1999) states that there has been much discussion around need and desire for the transmission model being ‘supplemented, if not entirely supplanted, by a model that conceptualizes communication as a constitutive process that produces and reproduces shared meaning’ (125). In other words, there is more to communication theory than a one-way transmission of a message from one source to another. There is shared meaning-making occurring. Craig advocates for the creation of a meta-model (called the constitutive model) that

allows a space for many different models to exist, each being useful for a particular purpose (127).

James Carey (2008) also argues against the transmission model, saying that it is important to retain the connection to community and culture. He advocates for more of a ritual or cultural view of communication. Stuart Adam (2008) describes Carey's approach as portraying a more 'developed understanding of communication [involving] both a ritual and a transmission view' (xviii), both of which are needed for a modern society to exist. Antonio López (2014: 47–48) builds upon Carey's view (with somewhat more criticism) and cautions against the transmission model:

In terms of media literacy, using mechanistic models of cognition and communication will reinforce the paradigm of industrialism, remaining stuck in a system of 'bad ideas'; the essential bad idea being the assumption that communication is a matter of autonomous beings transporting ideas between each other as messages, and that such communication is disembodied from the thinking system that comprises our cultural patterns and embeddedness within living systems.

López continues by describing an ecological intelligence where a person is 'not simply an autonomous self but is part of an interconnected thinking system that not only includes socially constructed knowledge but knowledge that is co-pro-

duced with the living environment' (48). This moves from an approach where people construct their own knowledge of the world to an approach that understands the co-constitution that occurs during communication.

Marshall McLuhan (as cited in Eric McLuhan, 2008) calls Shannon and Weaver's communication model a theory of transportation, not communication. He defines communication as something that transforms or changes the recipient. Without this transformation, it is not communication. Marshall McLuhan, as his son Eric McLuhan (2008: 30–31) summarizes, believes that:

Communication means change. If something is communicated the recipient has changed in some manner or degree. Our 'common sense' idea of communication is merely one of transporting messages from point to point. Shannon and Weaver laid the foundation of all Western 'theories of communication' with their model. [...] But this only is a transportation theory, not a theory of communication. They are concerned merely with getting a bundle of goodies from one place to another, while keeping dreaded Noise to a minimum.

The constitutive model of communication, where the action of communication changes the recipient, as well as the person communicating, is how I conceive of communication in this book. The act of communication is a relational act that

co-constitutes (transforms) the people involved in the communication. This co-constituting relationality is an integral concept in the development of the posthuman developed in this book.

Media Literacy Overview

The term ‘literacy’ in media literacy reflects the underlying echo of reading or print literacy. However, media literacy focuses on a person’s competence and knowledge of media. And, with the swift speed of change in current media trends, it is becoming more and more difficult to keep abreast of the many new developments. As Lev Manovich (2013) points out, the world ‘is now defined not by heavy industrial machines that change infrequently, but by software that is always in flux’ (1–2). The need for media literacy has never been so important. I begin by discussing the importance of education and its impact on agency, after which I offer several definitions of media literacy from key organizations. Then, the core concepts and competencies of media literacy are discussed, concluding with an overview of the approaches currently found in media literacy.

Education, Literacy, and Agency

One of media literacy’s core aspects is education (e.g., Alver-

mann et al., 2018; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2019; Livingstone & Van der Graaf, 2008; Potter, 2018; and the journal *Teaching Media Quarterly*). This focus on education pragmatically elevates the importance of the user and helps to ground the theoretical concepts concerning media. While *literacy* is not a neutral term and comes with its own contradictions (Luke, 1989; Livingstone, 2004), it also stresses the focus on the user of media, whether as one whom consumes, produces, or simply uses it. This general educational aspect is, as John Dewey (1997) posits, critical for a healthy democracy. McLuhan (1969) says, somewhat hyperbolically, ‘If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves’ (n.p.).

Media literacy’s focus on education is key for developing awareness and thus agency. Since this educational component is not as heavily stressed in the other fields of inquiry that I analyze (specifically post phenomenology and philosophical posthumanism), I draw inspiration from media literacy in order to create an approach that is pragmatic and useful as an instrument for education.

The term *literacy* in education has its own socio-cultural baggage and should not be thought of as a neutral term. Carmen Luke (1989) points out that the basis of public schooling standardized ‘what and how all children should be taught; it would provide all children with basic literacy skills and simul-

taneously facilitate the mass transmission of centrally selected and controlled knowledge' (5). Sonia Livingstone (2004) summarizes Luke's (1989) points by saying, literacy 'masks a complex history of contestation over the power and authority to access,

interpret, and produce printed texts' (4). In other words, who gets to define and judge the qualities and knowledges that equate with literacy? And, as the primary medium of print gives way to a diversity of media, Jay Lemke (2006) suggests, 'We need a broader definition of literacy itself, one that includes all literate practices, regardless of medium' (3).

At the start of the chapter, I referred to a quote by Eric McLuhan (2009) which points out that there are many variations of literacy.

Two variations that are close to (and can be considered part of) media literacy are *digital literacy* (Buckingham, 2006; Gilster, 1997; Van Dijk

& Van Deursen, 2014), and *social media literacy* (Ahn, 2013; Burnett & Merchant, 2011; Livingstone, 2014; Vanwynsberghe, 2014). Livingstone (2004: 5) states,

[P]eople now engage with a media environment which integrates print, audiovisual, telephony, and computer media. Hence, we need a conceptual framework that spans these media. Literacy seems to do the work required here: It is pan-media in that it covers the interpretation of all complex, mediated symbolic texts broadcast

or published on electronic communications networks; at the same time.

Some of the most recent literacies are artificial intelligence literacy (or related literacies such as those concerning machine learning or neural networks) and algorithmic literacy. Petar Jandrić (2019) makes the case for expanding critical media literacy to encompass artificial intelligence (AI) and the post-digital context. Jussi Okkonen and Sirkku Kotilainen (2019) describe the potential effects that AI has on youth (and their parents) and the implications this has for media literacy. Jialei Jiang and Matthew Vetter (2020) make the case for becoming more literate concerning the effects of algorithms, specifically analyzing algorithmic writing bots on Wikipedia. These post-digital challenges point to future directions that are emerging in media literacy.

Education can increase a person's awareness, which in turn facilitates the ability for them to regain agency. An entire issue of the *Journal of Media Literacy* (Andersen & Arcus, 2017) is devoted to the concept of agency in media literacy. In it, Neil Andersen and Carol Arcus write, 'Agency is knowledge in action. In media literacy, agency is the exercising of awareness through critical thinking skills to effect change personally, locally and/or globally' (3). While agency of technology is discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, it is important in media literacy to understand that there is a shared agency as we interact with media, and by increasing our awareness (through education) we can increase our own agency. Tsjalling Swierstra and

Katinka Waelbers (2012) say, ‘Technologies affect our actions not just by altering the course of action (like billiard balls act upon each other) but by mediating *our reasons* or motives to act in a particular way’ (160).

In support of media users having agency, Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2007) focus on audience theory to point out ‘the moment of reception [is] a contested terrain of cultural struggle where critical thinking skills offer potential for the audience to negotiate different readings and openly struggle with dominant discourses’ (13). Additionally, McLuhan scholar Robert Logan (2013) explains McLuhan’s aphorism—the user is the content—means that ‘each reader or viewer brings his or her own experience and understanding to a medium and transforms the content according to his or her own need and abilities’ (76). Logan further explains, ‘information does not have an intrinsic meaning independent of the user’ (77). Media literacy plays a key role in helping educate people with regards to their media-rich lives, facilitating their awareness and thus increasing their own agency.

Defining Media Literacy

Bringing media and literacy together has created its own field of study. However, moving from the single-medium of print to the plurality of media-types and technologies makes it difficult to reduce *media literacy* to a single description. As Tibor Koltay (2011) states, ‘media literacy is an umbrella concept. It

is characterized by a diversity of perspectives and a multitude of definitions' (212).

It is Len Masterman's (1989, 2010) focus on representation that helps media literacy emerge from media studies. Masterman, from the United Kingdom, and Barry Duncan (2010), from Canada are often considered the founders of media literacy (Jolls & Wilson, 2014). According to Masterman (1989), 'The central unifying concept of Media Education is that of representation. The media mediate. They do not reflect but re-present the world. The media [...] are symbolic sign systems that must be decoded' (see Principle 2). This approach emphasizes the encoding and decoding of media representations and reflects the content-focused and transportation approach that has been dominant in media literacy.

As the U.S.-based National Association for Media Literacy (NAMLE) states, 'Media literacy is the ability to encode and decode the symbols transmitted via media and the ability to synthesize, analyze and produce mediated messages' (NAMLE, 2019). This definition is rooted in how the transmission concept of communication re-presents the sociocultural world. Masterman (2010: 5) differentiates content from representation:

What we were actually studying was television and not its different subject contents. That is, we were not actually studying sport or music or news or documentary. We were studying representations of these things. We were studying the

ways in which these subjects were being represented and symbolized and packaged by the medium.

While Masterman (1989) is making the case against a simple content centered approach, the conceptual framework he advocates for is still directed at reading and analyzing (decoding) media content and does not, for example, include the influence of the specific technological medium.

Another definition that comes from the Center for Media Literacy (CML) (2019) in the U.S., builds upon Masterman's (1980, 1989) concepts and contributes a more extended definition of media literacy, stating that it provides,

[A] framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms—from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (2nd expanded definition)

This definition covers many of the standard concepts and approaches (cf. below) used by many organizations involved with media literacy—

from government agencies to educational organizations. Arguably, more important than defining media literacy is how organizations have put into practice the development and implementation of competencies, core concepts, and questions.

Competencies, Concepts, and Questions

Several people and organizations have created lists of competencies in order to better articulate how a person might judge their own media literacy. This moves media literacy from being defined to being implemented, focusing on the abilities of a media literate person. Renee

Hobbs¹ (2010: 19) describes five essential competencies of digital and media literacy as:

1. Access: Finding and using media and technology tools skillfully and sharing appropriate and relevant information with others.
2. Analyze & Evaluate: Comprehending messages and using critical thinking to analyze message quality, veracity, credibility, and point of view, while considering potential effects or consequences of messages.
3. Create: Composing or generating content using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques
4. Reflect: Applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one's own identity and lived experience, commu-

1. Founder and director of the Media Education Lab: <https://mediaeducation-lab.com/>

nication behavior and conduct.

5. Act: Working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national and international levels.

Similarly, Ben Bachmair and Cary Bazalgette (2007: 84) describe the claim from the European Charter for Media Literacy that a media literate person should be able to:

- Use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;
- Gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;
- Understand how and why media content is produced;
- Analyze critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;
- Use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;
- Identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;
- Make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.

These core competencies are additionally reflected in the CML's handout (see Fig. 2.2), which is an effective example of bringing the concepts for media literacy into one useful document. In addition to the five core concepts, CML also has created questions for students to ask

themselves since the core concepts can be somewhat theoretical. The questions can help guide students in their investigations into specific media. The document also helpfully differentiates between consumers and producers of media.

The development of media literacy questions has also been implemented by organizations such as the Association of Media Literacy (AML) in Canada and NAMLE (namle.net) in the U.S. In addition to the development of various definitions, competencies, and concepts—all of which help to pragmatically implement media literacy skills—there have also been different approaches to media literacy identified. These approaches are a helpful way of narrowing the 'umbrella concept' (Koltay, 2011) of media literacy.

Four Approaches

Kellner and Share (2005, 2007) identify four differing approaches to media literacy. These different models focus on developing skills for the media literate person. They articulate the four approaches as: media arts-based, a media literacy movement, protectionist, and critical media literacy.

Media Arts-Based

In a *media arts-based* approach to media literacy, the focus is on developing the ability and skills to use new forms of media, often for creative self-expression. The primary focus is on the individual's ability to learn the skills in order to help find and creatively express their own voice through the media (Kellner & Share, 2007). While this contributes towards the literacy and empowerment of the individual, the approach tends to view the media in an instrumental or neutral manner—as a tool to learn in order to accomplish something.



CML's FIVE KEY QUESTIONS AND CORE CONCEPTS (Q/TIPS) FOR CONSUMERS AND PRODUCERS

Media Deconstruction/Construction Framework			
#	Key Words	Deconstruction: CML's 5 Key Questions (Consumer)	Construction: CML's 5 Key Questions (Producer)
1	Authorship	Who created this message?	All media messages are constructed.
2	Format	What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3	Audience	How might different people understand this message differently?	Different people experience the same media message differently.
4	Content	What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?	Media have embedded values and points of view.
5	Purpose	Why is this message being sent?	Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.



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Fig. 2.2 [The Center for Media Literacy's core concepts and key questions handout](#). Used with Permission. © Center for Media Literacy, 2002–2020, All Rights Reserved.

These programs can range in their level of emphasis on criticism, the danger being that if they only teach self-expression without also including a critical component, the students

might be prone to ‘reproduce hegemonic representations or express their voice without the awareness of ideological implications or any type of social critique’ (7). Teaching the skills of working with the media technologies is very important, but it is important to teach the concept that the mediums worked with are not neutral, as well as the importance of critical analysis.

Media Literacy Movement

For the second approach, Kellner and Share (2005) situate a *media literacy movement* within broader literacies, building upon the tradition of print literacy. They primarily focus on the relatively young media literacy movement in the U.S. Here, the approach is to ‘teach students to read, analyze, and decode media texts in a fashion parallel to the advancement of print literacy’ (372). In the current landscape of fake news (cf. Jolls & Johnsen, 2017; Livingstone, 2018), the ability to decode and analyze what is being portrayed in the media is an important skill, critical for educating the population. As Livingstone (2018: para. 5, italics in original) warns,

The more that the media mediate everything in society—work, education, information, civic participation, social relationships and more—the more vital it is that people are informed about and critically able to judge what’s useful or misleading, how they are regulated, when media can

be trusted, and what commercial or political interests are at stake. In short, media literacy is needed not only to engage *with the media* but to engage with society *through the media*.

Media literacy can often become an umbrella term for more specific literacies such as: digital literacy, internet literacy, computer literacy, and even potentially AI literacy. While Kellner and Share (2007) commend the media literacy movement, they believe that too often media educators ‘express the myth that education can and should be politically neutral, and that their job is to objectively expose students to media content without questioning ideology and issues of power’ (8). Literacy has its own socio-cultural baggage and should not be thought of as a neutral term. Citing Luke (1989), Livingstone (2004) states that literacy ‘masks a complex history of contestation over the power and authority to access, interpret, and produce printed texts’ (4). These last points are addressed by the fourth approach (cf. below).

Protectionist

A third approach in media literacy is the *protectionist* approach. This investigates the ways media can be harmful—especially for young people—with repercussions like reducing attention spans, inciting violence, or promoting capitalist propaganda, particularly in advertising (Francis, 2016; Giroux, 2002; Kellner & Share, 2007). Friedrich Kittler

(1999) begins one of his books by stating, ‘Media determine our situation’ (xxxix). This determinist view is often foundational for the protectionists, who posit that certain media technologies are inherently harmful or destructive to human flourishing. Neil Postman (2006) and Lance Strate (2014) detail the drawbacks of electronic media like television, especially compared with print media. Kellner and Share (2007) point out that ‘Some conservatives blame the media for causing teen pregnancies and the destruction of family values while some on the left criticize the media for rampant consumerism and making children materialistic’ (6).

Some researchers within this approach also address the ways newer digital media are inferior for supporting a well-read society in comparison to traditional print media (Postman, 2006; Strate, 2014). This focus raises the issue of the effects of a particular medium on society. For example, Sherry Turkle (2011) warns that new information and communication technologies are driving us apart while giving us the semblance of being together through virtual communication. Kellner and Share (2007) describe this as a fear of media with an aim to ‘protect or inoculate people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction. This protectionist approach posits media audiences as somewhat passive victims and values traditional print culture over media culture’ (6).

Stuart Hall (1980) challenges the view of audiences being passive victims through his work in encoding/decoding of media messages. Hall articulates that audiences are more than

passive receivers of media texts and they have the ability to read the messages produced outside of a dominant-hegemonic position—preferred by the producers—in negotiated or even oppositional ways (1980). This raises the question of the role of agency. Though there is a wide variety of focus within the protectionist approach, it tends toward technological determinism, which is the opposite of the skills-based (instrumentalist) approach. The protectionist approach is inclined to consider media and technology as something harmful to humans. In general, the first two approaches tend to consider the technological medium as neutral, not focusing on any influence that the medium may have. For the protectionist approach, the content and medium become more determining, potentially endangering the user and suppressing much of the user's agency.

Critical Media Literacy

The fourth approach is called *critical media literacy* and builds on the previous three approaches. It then adds the analysis of 'media culture as products of social production and struggle [...] teaching students to be critical of media representations and discourses, but also stressing the importance of learning to use the media as modes of self-expression and social activism' (Kellner & Share, 2005: 372). According to Kellner and Share (2007: 8–9),

Critical media literacy thus constitutes a cri-

tique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multiperspectival critical inquiry of media culture and the cultural industries that address issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media. Media and information communication technology can be tools for empowerment when people who are most often marginalized or misrepresented in the mainstream media receive the opportunity to use these tools to tell their stories and express their concerns.

Critical media literacy strives to understand the underlying cultural influences and meanings that are embedded within media messages and how they often negatively affect already marginalized people. Kellner and Share (2007) state ‘The analysis of different models of representation of women or people of color makes clear the constructedness of gender and race representations and that dominant negative representations further subordination and make it look natural’ (13). They summarize by saying, ‘critical media literacy offers the tools and framework to help students become subjects in the process of deconstructing injustices, expressing their own voices, and struggling to create a better society’ (2005: 382). This reflects how media literacy can be used to regain user agency while navigating a mediated world. Lemke (2006)

states, ‘More than ever we need a critical multimedia literacy to engage intelligently with their potential effects on our social attitudes and beliefs’ (4).

Supporting critical media literacy, John Hartley (2002) states, ‘Literacy is not and never has been a personal attribute or ideologically inert “skill” simply to be “acquired” by individual persons’ (135). Hartley continues by saying, ‘It is ideologically and politically charged— it can be used as a means of social control or regulation, but also as a progressive weapon in the struggle for emancipation’ (136). This reflects the non-neutrality of media and emphasizes the importance of learning how media affects our lives. While these four approaches cover much of the current state of media literacy, I believe that there is still more that should be covered by the field.

Expanding Media Literacy

With the ubiquity of ICTs and the speed with which they evolve and change, it is critical for media literacy to help us learn how to quickly situate and guide our own investigation into understanding the media we not only invite into our lives, but the inescapable media that surrounds us daily as well. Joshua Meyrowitz (1994: 50, *italics added*) provides an apt summary of media literacy:

Most of the questions that engage media researchers and popular observers of the media focus only on one dimension of our media environment: the content of media messages.

Typical concerns centre on how people (often children) react to what they are exposed to through various media; how institutional, economic, and political factors influence what is and is not conveyed through media; whether media messages accurately reflect various dimensions of reality; how different audiences interpret the same content differently; and so on. *These are all very significant concerns, but content issues do not exhaust the universe of questions that could, and should, be asked about the media.*

While carving out an important niche for itself, media literacy has become an established area of study with its own supporting literature. However, in the process it has lost some of its original interdisciplinarity (cf. Moores, 2012; Morley, 2009), focusing mainly on issues of representation, skill development, analysis, and social construction through media content. As Tessa Jolls and Carolyn Wilson (2014) point out, ‘the pioneering work of communications expert Marshall McLuhan [...] created a foundation upon which many of our current ideas about media literacy are built’ (69). That said, McLuhan’s focus on the effects of the medium has largely dropped off the radar for most iterations of media literacy.²

While media literacy brings several pedagogical tools that help people better understand not only how to use media

2. Canada’s AML (aml.ca) being one of the few exceptions that still retain some focus on the medium

effectively but also how to understand it critically (cf. Van Dijck & Van Deursen, 2014), there are those who believe it should not be too narrowly focused. Moores (2012) says, ‘I have a longstanding interest in studying everyday media uses [...], yet I firmly believe that these uses are best investigated in context, alongside other everyday practices and within wider social processes’ (11). While critical media literacy is one of the steps in expanding media literacy in order to include critically analyzing the social context of biased representations, there is room to expand it further.

I use a two-step approach that focuses on the context. The first step is to include a focus on the technological medium being used. The second is similar to the call of Moores (2016) and Morley (2007; see also Krajina et al., 2014) for a non-media-centric media literacy that goes beyond a focus on representation and skills. Morley suggest de-centering media from media studies so we can ‘understand better the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other’ (200). Investigating the aspect of the medium itself is a first step that moves beyond a focus on media representation and skills. Following this, I create an approach using fields outside of media literacy in order to bring together concepts that help situate media literacy in a broader context, which I call a posthuman approach, and can be considered a fifth approach to media literacy.

The Medium as Non-neutral

Environment

The first step in enhancing media literacy is to extend beyond the primary concern with media content to begin exploring how the content is entangled with the specific medium itself. Currently, when a medium is discussed, the discussion generally focuses on ways to categorize the content mediated by that particular medium. For instance, in Figure 2.2 the second concept is format. The core concept states, *‘Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules’*, the emphasis being on language rather than the medium itself. This reflects media literacy’s primary focus on representation and its lack of attention on the medium. Not only is it beneficial to focus on the content and social context of media messages (i.e., critical media literacy), but we should also pay attention to the effects of the actual technology itself.

Marshall McLuhan’s focus on the medium can be credited for drawing a focus to and interest in media education. Jolls and Wilson (2014: 69) write,

In Canada, the pioneering work of communications expert Marshall McLuhan in the 1940s through the 1960s created a foundation upon which many of our current ideas about media literacy are built. McLuhan was aware of the profound impact of communications technologies on our lives, our societies and our future. His famous idea, that the ‘medium is the mes-

sage' taught us to recognize that the form through which a message is conveyed is as important as the content of the message. [...]

McLuhan's theory was based on the idea that each medium has its own technological 'grammar' or bias that shapes and creates a message in a unique way. Different media may report the same event, but each medium will create different impressions and convey different messages.

One of the few media literacy organizations that does include a focus on the medium is Canada's AML. Their Eight Key Concepts of media literacy³ includes three where the medium is pointed out (bold was added):

1. Media construct reality
2. **Media construct versions of reality** (biases of medium and creator)
3. Audiences negotiate meaning
4. Media have economic implications
5. Media communicate values messages
6. Media communicate political and social messages
7. **Form and content are closely related in each**

3. Canada's Association of Media Literacy (<https://aml.ca/resources/essentialframework/>)

medium

8. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

However, the aspect of the medium is not mentioned in their *Triangled Questions* document,⁴ which they describe as a tool for teaching media literacy. This misses an opportunity to include a focus on the medium, which—at least implicitly—tends to view the objects of ICTs in an instrumental manner, as neutral carriers (Mason, 2016).

The issue of neutrality brings up how media has been judged in the past. Often, there is a binary approach, where media is perceived as either neutral (it has no effect) or determining (it has great effect). This way of perceiving media can be used to analyze both the content of the media or the medium itself. The protectionist approach and critical media literacy approach (cf. above) are generally concerned with the determining aspects of the media, while the media arts-based education and media literacy movement are more neutral.

One way to move beyond the binary approach of either neutral or determining is through the idea of non-neutrality. This stance acknowledges media's effect on human subjects (and can be applied to both content and medium), but refrains from an absolute determining stance. According to Melvin Kranzberg (1986), 'Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is

4. <https://aml.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/triangleq.pdf>

it neutral' (545). However, the non-neutrality acknowledged by Kellner and Share (2007) focuses on the content rather than the material technology: 'Media are thus not neutral disseminators of information because the nature of the construction and interpretation processes entails bias and social influence' (12).

One of the gaps in media literacy that I am addressing is the nonneutrality of the material technology: the medium. Two media-related fields of study that I include in order to demonstrate this are media ecology and the philosophical approach of postphenomenology. Researchers in these fields are not the only advocates supporting a non-neutral view of technology (cf. Feenberg, 1999, 2017; Latour, 1999; Puech, 2016; Williams, 2004), but they provide two approaches that help to create an inclusive understanding of the non-neutrality of media technologies. My stance is that a balanced approach, combining content analysis and technological mediation, can help media literacy be more effective.

One way to help keep this balanced approach in mind is through the analogy McLuhan often used, that of figure and ground (McLuhan et al., 1977). 'Simply stated, figure is what one notices within an environment, whereas ground consists of the things one ignores' (Mason, 2019: 4). In the case of Masterman's (1980) work on television, it is the content or message that is the figure. However, the medium of the television is the ground for the content. The medium plays an important role in shaping the content, and it should be one of the foci of

media literacy, along with the content. McLuhan (McLuhan et al., 1977) uses the figure/ground analogy in order to help us retrain our perception so that we become aware of the effects that the ‘ground’ has on us.

At one point McLuhan (McLuhan et al., 1977) explains that, ‘[...] in your own experience, you are always the figure, as long as you are conscious. The ground is always the setting in which you exist and act. The ground is never static; it is always changing. The interplay between you and this changing ground changes you’ (10). Being conscious and aware of media’s effects are in accord with the goals of media literacy. Lance Mason (2016) states, ‘because McLuhan more fully conceptualizes the non-neutrality of technologies, he provides a broader conceptualization of user agency that transcends media messages and also considers media as form or environments for engagement’ (93). Mason continues (2016: 93–94):

While critical media literacy advocates are right to insist that audiences are active appropriators of media content, ignoring the structuring role of media technologies leads them to ignore or discount the insight that the medium influences the environmental conditions within which a user transacts with the world. [...] From this perspective, McLuhan’s conception of media agency could bolster the conception of critical media literacy by affording a consideration of the material

environments that mediate experiences for students in particular contexts.

The technological medium contributes to the shaping of media messages and deserves to be included in a broader approach to media literacy. Lars Qvortrup (2006) states that successful communication is not a ‘natural’ but a highly improbable phenomenon, and ‘the effect of communication [medium] is to limit the improbability of communication success, and the qualities of media can be measured by their impact on communication success’ (351). McLuhan (1994) described the medium as an environment, and this environment makes up part of the context that contains media messages.

Adding Context via Domestication Theory

While domestication theory⁵ is outside the realm of media literacy—as it has a sociological and ethnographic focus rather than one on educating people to become media literate—it demonstrates how media studies in general can broaden its

5. 5 For clarity, I will only use the term domestication theory. However, there has also been research in describing double (cf. Livingstone, 2007) and triple (cf. Courtois et al., 2012, 2013; Hartmann, 2006) articulation that is usually included in domestication theory discussions.

scope to include both object and context. This highlights the importance of understanding the context of where the media object exists, how it is used, and how it changes the behaviors of people who adapt to it. This example reflects what I wish to bring to media literacy through the development of an inclusive approach that situates ICTs in our everyday world in order for media users to understand the complexity of interrelations of content, technological medium, and context.

Domestication theory examines media as it is used within its environment. Silverstone (2006) created this theory—further developing it with David Morley (Morley & Silverstone, 1990), Leslie Haddon (2007), and others—through investigating how television was assimilated into homes in the U.K. The process focuses on the context, or environment, where the media is used and how that environment plays a role in understanding media. Edgar Morin (2007) describes, ‘The need for contextualization is extremely important. I would even say that it is a principle of knowledge’ (15; see also Engel, 1999). Yoni Van Den Eede (2015b) also makes the case for context saying, ‘No thing is ever perceived in isolation. One may focus on it, but it is always there in relation to a ground or field. We can, however, try to get that broader context in view’ (145).

Maren Hartmann (2006) describes how domestication theory began by analyzing the consumption of media, specifically television, and critiqued existing television research that was not ‘accounting for the complexity of culture and the social’

(83). Hartmann continues (2006: 84) by describing how, in domestication theory,

both the material and the symbolic values present in media use are researched. The most general framework was thus the contextualized processes of the integration of technologies into everyday life. This context is both complex and contingent—and this context was also still meant to include content.

Morley and Silverstone (1990) write, ‘our main objective is to recontextualize the study of television in a broader framework’ (31), with an approach that ‘defines television as an essentially domestic medium, to be understood both within the context of household and family, and within the wider context of social, political and economic realities’ (32). They conclude by stating, ‘within this formulation television’s *meanings*, that is the meanings of both texts and technologies, have to be understood as emergent properties of contextualized audience practices’ (31, italics in original).

Domestication stresses the attention on the everyday aspect of media and how it becomes integrated into our daily routines. Merete Lie and Knut Sørensen (1996) broaden the scope of domestication by investigating media outside of the home. They find that everywhere we go, we ‘consume technologies—or, more precisely, technical artefacts— by integrating and using them. We are also consumed by the artefacts when

they gain our attention and have us react to them and become occupied by their abilities, functions, and forms' (8).

How domestication theory engages with complexity is also an important concept, one that is expanded upon in Chapter 4. Thomas Berker et al. (2006: 1) describe what happens when we study media relations in context:

The emergence of the domestication concept represented a shift away from models which assumed the adoption of new innovations to be rational, linear, monocausal and technologically determined. Rather, it presented a theoretical framework and research approach, which considered the complexity of everyday life and technology's place within its dynamics, rituals, rules, routines and patterns.

This complexity has created problems for domestication theory. While it has been well developed as a theory, Hartmann (2006) notes that

it 'was then lost in the "application" of the domestication concept in actual research' (81). According to Hartmann, the 'question that keeps reappearing and that has not yet been solved is how to adequately research the complexity of the combination of media content and media context to paint a picture of the overall whole' (89). What is needed is a way to situate and contextualize the complexity of our media-saturated, everyday lives.

Concluding Thoughts

Today, much of media literacy focuses on fake news and the challenge this trend presents to democracy (cf. Jolls & Johnsen, 2017; Livingstone, 2018). People are mediated by technologies of all sorts,⁶ one of the most prevalent being the smartphone. The news is not only mediated; it is re-mediated into smaller and smaller bits, which are typically cut and re-cut, decontextualized and then re-contextualized with different meanings (cf. Chouliaraki, 2013, 2017). The many different mediums disseminate these bits in their own unique way. Ubiquitous ICTs have transformed the way most people live, especially in the developed Western world. However, people are not only mediated by ICTs in general, but also by cultural relations through power structures, social norms, language, gender, race, and many other groupings of relations. This is where critical media literacy comes into play and where there is much overlap with critical posthumanism (cf. Chapter 4).

I am not the only researcher calling for expanding the field of media literacy. There has been a push from within the field for broadening its scope, returning to a more interdisciplinary

6. Livingstone (2009) writes on the mediation of everything, stating, ‘distinct aspects of the concept of mediation invite communication scholars to attend to the specific empirical, historical and political implication of the claim that “everything is mediated”’ (1).

approach. Morley (2009) writes of the need to ‘develop a model for the integrated analysis of communications, which places current technological changes in historical perspective’ (114). To do so means avoiding the simplified and ‘overdrawn binary divides between the worlds of the “old” and the “new” media’ (115). It is critical for media literacy to develop a framework in order to keep an overarching perspective on the constant onslaught of new ICTs. In the words of Eric McLuhan (2009: 12),

When change is relatively slow, the need for training awareness is not so pressing. But when major new media appear every three or four years, the need becomes a matter of survival. Each new medium is a new culture and each demands a new spin on identity; each takes root in one or another group in society, and as these flow in and out of each other the abrasive interfaces generate much violence. It is urgent that we begin to study all of the forms of knowing, now called literacies.

My approach follows several amodern—not modern but not postmodern—philosophies (postphenomenology, philosophical posthumanism, complexity theory, etc.). I balance the binaries of technological determinism and technological neutrality. One of the most effective ways to reduce technological determinism—following Michel Foucault (1988), Michel Puech (2016), and others—is to become aware of the systems that have influence on us, and this is where media literacy can

excel. John Culkin (1967: 51) stresses the importance of being media literate:

The environments set up by different media are not just containers for people; they are processes which shape people. Such influence is deterministic only if it is ignored. There is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.

As critical media literacy helps to fill the critical social theory gap within media literacy, my aim is to create an approach that can be used by media literacy in order to situate the wider range of effects of media that a mediate literate person should be aware of: content, medium, and context. As Lemke (2006) states, ‘We need conceptual frameworks to help us cope with the complexity and the novelty of these new multimedia constellations’ (5).

The first step towards an expansion of media literacy is developing an understanding of the co-constituting effects of technological relations, especially embodied relations, which I investigate in the next chapter. Both media ecology and post-phenomenology help us keep in mind the way media and technologies enable and constrain our abilities, allowing us to have more realistic expectations for complex media environments. This aspect of co-constitution is the focus of the next two chapters. First, I look at the medium/technology side (Chapter 3) and then focus on which subject we are discussing that is being constituted by media relations (Chapter 4). This is not

the subject of the transmission model of communication, but the subject of the constitutive model (Craig, 1999) and the transformation model (McLuhan, 2008). We are not stand-alone entities simply transporting discreet messages back and forth through various media; rather, we are being constituted within a complexity of mediated relations

Media Attributions

- Shannon_communication_system
- Screenshot 2025-10-27 101542

CHAPTER 1: MEDIA AND CULTURE

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entire 93-performance tour of the United States. Ever the savvy self-promoter, Barnum turned his huge investment to his advantage by using it to create publicity—and it paid off. When the Swedish soprano’s ship docked on U.S. shores, she was greeted by 40,000 ardent fans; another 20,000 swarmed her hotel (Barnum). Congress was adjourned specifically for Lind’s visit to Washington, DC, where the National Theatre had to be enlarged to accommodate her audiences. A town in California and an island in Canada were named in her honor. Enthusiasts could purchase Jenny Lind hats, chairs, boots, opera glasses, and even pianos. Barnum’s marketing expertise made Lind a household name and created an overwhelming demand for a singer previously unknown to American audiences.

The “Jenny rage” that the savvy Barnum was able to create was not a unique phenomenon, however; a little more than a century later, a new craze transformed some American teenagers into screaming, fainting Beatlemaniacs. Though other performers like Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley were no strangers to manic crowds, the Beatles attracted an unprecedented amount of attention when they first arrived in the United States. When the British foursome touched down at New York’s Kennedy Airport in 1964, they were met by more than 3,000 frenzied fans. Their performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was seen by 73 million people, or 40 percent of the U.S. population. The crime rate that night dropped to its lowest

level in 50 years (Ehrenreich, et. al., 1992). Beatlemania was at such a fever pitch that Life magazine cautioned that “a Beatle who ventures out unguarded into the streets runs the very real peril of being dismembered or crushed to death by his fans.” The BBC publicized the trend and perhaps added to it by highlighting the paraphernalia for fans to spend their money on: “T-shirts, sweat shirts, turtle-neck sweaters, tight-legged trousers, night shirts, scarves, and jewelry inspired by the Beatles” were all available, as were Beatles-style mop-top wigs.

In the 21st century, rabid fans could turn their attention to a whole swath of pop stars in the making when the reality TV program American Idol hit the airwaves in 2002. The show was the only television program ever to have snagged the top spot in the Nielsen ratings for six seasons in a row, often averaging more than 30 million nightly viewers. Rival television network executives were alarmed, deeming the pop giant “the ultimate schoolyard bully,” “the Death Star,” or even “the most impactful show in the history of television,” according to former NBC Universal CEO Jeff Zucker (Carter, 2007). New cell phone technologies allowed viewers to have a direct role in the program’s star-making enterprise through casting votes, signing up for text alerts, or playing trivia games on their phones. In 2009, AT&T estimated that Idol-related text traffic amounted to 178 million messages (Poniewozik, 2009).

On July 15, 2012, South Korean K-pop artist Psy released “Gangnam Style,” a single from his sixth album (Psy 6). While the song quickly reached the #1 spot on the Korean music

charts, its success was not limited to Korea but instead became a worldwide phenomenon. This, of course, was helped in large part by the accompanying music video, which was the first to ever reach one billion views on YouTube. The music video features Psy doing what is now referred to as the “invisible horse dance,” which itself seemed to pull from earlier crazes (Chubby Checker’s “Pony” dance from the 1960s, the “Melbourne Shuffle,” and Monty Python) (Judkis, 2012). Other well-known artists began to sing it during their concerts, Gangnam-themed merchandise was marketed, and of course parody videos began to emerge that took on a popularity of their own (Judkis, 2012). This craze in particular is productive to study because not only did it pull from past crazes spanning decades but also created popular spin offs that engaged a global audience. It also demonstrates the power of the K-pop industry to create such crazes.

These four crazes all relied on various forms of media to create excitement. Whether through newspaper advertisements, live television broadcasts, or integrated Internet marketing, media industry tastemakers help shape what we care about. For as long as **mass media** has existed in the United States, it’s helped to create and fuel mass crazes, skyrocketing celebrities, and pop culture manias of all kinds. Even in our era of seemingly limitless entertainment options, mass hits like American Idol still have the ability to dominate the public’s attention. In the chapters to come, we’ll look at different kinds of **mass**

media and how they have been changed by—and are changing—the world we live in.

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1.2 INTERSECTION OF AMERICAN MEDIA AND CULTURE

Pop culture and American media are inextricably linked. Consider that Jenny Lind, the Beatles, and American Idol were each promoted using a then-new technology (photography for Lind, television for the Beatles, and the Internet and text messaging for American Idol).

Mass Communication, Mass Media, and Culture

The chapters to come will provide an in-depth look at many kinds of media, at how media trends are reshaping the United States' cultural landscape, and at how that culture shapes media in turn. These topics will be explored through an examination of **mass media** and mass communication both past and present—and speculation about what the future might look like.

First, it is important to distinguish between mass communication and mass media. It also is essential to provide a work-

ing definition of **culture** that reveals its relationship to the media. **Mass communication** refers to information transmitted to large segments of the population. The transmission of mass communication may happen using one or many different kinds of media (singular medium), which is the means of transmission, whether print, digital, or electronic. Mass media specifically refers to a means of communication that is designed to reach a wide audience using a communication technology. **Mass media** platforms are commonly considered to include radio, newspapers, magazines, books, video games, and Internet media such as blogs, podcasts, and video sharing. Another way to consider the distinction is that a mass media message may be disseminated through several forms of mass media, such as an ad campaign with television, radio, and Internet components. **Culture** generally refers to the shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that characterize, organize, and stabilize a social group, organization, or institution. Just as it is difficult to pin down an exact definition of culture, cultures themselves can be hard to draw boundaries around, as they are fluid, diverse, and often overlapping.

Douglas Kellner's definition of media culture is instructive to draw media and culture together, for he perceives that media have become so interwoven into our culture, practices, and structures of meaning that it is no longer possible to separate them: "A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior,

and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (1995, p. 1). In the era of the Internet, it is clear that Kellner’s conception of media culture is even more relevant today.

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What will you ask the presidential candidates?



THE CNN★YOUTUBE DEBATES

LIVE ON CNN THIS SUMMER & FALL

Turn your question into a video and you could see it broadcast and answered on live TV!



This summer and fall, YouTube, CNN and a few engaged and engaging citizens will make political history by having the presidential candidates answer questions submitted via YouTube videos.

The first debate will feature the Democratic candidates on July 23rd in Charleston, South Carolina. Submit your question for the Democrats between June 14 and July 22 (the earlier the better). The CNN political team will choose the most creative and compelling videos, and if yours is one of them, you may get the chance to fly to Charleston to watch the debate live and offer your reactions afterward on YouTube's political video blog, [CitizenTube](#).

So if you've always wanted your voice to be heard, now's your chance -- grab a camera and get rolling.

★ GUIDELINES

- Be original -- choose your own approach.
- Be personal -- your perspective is important.
- Choose your focus -- you can address one or all of the candidates.
- Keep it quick -- your question should be less than 30 seconds.
- Make it look good -- speak loudly and keep that camera steady.
- Provide context -- in your question or video description, include your name & home town.
- Please note -- all videos are subject to the YouTube [Terms of Use](#).

DEMOCRATS★
THE SOUTH CAROLINA DEBATE
MONDAY JULY 23rd
Hosted by:
CNN Anderson Cooper

COMING UP:
REPUBLICAN DEBATE★
ON MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 17 IN FLORIDA

SUBMIT YOUR QUESTION!

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Advances in media technology allowed for unprecedented voter participation in the 2007 CNN/YouTube® presidential debates. Attribution: The CNN + YouTube Debates – lafra – [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

Incorporating the idea of media culture, it is important to recognize that throughout U.S. history, evolving media technologies have changed the way we relate socially, economically,

and politically. In 2007, for example, a joint venture between the 24-hour news network CNN and the video-sharing site YouTube allowed voters to pose questions directly to presidential candidates in two televised debates. Voters could record their questions and upload them to YouTube, and a selection of these videos were then chosen by the debate moderators and played directly to the presidential candidates. This new format opened up the presidential debates to a much wider array of people, allowing for greater voter participation than has been possible in the past, where questions were posed solely by journalists or a few carefully chosen audience members.

In today's wired world of smartphones and streaming satellite feeds, our expectations of our leaders, celebrities, teachers, and even ourselves are changing in even more drastic ways. This book provides you with the context, tools, and theories to engage with the world of **mass media** through an examination of the history, theory, and effects of media practices and roles in America. This book also provides you with the framework to consider some of the crucial issues affecting media and culture in today's world.

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1.3 THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA

In 2010, Americans could turn on their television and find 24-hour news channels as well as music videos, nature documentaries, and reality shows about everything from hoarders to fashion models. That's not to mention movies available on demand from cable providers or television and video available online for streaming or downloading. Much has changed in consumption of legacy media like newspapers: while half of U.S. households received a daily newspaper in the early 2000s (State of the Media, 2004), more recent numbers indicate that newspaper subscriptions have fallen precipitously, as the Pew Research Center for Journalism and Media (2019) makes clear: "The estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (print and digital combined) in 2018 was 28.6 million for weekday and 30.8 million for Sunday, down 8% and 9%, respectively, from the previous year." Conversely (and perhaps unsurprisingly) use of new media is up. A University of California, San Diego study claimed that U.S. households consumed a total of approximately 3.6 zettabytes of information in 2008—the digital equivalent of a 7-foot high stack of books covering the entire United States—a 350 percent increase since 1980 (Ramsey, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic, aver-

age wireless data usage increased dramatically: streaming services like Netflix and Disney+ reported skyrocketing subscription rates, resulting in a rise of monthly broadband consumption per household to “as much as 600 gigabytes, about 35% higher than before” (Morison, 2020). Americans are exposed to media in taxicabs and buses, filling up at gas stations, in classrooms and doctors’ offices, on highways, in airplanes, and even in airport bathroom mirrors. We can begin to orient ourselves in the information cloud through parsing what roles the media fill in society, examining its history in society, and looking at the way technological innovations have helped bring us to where we are today.

What Do Media Do for Us?

Media fulfills several basic roles in our society. One obvious role is entertainment. Media can act as a springboard for our imaginations, a source of fantasy, and an outlet for escapism. In the 19th century, Victorian readers disillusioned by the grimness of the Industrial Revolution found themselves drawn into fantastic worlds of fairies and other fictitious beings. In the first decade of the 21st century, American television viewers could peek in on a conflicted Texas high school football team in *Friday Night Lights*; the violence-plagued drug trade in Baltimore in *The Wire*; a 1960s-Manhattan ad agency in *Mad Men*; or the last surviving band of humans in a distant,

miserable future in *Battlestar Galactica*. Through bringing us stories of all kinds, media have the power to take us away from ourselves.

Media can also provide information and education. Information can come in many forms, and it may sometimes be difficult to separate from entertainment. Today, newspapers and news-oriented television and radio programs make available stories from across the globe, allowing readers or viewers in London to access voices and videos from Baghdad, Tokyo, or Buenos Aires. Books and magazines provide a more in-depth look at a wide range of subjects. The free online encyclopedia Wikipedia has articles on topics from presidential nicknames to child prodigies to tongue twisters in various languages. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has posted free lecture notes, exams, and audio and video recordings of classes on its OpenCourseWare website, allowing anyone with an Internet connection access to world-class professors.

Another useful aspect of media is its ability to act as a **public forum** for the discussion of important issues. In newspapers or other periodicals, letters to the editor allow readers to respond to journalists or to voice their opinions on the issues of the day. These letters were an important part of U.S. newspapers even when the nation was a British colony, and they have served as a means of public discourse ever since. The Internet is a fundamentally democratic medium that allows everyone who can get online the ability to express their opin-

ions through, for example, blogging or podcasting—though whether anyone will hear is another question.

Similarly, media can be used to monitor government, business, and other institutions. Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed the miserable conditions in the turn-of-the-century meatpacking industry; and in the early 1970s, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered evidence of the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, which eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. But purveyors of mass media may be beholden to particular agendas because of political slant, advertising funds, or ideological bias, thus constraining their ability to act as a watchdog. The following are some of these agendas:

1. Entertaining and providing an outlet for the imagination
2. Educating and informing
3. Serving as a public forum for the discussion of important issues
4. Acting as a watchdog for government, business, and other institutions

It's important to remember, though, that not all media are created equal. While some forms of **mass communication** are better suited to entertainment, others make more sense as a venue for spreading information. In terms of print media, books are durable and able to contain lots of information, but are relatively slow and expensive to produce; in contrast, news-

papers are comparatively cheaper and quicker to create, making them a better medium for the quick turnover of daily news. Television provides vastly more visual information than radio and is more dynamic than a static printed page; it can also be used to broadcast live events to a nationwide audience, as in the annual State of the Union address given by the U.S. president. However, it is also a one-way medium—that is, it allows for very little direct person-to-person communication. In contrast, the Internet encourages public discussion of issues and allows nearly everyone who wants a voice to have one. However, the Internet is also largely unmoderated. Users may have to wade through thousands of inane comments or misinformed amateur opinions to find quality information.

The 1960s media theorist Marshall McLuhan took these ideas one step further, famously coining the phrase **“the medium is the message”** (McLuhan, 1964). By this, McLuhan meant that every medium delivers information in a different way and that content is fundamentally shaped by the medium of transmission. For example, although television news has the advantage of offering video and live coverage, making a story come alive more vividly, it is also a faster-paced medium. That means more stories get published more rapidly and also covered in less depth. A story told on television will probably be flashier, less in-depth, and with less context than the same story covered in a monthly magazine; therefore, people who get the majority of their news from television may have a particular view of the world shaped not by the content

of what they watch but its medium. Or, as computer scientist Alan Kay put it, “Each medium has a special way of representing ideas that emphasize particular ways of thinking and de-emphasize others (Kay, 1994).” Kay was writing in 1994, when the Internet was just transitioning from an academic research network to an open public system. A decade and a half later, with the Internet firmly ensconced in our daily lives, McLuhan’s intellectual descendants are the media analysts who claim that the Internet is making us better at associative thinking, or more democratic, or shallower. But McLuhan’s claims don’t leave much space for individual autonomy or resistance. In an essay about television’s effects on contemporary fiction, writer David Foster Wallace scoffed at the “reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes.... Treating television as evil is just as reductive and silly as treating it like a toaster with pictures (Wallace, 1997).” Nonetheless, media messages and technologies affect us in countless ways, some of which probably won’t be sorted out until long in the future.

A Brief History of Mass Media, Technology, and Culture

Until Johannes Gutenberg’s 15th-century invention of the

movable type printing press, books were painstakingly hand-written and no two copies were exactly the same. The printing press made the mass production of print media possible. Not only was it much cheaper to produce written material, but new transportation technologies also made it easier for texts to reach a wide audience. It's hard to overstate the importance of Gutenberg's invention, which helped usher in massive cultural movements like the European Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. In 1810, another German printer, Friedrich Koenig, pushed media production even further when he essentially hooked the steam engine up to a printing press, enabling the industrialization of printed media. In 1800, a hand-operated printing press could produce about 480 pages per hour; Koenig's machine more than doubled this rate. (By the 1930s, many printing presses could publish 3,000 pages an hour.)

This increased efficiency went hand in hand with the rise of the daily newspaper. The newspaper was the perfect medium for the increasingly urbanized Americans of the 19th century, who could no longer get their local news merely through gossip and word of mouth. These Americans were living in unfamiliar territory, and newspapers and other media helped them negotiate the rapidly changing world. The Industrial Revolution meant that some people had more leisure time and more money, and media helped them figure out how to spend both. Media theorist Benedict Anderson has argued that newspapers also helped forge a sense of national identity by treating readers

across the country as part of one unified community (Anderson, 1991).

In the 1830s, the major daily newspapers faced a new threat from the rise of penny papers, which were low-priced broadsheets that served as a cheaper, more sensational daily news source. They favored news of murder and adventure over the dry political news of the day. While newspapers catered to a wealthier, more educated audience, the penny press attempted to reach a wide swath of readers through cheap prices and entertaining (often scandalous) stories. The penny press can be seen as the forerunner to today's gossip-hungry tabloids.



The penny press appealed to readers' desires for lurid tales of murder and scandal. [Penny Press](#) – public domain.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the first major non-print form of mass media—radio—exploded in popularity. Radios, which were less expensive than telephones and widely available by the 1920s, had the unprecedented ability of allowing huge numbers of people to listen to the same event at the same time. In 1924, Calvin Coolidge’s pre-election speech reached more than 20 million people. Radio was a boon for advertisers, who now had access to a large and captive audience. An early advertising consultant claimed that the early days of radio were “a glorious opportunity for the advertising man to spread his sales propaganda” because of “a countless audience, sympathetic, pleasure seeking, enthusiastic, curious, interested, approachable in the privacy of their homes (Briggs & Burke, 2005).” The reach of radio also meant that the medium was able to downplay regional differences and encourage a unified sense of the American lifestyle—a lifestyle that was increasingly driven and defined by consumer purchases. “Americans in the 1920s were the first to wear ready-made, exact-size clothing...to play electric phonographs, to use electric vacuum cleaners, to listen to commercial radio broadcasts, and to drink fresh orange juice year round (Mintz, 2007).” This boom in consumerism put its stamp on the 1920s and also helped contribute to the Great Depression of the 1930s (Library of Congress). The consumerist impulse drove production to unprecedented levels, but when the Depression began and consumer demand dropped dramatically, the sur-

plus of production helped further deepen the economic crisis, as more goods were being produced than could be sold.

The post–World War II era in the United States was marked by prosperity, and by the introduction of a seductive new form of **mass communication**: television. In 1946, about 17,000 televisions existed in the United States; within 7 years, two-thirds of American households owned at least one set. As the United States’ gross national product (GNP) doubled in the 1950s, and again in the 1960s, the American home became firmly ensconced as a consumer unit; along with a television, the typical U.S. household owned a car and a house in the suburbs, all of which contributed to the nation’s thriving consumer-based economy (Briggs & Burke, 2005). **Broadcast television** was the dominant form of mass media, and the three major networks controlled more than 90 percent of the news programs, live events, and sitcoms viewed by Americans. Some social critics argued that television was fostering a homogenous, conformist culture by reinforcing ideas about what “normal” American life looked like. But television also contributed to the counterculture of the 1960s. The Vietnam War was the nation’s first televised military conflict, and nightly images of war footage and war protesters helped intensify the nation’s internal conflicts.

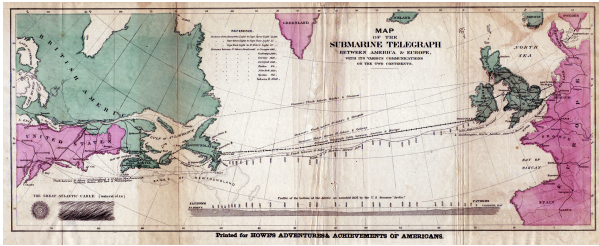
Broadcast technology, including radio and television, had such a hold on the American imagination that newspapers and other print media found themselves having to adapt to the new media landscape. **Print media** was more durable and

easily archived, and it allowed users more flexibility in terms of time—once a person had purchased a magazine, he or she could read it whenever and wherever. **Broadcast media**, in contrast, usually aired programs on a fixed schedule, which allowed it to both provide a sense of immediacy and fleetingness. Until the advent of digital video recorders in the late 1990s, it was impossible to pause and rewind a live television broadcast.

The media world faced drastic changes once again in the 1980s and 1990s with the spread of cable television. During the early decades of television, viewers had a limited number of channels to choose from—one reason for the charges of homogeneity. In 1975, the three major networks accounted for 93 percent of all television viewing. By 2004, however, this share had dropped to 28.4 percent of total viewing, thanks to the spread of cable television. Cable providers allowed viewers a wide menu of choices, including channels specifically tailored to people who wanted to watch only golf, classic films, sermons, or videos of sharks. Still, until the mid-1990s, television was dominated by the three large networks. The **Telecommunications Act of 1996**, an attempt to foster competition by deregulating the industry, actually resulted in many mergers and buyouts that left most of the control of the broadcast spectrum in the hands of a few large corporations. In 2003, the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** loosened regulation even further, allowing a single company to own 45 percent of a single market (up from 25 percent in 1982).

Technological Transitions Shape Media Industries

New media technologies both spring from and cause social changes. For this reason, it can be difficult to neatly sort the evolution of media into clear causes and effects. Did radio fuel the consumerist boom of the 1920s, or did the radio become wildly popular because it appealed to a society that was already exploring consumerist tendencies? Probably a little bit of both. Technological innovations such as the steam engine, electricity, wireless communication, and the Internet have all had lasting and significant effects on American culture. As media historians Asa Briggs and Peter Burke note, every crucial invention came with “a change in historical perspectives.” Electricity altered the way people thought about time because work and play were no longer dependent on the daily rhythms of sunrise and sunset; wireless communication collapsed distance; the Internet revolutionized the way we store and retrieve information.



The transatlantic telegraph cable made nearly instantaneous communication between the United States and Europe possible for the first time in 1858. Attribution: [1858 trans-Atlantic telegraph cable route – Amber Case – CC BY-NC 2.0.](#)

The contemporary media age can trace its origins back to the

electrical telegraph, patented in the United States by Samuel Morse in 1837. Thanks to the telegraph, communication was no longer linked to the physical transportation of messages; it didn't matter whether a message needed to travel 5 or 500 miles. Suddenly, information from distant places was nearly as accessible as local news, as telegraph lines began to stretch across the globe, making their own kind of World Wide Web. In this way, the telegraph acted as the precursor to much of the technology that followed, including the telephone, radio, television, and Internet. When the first transatlantic cable was laid in 1858, allowing nearly instantaneous communication from the United States to Europe, the *London Times* described it as “the greatest discovery since that of Columbus, a vast enlargement...given to the sphere of human activity.”

Not long afterward, wireless communication (which eventually led to the development of radio, television, and other broadcast media) emerged as an extension of telegraph technology. Although many 19th-century inventors, including Nikola Tesla, were involved in early wireless experiments, it was Italian-born Guglielmo Marconi who is recognized as the developer of the first practical wireless radio system. Many people were fascinated by this new invention. Early radio was used for military communication, but soon the technology entered the home. The burgeoning interest in radio inspired hundreds of applications for broadcasting licenses from newspapers and other news outlets, retail stores, schools, and even cities. In the 1920s, large media networks—including the National Broad-

casting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS)—were launched, and they soon began to dominate the airwaves. In 1926, they owned 6.4 percent of U.S. broadcasting stations; by 1931, that number had risen to 30 percent.



Gone With the Wind defeated The Wizard of Oz to become the first color film ever to win the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1939. Attribution: Poster – [Gone with the Wind](#) – public domain; [The Wizard of Oz Lobby Card](#) – public domain.

In addition to the breakthroughs in audio broadcasting, inventors in the 1800s made significant advances in visual media. The 19th-century development of photographic technologies would lead to the later innovations of cinema and television. As with wireless technology, several inventors independently created a form of photography at the same time, among them the French inventors Joseph Niépce and Louis Daguerre and the British scientist William Henry Fox Talbot. In the United States, George Eastman developed the Kodak camera in 1888,

anticipating that Americans would welcome an inexpensive, easy-to-use camera into their homes as they had with the radio and telephone. Moving pictures were first seen around the turn of the century, with the first U.S. projection-hall opening in Pittsburgh in 1905. By the 1920s, Hollywood had already created its first stars, most notably Charlie Chaplin; by the end of the 1930s, Americans were watching color films with full sound, including *Gone With the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

Television—which consists of an image being converted to electrical impulses, transmitted through wires or radio waves, and then reconverted into images—existed before World War II, but gained mainstream popularity in the 1950s. In 1947, there were 178,000 television sets made in the United States; 5 years later, 15 million were made. Radio, cinema, and live theater declined because the new medium allowed viewers to be entertained with sound and moving pictures in their homes. In the United States, competing commercial stations (including the radio powerhouses of CBS and NBC) meant that commercial-driven programming dominated. In Great Britain, the government managed broadcasting through the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Funding was driven by licensing fees instead of advertisements. In contrast to the U.S. system, the BBC strictly regulated the length and character of commercials that could be aired. However, U.S. television (and its increasingly powerful networks) still dominated. By the beginning of 1955, there were around 36 million television sets in the United States, but only 4.8 million in all of Europe. Import-

tant national events, broadcast live for the first time, were an impetus for consumers to buy sets so they could witness the spectacle; both England and Japan saw a boom in sales before important royal weddings in the 1950s.



In the 1960s, the concept of a useful portable computer was still a dream; huge mainframes were required to run a basic operating system. [Computer DEC VAX 11-780-5](#) by Joe Mabel licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#).

In 1969, management consultant Peter Drucker predicted that the next major technological innovation would be an electronic appliance that would revolutionize the way people lived just as thoroughly as Thomas Edison's light bulb had. This appliance would sell for less than a television set and be "capable of being plugged in wherever there is electricity and giving immediate access to all the information needed for school work from first grade through college." Although Drucker may have underestimated the cost of this hypothetical machine, he was prescient about the effect these machines—personal computers—and the **Internet** would have on education, social relationships, and the culture at large. The inventions of random access memory (RAM) chips and microprocessors in the 1970s were important steps to the Internet age. As Briggs and Burke note, these advances meant that "hundreds of thousands of components could be carried on a microprocessor." The reduction of many different kinds of content to digitally stored information meant that "print, film, recording, radio and television and all forms of telecommunications [were] now being thought of increasingly as part of one complex." This process, also known as **convergence**, is a force that's affecting media today.

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1.4 CONVERGENCE

It's important to keep in mind that the implementation of new technologies doesn't mean that the old ones simply vanish into dusty museums. Today's media consumers still watch television, listen to radio, read newspapers, and become immersed in movies. The difference is that it's now possible to do all those things through one device—be it a personal computer or a smartphone—and through the Internet. Such actions are enabled by **media convergence**, the process by which previously distinct technologies come to share tasks and resources.

Convergence Culture

The term **convergence** can hold several different meanings. In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins offers a useful definition of convergence as it applies to new media:

“By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want (Jenkins, 2006).”

A self-produced video on YouTube that gains enormous popularity and thus receives the attention of a news outlet is a good example of this migration of both content and audiences. Consider this flow: The video appears and gains notoriety, so a news outlet broadcasts a story about the video, which in turn increases its popularity on YouTube. This migration works in a number of ways. Humorous or poignant excerpts from television or radio broadcasts are often posted on social media sites and blogs, where they gain popularity and are seen by more people than had seen the original broadcast.

Thanks to **new media**, consumers now view all types of media as participatory. For example, the massively popular talent show *American Idol* combines an older-media format—television—with modern media consumption patterns by allowing the home audience to vote for a favorite contestant. However, *American Idol* segments regularly appear on YouTube and other websites, where people who may never have seen the show comment on and dissect them. Phone companies report a regular increase in phone traffic following the show, presumably caused by viewers calling in to cast their votes or simply to discuss the program with friends and family. As a result, more people are exposed to the themes, principles, and culture of *American Idol* than the number of people who actually watch the show (Jenkins, 2006).

New media have encouraged greater personal participation in media as a whole. Although the long-term cultural consequences of this shift cannot yet be assessed, the development

is undeniably a novel one. As audiences become more adept at navigating media, this trend will undoubtedly increase.

Bert Is Evil



Attribution: [evil bert](#)
– Jughead – [CC](#)
[BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

In 2001, high school student Dino Ignacio created a collage of Sesame Street character Bert with terrorist Osama bin Laden as part of a series for his website.

Called “Bert Is Evil,” the series featured the puppet engaged in a variety of illicit activities. A Bangladesh-based publisher looking for

images of bin Laden found the collage on the Internet and used it in an anti-American protest poster, presumably without knowledge of who Bert was. This ended up in a CNN report on anti-American protests, and public outrage over the use of Bert made Ignacio’s original site a much-imitated cult phenomenon.

The voyage of this collage from a high school student's website to an anti-American protest poster in the Middle East to a cable television news network and finally back to the Internet provides a good illustration of the ways in which content migrates across media platforms in the modern era. As the collage crossed geographic and cultural boundaries, it grew on both corporate and grassroots media. While this is not the norm for media content, the fact that such a phenomenon is possible illustrates the new directions in which media is headed (Jenkins, 2006).

A cell phone that also takes pictures and video is an example of the convergence of digital photography, digital video, and cellular telephone technologies. An extreme, and currently nonexistent, example of technological convergence would be the so-called black box, which would combine all the functions of previously distinct technology and would be the device through which we'd receive all our news, information, entertainment, and social interaction.

Kinds of Convergence

But **convergence** isn't just limited to technology. Media theorist Henry Jenkins argues that **convergence** isn't an end result (as is the hypothetical black box), but instead a process that changes how media is both consumed and produced. Jenkins breaks **convergence** down into five categories:

1. *Economic convergence* occurs when a company controls several products or services within the same industry. For example, in the entertainment industry a single company may have interests across many kinds of media. For example, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation is involved in book publishing (HarperCollins), newspapers (New York Post, The Wall Street Journal), sports (Colorado Rockies), broadcast television (Fox), cable television (FX, National Geographic Channel), film (20th Century Fox), Internet (MySpace), and many other media.
2. *Organic convergence* is what happens when someone is watching a television show online while exchanging text messages with a friend and also listening to music in the background—the “natural” outcome of a diverse media world.
3. *Cultural convergence* has several aspects. Stories flowing across several kinds of media platforms is one component—for example, novels that become television series

(True Blood); radio dramas that become comic strips (The Shadow); even amusement park rides that become film franchises (Pirates of the Caribbean). The character Harry Potter exists in books, films, toys, and amusement park rides. Another aspect of cultural convergence is **participatory culture**—that is, the way media consumers are able to annotate, comment on, remix, and otherwise influence culture in unprecedented ways. The video-sharing website YouTube is a prime example of participatory culture. YouTube gives anyone with a video camera and an Internet connection the opportunity to communicate with people around the world and create and shape cultural trends.

4. *Global convergence* is the process of geographically distant cultures influencing one another despite the distance that physically separates them. Nigeria's cinema industry, nicknamed Nollywood, takes its cues from India's Bollywood, which is in turn inspired by Hollywood in the United States. Tom and Jerry cartoons are popular on Arab satellite television channels. Successful American horror movies The Ring and The Grudge are remakes of Japanese hits. The advantage of global convergence is access to a wealth of cultural influence; its downside, some critics posit, is the threat of **cultural imperialism**, defined by Herbert Schiller as the way developing countries are "attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to

correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system” (White, 2001).” **Cultural imperialism**, as a key part of the process of **globalization**, can be a formal policy or can happen more subtly, as with the spread of outside influence through television, movies, and other cultural projects.

5. *Technological convergence* is the merging of technologies such as the ability to watch TV shows online on sites like Hulu or to play video games on mobile phones like the Apple iPhone. When more and more different kinds of media are transformed into digital content, as Jenkins notes, “we expand the potential relationships between them and enable them to flow across platforms (Jenkins, 2001).”



Nigeria's Nollywood produces more films annually than any other country besides India. Attribution: [nigerian VCDs at kwakoe](#) – Paul Keller – CC BY 2.0.

Effects of Convergence

Jenkins's concept of *organic convergence* is perhaps the most telling. To many people, especially those who grew up in a world dominated by so-called old (or “legacy”) media, there is nothing organic about today's media-dominated world. As a New York Times editorial recently opined, “Few objects on the planet are farther removed from nature—less, say, like a rock or an insect—than a glass and stainless steel smartphone (New York Times, 2010).” But modern American culture is plugged in as never before, and today's high school students have never

known a world where the Internet didn't exist. Such a cultural sea change causes a significant generation gap between those who grew up with new media and those who didn't.

A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that Americans aged 8 to 18 spent more than 7.5 hours with electronic devices each day—and, thanks to multitasking, they packed an average of 11 hours of media content into that 7.5 hours (Lewin, 2010). More recent data suggests that 95% of teens report they have access to a smartphone, and 45% of teens claim they are online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). These statistics highlight some of the aspects of the new digital model of media consumption: participation and multitasking. Today's teenagers aren't passively sitting in front of screens, quietly absorbing information. Instead, they are sending text messages to friends, linking news articles on Facebook, commenting on YouTube videos, writing reviews of television episodes to post online, and generally engaging with the culture they consume. Convergence has also made multitasking much easier, as many devices allow users to surf the Internet, listen to music, watch videos, play games, and reply to e-mails on the same machine. It is important to note that high media use is not solely a function of age, even if the type of media use is different: A recent Pew Research article reveals that adults 60 and over spend more than half of their daily leisure time, four hours and 16 minutes, in front of screens, mostly watching TV or videos. Screen time has increased for those in their 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond, and the rise is apparent across gen-

ders and education levels. Meanwhile, the time that these older adults spend on other recreational activities, such as reading or socializing, has ticked down (Livingstone, 2019, para 2)

However, it's still difficult to predict how **media convergence** and **immersion** are affecting culture, society, and individual brains. In his 2005 book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson argues that today's television and video games are mentally stimulating, in that they pose a cognitive challenge and invite active engagement and problem solving. Poking fun at alarmists who see every new technology as making children stupider, Johnson jokingly cautions readers against the dangers of book reading: It "chronically understimulates the senses" and is "tragically isolating." Even worse, books "follow a fixed linear path. You can't control their narratives in any fashion—you simply sit back and have the story dictated to you.... This risks instilling a general passivity in our children, making them feel as though they're powerless to change their circumstances. Reading is not an active, participatory process; it's a submissive one (Johnson, 2005)."

A 2010 book by Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* is more pessimistic. Carr worries that the vast array of interlinked information available through the Internet is eroding attention spans and making contemporary minds distracted and less capable of deep, thoughtful engagement with complex ideas and arguments. "Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words," Carr reflects ruefully. "Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski (Carr,

2010).” Carr cites neuroscience studies showing that when people try to do two things at once, they give less attention to each and perform the tasks less carefully. In other words, multitasking makes us do a greater number of things poorly. Whatever the ultimate cognitive, social, or technological results, **convergence** is changing the way we relate to media today.

Video Killed the Radio Star: Convergence Kills Off Obsolete Technology—or Does It?

When was the last time you used a rotary phone? How about a street-side pay phone? Or a library’s card catalog? When you need brief, factual information, when was the last time you reached for a volume of Encyclopedia Britannica? Odds are it’s been a while. All of these habits, formerly common parts of daily life, have been rendered essentially obsolete through the progression of convergence.

But convergence hasn’t erased old technologies; instead, it may have just altered the way we use

them. Take cassette tapes and Polaroid film, for example. Influential musician Thurston Moore of the band Sonic Youth recently claimed that he only listens to music on cassette. Polaroid Corporation, creators of the once-popular instant-film cameras, was driven out of business by digital photography in 2008, only to be revived 2 years later—with pop star Lady Gaga as the brand's creative director. Several Apple iPhone apps allow users to apply effects to photos to make them look more like a Polaroid photo.

Cassettes, Polaroid cameras, and other seemingly obsolete technologies have been able to thrive—albeit in niche markets—both despite and because of Internet culture. Instead of being slick and digitized, cassette tapes and Polaroid photos are physical objects that are made more accessible and more human, according to enthusiasts, because of their flaws. “I think there’s a group of people—fans and artists alike—out there to whom music is more than just a file on your computer, more than just a folder of MP3s,” says Brad Rose, founder of a Tulsa, Oklahoma-based cassette label (Hogan, 2010). The distinctive Polaroid look—caused by uneven color

saturation, underdevelopment or overdevelopment, or just daily atmospheric effects on the developing photograph—is emphatically analog. In an age of high resolution, portable printers, and camera phones, the Polaroid’s appeal to some has something to do with ideas of nostalgia and authenticity. Convergence has transformed who uses these media and for what purposes, but it hasn’t eliminated these media.

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1.5 CULTURAL PERIODS

Cultural Periods		
Modern Era	Early Modern Period (late 1400s–1700s)	Began with Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the movable type printing press; characterized by improved transportation, educational reform, and scientific inquiry.
	Late Modern Period (1700s–1900s)	Sparked by the Industrial Revolution; characterized by technical innovations, increasingly secular politics, and urbanization.
Postmodern Age (1950s–present)	Marked by skepticism, self-consciousness, celebration of differences, and the digitalization of culture.	

After exploring the ways technology, **culture**, and **mass media** have affected one another over the years, it may also be helpful to look at recent cultural eras more broadly. A cultural period is a time marked by a particular way of understanding the world through culture and technology. Changes in cultural periods are marked by fundamental switches in the way people

perceive and understand the world. In the Middle Ages, truth was dictated by authorities like the king and the church. During the Renaissance, people turned to the scientific method as a way to reach truth through reason. And, in 2008, *Wired* magazine's editor in chief proclaimed that Google was about to render the scientific method obsolete (Anderson, 2008). In each of these cases, it wasn't that the nature of truth changed, but the way humans attempted to make sense of a world that was radically changing. For the purpose of studying culture and mass media, the post-Gutenberg modern and postmodern ages are the most relevant ones to explore. As you read this, consider the role that technology plays in changes in society and culture. Is ***technological determinism*** – the idea that technological changes and developments are responsible for social upheavals and change – at play or is the influence of technology more limited in these changes?

The Modern Age

The **Modern Age**, or modernity, is the postmedieval era, a wide span of time marked in part by technological innovations, urbanization, scientific discoveries, and globalization. The Modern Age is generally split into two parts: the early and the late modern periods.

The *early modern period* began with Gutenberg's invention of the movable type printing press in the late 15th century and

ended in the late 18th century. Thanks to Gutenberg's press, the European population of the early modern period saw rising literacy rates, which led to educational reform. As noted in preceding sections, Gutenberg's machine also greatly enabled the spread of knowledge and, in turn, spurred the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. During the early modern period, transportation improved, politics became more secularized, capitalism spread, nation-states grew more powerful, and information became more widely accessible. Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationalism, and faith in scientific inquiry slowly began to replace the previously dominant authorities of king and church.

Huge political, social, and economic changes marked the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the *late modern period*. The Industrial Revolution, which began in England around 1750, combined with the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, marked the beginning of massive changes in the world.

The French and American revolutions were inspired by a rejection of monarchy in favor of national sovereignty and representative democracy. Both revolutions also heralded the rise of secular society as opposed to church-based authority systems. Democracy was well suited to the so-called Age of Reason, with its ideals of individual rights and progress.

Though less political, the Industrial Revolution had equally far-reaching consequences. It did not merely change the way goods were produced—it also fundamentally changed the eco-

nomic, social, and cultural framework of its time. The Industrial Revolution doesn't have clear start or end dates. However, during the 19th century, several crucial inventions—the internal combustion engine, steam-powered ships, and railways, among others—led to innovations in various industries. Steam power and machine tools increased production dramatically. But some of the biggest changes coming out of the Industrial Revolution were social in character. An economy based on manufacturing instead of agriculture meant that more people moved to cities, where techniques of mass production led people to value efficiency both in and out of the factory. Newly urbanized factory laborers could no longer produce their own food, clothing, or supplies, and instead turned to consumer goods. Increased production led to increases in wealth, though income inequalities between classes also started to grow.

These overwhelming changes affected (and were affected by) the media. As noted in preceding sections, the fusing of steam power and the printing press enabled the explosive expansion of books and newspapers. Literacy rates rose, as did support for public participation in politics. More and more people lived in the city, had an education, got their news from the newspaper, spent their wages on consumer goods, and identified as citizens of an industrialized nation. Urbanization, mass literacy, and new forms of mass media contributed to a sense of mass culture that united people across regional, social, and cultural boundaries.

Modernity and the Modern Age, it should be noted, are

distinct from (but related to) the cultural movement of modernism. The Modern Era lasted from the end of the Middle Ages to the middle of the 20th century; modernism, however, refers to the artistic movement of late 19th and early 20th centuries that arose from the widespread changes that swept the world during that period. Most notably, modernism questioned the limitations of traditional forms of art and culture. Modernist art was in part a reaction against the Enlightenment's certainty of progress and rationality. It celebrated subjectivity through abstraction, experimentalism, surrealism, and sometimes pessimism or even nihilism. Prominent examples of modernist works include James Joyce's stream-of-consciousness novels, cubist paintings by Pablo Picasso, atonal compositions by Claude Debussy, and absurdist plays by Luigi Pirandello.

The Postmodern Age

Modernism can also be seen as a transitional phase between the modern and postmodern eras. While the exact definition and dates of the **Postmodern Age** are still being debated by cultural theorists and philosophers, the general consensus is that the Postmodern Age began during the second half of the 20th century and was marked by skepticism, self-consciousness, celebration of difference, and the reappraisal of modern conventions. The Modern Age took for granted scientific rationalism,

the autonomous self, and the inevitability of progress; the Postmodern Age questioned or dismissed many of these assumptions. If the Modern Age valued order, reason, stability, and absolute truth, the Postmodern Age reveled in contingency, fragmentation, and instability. The effect of technology on culture, the rise of the Internet, and the Cold War are all aspects that led to the Postmodern Age.

The belief in objective truth that characterized the Modern Age is one of the major assumptions overturned in the Postmodern Age. Postmodernists instead took their cues from Erwin Schrödinger, the quantum physicist who famously devised a thought experiment in which a cat is placed inside a sealed box with a small amount of radiation that may or may not kill it. While the box remains sealed, Schrödinger proclaimed, the cat exists simultaneously in both states, dead and alive. Both potential states are equally true. Although the thought experiment was devised to explore issues in quantum physics, it appealed to postmodernists in its assertion of radical uncertainty. Rather than there being an absolute objective truth accessible by rational experimentation, the status of reality was contingent and depended on the observer.

This value of the relative over the absolute found its literary equivalent in the movement of deconstruction. While Victorian novelists took pains to make their books seem more realistic, postmodern narratives distrusted professions of reality and constantly reminded readers of the artificial nature of the story they were reading. The emphasis was not on the all-

knowing author, but instead on the reader. For the postmodernists, meaning was not injected into a work by its creator, but depended on the reader's subjective experience of the work. The poetry of Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg exemplify this, as much of their work is emotionally charged and designed to create a dialogue with the reader, oftentimes forcing the reader to confront controversial issues such as mental illness or homosexuality.

Another way the Postmodern Age differed from the Modern Age was in the rejection of what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard deemed “grand narratives.” The Modern Age was marked by different large-scale theories that attempted to explain the totality of human experience, such as capitalism, Marxism, rationalism, Freudianism, Darwinism, fascism, and so on. However, increasing globalization and the rise of subcultures called into question the sorts of theories that claimed to explain everything at once. Totalitarian regimes during the 20th century, such as Adolf Hitler's Third Reich and the USSR under Joseph Stalin, led to a mistrust of power and the systems held up by power. The Postmodern Age, Lyotard theorized, was one of micro-narratives instead of grand narratives—that is, a multiplicity of small, localized understandings of the world, none of which can claim an ultimate or absolute truth. An older man in Kenya, for example, does not view the world in the same way as a young woman from New York. Even people from the same cultural backgrounds have different views of the world—when you were a teenager, did

your parents understand your way of thinking? The diversity of human experience is a marked feature of the postmodern world. As Lyotard noted, “Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture; one listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games (Lyotard, 1984).”

Postmodernists also mistrusted the idea of originality and freely borrowed across cultures and genres. William S. Burroughs gleefully proclaimed a sort of call to arms for his generation of writers in 1985: “Out of the closets and into the museums, libraries, architectural monuments, concert halls, bookstores, recording studios and film studios of the world. Everything belongs to the inspired and dedicated thief (Burroughs, 1993).” The feminist artist Barbara Kruger, for example, creates works of art from old advertisements, and writers, such as Kathy Acker, reconstructed existing texts to form new stories. The rejection of traditional forms of art and expression embody the Postmodern Age.

From the early Modern Age through the Postmodern Age, people have experienced the world in vastly different ways. Not only has technology rapidly become more complex, but culture itself has changed with the times. When reading further, it’s important to remember that forms of media and culture are hallmarks of different eras, and the different ways in which

media are presented often tell us a lot about the culture and times.

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1.6 MASS MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Burroughs's jubilant call to bring art "out of the closets and into the museums" spoke to postmodernism's willingness to meld high and low culture (Leonard, 1997). And although the Postmodern Age specifically embraced **popular culture**, mass media and pop culture have been entwined from their very beginnings. In fact, mass media often determines what does and does not make up the pop culture scene. How to define popular culture? A useful starting point is to relate it to the concept of culture. While we defined culture earlier in this book as "the shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices that characterize, organize, and stabilize a social group, organization, or institution," here the definition can be expanded, where culture provides "a means or organizing and stabilizing communal life and everyday activities through specific beliefs, rituals, rites, performances, art forms, language, clothing, food, music, dance, and other human expressive, intellectual, and communicative pursuits.....associated with a group of people at a particular period of time" (Danesi, 2018, p. 2). Danesi's definition is more expansive, in the process embedding media and technology into the concept of culture to permit a view of popular culture that is "populist, unpredictable, and

ephemeral, reflecting the ever-changing tastes of one generation after another” and created in a “open social forum” (p. 4).

Tastemakers

Historically, mass pop culture has been fostered by an active and tastemaking mass media that introduces and encourages the adoption of certain trends. Although they are similar in some ways to the widespread media gatekeepers discussed in Section 1.4.3 “Gatekeepers”, **tastemakers** differ in that they are most influential when the mass media is relatively small and concentrated. When only a few publications or programs reach millions of people, their writers and editors are highly influential. The New York Times’s restaurant reviews used to be able to make a restaurant successful or unsuccessful through granting (or withdrawing) its rating.

Or take the example of Ed Sullivan’s variety show, which ran from 1948 to 1971, and is most famous for hosting the first U.S. appearance of the Beatles—a television event that was at the time the most-watched TV program ever. Sullivan hosted musical acts, comedians, actors, and dancers and had the reputation of being able to turn an act on the cusp of fame into full-fledged stars. Comedian Jackie Mason compared being on The Ed Sullivan Show to “an opera singer being at the Met. Or if a guy is an architect that makes the Empire State Building....This was the biggest (Leonard, 1997).” Sullivan was a

classic example of an influential tastemaker of his time. A more modern example is Oprah Winfrey, whose book club endorsements often send literature, including old classics like Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, skyrocketing to the top of *The New York Times* Best Sellers list.



For Elvis Presley's third appearance on The Ed Sullivan show, he was shown only from the waist up; Sullivan considered his dancing too scandalous for family viewing. [Elvis Presley Promoting Jailhouse Rock](#) – public domain.

Along with encouraging a **mass audience** to see (or skip) cer-

tain movies, television shows, video games, books, or fashion trends, people use tastemaking to create demand for new products. Companies often turn to advertising firms to help create public hunger for an object that may have not even existed 6 months before. In the 1880s, when George Eastman developed the Kodak camera for personal use, photography was most practiced by professionals. “Though the Kodak was relatively cheap and easy to use, most Americans didn’t see the need for a camera; they had no sense that there was any value in visually documenting their lives,” noted New Yorker writer James Surowiecki (Surowiecki, 2003). Kodak became a wildly successful company not because Eastman was good at selling cameras, but because he understood that what he really had to sell was photography. Apple Inc. is a modern master of this technique. By leaking just enough information about a new product to cause curiosity, the technology company ensures that people will be waiting excitedly for an official release.

Tastemakers help keep culture vital by introducing the public to new ideas, music, programs, or products, but tastemakers are not immune to outside influence. In the traditional media model, large media companies set aside large advertising budgets to promote their most promising projects; tastemakers buzz about “the next big thing,” and obscure or niche works can get lost in the shuffle.

A Changing System for the

Internet Age

In retrospect, the 20th century was a tastemaker's dream. Advertisers, critics, and other cultural influencers had access to huge audiences through a number of mass-communication platforms. However, by the end of the century, the rise of cable television and the Internet had begun to make tastemaking a more complicated enterprise. While *The Ed Sullivan Show* regularly reached 50 million people in the 1960s, the most popular television series of 2009—*American Idol*—averaged around 25.5 million viewers per night, despite the fact that the 21st-century United States could claim more people and more television sets than ever before (Wikipedia, 2012). However, the proliferation of TV channels and other competing forms of entertainment meant that no one program or channel could dominate the attention of the American public as in Sullivan's day.

Viewings of Popular Television Broadcasts

Show/Episode	Number of Viewers	Percent of Households	Year
The Ed Sullivan Show / The Beatles' first appearance	73 million	45.1%	1964
The Ed Sullivan Show / Elvis Presley's first appearance	60 million	82.6%	1956
I Love Lucy / "Lucy Goes to the Hospital"	44 million	71.7%	1953
M*A*S*H / Series finale	106 million	60.2%	1983
Seinfeld / Series finale	76 million	41.3%	1998
American Idol / Season 5 finale	36 million	17%	2006

Meanwhile, a low-tech home recording of a little boy acting loopy after a visit to the dentist ("David After Dentist") garnered more than 37 million YouTube viewings in 2009 alone. The Internet appears to be eroding some of the tastemaking power of the traditional media outlets. No longer is the traditional mass media the only dominant force in creating and promoting trends. Instead, information spreads across the globe without the active involvement of traditional mass media. Websites made by nonprofessionals can reach more people daily than a major newspaper. Music review sites such as Pitchfork keep their eyes out for the next big thing, whereas review aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes allow readers to read hun-

dreds of movie reviews by amateurs and professionals alike. Blogs make it possible for anyone with Internet access to potentially reach an audience of millions. Some popular bloggers have transitioned from the traditional media world to the digital world, but others have become well known without formal institutional support. The celebrity-gossip chronicler Perez Hilton had no formal training in journalism when he started his blog, PerezHilton.com, in 2005; within a few years, he was reaching millions of readers a month.

E-mail and text messages allow people to transmit messages almost instantly across vast geographic expanses. Although personal communications continue to dominate, e-mail and text messages are increasingly used to directly transmit information about important news events. When Barack Obama wanted to announce his selection of Joe Biden as his vice-presidential running mate in the 2008 election, he bypassed the traditional televised press conference and instead sent the news to his supporters directly via text message—2.9 million text messages, to be exact (Covey). Social networking sites, such as Facebook, and microblogging services, such as **Twitter**, are another source of late-breaking information. When Michael Jackson died of cardiac arrest in 2009, “RIP Michael Jackson” was a top trending topic on Twitter before the first mainstream media first reported the news.

Thanks to these and other digital-age media, the Internet has become a pop culture force, both a source of amateur talent and a source of amateur promotion. However, tradi-

tional media outlets still maintain a large amount of control and influence over U.S. pop culture. One key indicator is the fact that many singers or writers who first make their mark on the Internet quickly transition to more traditional media—YouTube star Justin Bieber was signed by a mainstream record company, and blogger Perez Hilton is regularly featured on MTV and VH1. New-media stars are quickly absorbed into the old-media landscape.

Getting Around the Gatekeepers

Not only does the Internet give untrained individuals access to a huge audience for their art or opinions, but it also allows content creators to reach fans directly. Projects that may not have succeeded through traditional mass media may get a second chance through newer media. The profit-driven media establishment has been surprised by the success of some self-published books. For example, dozens of literary agents rejected first-time author Daniel Suarez's novel *Daemon* before he decided to self-publish in 2006. Through savvy self-promotion through influential bloggers, Suarez garnered enough attention to land a contract with a major publishing house.



E-readers offer authors a way to get around the traditional publishing industry, but their thousands of options can make choosing hard on readers. [Some ereaders](#) by vainaimoinen – public domain.

Suarez’s story, though certainly exceptional, reaches some of the questions facing creators and consumers of pop culture in the Internet age. Without the influence of an agent, editor, or PR company, self-published content may be able to hew closer to the creator’s intention. However, much of the detailed marketing work must be performed by the work’s creator instead of by a specialized public relations team. And with so many self-published, self-promoted works uploaded to the Internet every day, it’s easy for things—even good things—to get lost in the shuffle.

Critic Laura Miller spells out some of the ways in which writers in particular can take control of their own publishing:

“Writers can upload their works to services run by Amazon, Apple and... Barnes & Noble, transforming them into e-books that are instantly available in high-profile online stores. Or they can post them on services like Urbis.com, Quillp.com, or CompletelyNovel.com and coax reviews from other hopeful users (Miller, 2010).” Miller also points out that many of these companies can produce hard copies of books as well. While such a system may be a boon for writers who haven’t had success with the traditional media establishment, Miller notes that it may not be the best option for readers, who “rarely complain that there isn’t enough of a selection on Amazon or in their local superstore; they’re more likely to ask for help in narrowing down their choices (Miller, 2010).”

The question remains: Will the Internet era be marked by a huge and diffuse pop culture, where the power of traditional mass media declines and, along with it, the power of the universalizing blockbuster hit? Or will the Internet create a new set of tastemakers—influential bloggers—or even serve as a platform for the old tastemakers to take on new forms?

Democratizing Tastemaking

In 1993, *The New York Times* restaurant critic

Ruth Reichl wrote a review about her experiences at the upscale Manhattan restaurant Le Cirque. She detailed the poor service she received when the restaurant staff did not know her and the excellent service she received when they realized she was a professional food critic. Her article illustrated how the power to publish reviews could affect a person's experience at a restaurant. The Internet, which turned everyone with the time and interest into a potential reviewer, allowed those ordinary people to have their voices heard. In the mid-2000s, websites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor boasted hundreds of reviews of restaurants, hotels, and salons provided by users. Amazon allows users to review any product it sells, from textbooks to bathing suits. The era of the democratized review had come, and tastemaking was now everyone's job.

By **crowdsourcing** (harnessing the efforts of a number of individuals online to solve a problem) the review process, the idea was, these sites would arrive at a more accurate description of the service in choice. One powerful reviewer would no longer be able to wield disproportionate power; instead, the wisdom of the crowd

would make or break restaurants, movies, and everything else. Anyone who felt treated badly or scammed now had recourse to tell the world about it. By 2008, Yelp had 4 million reviews

However, mass tastemaking isn't as perfect as some people had promised. Certain reviewers can overly influence a product's overall rating by contributing multiple votes. One study found that a handful of Amazon users were casting hundreds of votes, while most rarely wrote reviews at all. Online reviews also tend to skew to extremes—more reviews are written by the ecstatic and the furious, while the moderately pleased aren't riled up enough to post online about their experiences. And while traditional critics are supposed to adhere to ethical standards, there's no such standard for online reviews. Savvy authors or restaurant owners have been known to slyly insert positive reviews or attempt to skew ratings systems. To get an accurate picture, potential buyers may find themselves wading through 20 or 30 online reviews, most of them from nonprofessionals. And sometimes those people aren't professionals for a reason. Consider these user reviews on

Amazon of William Shakespeare's Hamlet: "There is really no point and it's really long," "I really didn't enjoy reading this book and I wish that our English teacher wouldn't force my class to read this play," and "don't know what Willy Shakespeare was thinking when he wrote this one play tragedy, but I thought this sure was boring! Hamlet does too much talking and not enough stuff." While some may argue that these are valid criticisms of the play, these comments are certainly a far cry from the thoughtful critique of a professional literary critic.

These and other issues underscore the point of having reviews in the first place—that it's an advantage to have certain places, products, or ideas examined and critiqued by a trusted and knowledgeable source. In an article about Yelp, The New York Times noted that one of the site's elite reviewers had racked up more than 300 reviews in 3 years, and then pointed out that "By contrast, a New York Times restaurant critic might take six years to amass 300 reviews. The critic visits a restaurant several times, strives for anonymity and tries to sample every dish on the menu (McNeil, 2008)." Whatever your vantage

point, it's clear that old-style tastemaking is still around and still valuable—but the democratic review is here to stay.

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1.7 MEDIA LITERACY

In Gutenberg’s age and the subsequent modern era, literacy—the ability to read and write—was a concern not only of educators, but also of politicians, social reformers, and philosophers. A literate population, many reasoned, would be able to seek out information, stay informed about the news of the day, communicate effectively, and make informed decisions in many spheres of life. Because of this, literate people made better citizens, parents, and workers. Several centuries later, as global literacy rates continued to grow, there was a new sense that merely being able to read and write was not enough. In a media-saturated world, individuals needed to be able to sort through and analyze the information they were bombarded with every day. In the second half of the 20th century, the skill of being able to decode and process the messages and symbols transmitted via media was named **media literacy**. According to the nonprofit National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), a person who is media literate can access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information. Put another way by John Culkin, a pioneering advocate for media literacy education, “The new mass media—film, radio, TV—are new languages, their grammar as yet unknown (Moody, 1993).” Media literacy seeks to give media consumers

the ability to understand this new language. The following are questions asked by those who demonstrate media literacy:

1. Who created the message?
2. What are the author's credentials?
3. Why was the message created?
4. Is the message trying to get me to act or think in a certain way?
5. Is someone making money for creating this message?
6. Who is the intended audience?
7. How do I know this information is accurate?

Why Be Media Literate?

Culkin called the pervasiveness of media “the unnoticed fact of our present,” noting that media information was as omnipresent and easy to overlook as the air we breathe (and, he noted, “some would add that it is just as polluted”) (Moody, 1993). Our exposure to media starts early—a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 68 percent of children ages 2 and younger spend an average of 2 hours in front of a screen (either computer or television) each day, while children under 6 spend as much time in front of a screen as they do playing outside (Lewin). Almost half of U.S. teenagers report spending almost all of their time online. Media literacy isn't merely a skill young people need to acquire, however. Today's

Americans get much of their information from various media sources—but not all that information is created equal. One crucial role of media literacy education is to enable us to skeptically examine the often-conflicting media messages we receive every day. Thus, learning how to be media literate encourages critical thinking, enables understanding of different perspectives and viewpoints, fosters the ability to “decode” messages from Hollywood and the advertising industry, and create media with an eye for social change and social justice.

Advertising

Many of the hours people spend with media are with commercial-sponsored content. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) estimated that each child aged 2 to 11 saw, on average, 25,629 television commercials in 2004 alone, or more than 10,700 minutes of ads. Each adult saw, on average, 52,469 ads, or about 15.5 days’ worth of television advertising (Holt, 2007). Children (and adults) are bombarded with contradictory messages—newspaper articles about the obesity epidemic run side by side with ads touting soda, candy, and fast food. The American Academy of Pediatrics maintains that advertising directed to children under 8 is “inherently deceptive” and exploitative because young children can’t tell the difference between programs and commercials (Shifrin, 2005). Advertising often uses techniques of psychological pressure to influ-

ence decision making. Ads may appeal to vanity, insecurity, prejudice, fear, or the desire for adventure. This is not always done to sell a product—antismoking public service announcements may rely on disgusting images of blackened lungs to shock viewers. Nonetheless, media literacy involves teaching people to be guarded consumers and to evaluate claims with a critical eye.

Bias, Spin, and Misinformation

Advertisements may have the explicit goal of selling a product or idea, but they're not the only kind of media message with an agenda. A politician may hope to persuade potential voters that he has their best interests at heart. An ostensibly objective journalist may allow her political leanings to subtly slant her articles. Magazine writers might avoid criticizing companies that advertise heavily in their pages. News reporters may sensationalize stories to boost ratings—and advertising rates.

Mass-communication messages are created by individuals, and each individual has his or her own set of values, assumptions, and priorities. Accepting media messages at face value could lead to confusion because of all the contradictory information available. For example, in 2010, a highly contested governor's race in New Mexico led to conflicting ads from both candidates, Diane Denish and Susana Martinez, each claiming that the other agreed to policies that benefited sex offenders.

According to media watchdog site [FactCheck.org](https://www.factcheck.org), the Danish team's ad "shows a preteen girl—seemingly about 9 years old—going down a playground slide in slow-motion, while ominous music plays in the background and an announcer discusses two sex crime cases. It ends with an empty swing, as the announcer says: 'Today we don't know where these sex offenders are lurking, because Susana Martinez didn't do her job.'" The opposing ad proclaims that "a department in Danish's cabinet gave sanctuary to criminal illegals, like child molester Juan Gonzalez (Robertson & Kiely, 2010)." Both claims are highly inflammatory, play on fear, and distort the reality behind each situation. Media literacy involves educating people to look critically at these and other media messages and to sift through various messages and make sense of the conflicting information we face every day.

New Skills for a New World

In the past, one goal of education was to provide students with the information deemed necessary to successfully engage with the world. Students memorized multiplication tables, state capitals, famous poems, and notable dates. Today, however, vast amounts of information are available at the click of a mouse. Even before the advent of the Internet, noted communications scholar David Berlo foresaw the consequences of expanding information technology: "Most of what we have

called formal education has been intended to imprint on the human mind all of the information that we might need for a lifetime.” Changes in technology necessitate changes in how we learn, Berlo noted, and these days “education needs to be geared toward the handling of data rather than the accumulation of data (Shaw, 2003).”

Wikipedia, a hugely popular Internet encyclopedia, is at the forefront of the debate on the proper use of online sources. In 2007, Middlebury College banned the use of *Wikipedia* as a source in history papers and exams. One of the school’s librarians noted that the online encyclopedia “symbolizes the best and worst of the Internet. It’s the best because everyone gets his/her say and can state their views. It’s the worst because people who use it uncritically take for truth what is only opinion (Byers, 2007).” Or, as comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert put it, “Any user can change any entry, and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true (Colbert, 2006).” A computer registered to the U.S. Democratic Party changed the Wikipedia page for Rush Limbaugh to proclaim that he was “racist” and a “bigot,” and a person working for the electronic voting machine manufacturer Diebold was found to have erased paragraphs connecting the company to Republican campaign funds (Fildes, 2007). Media literacy teaches today’s students how to sort through the Internet’s cloud of data, locate reliable sources, and identify bias and unreliable sources.

Individual Accountability and Popular Culture

Ultimately, media literacy involves teaching that images are constructed with various aims in mind and that it falls to the individual to evaluate and interpret these media messages. Mass communication may be created and disseminated by individuals, businesses, governments, or organizations, but it is always received by an individual. Education, life experience, and a host of other factors make each person interpret constructed media in different ways; there is no correct way to interpret a media message. But on the whole, better media literacy skills help us function better in our media-rich environment, enabling us to be better democratic citizens, smarter shoppers, and more skeptical media consumers. When analyzing media messages, consider the following:

1. **Author:** Consider who is presenting the information. Is it a news organization, a corporation, or an individual? What links do they have to the information they are providing? A news station might be owned by the company it is reporting on; likewise, an individual might have financial reasons for supporting a certain message.
2. **Format:** Television and print media often use images to grab people's attention. Do the visuals only present one side of the story? Is the footage overly graphic or

- designed to provoke a specific reaction? Which celebrities or professionals are endorsing this message?
3. Audience: Imagine yourself in another's shoes. Would someone of the opposite gender feel the same way as you do about this message? How might someone of a different race or nationality feel about it? How might an older or younger person interpret this information differently? Was this message made to appeal to a specific audience?
 4. Content: Even content providers that try to present information objectively can have an unconscious slant. Analyze who is presenting this message. Does he or she have any clear political affiliations? Is he or she being paid to speak or write this information? What unconscious influences might be at work?
 5. Purpose: Nothing is communicated by mass media without a reason. What reaction is the message trying to provoke? Are you being told to feel or act a certain way? Examine the information closely and look for possible hidden agendas.

With these considerations as a jumping-off place, we can ensure that we're staying informed about where our information comes from and why it is being sent—important steps in any media literacy education (Center for Media Literacy).

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MEDIA FUNCTIONS AND FIRMS

MEDIA, SOCIETY, CULTURE AND YOU

“Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication.” — John Dewey in *Democracy and Education*, 1916

The purpose of this chapter is to define media, society and culture broadly. Additionally, the term “communication” is defined in its many forms. Chapters 2 and 3 deal with communication theory in more detail. Digital culture is covered in depth in Chapter 2. We will discuss media literacy and media studies in Chapter 3, but we have to learn to walk before we run, as the saying goes.

The Role of Mass Media in Society

More than one hundred years ago, John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* that society is not only supported by various forms of communication but also enveloped in communication. Dewey reiterated what philosophers and scholars had noted for centuries: small groups, larger commu-

nities and vast institutions — all the things that make up a [society](#) — function in relation to how communication flows within and between groups.

There are different forms of communication. At the broadest level, [communication](#) is an exchange of meaning between people using symbols. The most common symbols we use are verbal and written words, but there are also many forms of nonverbal communication such as American Sign Language. What sign language, verbal communication and written communication have in common is the use of abstract symbols to convey meaning. Whether you say “thank you” in face-to-face communication, send someone a card with the words “thank you” written on it, or [use nonverbal cues to express thanks](#), the meaning is the same.



A boy smiles as he stands next to a Christmas tree.

[Interpersonal communication](#) generally refers to the exchange of meaning between two or more people on a personal, often one-on-one, level. Interpersonal communication can be verbal or nonverbal. Most often, it happens in face-to-

face settings. It differs from [mass communication](#), which involves sharing meaning through symbolic messages to a wide audience from one source to many receivers. Sometimes, particularly in [computer-mediated communication](#), messages

conveyed using computers, it can be difficult to tell the difference between interpersonal communication and mass communication because individuals can send messages intended only for other individuals that might quickly reach large numbers of people. Social media platforms are often structured in ways that allow interpersonal messages to “go viral” and become mass messages whether the original sender intended to address a mass audience or not.

It is not the type of message that determines interpersonal or mass communication. It is the way the message is distributed and the relationships between sender and receiver(s). This text will continue to grapple with the overlap of interpersonal communication and mass communication structures on networked communication platforms, but first, another form of communication commonly studied in academic settings should be introduced.

Organizational communication is the symbolic exchange of messages carrying specific meaning for members belonging to formal organizations. In practical terms, it is the internal communication that helps governments, businesses, schools and hospitals to run.

People working together in organizations get usually things done by communicating directly with one another or in small groups. Organizations cannot function without communication. Organizational communication effectiveness can influence the success or failure of businesses and other social institutions. Thus, communication does not merely happen

within organizations; it is an essential part of the way they are structured. Organizational communication is a [separate field of study, introduced well in this YouTube video](#).

Successful communication, whether intended for personal use, for use within an organization, or for a wide audience, can help people to understand each other and to get things done.

If good organizational communication is necessary for groups to function with a formal purpose, mass communication is essential for societies to function. Societies are made up of formal organizations of various sizes. Usually, the larger the group, the more complex its communication structures.

[Communication structure](#) refers to a combination of information and communication technologies (ICTs), guidelines for using those technologies, and professional workers dedicated to managing information and messages. In the mass communication field, communication structures are more than computers and transmission networks. The guidelines for using networks to create and distribute messages for mass consumption are a matter of corporate policy as well as law.

It has been noted that a society is made up of small groups, larger communities, and vast institutions. A more complete definition of the term comes from the field of sociology. A [society](#) is a very large group of people organized into institutions held together over time through formalized relationships. Nations, for example, are made up of formal institutions organized by law. Governments of different size, economic

institutions, educational institutions and others all come together to form a society.

By comparison, **culture** — the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of groups large and small — is not necessarily formalized. Culture is necessary for enjoying and making sense of the human experience, but there are few formalized rules governing culture.

Mass communication influences both society and culture. Different societies have different media systems, and the way they are set up by law influences how the society works. Different forms of communication, including messages in the mass media, give shape and structure to society. Additionally, mass media outlets can spread cultural knowledge and artistic works around the globe. People exercise cultural preferences when it comes to consuming media, but mass media corporations often decide which stories to tell and which to promote, particularly when it comes to forms of mass media that are costly to produce such as major motion pictures, major video game releases and global news products.

More than any other, the field of mass communication transmits culture. At the same time, it helps institutional society try to understand itself and whether its structures are working.

The Mass Media Dynamic

The mass media system is an institution itself. What sets it

apart is its potential to influence the thinking of massive numbers of individuals. In fact, the ideas exchanged in organizational communication and interpersonal communication are often established, reinforced or negated by messages in the mass media. This is what it means for societies “to exist in transmission, in communication.” Different types of communication influence each other.

But the mass media are also shaped and influenced by social groups and institutions. This is the nature of the mass media dynamic.

Individuals and groups in society influence what mass media organizations produce through their creativity on the input side and their consumption habits on the output side. It is not accurate to say that society exists within the mass media or under mass media “control.” Social structures are too powerful for mass media to completely govern how they operate. But neither is it accurate to say that the mass media are contained within societies. Many mass media products transcend social structures to influence multiple societies, and even in societies that heavily censor their mass media the news of scandals and corruption can get out. The mass media and society are bound together and shape each other.

Almost everything you read, see and hear is framed within a mass media context; however, mere familiarity is no guarantee of success. Products in the mass media that fail to resonate with audiences do not last long, even if they seem in tune with current tastes and trends.

The Mass Communication Origin Story

In his book, John notes how, in the early 20th century, the mass media were beginning to connect large institutions in new ways. The production of mass media messages accelerated with the development of the telegraph and the popular newspaper. The spread of telegraph technology that began in the mid-1800s continued through the early 1900s to network the globe with a nearly instantaneous information transmission system. Much of the growth of newspapers occurred as a result of improvements in telegraph technology.

Thus, a primary function of the global mass communication system is to save time. People have a need to understand what is going on in the world, and they desire entertainment. Global electronic telecommunication networks collapse space by transmitting messages in much less time than the older, physical delivery systems.

The dynamic between society and mass media that is so prevalent today developed throughout the 20th century. Starting near the

end of the 1800s, communication flows began to move at electronic speeds. More people knew *about* more things than ever before, but scholars are quick to point out that communication is not synonymous with understanding.

Dewey wanted to focus on educating people so that they could live and work well in societies heavily shaped by global telecommunication networks. For him, education was the meaning of life and the global information and communication system needed to be molded into an educational tool.



The television station's webpage at KOMU, a local affiliate owned and operated by the University of Missouri-Columbia, is constantly on display in the newsroom.

Many of us still hold out hope for Dewey's educational goals, but as ICTs have advanced over the past century or two, it has become clear that the mere existence of global mass communication networks does not ensure that societies will learn to coexist and thrive.

This can be difficult for people to acknowledge. Shortly after the widespread dissemination of the [telegraph](#), the [radio](#), broadcast [television](#) and [public internet](#) access, some form of communication utopia was imagined or even expected. The telegraph collapsed space. Radio enabled instantaneous mass communication. Television brought live images from one side of the globe to the other for even larger mass audiences, and internet access gave individuals the power to be information senders, not just receivers. At each step hope and imagination flourished, but social and cultural clashes persisted. Communication systems can be used as weapons. The evolution of mass communication tools is the story of increased capacity to do the same good and evil things people have always done in societies and between them.

Looking beyond technological utopianism — the idea that new technologies (particularly ICTs) will lead to greater social understanding and better conditions for the global population — we are left with a tedious but massively meaningful project. We must find ways to coexist with other societies even as we are constantly aware of our differences and of possible threats that may have existed before but now are much easier to see.

Perhaps if we are to make the best of our digital global com-

munication network, it would help to track the evolution of different forms of mass communication. This text very briefly touched on the continuum from telegraph to widespread internet adoption, but the first mass medium was ink on paper.

The First Mass Medium

The first global medium, besides the spoken word, was neither the internet nor the telegraph. In fact, it was not a mass medium at all. It was paper. Via trade routes, messages in the form of letters moved around the world in a matter of weeks or months. It was global communication, but it was slow.

The development of a global telegraph network made it possible for messages to spread in minutes. When the telegraph was wed to mass-consumed newspapers, the world saw the rise of *fast, global, mass* communication that had the power to potentially influence large groups of people at once.

Books transmitted messages widely and inspired literacy, but they did not establish a channel for consistent, timely communication meant for mass audiences. After the Gutenberg printing press was developed around 1440, the Gutenberg Bible was slowly mass produced and disseminated around the Western world. It opened up access to sacred texts that had been bound up for centuries by large institutions like the Roman Catholic Church, and its dissemination helped fuel the Protestant Reformation. Still, it was an outlier. Most other

books, even those that were mass produced from around the 1500s to the 1800s were not disseminated as widely as the Gutenberg Bible. They were simply too expensive.

Nevertheless, mass literacy slowly paved the way for mass newspaper readership to emerge in the 20th century. After the telegraph was invented and developed for wide-scale use and after the cost of printing newspapers dropped, publishers could share news from around the globe with mass audiences. The newspaper, specifically the penny press, was the first mass medium.



The front page of the Cincinnati Penny Paper from Monday, May 16, 1881. From: George Edward Stevens' article "From Penny Paper to Post and Times-Star: Mr. Scripps' First Link" in the *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* No. 27, 1969, public domain. [The Penny Paper, May 16, 1881](#) – the public domain.

What distinguished the [penny press](#) was affordability. These papers were published in tabloid format, which used small-sized pages and was cheaper to produce. Penny papers were written for and read by working class audiences starting in about the 1830s. They covered all manner of current events. Soon, major institutions such as political parties and unions developed their own papers to cover the topics that suited their agendas

and to promote the cultural values that they held dear.

Mass Media Growth and Consolidation

As mass production of all sorts of manufactured goods grew during the 20th century, so did advertising budgets and the concept of brands. Brand advertising became fuel for the mass media, and as profitability rose, newspapers were bought up and organized into chains throughout the 20th century. Many newspapers grew their audience as they merged.

Partisan papers gave way to a brand of news that strived for objectivity. The profit motive mostly drove the change. To attract a mass audience, newspapers had to represent various points of view. This pushed some of the most opinionated citizens, particularly strong advocates for workers, to the fringes of mass discourse. Some advocates developed alternative media offerings. Others went mostly unheard or plied their craft directly in politics.

At the same, throughout much of the 20th century, the journalism workforce became more professionalized. Professional [norms](#), that is the written and unwritten rules guiding behavior decided on by people in a given field, evolved. Many full-time, paid professional journalists stressed and continue to stress the need to remain detached from the people they cover so that journalists can maintain the practice and appearance of objectivity. Journalists emphasized objectivity in order to remain autonomous and to be perceived as truthful. The norm of objective reporting still strongly influences news coverage in

newspapers as well as on most mainstream radio and television news networks.

That being said, the practice of maintaining objectivity is being called into question in our current hyper-partisan political media environment. Other strategies for demonstrating truthfulness require journalists to be transparent about how they do their work, about who owns their media outlets, and about what investments and personal views they may have. Chapter 9 covers news norms and their evolution in greater detail.

At the heart of the ethical discussion for professional journalists is a sort of battle between the need to be autonomous to cover news accurately with minimal bias and the need to be socially responsible. [Social responsibility](#) in the study of journalism ethics is a specific concept referring to the need for media organizations to be responsible for the possible repercussions of the news they produce. The debate goes on even as more and more platforms for mass communication are developed.

Beyond advancements in ink-on-paper newspapers (including the development of color offset printing), technological developments have contributed to the diversification of mass media products. Photography evolved throughout the 20th century as did motion picture film, radio and television technology. Other mass media presented challenges and competition for newspapers. Still, newspapers were quite a profitable business. They grew to their greatest readership levels in the

middle-to-late 20th century, and their value was at its high point around the turn of the 21st century. Then came the internet.

Stewing in our Own Juices

With the rise of global computer networks, particularly high-speed broadband and mobile communication technologies, individuals gained the ability to publish their own work and to comment on mass media messages more easily than ever before. If mass communication in the 20th century was best characterized as a one-to-many system where publishers and broadcasters reached waiting audiences, the mass media made possible by digital information networks in the twenty-first have taken on a many-to-many format.

For example, YouTube has millions of producers who themselves are also consumers. None of the social media giants such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Qzone and Weibo (in China), Twitter, Reddit or Pinterest is primarily known for producing content. Instead, they provide platforms for users to submit their own content and to share what mass media news and entertainment companies produce. The result is that the process of deciding what people should be interested in is much more decentralized in the digital network mass media environment than it was in the days of an analog one-to-many mass media system.

The process of making meaning in society — that is, the

process of telling many smaller stories that add up to a narrative shared by mass audiences — is now much more collaborative than it was in the 20th century because more people are consuming news in networked platforms than through the channels managed by [gatekeepers](#). A mass media gatekeeper is someone, professional or not, who decides what information to share with mass audiences and what information to leave out.

Fiction or non-fiction, every story leaves something out, and the same is true for shows made up of several stories, such as news broadcasts and heavily edited reality television. Gatekeepers select what mass audiences see, and then edit or disregard the rest. The power of gatekeepers may be diminished in networks where people can decide for themselves what topics they care most about, but there is still an important gatekeeping function in the mass media since much of what is ultimately shared on social media platforms originates in the offices and studios of major media corporations.

On social media platforms, media consumers have the ability to add their input and criticism, and this is an important function for users. Not only do we have a say as audience members in the content we would like to see, read and hear, but we also have an important role to play in society as voting citizens holding their elected officials accountable.

If social media platforms were only filled with mass media content, individual user comments, and their own home-grown content, digitally networked communication would be

complex enough, but there are other forces at work. Rogue individuals, hacker networks and **botnets** — computers programmed to create false social media accounts, websites and other digital properties — can contribute content alongside messages produced by professionals and legitimate online community members. False presences on social media channels can amplify hate and misinformation and can stoke animosity between groups in a hyper-partisan media age.

Around the world, societies have democratized mass communication, but in many ways, agreeing on a shared narrative or even a shared list of facts is more difficult than ever. Users create **filter bubbles** for themselves where they mostly hear the voices and information that they want to hear. This has the potential to create opposing worldviews where users with different viewpoints not only have differing opinions, but they also have in mind completely different sets of facts creating different images about what is happening in the world and how society should operate.

When users feel the need to defend their filtered worldviews, it is quite harmful to society.

De-massification

The infiltration of bots on common platforms is one issue challenging people working in good faith to produce accurate and entertaining content and to make meaning in the mass media. De-massification is another. Professionals working on

mass-market media products now must fight to hold onto mass audiences. [De-massification](#) signifies the breakdown of mass media audiences. As the amount of information being produced and the number of channels on which news and other content can be disseminated grows exponentially, ready-made audiences are in decline.

In the future, it is anticipated that audiences, or fan bases, must be built rather than tapped into. One path to growing audiences in digital networks is to take an extreme point of view. Producers of news and entertainment information on the right and left of the political spectrum often rail against mainstream media as they promote points of view which are more or less biased. This kind of polarization along with the tendency of social media platforms to allow and even encourage people to organize along political lines likely contributes to de-massification as people organize into factions.

The future of some mass communication channels as regular providers of shared meaning for very large audiences is in question. That said, claims that any specific medium is “dead” are overblown. For example, newspaper readership, advertising revenue and employment numbers have been declining for about 25 years, but as of 2018, there are still [more than 30 million newspaper subscribers](#). Mass audiences are shrinking and shifting, but they can still be developed.

Convergence

As mass audiences are breaking up and voices from the fringe are garnering outsized influence, the various types of media (audio, video, text, animation and the industries they are tied to) have come together on global computer and mobile network platforms in a process called [convergence](#).

It is as though all media content is being tossed into a huge stew, one that surrounds and composes societies and cultures, and within this stew of information, people are re-organizing themselves according to the cultural and social concerns they hold most dear.

According to one hypothesis, in a society dominated by digital communication networks, people gather around the information they recognize and want to believe because making sense of the vast amount of information now available is impossible.

This text covers several mass media channels including social media, film, radio, television, music recording and podcasting, digital gaming, news, advertising, public relations and propaganda because these are still viable industries even as the content they produce appears more and more often on converged media platforms.

What we see emerging in networked spaces is a single mass media channel with a spectrum of possible text, photo, audio, video, graphic and game elements; however, the sites of professional production still mostly identify as one particular indus-

try (such as radio and recorded music, film, television, cable television, advertising, PR, digital advertising or social media). Some of these are “legacy” media that have existed as analog industries prior to convergence, while others originated in digital media environments.

For the foreseeable future, we should expect legacy media producers to continue to hold formidable power as elements of larger media conglomerates, which acquired many media companies as a result of industry deregulation. We should also expect audiences to continue to fragment and digital media start-ups trying to build audiences out of fragmented communities to be common even if they are difficult to sustain.

What this means for social structures and for cultural production is disruption, limited perhaps by legacy media traditions and corporate power.

Melding Theories

The world of mass media has witnessed the convergence of media content on digital platforms, the ability of individuals to engage in one-to-many communication as though they were major broadcasters, and the emergence of structures that allow for many-to-many communication. These developments force us to rethink how separate interpersonal, organizational and mass communication truly are.

From a theoretical standpoint, these are well-established approaches to thinking about communication, but in practice,

certain messages might fit into multiple categories. For example, a YouTube video made for a few friends might reach millions if it goes viral. Is it interpersonal communication, mass communication or both? Viral videos and memes spread to vast numbers of people but might start out as in-jokes between internet friends or trolls. The message's original meaning is often lost in this process. In a networked society, it can be difficult to differentiate between interpersonal and mass communication. For our purposes, it will be helpful to consider the message creator's intent.

As a user, it is essential to realize the possibility that interpersonal messages may be shared widely. As professionals, it also helps to realize that you cannot force a message to go viral, although most social media platforms now engage in various kinds of paid promotion where brands and influential users can pay to have their content spread more widely more quickly.



Two women discuss a record album selection in a music shop in Amora, Portugal. Untitled photo by Pedro Ribeiro Simões, [CCBY](#). Source: Flickr.

We must also understand that advertisers treat digital communication platforms much the same way whether they appear to users to be interpersonal or mass media environments. Users can be targeted down to the individual on either type of platform, and advertisers (with the help of platform creators), can access mass audiences, even when users are intending only to participate

on a platform for purposes of interpersonal communication.

Scholars are still working to define how these platforms mix aspects of interpersonal and mass communication. Here is one takeaway: If you are not paying to use a platform like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Google), Instagram or Snapchat, *you* are the product. It is your attention that is being sold to advertisers.

The Big Picture

Society functions when the mass media work well, and we tend not to think about the technologies or the professionals who make it all possible. Interpersonal communication can

function with or without a massive technological apparatus. It is more convenient, though, to be able to text each another. When interpersonal communication breaks down, we have problems in our relationships. When organizational communication breaks down, it creates problems for groups and companies. But when mass communication breaks down, society breaks down.

Cultural Production

There is another way of looking at the mass media that needs to be mentioned after looking in some depth at the structural changes going on in and around the field of mass communication. Mass media channels are also huge engines of cultural production. That is, they make the entertainment that helps us define who we are as large and small groups of people. To quote from *Dead Poets Society*: “We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion. Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.” If you replace “reading and writing poetry” with “creating culture,” you get a sense of the importance of cultural production. We can define culture as a collection of our knowledge, beliefs and practices. In practice, culture is how we express ourselves and enjoy life’s experiences.

In media, there are three main types of cultural works, those associated with “high” culture, popular culture and folk culture. (Some scholars discuss “low” culture, but it is argued here that “low culture” is just another way of describing the low end of pop culture.)

High culture is arguably the best cultural material a society has to offer. Economic class often comes into play in defining what is “high culture” and what is not.

Pop culture is the vast array of cultural products that appeal to the masses.

Folk culture refers to cultural products borne out of everyday life identifiable because they usually have practical uses as well as artistic value. It is often associated with prehistoric cultures, but that is because the folk culture, pop culture and high culture of prehistoric peoples were often one and the same. Their best art may also have been an everyday object like a bowl or a basket or a doll or a mask. Don’t confuse prehistoric art with modern folk art.

Modern folk art has the specific quality of trying to capture what is both beautiful *and useful* in everyday life.

Folk music tends to rely on “traditional” sounds and instruments. Topically, it focuses on the value of everyday existence. Folk music is often built around narratives that carry morals much the same way fairy tales do. Fairy tales are probably the best example of folk literature.

So much of the interpretation and the value of cultural production is culturally relative. This means that an object or

work's value is determined by perceptions of people in different cultural groups.

In modern society, mass media often drive our perceptions. It is important to recognize that different cultures have different moral values and to acknowledge that some practices should be universally abhorred and stopped, even if they are partially or wholly accepted in other cultures.

The relationship between culture and mass media is complex; it is difficult to distinguish modern culture from how it appears in the various mass media. Culture in the developed world is spread through mass media channels. Just as society forms and is formed in part by messages in the mass media, so it goes with culture. Cultural products and their popularity can influence which media channels people prefer. Conversely, changes in media and ICTs can lead to changes in how we produce culture.

When we discuss digital culture in the next chapter, we will continue to break down different levels of culture and the relationship between cultural forms and mass communication in the networked communication age. To begin to understand the mass media, their role in society and how they shape culture and are shaped by cultural preferences, it helps to think about how the mass media may influence you.

Media Attributions

- Christmas_Tree_UK_Sherlock_Ornaments

- KOMU_Station_Site_Display
- Cincinnati Penny Paper
- Two women discuss a vinyl album selection

DIGITAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA



Lighted brushed-steel Google logo sign attached to a marble wall. [Google Office](#) by Open Grid Scheduler / Grid Engine, public domain.

“The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn’t understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had.” — Eric Schmidt, former executive chairman of [Alphabet Inc.](#)

Origin in Anarchy

Until the end of 2017, Eric Schmidt was the executive chairman of Alphabet Inc. Alphabet emerged out of Google to become a large holding company that would manage Google and several related properties including YouTube and Calico (a biotech company). Schmidt has a Ph.D. in computer science from Berkeley. He serves on advisory boards for Khan Academy, an education company with strong ties to YouTube, and

The Economist, a global news magazine with both digital and print products. Schmidt's résumé suggests he is intellectually outstanding and that he cares about technology, education and the mass media. If one of the biggest brains of our time, and the former leader of one of the few corporations with direct influence on the way the internet is shaped, describes the internet as "anarchy," it's a good indication that things are in flux in the digital world.

Of course, we should analyze critically any statements coming from someone whose primary purpose it is to maximize profits for their company. At the time he made these statements, Schmidt was running Google. The loyalties of executive-level leaders presumably rest with the corporation that signs their checks and provides their stock options. Google has an interest in making you feel that the internet is a confusing place since their search engine is one solution to the confusion. (However, if you rely on autocomplete, Google's suggestions may not only be confusing; they may even be [morally reprehensible](#).)

Still, Schmidt's characterization of the internet as a place of anarchy is accurate. And as we seek to define digital culture and to discuss the cultural relevance of social media in this chapter, we must recognize that there is no grand plan. The only constant in digital culture is change, which may sound cliché, but the underlying ICT structures shift so often that it can be difficult for cultural trends to take hold.

Chapter 1 of this text defined society and culture in the

context of the field of mass communication. It covered the distinction between interpersonal communication, organizational communication and mass communication, and then it delved deeper into concepts relating to mass communication. The purpose of the first chapter was to start a discussion about how evolving information and communication technologies (ICTs) can influence the mass media and contribute to social and cultural change in the process.

A Brief Overview

If you are anticipating a roadmap of neat, organized plans for how the evolution of culture on digital platforms will unfurl, [you're gonna have a bad time](#). Instead, this chapter offers a brief, lively discussion of how we define digital culture and what we might expect from it as it emerges in online spaces, mobile apps and platforms.

Additionally, this chapter includes a breakdown of the roles social media platforms may play in influencing culture.

If you acknowledge that cultures have always been in flux, then perhaps the concept of a digital culture emerging online amidst anarchy will look [less like disruption and more like evolution \(Spoiler Alert: Reveals the plot of The Last Jedi\)](#). However you classify it, the cultural impact of the merger of the mass media and digital networks is vast, and that is the topic of this chapter.

This chapter begins with a definition of “digital culture”

that comes from the media studies portion of mass communication literature. [Media studies](#) refers to the broad category of academic inquiry analyzing and critiquing the mass media, its products, possible effects of messages and campaigns, and even media history. Chapter 2 then continues with a deeper discussion of identity in the digital age and covers privacy and surveillance as well as the praxis of digital culture as defined by scholars. The term “praxis” here refers to how a theory plays out in actual practice.

This chapter also identifies different levels of culture (a concept borrowed from anthropology) as they relate to cultural products reaching audiences through digital mass communication channels. In other words, we ultimately answer this question: If we take existing theory for describing the *levels* of culture and apply it to digital culture, what are some immediately recognizable traits?

Finally, social media are defined from a scholarly point of view with particular attention given to the cultural potential of digitally networked social platforms.

Digital Culture Defined

Scholars argue whether we can understand what the spread of digital networks will mean for relatively well-established cultures in the tangible world, or predict with any certainty how cultures will evolve on digital platforms. There are two basic schools of thought. The first argues that existing cultures

might find themselves essentially recreated in digital form as more and more life experiences, from the exciting to the mundane, play out in digital spaces. The second school of thought posits that the dominant digital culture emerging now is a separate culture unto itself.

It seems likely that neither version of these imagined forms of digital culture will dominate; instead, we will likely see a combination of the two. Parts of existing culture will appear online as they do in the physical world and parts of digital culture will seem completely new, previously unfathomable because they could not or would not appear in the tangible world.



Commuters on the Washington DC Metro use their mobile phones beneath an ad stating, “It Begins with Bonjour.” [It Begins with Bonjour](#) by Craig Moe licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic](#).

Before we delve in with prognostications about where digital culture is headed, let us first define our terms. [Digital culture](#) refers to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of people interacting on digital networks that may recreate tangible-world cultures or create new strains of cultural thought and practice native to digital networks.

For example, an online fandom and a real-world fan club are both made up of people who are geographically separated

but share a common interest. If a fan club were to “go online,” networked communication platforms might make the experience better than it was in the physical world. Before the advent of the internet, most fan clubs produced a newsletter, offered connections with pen pals, and provided early opportunities to buy tickets and merchandise. Online, fans can create deeper relationships with one another. They can connect and communicate on official channels or make their own unofficial groups where they need not communicate through a central authority or gatekeeper. Fan and star interactions can be direct, one-on-one interactions on multiple social media channels. There may be an official, organized fan group, but many other avenues can appear on relatively open platforms with few rules.

The cultural product at the core of a fandom might still be a “legacy media” product. [Legacy media](#) are any media platforms that existed prior to the development of massive digital networks. Yes, there are people who are “Instagram famous” or “YouTube” famous, but the biggest stars in our cultural world still have many ties to legacy media. Musicians, film stars and comic book heroes come to mind. What other types of “legacy media” stars have huge online fandoms?

Online fandoms may simultaneously expect less centralized authority over the fan experience and more direct access to their heroes. They often expect to see transparency during the creative process, such as Instagram or Twitter posts with [“secret” messages](#) for longtime followers or behind-the-scenes

videos as albums and movies are made. Fandoms might demand to hear key information first or to have special access via social media.

Similar things could be said of fan clubs in the age of snail mail. Essential elements of the culture of fandom — gaining access to artists and finding friends in a community — have not changed as much in kind as they have in degree.

Is this an example of the transition of an existing cultural form (the fan club) to digital environments, or is online fandom something truly different from a snail mail fan club? This is a good question to debate in the classroom.

It is worth noting that there are also niche fandoms that probably would not exist without the aid of digital networks. With virtually unlimited communication space, there is room for incredibly [rarified fan groups to form on platforms such as Tumblr](#), and they are not always socially positive communities. In many cases of hyper-specific fandoms, it is difficult to argue that these cultures existed in the physical world and simply “moved online.” Being digitally networked is what makes it possible to find people with particularly narrow shared interests, for better and for worse.

Digital Dynamic

Even with the presence of niche online groups, digital culture cannot currently be separated from the influence of physical-world cultures. We can say two things about the relationship

between online and physical-world cultures at this time. First, the growth of interaction on digital networks influences “traditional” cultures. Second, longstanding cultural traditions are influencing digital culture as it takes shape. The ethics and norms established in the physical world shape our views about behavior and values in digital networks. The term **norm** refers to a behavioral standard. Mutual influences of what is considered “normal” in online behavior and well established physical world norms are emerging in a dynamic fashion. Sometimes they clash.

One example is online dating. Dating in real life (IRL) is changing as more and more people use dating apps and websites. Previously, dating was limited to the people you were likely to meet. You could meet friends of friends. You could meet people at school, at parties, at bars or on blind dates. Your options were limited geographically and by how outgoing you were, how much time you wanted to spend looking, and who you trusted to set you up. The personal ads in newspapers were often considered sad places for losers. Using a mass medium to find your true love was often considered a risky last resort.

When online dating first became available, it was often compared to posting and perusing digital personal ads. This was a cultural perception based on previous experiences, behavior and expectations from a pre-Internet culture.

Over the course of approximately ten years (1998-2008), what once was

considered odd, creepy or desperate in many parts of the Western world came to be considered commonplace. Apps and sites like OkCupid, Tinder, Match.com and eHarmony have millions of users. Culturally, [many of us have accepted](#) this new digital form of dating. It's not for everyone, but online dating does not carry the stigma it once did.

Even Tinder, which has a reputation as a “hook-up” app, [maintains popularity](#) and cultural significance as it is referenced often on other media platforms.

Whatever it may be in a given culture, sexual morality still exists, even if new technologies make hooking up easier and new capabilities challenge old norms of what dating should be.

This is the dynamic at the heart of this chapter. Digital technology can influence knowledge, beliefs and especially practices around dating. This can, in turn, shape the way people



Lindsay Blackwell, My Super Pseudo-Scientific Online Dating Experiment™. [Ignite Waterloo 8](#) by James Bastow under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0](#).

think about dating in general, not just in digital environments. The “old” cultural norms and morals can still be applied to judge those who use digital apps for casual hookups, but the new culture can push back, so to speak, and change how people think about dating even if they never use dating apps themselves.

We have discussed how the digital culture and physical world culture dynamic functions, but we have not yet defined digital culture. For that, we must look to scholars who have spent years trying to pinpoint what emergent digital culture seems to be.

Individualization, Post-nationalism, and Globalization

We turn to Mark Deuze, a scholar from the University of Amsterdam, for a complete definition. He seeks to provide a preliminary definition of “digital culture” in his 2006 article, [“Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture.”](#)

In his analysis of academic literature, Deuze finds that scholars often make assumptions when trying to explain how digital culture works. The main he identifies is the idea that culture moves to digital networks more or less intact. There was, a decade ago, a lack of explanation about what happens to culture in digital environments.

How much might culture change when certain practices

move online? How often can existing cultural beliefs and expectations be transferred intact? Deuze does not think digital culture is merely a recreation of physical world culture in online spaces, but he does not have a good answer for what has been emerging. He analyzes independent media sites, blogs and radical online media outlets to see what these new forms of communication demonstrate about digital culture.

That these forms are not meant to represent all culture but rather a cultural vanguard. They are (or were) the tip of the spear of newly evolving digital cultures. These sites are often progressive politically, so this is not as much a prediction of what will happen with all digital culture as it is a discussion of what is possible. Deuze maintains that the real practice of digital culture is [“an expression of individualization, post-nationalism, and globalization.”](#)

Individualization

Deuze finds individualization in blogs most frequently written by one person and focused on a specific topic or small geographical region. [Individualism](#), as it is used here, refers not only to an individual's ability to act as their own publisher online but also to a social condition in which individuals are free from government control. It means that even in authoritarian nations such as North Korea, Russia, China and Iran that try to control the behavior of their citizens, individuals may seek freedom of expression on the internet, although it comes at a greater risk.

Beyond Deuze's observations, evidence of individualism online comes from partisan news sites such as The Drudge Report and HuffPost. Both are named for individual founders. They are digital mass media outlets that started largely as personal points of view.

The importance of individualized expression on social media is clear. We appear as individuals on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Tumblr. This increases our reach. Each of us can potentially connect with every other individual on a given social media platform, but these platforms also [raise questions about surveillance and privacy](#).

Digital Individualism vs. Privacy

Eric Schmidt once said about online privacy and Google, "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." While this might make sense in a free society, there are many places in the world — North Korea for example — where government surveillance can utilize corporate invasions of privacy to crack down on dissent and severely limit freedom.

Suppose someone living in North Korea would like to use a social media channel such as Twitter to connect with like-minded people without government officials finding out. Should Twitter protect those users? What if a state threatens legal action or violence against Twitter employees? Would social media channels give up their users?

There is a difference between government surveillance (that

is, state-sanctioned data gathering and analysis on massive scales) and corporate data aggregation for targeted marketing purposes. Usually, by accepting the Terms and Conditions of apps and web services, you opt in to having your data stored, crunched and analyzed by corporations. Legally, you are responsible for that decision. Technically, the data gathering platform is not supposed to identify you as an individual, but so-called “safe harbor” laws [can be ineffectual](#).

Should Google protect your searches and refuse to divulge information about your habits to governments, even if they share that data with other companies for marketing purposes? Should Google give you a way to hide your online activity? Is there a way for the liberty-loving Southeast Asian to have his privacy protected while still enabling Western governments to watch out for terrorists? These questions relate to larger issues of freedom and individualism in digital culture.

Throughout its history, the United States of America has taken pride in its First Amendment and the rest of the Bill of Rights as guarantees of liberty. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, many Americans accepted new levels of scrutiny, particularly in digital environments. Support for strong leaders increased until [very recently](#). Concerns about the global rise of authoritarianism have people questioning government surveillance and corporate surveillance as they may limit our ability to engage as individuals in digital culture.

Eric Schmidt’s statement implies that privacy in digital networks is limited. This sentiment is echoed by Mark Zucker-

berg, who [has suggested that privacy is dead](#). What this means is that physical world behavior is expected to adapt to the demands of digital culture because the capabilities of digital culture also carry with them unique risks that we are not necessarily adapted to deal with.

Our experience with the anarchy of online mass communication platforms is quite limited. As we learn what government surveillance and corporate invasions of privacy are capable of, it may continue to deeply affect our physical world behavior.

Many would agree with the sentiment, “If you do nothing wrong, you have nothing to worry about,” but even advocates for a more open digital society want their privacy. Zuckerberg [bought several properties around his house to keep his physical location secure](#). Eric Schmidt does not want people to know where he lives. He generally does not invite the public into his private life, and, one might assume, does not want people to examine why his former wife said she [felt like a “piece of luggage” when married to him](#). Such information about Schmidt’s personal life is easy to find online and could be used against him, but should we care? Does it matter in the broader cultural sense?

This text argues that privacy does matter. The vast majority of us are not using digital platforms to break laws or to interact in negative ways with others and yet we still have aspects of ourselves that we would like to remain private. Has a parent or guardian ever snooped on your Facebook account or followed your Instagram? We have incredible freedoms and amaz-

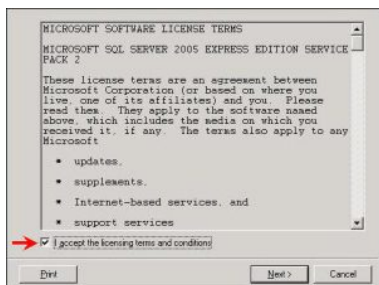
ing digital communication capabilities as individuals living our lives in the new digital culture. It comes with a price we have yet to grasp.

Terms and Conditions

The film *[Terms and Conditions May Apply](#)* details the ways our private information, such as our emails and texts, can easily be related to our public information on social networks.

The filmmakers note that the knowledge and hardware needed to snoop on people are bought and sold all over the world and are often unregulated.

Are we becoming more open because of the ways social media function? Is there anything wrong with that? Are we surrendering our privacy in ways that cannot be undone?



An old-school screen capture of Microsoft's Terms and Conditions by Klariti Template Shop, [Creative Commons BY 4.0](#). Source: Flickr.

One of the major cultural challenges of the network society will be to deal with people in power who would like to use our information against us as a means of control. It has already happened in some of the countries where the Arab Spring revolutions took place ([Egypt, for one](#)).

You never know what you might need to protest in the future, but we're beginning to see tools [deployed to pre-empt](#)

[protest and other acts of dissent](#). What this means for our efforts to define digital culture is that digital culture can free us as individuals, but it can also imprison us.

We can use the internet and smartphones to help us to get questions answered and to draw attention to ourselves in good ways. We can coordinate with others for fundraisers and to have parties. Digital communication networks are amazingly sophisticated tools that can help us connect as individuals to form groups to celebrate all sorts of interests, political and otherwise.

On the other hand, if individuals believe they have no privacy, digital networks could become virtual wastelands where innovative collaboration is hindered and where corporate commercial speech and government surveillance dominate.

Capitalism depends on risk-taking, and if you kill risk-taking online, you have hindered the entrepreneurialism that the network society offers. We scholars will study for decades to come how individual behavior changes and how relationships morph in a digital culture that discourages behavior we want to keep private while simultaneously encouraging levels of sharing that border on exhibitionism. How can we maintain privacy and gain attention, which is so often the currency of the open Internet? This is an interesting dilemma that arises in an individualistic digital culture.

Post-nationalism

Post-nationalism is another aspect of digital culture that Deuze

notes in his article. It may seem unrelated to our previous discussion of individualism and privacy in digital culture, but in fact, it is an analysis of the ways individuals represent themselves online.

Most simply, “[post-nationalism](#)” in digital culture means that one’s country appears to matter less as an influence on behavior and values online than it does in the tangible world, perhaps because we can be free of our national identities when engaging in digital networks with people from around the globe.

This does not mean that we should expect to see an end to nationalism in the tangible world. Quite the opposite seems to be true: As post-nationalism appears in digital spaces, [nationalism is on the rise in global politics](#). It might seem odd that people drop their nationalism online but demand it in physical spaces, but if you look at the way culture is expressed online, it is clear that for many people their nationality has little to do with their online identities.

For example, your country may be important to you, but it may not be one of the ways you define yourself in social media environments. You can love America without talking about it all of the time on Facebook or Twitter. Remember as well that national boundaries may be felt more readily in the daily lives of Africans, Asians, Europeans and others living in nations that are geographically smaller, more tightly packed and culturally distinct. In digital spaces, these cultural differences can evaporate.

Although war and immigration are highly influential on the current cultural climate in the physical world, the perception of evaporating culture in networked spaces may help drive the sense that physical world cultures are being threatened.

Recent political developments, however, make it somewhat more difficult to think of digital culture as post-nationalistic given the rise of online nationalism — particularly white nationalism in Europe and the United States. White nationalism is a brand of nationalism related to white supremacy, but it is an identity connected to the nation-state nonetheless. A nationalist's primary *modus operandi* in digital culture may not reflect what nation states ultimately become in the 21st century, but rather what they wish it were. Even so, there is evidence that some factions will use digital spaces to promote a return to nationalism.

Does this mean that post-nationalism in digital culture is a false notion conceived in the early 2000s that has no bearing on culture today? Perhaps, but it is more likely that we are seeing a backlash against the rise of a global post-nationalist space online.

Globalization

Digital culture, Deuze posits, reflects a globalized or globalizing world. Behaviors, interests, and relationships cross international boundaries. The economic structure of digital networks, including the mass media system, is global. For example, multinational conglomerate corporations tend to

dominate the media industry, [not just in the United States but around the world](#). Books, academic articles and [simple infographics](#) show that most mass media companies fall under the ownership of large corporate firms. It is not accurate to say this represents *all* media or that “the media” are being controlled, but it is accurate to say a significant level of influence can be attributed to a handful of media corporations in most developed parts of the world.

Mass media consumers should be aware of the environment in which media products are produced, but this is not to say that the globalization of mass media is always a negative thing. When it comes to culture, globalization has its supporters. Here is a site [in English about K-pop music](#). The music comes from Korea, but the fanbase is spread worldwide, and the site can reach a global audience only because of the global nature of digital networks. It works only because computer servers are connected by wires all over the globe to make this bit of culture, like many others, available to the entire globe.

There exists a global point of view in both the physical world and in digital culture which is open to all kinds of cultural production as long as it is interesting, funny and shows great talent. There are videos that go viral globally, although it is not always clear why. (If we had the formula, we’d include it here.) All we can say at this time is that you can reach the world with any online message and, for whatever reason, some things are globally likable and “shareable.”

A Place Called Gangnam

Humanity's recently developed ability to develop a globalized point of view and to establish a common digital culture is the reason you have heard (and likely tired) of "Gangnam Style." Ironically, PSY, who performs the song, is kind of an anti-pop star within Korea. The song makes fun of the country's higher class, a conspicuously wealthy subculture from a place called the Gangnam District. But PSY is a global success. He is popular, many argue, because he is quite funny and because he is *not* the [prototypical K-pop hero](#). He comes from a particular national cultural tradition, but he also transcends it by being absurd. Thus, as a distinctly individual performer, he personifies a type of post-nationalism and the globalization of digital culture.

Individualism, post-nationalism and globalization go a long way toward defining the emergent "digital culture." For more information, consult [Deuze's original article](#).

Digital Culture in Practice

Deuze makes one more observation not about *what digital culture is* but rather *how it works*. Deuze argues that the production of digital culture will be carried out through participation, remediation and bricolage.

[Participation](#) means that every individual will have the ability to contribute to online media. Professionals and ama-

teurs will work together much more often than they did on “legacy media” products and projects.

Because people do not want to work for free, they will not flock to an online platform simply because it has been opened up for contributions. If anyone could build a Facebook, there would be hundreds or even thousands of competing platforms. As it stands, there are perhaps [ten major social media platforms](#) worldwide, if “major” means they are home to more than 200 million members.

It is also clear from social networking sites, Reddit, and similar social news sharing sites that people will contribute to a platform even if it is not necessarily well-policed or easy to use. In digital culture, it helps to be the first to be big. Success breeds success in an economy based on attention, and what dominates tends to be emotional issues, as [satirized here](#).

Consistency also seems to help, but what matters most is the ability to consistently draw an audience. Think of a person trying to become a YouTube influencer. They must publish interesting content regularly for months or even years before they develop a following that they might be able to sell to advertisers. Once the YouTube star does begin to peddle products, they run the risk of alienating a portion of their audience.

Participation is an essential part of digital culture. It can be easy and fun to do it for free. If you want to make a career out of it, it takes professional-level commitment, and the resulting content often favors what is popular and emotionally gripping rather than what is informative or socially beneficial.

Remediation means that old media are made new again in digital spaces. Television becomes YouTube. Radio becomes podcasting, Spotify and Pandora. Newspapers become... online newspapers! The new media take elements of the old media and repurpose them, while “legacy” media firms copycat digital media trends, buy out media startups, or try to forge new paths at significant expense.

In the practice of digital culture, media are remade in digital environments in a process that combines the appealing parts of existing forms of media with additional functionalities made possible by new ICTs and digital networking capabilities. The [author's own research](#) argues that attempts by legacy media organizations to create new businesses online face many institutional hurdles. Remediation is constantly happening, but that does not mean existing media companies can determine how to monetize the practice in a sustainable way. We should expect considerable remediation innovation to come from startup companies and individual tech entrepreneurs with few ties to legacy media.

A good example of remediation is taking classic movies or video games and showing them to young people to record their reactions for YouTube. Reaction videos of all kinds take media products people are familiar with and show them to the unfamiliar so that viewers can judge their reactions. This new media product repurposes old content with an added element designed to pique our interest; however, remediation does not always add much value.

Bricolage is a French term not easy to translate literally to English. A translation offering deep context might be: Do it yourself by combining elements found elsewhere. Much of digital culture is an amalgamation of existing content and new cultural work being done at home by people with amateur skills and affordable but capable tools, such as smartphones and tablet computers. Even basic tools are quite powerful. Smartphones come with front- and back-facing cameras as well as HD-quality video. The computing power of a smartphone is more powerful than a mainframe computer was 70 years ago. Independent producers have video and audio editing software options and can create professional looking, popular media products on their own with little formal training.

Professionalism

What is formal training for, then? It prepares you to transition from making professional looking and sounding media products once in a while to consistently making professional quality media. Formal training prepares you to think strategically about where industries are going so that you know not only how to make mass media products but where to place them and how to use and possibly develop your own communication platforms.

Formal training includes an education in history and ethics. Amateur producers are skilled at chasing trends and gaining popularity, but they often ride cultural waves that last from a few months to a couple of years. Planning for multiple media

shifts and seeing digital cultural trends as or before they emerge requires an education in more than the tools and tricks of the trade.

Deuze in Sum

Deuze's analysis suggests that barriers between professionals and amateurs are breaking down. Old media are made new again in digital culture, through a process of making digital media collages, so to speak. (The word "bricolage" is related to "collage.")

Thus, in practice, digital culture is democratizing (though not fully democratic, of course). Amateurs can create media products that challenge the popularity of cultural production made by corporate conglomerates valued at hundreds of billions of dollars. What emerges in terms of popularity, though, is not necessarily high in quality or accuracy. Quality and accuracy are the hallmarks of professional communication (although not all professionals behave as they should).

Levels of Culture in Digital Media

Let's take a step back and look at the definition of culture again. In the first chapter, this text defined [culture](#) as being made up of the knowledge, beliefs and practices of a group of people. We need to tweak that definition a little. It is more accurate to say that the knowledge, beliefs and practices of

a massive group of people at a certain time and place defines [common culture](#).

Three levels of culture exist in anthropology literature, and they apply to the ways culture is expressed in the mass media. The three levels of culture are personal culture, group culture and common culture (similar to pop culture).

Any kind of culture, whether it is personal, group or common culture, relies on shared knowledge. There must be shared experiences and shared stories about those experiences for us to have a common culture. If we did not have shared experiences, cultural references would not make sense. Thus common culture can be arrived at when individuals and groups tell the same stories, or when mass media reach mass audiences with the same messages at the same (or about the same) time.

The more people who know about a song, film, work of art or event with cultural significance, and the more information that they know about it, the more likely it is that event will become part of the common culture. The mass media influence common culture, although it is not correct to say that they directly shape it. There are many other institutional influences on common culture such as governments, churches, families and educational systems.

In fact, messages in the mass media may not be as influential now as they were in the mid-20th century when millions of people watched the same TV shows each week at the same time and read the same major metropolitan daily newspapers

and national magazines. Demassification has affected the ways common culture is established and fed.

The mass media influence may have less power to influence common culture directly, but it is still relevant. Think about any major global news event of the past few months. When an event is big enough that it is shared across all media platforms, especially cable television, broadcast television and social media channels, it can form a piece of common culture. If several events occur or if an event has a broad enough global impact, it can enter the global [collective memory](#), the shared cultural memory of a group of people.

[Group culture](#) is what we used to refer to as a “subculture.” It is the knowledge, beliefs and practices of a subset of people considered to be part of a larger culture. Group culture is distinct in some ways from the shared, broader common culture. Group culture might center on religious beliefs and practices, ethnic norms and interests, or food, music and other forms of material production. Groups can be as large as all Chinese-Americans and as small as the remaining St. Louis NFL fan culture.

You have a say in defining your [personal culture](#) — the knowledge, beliefs and practices held most dear to the individual. You may find yourself identifying with many group cultures or taking most of your interests from the dominant common culture. Do you take your cultural cues about what to think about and talk about from television, social media or small group cultures with which you identify? This much is

your prerogative. You can choose your personal culture. It is based both on what you believe in and what cultural products you consume.

America, 'Merica, Los Estados Unidos, Etc.

There is a common culture in America, but there is no single, dominant, common culture across global digital networks. There may be a tendency for people to believe that the group cultures they interact with most often online constitute the “real” digital culture, but as yet there is no clear consensus about what our shared digital culture is or even if we will develop one.

Algorithms in search engines and social media platforms determine much of what we find when we search the internet and what we see when we look at news and information feeds from our friends. Do algorithms constitute common culture? They may shape it, and they may be influenced by user preferences, but they are not always designed for truth, accuracy or information literacy. They are most often designed to give consumers whatever makes them consume more of what the platform wants them to consume. Google usually wants you to spend money with its advertisers. Facebook wants your time and your data so it can sell your information to third party advertisers.

What shapes digital culture is often in a “black box”: It is the proprietary information of very large corporations, and the public may or may not have access to the code. Even if we did

have it, it would be difficult to explain exactly how algorithms work. There are times when the corporations that deploy algorithms seem surprised by how they function in the hands of massive numbers of users.

Major events that cut across algorithms and show up on almost everyone's news feed and in almost everyone's search results are still likely to have an impact on common culture. Major events are likely to shape personal, group, and common culture if they are significant enough. What kind of cultural impact does a given event have? It depends.

The impact of a school shooting near Miami might be felt differently in Florida than in California because of proximity and because the gun laws in each state are quite different. In other words, something can enter the common culture but still be perceived quite differently by individual members of the public.

Norms

By now you should understand that the cultural impact of messages in the mass media at each level — personal, group and common culture — is related to the shared knowledge that existed before the event.

Events are often going to be perceived differently by people identifying with different small group cultures within a larger common culture. Events will usually be interpreted differently by individuals within a small group culture, depending on an

individual's beliefs about and personal experiences with the issue at hand.

A person's response to current events as they appear in the mass media is also related to the existence and strength of shared beliefs about the way they think things *ought* to be. We call those beliefs **cultural norms**.

There is no single, agreed-upon set of norms that everyone in a given group culture adheres to. If you

have lived your whole life as part of the dominant culture, and you do not recognize the existence and struggle of various cultural groups, it can be difficult to recognize reactions in digital media spaces that do not relate much to what you see in your physical world. Conversely, if you have grown up being oppressed as part of a small group, you may find it hard to understand how others identifying with the dominant portion of a common culture can miss the cruelty present in some cultural norms they don't think twice about.

Exposure to other groups' cultures in a network society can bring about both greater understanding and greater anxiety. This is something that will be worked out, for better or for



Graffiti explaining the role of women in Egypt's revolution. [Women in the Revolution](#) by Gigi Ibrahim licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic](#).

worse, over the next several decades as digital culture evolves. Figuring out how groups with different cultural interests, norms, and values can get along while being constantly exposed to one another's views in the free-for-all of network society is the challenge of emergent digital culture.

One response is to run to echo chambers, to partisan spaces that feel safe for certain group cultures and for our personal cultural beliefs and priorities, but this practice can only deepen the divide between cultural groups.

In the early years of working to establish a common culture in the network society, we have managed to inundate ourselves with information from all manner of cultural groups and to isolate ourselves from views that contradict our own group cultural norms. This is anarchy. This is culture without a strong social structure to hold it together.

The question facing mass communication scholars that members of our common culture also face is whether the institutions of the physical world can or should try to control how digital culture is shaped. You have the power to decide if digital culture should be regulated and how. This may be the most important civic responsibility you have, but it is also a matter of cultural power.

Social Media and Social Capital

What do you think it means for society that networked communication platforms can make anybody a mass communica-

tor? One answer is that there is great potential for social change because society, as Dewey said in Chapter 1, is not just transmitted by communication, it exists in it.

That means every individual with a computer or a smart-phone has the potential to disseminate messages that influence broader society. Think of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010-2012. Think of #Ferguson protests in the summer and fall of 2014. Think of the way candidate Donald Trump bypassed mass media outlets to reach voters and to set a separate news agenda in 2015 and 2016. Individuals and small groups are now able to coordinate and to lead social movements using networked communication technologies.



Facebook's Facebook Page by "Christopher," [Creative Commons BY 4.0](#). Source: Flickr.

You have probably heard the term "social movement." In a sense, a social movement is a change in society brought on by communication. What is different about the world of networked communication is how interpersonal messages and message cam-

paigns can shift in an instant to being mass messages or massive campaigns. This makes digital networks battlegrounds because networked public communication platforms are centers of power now more than ever.

Just as they can influence and even disrupt social structures,

individuals and small groups can shape culture using social media channels. This makes our communication system as ripe for abuse by outside forces as it is for use by legitimate citizens. Governments, corporations and rogue dictators all have an interest in learning our secrets, and they could potentially hold them against us.

We cannot underestimate how important this is will be in the mass communication field. Individual, group and broader social secrets — including consumer behavior, political behavior and even personal thoughts and interests — are easier to discern and possibly manipulate than ever before because of the vast amounts of data collected about us from our social media and other internet habits. This can have a profound effect on our behavior and on our society, and we are not prepared as a society to defend ourselves against attacks.

Before you get discouraged about digital culture and privacy, and before you get inundated with all of the possibilities and implications of digital culture, consider [Clay Shirky's Ted talk, "How social media can make history."](#)

Shirky outlines the power of social connectivity and applies the concept of [social capital](#). The basic definition of social capital is the potential to get help, not just financial assistance, from the people around you when needed. Social media platforms can be great places to build social capital. Thus, they have the potential to be constructive or disruptive. It depends on how you use them. Watch the video for a complete definition.

Interpersonal communication, organizational communication and mass communication are separate areas of academic interest, as stated in the first chapter, but our ability as consumers and as producers to alternate from one to the other is as powerful as it has ever been. Being connected to each other almost at all times by digital networks creates the capacity for relatively quick mass social action. People are beginning to use this power to pull society in different directions. Large numbers of people can be organized and we could see social shifts and rifts develop more quickly than they can be put back together. It will be up to individual users and groups of users to decide how to respond to such social and cultural changes.

Participatory Media

A major shaper of culture and society is the news media. There will be separate sections on the evolution of news in later chapters, but in the context of digital culture, it bears noting that the role of news media within broader media landscapes is also shifting.

Apart from the ability of social movements and cultural movements to arise and take shape on social media platforms, there is also the potential for public opinion to be influenced quickly and deeply when mass media outlets operated in the same digital networks as influential individuals and groups.

You may contribute to news information by volunteering. One of the biggest stories to gain national attention in 2014 that was filmed and posted by a [citi-zen journalist](#) was the story of **Eric Garner**, who was seen being put into a chokehold by NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo. Reports

said that Garner had asthma and that he died of a heart attack. Here the term “citizen journalist” refers to a person who is not a paid professional but who delivers news to audiences nonetheless.

It is doubtful that the story would have received national attention had it not been for the video bystander Taisha Allen took with her mobile phone. When she shared that video, and it went viral on social media channels, she made the mass media story possible.

Allen probably had several reasons for sharing the video of Garner, and she was probably aware of the potential social and cultural impact of the video. You do not have to be a media literacy expert to know that such a video would receive broad attention and generate controversy. Allen chose to share the video because she thought people needed to see what had happened.



New York tabloid newspapers cover the killing of Eric Garner by police during an arrest. Photo by Mike Mozart, [Creative Commons BY 4.0](#). Source: Flickr.

Further solidifying the cultural significance of the video, within days of the story breaking, Spike Lee had re-cut a scene from his groundbreaking film *Do the Right Thing* where the character Radio Raheem is choked to death by an NYPD officer. He interspersed his original film clip with bystander video of Eric Garner's death. This almost instant connection between a post made by a citizen using social media and a bit of modern classic film speaks to the rising power and cultural influence of amateur media. Individuals can affect major producers in a mutual effort to shape social norms and structures as well as cultural influences.

We should expect more and more professionals to make these kinds of connections with amateurs and bystanders in the future. Mashups of professionally made mass media messages and citizen-generated messages are likely to proliferate. Can you think of video footage from individuals present during major news events that shaped the news and public opinion?

The events in Ferguson, Missouri followed a similar path as the Eric Garner story: Social media accounts of the killing of Michael Brown were shared virally almost immediately after the incident. Social media activity on YouTube, Twitter and other channels helped shape the way events unfolded. This drove the way the story was covered in the national media in the early reporting, but backlash inevitably followed.

Much of the work done by citizen journalists will be controversial. Media professionals working in news and other fields

will have to use discernment in deciding which views to share because in a sense sharing is promoting, even if one disagrees with the sentiment of the tweet, video, or post.

No piece of media that is meaningful on a cultural level is going to be captured and disseminated with universal agreement about its importance or its meaning, but for society to function and for culture to serve its purposes we need to agree in a general sense on what's real and what is not. The real danger in the rise of the power of individuals and small groups in digital culture is that they can pull larger groups away from looking for fact-based discourse.

Media Attributions

- Google lighted logo
- It Begins with Bonjour
- Online Dating Presentation
- Microsoft Terms and Conditions
- Women in the Revolution
- Facebook's Facebook Page
- Eric Garner Daily News and New York Post Covers

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

This unit focuses on defining some of the key terms that we will be using over the course of the semester. The sections include:

- News
- Journalism
- Social Actors
- Technological Actants
- Audiences
- Journalistic Activities

NEWS

Introduction

News refers to *novel information about recent affairs*.

News has been a part of human societies for as long as we've been able to communicate complex ideas. Going back to our early times, you can think of travelers, priests, and soldiers as individuals who would learn something about a recent affair — such as the outcome of a battle or the emergence of a plague nearby — and would share that news with others. Perhaps you have even heard about the 'town criers' who would learn some news — perhaps an official decree from the king — and share it with a public audience.

News is the lifeblood of journalism. And, in the context of journalism, news usually entails novel information about recent affairs *that is in the public interest*. This emphasis on 'public interest' is influenced by Enlightenment principles, which emphasize objectivity and rationality in order to engage with social problems in a fruitful way. Moreover, this view considers *newsgathering* to be an important activity within a democratic society. That activity involves having individuals (news gatherers) *systematically collect* novel information about recent affairs and convey that information in a way that allows

citizens to engage productively in debates about matters that impact the public.

That interpretation of newsgathering is similar to what we tend to call *reporting* today. However, if we were to require news gatherers to be hired and dedicated reporters — basically, limit them to people who get paid to report the news — then we would find that there was fairly little newsgathering until the 1800s, and only in a few places around the world. Put another way, our current imagining of newsgathering (or reporting) as a distinct, semi-professionalized activity is a historically recent development.

News and The News

While we can define “news” in these more-academic terms, it’s important to keep in mind that it also has a colloquial meaning, and also to distinguish between “news” and “*the news*.” It is not uncommon to hear “news” be used colloquially in reference to *a particular way of conveying* novel information about recent affairs, and “*the news*” as some monolithic aggregation of it. For example, the phrase, “What’s ‘the news’ today?” implies that there is one relatively small group of news stories, drawn from a much-larger pool of possible news stories, that a large group of people would accept as being particularly important at that moment in time.

It is thus important to recognize that “news” and “*the news*”

are modern cultural constructs that reflect particular understandings of what is news and what is *newsworthy*. Those understandings, in turn, are shaped by the histories and cultures of particular places and peoples. Put another way, “news” and “*the news*” are *not* natural things but rather things a group of people collectively agree to accept as “news” and “*the news*.”

For example, a news story is rarely understood to mean a simple chronological listing of observations. You wouldn’t expect the lead news story in *The New York Times* to read that Dr. Zamith woke up, went to his office, ate lunch, stubbed his toe, and found the cure for dementia. Instead, most people expect “news” to resemble a particular format. In the United States, you would likely expect a journalistic account of that news to start with the fact that Dr. Zamith found the cure to dementia — and probably not even mention the fact that he ate lunch that day. Moreover, given the prevalence of dementia in the United States and the significance of the discovery, such a story would likely be considered a part of “*the news*” for that day.

The News and Newsworthiness

What is understood as “*the news*” varies considerably across and within places because it reflects not only different ways of thinking about what “news” should look or sound like but also

who has the authority to define what “news” is, as well as what is *newsworthy*. Some stories tend to have more universal appeal — for example, dementia is a serious concern in much of the world, and not just the U.S. — but other stories (e.g., stories about violence against transgender people) may be treated as more newsworthy in some societies.

Returning to that earlier question, “What’s *the* news today?” we must therefore recognize that there is a finite space for “news” — because, after all, we only have so much *time* to consume news and newsgatherers can only follow up on so many stories — and that “*the* news” consequently requires someone (or, more accurately, some group of people) to define what matters, both in terms of what news is important as well as what is important about that news.

While “news” can be understood as simply being novel information about recent affairs, it can therefore also be understood more broadly as *a form of knowledge* about the world we live in. Consequently, those who are recognized as the primary definers of “*the* news” — be they journalists, some other group of people, or a mix thereof — are granted power in shaping how we understand the societies we live in as well as those we’ve never seen ourselves.

Key Takeaways

- Within the context of journalism, the term “news” usually refers to novel information about recent affairs that is in the public interest.
- While news has long been traded by different people, the notion of newsgathering as a distinct professional activity is a historically recent development.
- “News” is an evolving cultural object. It is rarely just a chronological listing of observations. Instead, it reflects local ways of thinking about things like presentation formats and ways of organizing information.
- There is also the notion of “the news,” which suggests that there is a collection of particularly important news. Those who are recognized as the primary definers of “the news” have power in shaping societal priorities and what is particularly important about emerging developments.
- News can be understood as more than just a collection of information. It is also a form of knowledge.

JOURNALISM

Introduction

The term “journalism” can mean very different things to different people. As such, you will often get a wide range of responses when you ask a group of people to define “journalism.”

For example, you can define “journalism” as a *product*. Under this view, an investigative news story about the mayor taking bribes might be treated as “journalism” because the product (an online article) contains certain things thought to be journalistic, like a clear headline and quotes from multiple interviewees. Similarly, that story might be treated as “journalism” because it appears on a television show that looks a certain way — maybe it has someone dressed professionally sitting behind a long table describing the incident — or follows certain linguistic patterns.

“Journalism” can also be defined in terms of the *people* who are involved in the creation of a news product. If something is produced by a certain kind of person, perhaps someone with a college degree in Journalism or some related form of professional training, then some people might treat their work as “journalism.” In some countries, people have to be recognized

(or certified) by the government in order to legally produce “journalism” or receive certain legal protections.

Similarly, “journalism” can be defined in terms of the *institutions* that create such products. If something is produced by a particular kind of organization, such as *The New York Times* or BBC News, then some people will treat that product as a form of “journalism.”

More broadly, “journalism” can be thought about as a *set of activities* through which news is collected, organized, presented, and circulated. For example, someone might believe something to be “journalism” only if it involved first-hand observation by the would-be journalist, or interviews with multiple witnesses. That person may also require all accounts to be subjected to verification practices by the would-be journalist.

Even more broadly yet, “journalism” can be understood as a *service* that is guided by certain goals and values, such as identifying issues that are important to a community and holding elected officials to account, or connecting citizens with opportunities for civic engagement. From this perspective, “journalism” is less about what the product looks like, who made it, or how they made it, but rather about what one hoped to accomplish through their endeavor.

Finally, “journalism” can also be understood as an *occupation* that is bound together by a particular ideology spanning different elements of product, people, practice, and service. For example, in the United States, this might entail values like

seeking to provide a public service to citizens; striving to be objective, fair, and trustworthy; working independently from governmental officials; being committed to an approach that emphasizes gathering first-hand accounts of events in a timely fashion; and deferring to a shared, professional sense of ethics. In other contexts, that ideology might be different. For example, the ideology may instead seek to promote societal stability by having journalists be more deferential to government authorities and less critical of the status quo. Those who act in line with the dominant occupational values of journalism within a society — whatever that may look like — may thus be seen as practicing “journalism.”

Why Definitions Matter

As we can see, there are many ways to define “journalism.” Not only do different places and different groups of people within those places often understand the term differently, but those same places and groups have also understood it differently through history.

What this tells us is that *journalism is a fluid and contested thing*. Changing social, cultural, economic, political, and technological conditions change how people understand journalism. For example, technological advances have made it possible for a kindergarten teacher to regularly blog about their city’s public Board of Health meetings to a large online audience —

in effect, arguably allowing that teacher to perform *acts of journalism* in ways that were not previously possible.

This matters because the way journalism is broadly understood within a society impacts how *symbolic resources* are translated into *material rewards*. For example, think about a press conference or a trial that has limited seating. Some of those seats may be reserved for those who practice journalism. To determine who is eligible for those seats, someone has to first define what “journalism” is.

Definitions and Expectations

In many societies, journalism also receives a special social status as being the *authority* on “news.” You can see evidence of this in the way journalism is enshrined in foundational documents and legal protections of some countries. For example, in the United States, the First Amendment protects a “free press” because of its presumed importance to a well-informed democracy.

With such status comes expectation, and perhaps even deference, from individual citizens and the broader public. For example, if someone considers *The New York Times* to engage in journalism but does not consider Fox News to do so, then they will typically hold *The New York Times* to a higher standard when the *Times* makes a mistake. At the same time, they will be more likely to give the *Times* the benefit of the doubt

when that someone can't independently verify some reported information themselves. Put another way, that someone is effectively granting *The New York Times* a degree of legitimacy that they are not granting Fox News because of how that someone understands journalism.

The consequence of this is that it grants the individuals and organizations that are perceived to be legitimate brokers of journalism considerable power as they are deemed to be authoritative by some group of people. That, in turn, allows those organizations to become the primary definers of “news” for that group. This is why different news organizations, commentators, and public figures expend so much energy casting some things as journalism and other things as not-journalism (sometimes with disparaging labels like “fake news”).

Journalism as Plural

Although we have talked about “journalism” in the singular form, it is important to recognize that journalism is not some monolithic thing. Thus, one could very easily talk about *journalisms* — that is, journalism in a pluralized sense.

For example, we often hear about “sports journalism,” “data journalism,” and “advocacy journalism.” These prefixes refer to more than just genres or technologies. They recognize that there is something substantively different about that particular rendition of “journalism,” whether in its purpose, people,

processes, or products. Those differences, in turn, result in distinct symbolic associations, material rewards, and social expectations within that area of journalism. Put another way, what is considered to be desirable practice within one area of journalism — like adopting a neutral tone or using an inverted pyramid story structure — may be considered undesirable in another. As such, there is no one “right way” to do journalism, but certain ways are privileged over others in particular contexts.

These definitional challenges and considerations thus help us to appreciate that “journalism” is actually a very dynamic and multifaceted thing.

Key Takeaways

- Journalism can be defined in many ways, which means that “journalism” is a contested term that means different things to different people.
- In the U.S. and many liberal democracies, journalism is associated with certain occupational values that stress a public service orientation, objectivity, independence, immediacy, and professional ethics.
- How journalism is generally understood within a society matters because it affects how symbolic resources are translated into material rewards and expectations.

- There is a plurality of journalisms (e.g., “data journalism” and “advocacy journalism”), each with distinct norms, values, and processes. This points to a recognition that journalism is not a single, monolithic entity.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Introduction

Human beings play a central role in journalism, and we can refer to *the individuals* who help shape the renditions of news we come across (and the organizations those individuals work for) as *social actors* within the space of “journalism.”

The most obvious social actor in journalism is the journalist. But what constitutes a “journalist” is often debated both within and across societies, and it changes over time. For example, 50 years ago, it may have been enough to say that anyone who was employed to do editorial work for an organization that primarily produced news was effectively a “journalist.” However, news organizations and the journalism ecosystem are simply too complex today for that to be a good definition.

Scholars have traditionally found two particularly helpful approaches for defining who a “journalist” is.

From a *sociological approach*, one could say that journalists are individuals with *particular skills and knowledge* who both *adhere to the shared ideals of what is recognized as journalism* within a given context and *believe they are participating in shaping the profession’s standards of proper practice*. Put another way, the sociological approach looks at a combination

of what the individual does, how they do it, and the role they play in shaping the profession.

From a *normative approach*, one could say that a journalist is simply someone who reports news *while holding certain values associated with journalism* in a given society. For example, in the United States, such values might include seeking to report honestly and independently from commercial and social pressures, committing to verifying information before disseminating it, and being responsible, methodical, and transparent in their work. Put another way, the normative approach focuses less on what a person does and more on the values they adopt and *try* to apply in their work. Those norms, in turn, serve as identity markers for the individual, helping them define who they are as professionals (or semi-professionals). Those norms also serve as boundary markers separating journalists from non-journalists, helping those individuals define who they are *not*, as well as who is *not* one of us.

While this distinction may seem strictly academic at first, it has two broad practical implications. First, individuals viewed as journalists by one group of people may not be viewed as journalists by another group because they apply different definitional criteria. Second, journalists often try to present themselves as journalists (or not-journalists) in relation to norms and/or professional standards — which underscores the ‘soft’ power of those cultural constructions.

Editorial Actors

News organizations have a range of social actors who are typically associated with the label of “journalist” — whom we may call *editorial actors*. These include reporters and correspondents, who collect and analyze information, and then produce news reports about newsworthy events; photojournalists, who try to capture those events through still and moving images; and anchors and presenters, who serve as the faces and primary interpreters in broadcast news programs.

In addition to those more front-facing social actors, you also have individuals who work behind the scenes but are nevertheless also grouped under the “journalist” umbrella. These include editors, who assign stories to reporters, review their work, and have the ability to make substantial changes to the news reports that reporters produce; copy editors, who review news reports for accuracy, grammar, adherence to the organization’s journalistic style, and often write the headlines; community engagement editors, who help tailor content for social media and build community around stories; and news designers, who employ different aesthetics like fonts and visual hierarchy in order to call attention to certain aspects of a story.

There are also some content producers whose work is regularly featured alongside that of journalists but whose practices, norms, or styles result in their being considered “journalists” only some of the time (if at all). These include columnists, who write regular analyses of news that typically convey an explicit

point of view or personal experience; cartoonists, who often seek to convey an explicit point of view on an issue through creative illustration; and a news organization's editorial board, which may write anonymous editorials that convey the organization's view on some issue. The work from these individuals is often — but not always — explicitly separated from that of the aforementioned actors, such as by being included in an “Opinion” section.

Economic and Technical Actors

In addition to those social actors, there are also individuals who are crucial to the operation of a news organization but are less likely to be labeled a “journalist.” Two important groups of such individuals are *economic actors* and *technical actors*.

Some of the key economic actors within news organizations are managers and proprietors. Management covers a broad category of social actors who play a role in defining and implementing the organization's business strategy, including its revenue model, economic targets, budgets and resource allocations, and hiring choices. Proprietors, in turn, refer to the actors who own news organizations. These actors may be hands-off and allow the organization to operate with considerable independence — provided they reach specified economic targets — but they may also actively engage in the day-to-day

decision-making by assigning stories of interest to them, shutting down stories that hurt their interests, and serving as the ‘final word’ in different newsroom affairs.

News organizations also require a range of technical actors in order to operate successfully. These include camera operators, who set up and work the cameras for news broadcasts; sound mixers, who record, synchronize, and edit audio for news segments; and web and app developers, who design and operate content management systems and user-facing applications. Simply put, these individuals help design and operate the tools needed to create the news products that an organization wants to put out — and without whom there likely would not be a polished product.

Interlopers

These are just a small sampling of the many social actors involved in journalism, all of whom could easily fall under a single news organization’s umbrella, provided the organization is large enough. However, it is imperative to note that not only are there many different social actors involved in journalism but that these (and related) actors can work either inside or outside of a newsroom.

For example, consider a news organization’s content management system. Such systems are commonplace in modern news organizations. They allow a reporter to easily write their

story on a digital platform, pass it on to an editor who reviews it, and then quickly publishes it on the organization's website. Although commonplace, the software supporting a system like this is often developed by a different organization — and one that likely produces software for businesses in different industries. That software development organization thus *generally* operates outside the space of journalism. As such, the coders who create that content management system may rarely ever interact with journalists, and they may even produce the software with a different user base in mind, such as food bloggers. Nevertheless, the coder's decisions partly shape what the reporter can and cannot do. For example, the editor may not be able to use a 'track changes' function while editing a story because the coders never considered that need, and thus did not program the system to allow that functionality.

We could call such a software development organization (and the coders who worked on the content management system) an *interloper* because they would likely be seen as a non-journalistic actor that operates outside of typical journalistic spaces, even though that organization contributes meaningfully to journalism (despite that contribution perhaps being unintentional). While some interlopers stumble onto journalism — perhaps as a result of a job or a passion project — others do *intentionally* seek to contribute to journalism, even as they may not seek recognition as journalistic actors. An example of this might be an open-data advocate who digitizes records of

complaints against police officers so that data journalists can write stories about that issue.

Interlopers are important because they often challenge the orthodoxies of journalism. They may do this by explicitly critiquing those orthodoxies or by implicitly introducing new practices and ways of thinking as a result of their non-journalistic background and training. Those challenges, over time, have the potential to structurally reshape aspects of journalism, allowing it to develop in unforeseen ways.

It is important to note, however, that some outsiders may seek to interlope and gain recognition as journalistic actors — if not as outright “journalists.” An example of this may be a comedian who claims to be a “journalist” because they regularly feature news material in their performances and provide news analysis through the lens of comedy. Another example may be YouTube personalities who claim to be both an “outsider” and a “journalist,” and therefore not subject to the media problems they critique. Such efforts are sometimes successful. However, they are more often *unsuccessful* because the interloper’s interventions may be deemed too extreme, and instead serve as an example against which a boundary for what does constitute “journalism” is set. Over time, such boundaries do change, though.

Networks of Actors

Given that there are so many kinds of actors within journalism, it can be helpful to think about journalism through a network lens, wherein different actors are connected to one another. Such an exercise not only helps to make sense of the many different actors involved in journalism but, crucially, helps illustrate that *producing news is rarely a solitary endeavor*. Instead, it involves interactions, interrelations, and tensions among a range of actors. That, in turn, leads to frequent reshaping of the ideas, norms, and practices that define who is (and is not) a “journalist” and what “journalism” is (and is not).

For example, as web developers became more central to creating interactive data visualizations in some newsrooms, they were physically moved to desks that were closer to the data journalists in that newsroom. That, in turn, gave those coders reputational credit within journalistic spaces — they began being seen less as support staff and more as journalists in their own right — and gave them a greater ability to reshape the journalistic culture within those newsrooms.

Finally, although some actors may be thought of as being central to or on the periphery of that network encompassing “journalism,” it is important to recognize that their positions within the network are often fluid. This means that they can move from the periphery to a more central position over time — or, the network may become re-centered toward certain kinds of actors. Those fluid linkages within the social network

can thus grant different actors different forms and amounts of power over time. For example, as U.S. journalism progressed in its digital transformations, actors who were technically proficient with the so-called ‘new media’ began to have a stronger voice within newsrooms. Similarly, individuals whose informal writing styles may have relegated them to the periphery of journalism in the past — they may not have been considered ‘serious’ journalists because of how they wrote — may now find a place closer to the center as a result of the large and engaged online followings they can attract. Journalistic networks thus adapt as the institution of journalism evolves.

Key Takeaways

- The term “social actors” refers to the human individuals (and the organizations they work for) that operate within a given space, like journalism.
- There is a wide range of editorial, economic, and technical actors in journalism, and those actors may operate within and outside the newsroom. Examples of these actors include reporters, proprietors, and web developers.
- In addition to traditional actors, there are also interlopers, or actors who are not typically recognized as journalistic actors and may operate outside of typical

journalistic spaces but nevertheless exert substantial influence on journalism.

- Journalistic spaces are shaped in large part through the interactions, interrelations, and tensions within the assemblage of actors in that space.
- Over time, actors can move between central and peripheral positions within the network encompassing the space of “journalism” (or some subset of it). Alternatively, the network can also become re-centered in favor of certain kinds of actors.

TECHNOLOGICAL ACTANTS

Introduction

Although journalism is often associated with human beings, non-human entities also play an important role in shaping journalism — especially today. We can refer to *the material, non-human technologies* that make a difference to how news is produced and disseminated as *technological actants* within the space of journalism. Examples of technological actants in journalism include word processing applications (used to produce news stories), search engine algorithms (used to find news), and smartphones (used to consume news).

While that definition may seem quite abstract, at its heart is a simple truth: Nearly all of today's journalistic work is shaped in some part by technology. This isn't a recent development, though. Technological actants have played a major role in the historical development of journalism. For example, the development of the printing press made the mass distribution of journalism theoretically possible, even as it restricted the formats that journalistic products could take on due to the technology's limitations. Another technological actant, the

telegraph, enabled newswire services like *The Associated Press* to develop and allowed reporters to transmit their reports relatively quickly from afar. Conversely, the proliferation of the telephone allowed more reporting to be done from within the newsroom since reporters could just call their sources instead of having to meet them in person.

Technological actants are important because they both enable, restrict, and shape different forms of journalism in both visible and invisible ways, and they very much impact the social actors (human beings) who interact with technology. Moreover, although technological actants are often described as neutral entities — after all, they're machines presumably acting in predictable ways — technological actants are very much shaped by the social actors who create them.

Technology Shaping Human Behaviors

In the aforementioned examples of the printing press, the telegraph, and the telephone, *technological actants shaped the behaviors of human actors* by creating new possibilities and restricting others.

For a more detailed example, consider the following scenario: A news organization uses a content management system to facilitate its workflow, and all reporters at that organization must submit their stories through that system. When a

reporter sees that a star athlete announced, via a video on Instagram, that they're signing a new contract, the reporter quickly writes a news brief for the website and plans to embed the Instagram post so readers may see the athlete's excitement with their own eyes. However, it turns out that the particular content management system used by the news organization does not have the technical capacity to embed social media posts in a story — perhaps the person who created the system just never thought to add the functionality. Thus, the reporter must either describe the video through the text in the story or send the reader away from the story through a link to the post.

In that example, the technological actant (the content management system) shaped a particular human choice by making it impossible for the reporter to pursue their preferred course of action, which was to embed the post with the video. Instead, it provided the reporter with a limited set of alternative courses of action that the system could accommodate: linking out to Instagram or presenting a written description of the video. Over time, that system may end up discouraging the use of social media in reporting — such as embedding posts that illustrate a point made by the reporter or that include reactions by other people — and thus impact the way the reporters working for that organization relate with their sources and audiences.

It is crucial to note, though, that just because a technological actant is designed to promote a particular way of doing things does not mean that its users will use them in that way — or use that actant at all. Many innovations in journalism

are not actually adopted by journalists. And, when they are, those actants are often adopted in ways that allow journalists to continue doing the things they are used to doing, and in the ways they are used to doing them. In that sense, technological actants can take on the values, operational logics, and biases of their users when they are put to particular uses. For example, when mainstream journalistic outlets began adopting the then-novel blogging format in new sections of their websites, its journalists tended to use the new functionalities in very traditional ways — such as by linking primarily to mainstream organizations, limiting audience participation, and using the same journalistic writing style they were already used to.

Humans Shaping Technology

The relationship between technological actants and human actors is not a one-way street, though. That is, *human actors also shape technological actants*.

It is easy to think of technological actants as neutral tools due to their mechanical nature. However, they are created and refined by human actors, and thus take on certain cultural norms, politics, and ideological values. These may be intentionally inserted into the technological actant by those humans in order to advance certain commercial, technical, or journalistic objectives. They may also be added unintentionally as a result of the human creator's biases and ways of thinking.

To illustrate this, consider a scenario wherein a freelance coder is contracted to create a web tool that helps journalists at a news organization quickly produce interactive data visualizations. The coder intuits that most journalists at that organization are not tech-savvy, and thus chooses to limit the range of customization options so as to not overwhelm the journalists. The coder similarly intuits that many of the journalists lack a design background, and thus implements a feature that will quickly inspect the dataset and recommend the chart form that best illustrates the data. Finally, the coder is told to optimize the tool for “a mobile-first experience,” and the coder thus further restricts the customization options to ensure that the journalist can only create visualizations that look good on a smartphone.

In that scenario, the coder — a social actor — has shaped the tool — a technological actant — in different ways. First, their biases and perceptions lead them to promote a restrictive logic of simplicity within the tool. Second, the coder’s background shapes the tool’s suggestion for which kind of chart to use for a given dataset, and those suggestions may be more oriented to scientific visualizations than journalistic ones if the coder’s background lies outside of journalism. Third, the economic logic of the news organization instructs the coder to optimize the tool’s outputs for smartphones; the coder, in turn, programs the tool accordingly.

As these examples show, not only do technological actants take on the biases and logics of their users when they are put to

use but they are also infused with the logics and biases of their creators as they are built.

Mutual Shaping

By acting upon one another, technological actants are constantly shaping human actors and human actors are constantly shaping technological actants. This is called *mutual shaping* and it operates in an iterative manner.

Returning to our data visualization tool scenario, the coder's choice to have the software recommend pie charts when presented with data about proportions may result in that visual format becoming a popular form in data visualizations created by that organization. However, one of the journalists may find that they want the doughnut chart form (an alternative to pie charts) to be an option, and eventually convince the coder to include that functionality. Over time, the journalist's peers may try that option and come to prefer it. They thus convince the coder to set the doughnut chart to become the default recommendation, which in turn socializes future hires in the organization to consider the doughnut chart first — even as they continue to stay within that general visual aesthetic initially proposed by the non-journalist coder.

As the scenario now shows, a human actor shaped a technological actant, which shaped the behaviors of other human actors, who in turn used the actant in particular ways and had

the coder reshape the actant, which had subsequent impacts on yet more human actors. As such, they were influencing one another over time, with the technological actant taking on the ideas, biases, and logics of different people — even as it influenced those very same people in important ways. While this is a fairly simple example, you can imagine similar mutual shaping processes for more complex technologies (e.g., search algorithms, communication platforms, virtual assistants).

Given that technological actants act and are acted upon by human actors (as well as other technological actants), it is unsurprising that those dynamics introduce fluid power relationships. Those relationships are oftentimes asymmetric, meaning that a technological actant may ultimately have more power over the human actor — and vice versa.

For example, Google's search algorithms may play a major role in determining how many clicks a reporter's story gets, and the reporter may thus try to optimize the language in their story to get more attention from Google. (This is called search engine optimization, or SEO.) However, Google's algorithms are hardly influenced by that individual journalist, or perhaps even the journalism industry as a whole. Thus, that algorithm has more power over the reporter than the reporter has over the algorithm, as the reporter must adapt to remain relevant but not the other way around.

Such power relationships are particularly important to examine as particular technologies become more and less cen-

tral to the profession and to everyday life, and as certain kinds of human actors become more and less central to journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Technological actants refer to material, non-human technologies that make a difference to how journalism is produced and disseminated.
- Technological actants shape human actors by structuring their behaviors, both in terms of making it easier to do some things and impossible to do others.
- Technological actants are not neutral. They are developed by humans and take on those humans' values, biases, and preferred ways of accomplishing tasks. Moreover, they are sometimes intentionally employed within organizations (including newsrooms) to address different commercial, technical, and/or journalistic imperatives.
- The mutual shaping of human actors and technological actants creates power relationships that are fluid and dynamic, and are of consequence to the development of journalism.

AUDIENCES

Introduction

The term *audience* refers to the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of. Within the space of journalism, this would typically be the readers, listeners, viewers, and so on that a journalistic outlet seeks to serve.

News audiences in particular are sometimes interchangeably called “the public” or *citizens*. Those designations typically imply a civic objective: they are individuals that journalists should seek to inform *so that they may participate intelligently in democratic processes*. However, audiences may also be referred to as news *consumers*, which sometimes implies a more commercial logic — after all, the consumption of a product is what is highlighted — and thus emphasizes the organization’s economic objectives over its social ones. More recently, the term “news *users*” has received attention because it moves away from the passive connotation of consumption and instead offers audiences more *agency* by suggesting that they can actively participate in media use.

Although these terms differ, they all orient themselves toward something we can call “news audiences.”

News Audiences Over Time

Although journalistic outlets often depend on their audiences for their financial success — whether directly through subscriptions or indirectly through advertisements — the newsrooms within those organizations have historically wanted little to do with their audiences.

News audiences have historically been treated in a fairly passive sense, as recipients of media or commodities. Put another way, they were often thought about as just people who consumed the work of journalists, and with whom the journalists rarely ever interacted — save for the occasional letter or phone call that a journalist might receive.

Going back to the 1930s, much of the thinking about mass media (which includes journalism) was oriented around a hypodermic needle model wherein ‘the audience’ was seen as a passive, monolithic group that simply accepted media messages as intended by the sender — in this case, the journalist. This view became progressively less influential throughout the 1950s.

Today, audiences are typically seen as having more agency in how they encounter and interpret media messages. Put another way, they are seen as being more able to determine how they find news, being more able to participate in how news is produced and distributed, and having greater ability to interpret news through their own filters, which in turn are shaped by their individual background and beliefs. This has

profoundly changed how news audiences are thought about, both professionally and academically.

Additionally, there are now greater commercial pressures on journalists and journalistic outlets to think about their audiences as potential active participants in news production and distribution, and to enlist their help in order to lower news production costs and increase the organization's reach. As advertising revenue declined for many traditional media sectors and in many parts of the world, commercial journalistic outlets have begun relying more on audience subscription revenue, which generally increase when audiences feel more engaged (and thus see greater value in a subscription). Even among state-supported and non-profit journalistic outlets, audience engagement is becoming an increasingly important marker for legitimizing those outlets' requests for funding.

News Audiences and Participation

However, just because audiences *can* participate does *not* mean that news producers will seek or even want their participation.

It has been argued that part of what gives a journalist a professional sense of identity is that they have a 'sixth-sense' for news, and the training needed to produce it well. Journalists have thus historically rejected high degrees of audience participation in news production because they perceived such par-

ticipation to be an affront to their independence and expertise, and thus to the quality of the news content they produced.

In recent years, however, there has been a cultural shift within the industry toward welcoming participation — and doing so in ways that are not simply optimized toward economic benefits. Journalists today are generally more open to the idea of co-production with audiences since they have seen first-hand the quality of the work that citizen journalists have been able to produce. They also now have access to technological actants that make it easier to enlist the help of audiences to engage in certain tasks, like reviewing large troves of public documents released by whistleblowers and activists. Furthermore, there is greater acceptance of the idea that audiences have more to offer journalism — whether through story ideas or their own social networks — than they have been able to contribute in the past.

However, just because audience participation is welcomed does *not* mean that audiences will themselves want to participate. This is especially true if there is no incentive for participation, or if they're treated as an appendix of sorts in the broad scheme of things. Put differently, audiences are attune to *exploitation* — such as being asked to simply do grunt work for free — and participatory forms of journalism are therefore most successful when the relationships are perceived as being reciprocal, with both journalists and audiences feeling like they have gained something as a result. As such, discussions about

“participatory journalism” now also include terms like “reciprocal journalism.”

Fragmentation of News Audiences

Today’s media ecology has also complicated ideas about audiences and the experiences they have. For one, the rapid growth of media choices people have and the ease with which they may access those choices has resulted in the *fragmentation of news audiences*. No longer do tens of millions of people in the U.S. tune in to see a single news broadcast at the same time, as was the case for CBS Evening News in the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, news audiences are no longer bound to the handful of channels their TV or radio antennas might pick up, to the delivery zones of their local newspapers, or even to the cultural tastes of the owners of local stores that distribute magazines.

Instead, news audiences today can easily navigate their way to the *New York Times*’ website for national news, the *Boston Globe*’s website for regional news, ESPN’s website for sports news, and SCOTUSblog for news about the Supreme Court. If they want to stream local news from the National Public Radio member station in Minneapolis in the morning, and then download a recorded broadcast from its Miami affiliate in the evening, they can do that, too. If they want to see how the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, covered a particu-

lar issue, they can likely find that on YouTube or the BBC's website.

In short, news audiences have access to far more news content, and far more sources, than ever before — and the cost of switching between journalistic outlets, in terms of both money and convenience, is also lower than ever before in many regards. This makes it difficult for a single journalistic outlet to gain a near-monopoly on audiences. However, it has resulted in a media ecosystem wherein a few large organizations are able to capture fairly large audiences due to brand recognition, followed by a steep drop-off to a long tail made up of tens of thousands of journalistic outlets that can only capture niche audiences and are, in many cases, deemed to be interchangeable by users.

Furthermore, not only do audiences now have access to more options for *news* but they also have more options for *other media*. This includes entertainment media, such as a popular show on Netflix or a streamer on Twitch. Such media compete with news for a finite amount of audience time and attention. That, in turn, can further fragment audiences as they turn to many different organizations to satisfy particular media desires instead of relying on a single source, like CBS or NBC, to single-handedly satisfy their want for news, culture, and entertainment.

Technological Actants and

Audiences

Although news audiences now have more agency, it is also important to be aware that technological actants play an important role in *mediating the interactions* between news audiences and journalistic actors, including journalistic outlets. For example, when an individual searches for news about a recent event on YouTube, algorithms developed by engineers at YouTube decide how to order the presentation of the search results. Crucially, those algorithms are optimized to promote certain kinds of content, including provocative or controversial content that will keep users on the platform longer. Thus, news audiences are sometimes given a false sense of control, as the search algorithms work invisibly to promote certain kinds of content while deliberately obfuscating alternatives.

Similarly, the experiences that news audiences have may be personalized in small but important ways. Consider the following example: Dr. Zamith goes to the *New York Times*' website and finds that the first opinion piece listed is about climate change, an issue he cares deeply about. Other users might be shown a different opinion piece, but Dr. Zamith is shown one about climate change because a technological actant's analysis of his past browsing behavior estimated that he's interested in that particular topic. When Dr. Zamith clicks on that opinion piece, he finds that the third paragraph of the story is tailored to describe the average highs and lows over the past few decades in Amherst. That's because a different technological

actant guessed Dr. Zamith's location based on his IP address, and yet another actant looked up the climate information in that area and generated a paragraph of text describing it. Then, as Dr. Zamith scrolls to the middle of the article, he encounters an image of a map-based data visualization that is automatically zoomed into Amherst. That's because yet another technological actant determined that Dr. Zamith is using his phone to access the story. Had he used a device with a larger screen, like a laptop, Dr. Zamith would have been shown an interactive map of the entire United States, which casts a broader lens on the issue.

Throughout that example, a series of technological actants intervened in Dr. Zamith's news experience in fairly invisible ways. These interventions may be seen as positive. By personalizing the news experience, the story may feel more engaging to Dr. Zamith and get him to care more about the issue. However, such personalization can be highly problematic if the technological actants are used to mediate experiences by offering audiences highly different stories based on characteristics like political ideology, race and ethnicity, or economic status. In the extreme, such interventions would make it harder for a *public* to have a shared sense of reality — something that scholars have argued is important for democratic deliberation.

Technological actants have also altered the way news audiences and journalistic actors communicate with one another, and thus the kinds of relationships they tend to develop. For example, audience members are now more likely to give feed-

back on a story through brief, immediate, public exchanges directed at the journalist using a platform like Twitter, as opposed to longer, slower, private exchanges like a letter or e-mail. This can result in more meaningful and direct audience participation. However, it can likewise promote negative forms of participation, such as ‘brigading’ and strategic harassment of journalists.

Key Takeaways

- Audiences are the individuals and groups to whom products and services, like journalism, are produced for or in the service of.
- Historically, journalistic audiences have generally been thought about as passive recipients of media or commodities. In more recent times, journalistic audiences have gained greater ability (and recognition) as active participants in media production and distribution.
- Just because audiences can participate does not mean that producers will want or seek their participation, or that audiences will themselves want to participate.
- Today’s diffuse media ecology permits greater news audience fragmentation, as audiences not only have more choices but also tend to consume different kinds of news from different journalistic outlets. Additionally, journal-

istic media are competing with even more (non-journalistic) media than ever before for a finite amount of time and attention.

- The relationships between journalistic actors and audiences is mediated to a great extent today by technological actants.

JOURNALISTIC ACTIVITIES

Introduction

Journalistic activities refer to the *routinized practices* that help shape both news media messages and the ways they are distributed and consumed.

The phrase “routinized practices” underscores that journalistic activities tend to follow certain routines, or ways of doing things. They’re often deeply influenced by long-standing institutional logics, processes, and cultural values that make it possible for different kinds of social actors and technological actants to not only *work together* but also *work efficiently* across the multi-stage process of producing journalism.

Although journalistic activities are influenced by their past, they are not static or unchangeable. In fact, they frequently iterate as new configurations of social actors, technological actants, and audiences emerge as a result of social, political, economic, and technological changes within media industries and society at large.

For example, journalism was historically a more insular practice, with journalists often writing for an audience they

knew relatively little about and received relatively little input from. Put another way, after the journalist identified a story *they* perhaps thought was important, the journalist would report it and write it in a way that would help answer questions they thought their audiences probably had. After the editors and production staff processed the journalist's story, it would appear on somebody's doorstep. That was often the end of that story's lifecycle.

In contrast, that same journalist is today more likely to be looking at social media trends to identify story ideas, put out open calls to solicit help in running down a tip, and even receive frequent audience feedback about their story after it has been published. Moreover, that journalist may go on to respond to questions about the story on social media and later tweet small updates to the story based on audience interest. Journalistic activities today are thus more social and less insular.

From Production to Consumption

We can broadly place many of the most consequential journalistic activities into five distinct stages: *access and observation*, *selection and filtering*, *processing and editing*, *distribution*, and *interpretation*.

Access and Observation

Access and observation pertains to the information gathering stage of news production. This involves gathering source material, like attending a press conference, being present at a protest, or gaining access to confidential government reports. It also involves identifying patterns in those source materials, like the members of Congress who routinely receive more political donations from certain industries. Regular citizens are now far more likely to participate in this stage than in times past because they can easily serve as observers by streaming events or capturing incidents that professional journalists may not be able to observe first-hand themselves. For example, a Minneapolis teenager received a special citation by the Pulitzer Board in 2021 for filming the murder of George Floyd. That video was crucial to journalistic coverage of that incident, and it helped generate a great deal of media attention to the issue of police violence against people of color in the summer of 2020.

Selection and Filtering

Selection and filtering pertains to the stage wherein gathered information is winnowed down to its most interesting and/or important parts. This involves looking at all potential stories that might emerge from an event, like a protest, and deciding what to include in a news product and where to include it. For example, a journalist may choose to focus the story on the

size of the turnout at a protest, on the police response to the protesters, on the history of the issue that is being protested against, on the potential solutions to the issue, and so on. Even if the journalist has the time or space to cover every one of those angles — and they often do not — they still need to decide which aspect of the issue to lead the news story with.

Processing and Editing

Processing and editing pertains to the stage wherein the gathered and filtered information is turned into a news product, often by following certain stylistic guidelines. For example, the journalist may be expected to organize the information using the inverted pyramid schema, wherein the most timely and important information is placed near the very top of the story, followed by decreasingly important details until you get to the non-essential background information at the end. The journalist may also be expected to generally use non-emotive language, like claiming a policy proposal was “dismissed” instead of “lambasted” in order to signal their neutrality. Within this stage, there may be multiple individuals (from the supervising editor to a copy editor to the layout or web editor) modifying the news product as it moves through the news production chain.

Distribution

Distribution pertains to the stage wherein news products are disseminated to audiences, such as by broadcasting a news story on a television show or trying to place it on a user's social media feed. Historically, newsroom personnel had a limited role to play in this stage as organizations had a dedicated group of people to handle these activities. For example, dedicated print workers would set up the printing press, print thousands of copies, and stash them in bunches at a delivery dock. Delivery workers would then pick up and drop off individual copies at subscribers' homes. Today, however, newsroom personnel often participate directly in the distribution process by linking to their own stories on social media and sometimes even trying to draw attention to the stories by engaging in online communities where would-be audiences might congregate. Additionally, audiences themselves now play a crucial role in distribution: They're often the ones driving attention to a story by sharing it, helping some news products go viral.

Interpretation

Interpretation pertains to the discussion around the distributed news product, and more broadly about how it becomes widely understood and accepted by the general population. Journalists can certainly influence the interpretation of a news product based on the specific words and story angles they use

in describing an issue or event, and editors can similarly play a major role based on the headline they write for the story and the pictures they choose to accompany it. However, audiences also play a crucial role in this process based on how they talk about the product in associated ‘comments’ sections, the contexts within which they share the stories on social media, and the rebuttals they may choose to issue themselves via blogging platforms and the like.

Changing Nature of Activities

At the heart of these examples are human actors. This is because journalistic activities have historically been human-led, with technological actants acting largely in a support role to help enact the human-led objectives more efficiently. For example, content management systems made it possible for journalists to quickly write their stories — perhaps with some automated spell- and grammar-checking help — and easily move it up the chain to a human editor. However, human beings were still doing much of the core labor.

This is changing, however. In some instances, the roles are now outright inverted, with the human social actor playing the support role and the technological actant taking the primary journalistic role, and sometimes acting with a remarkable degree of *independence*. For example, newswriting algorithms are already able to take in large numbers of electronic financial

reports, identify the most interesting changes from the previous financial quarter, and write thousands of news stories that look very similar to what a human journalist might have produced. Another algorithm may then take those stories and post them to an organization's website — with a clever headline and all — and automatically promote it on social media. All of this can be done with limited human intervention, beyond the work that goes into setting up the algorithm.

While algorithmically led user-facing activities are still the exception within the *general* space of journalism, they have become central in some sectors. For example, *The Associated Press* publishes tens of thousands of algorithmically written news stories about finance and sports each year, and a major journalistic media chain in Sweden employs algorithms to automatically organize news stories on their homepages using a mixture of personalization and algorithmic editorial judgment.

Thus, while journalistic activities are often organized around predictable routines shaped by history, they're also continually iterating before our eyes.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic activities refer to the routinized practices that help shape news messages as well as their distribu-

tion and consumption.

- Journalistic activities are often governed by long-standing principles, values, and ways of doing things. However, they also evolve to accommodate new arrangements of social actors, technological actants, and audiences.
- When it comes to journalism, we can broadly place the most consequential activities within five stages: access and observation, selection and filtering, processing and editing, distribution, and interpretation.
- While technological actants have historically been used to support human actors, in some cases they are now able to work fairly independently from them.

MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMATIZING OUR RELATIONS WITH MEDIA

1. Introduction:

Problematizing our Relations with Media Technologies

We are immersed in a world mediated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), both hardware (smartphones, smartwatches, home assistants) and software (algorithms, software programs, and infrastructures such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat). We are transformed by these media, whether we have invited them into our lives or not. We subsequently perceive and engage with the world through these transformations. However, media literacy for the most part does not provide clear assistance in helping us become aware of these effects.

Thus far, media literacy has focused mainly on developing the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media mes-

sages, and has not focused sufficiently on the impact of the actual technological medium, how it enables and constrains both messages and media users. Additionally, a more fully developed media literacy would situate media investigations in such a way as to allow for a deeply practical analysis without losing a holistic, theoretical perspective. In order to accomplish this, a concise transdisciplinary approach comprised of a general framework and specific instrument is proposed. This approach is based on an interdisciplinary study of postphenomenology, media ecology, philosophical posthumanism, and complexity theory.

The framework of the approach described in this book uses six groupings of relations: technological, sociocultural, time, space, mind, and body, with a main emphasis on technological relations. How these relations, as well as their interrelational effects, participate in the constitution of the human subject is explored through an analysis of a museum selfie, which contributes to the development of a pragmatic instrument that can be used for media literacy.

The pragmatic instrument helps bring to the foreground the contributing influences that are continually constituting human subjects in everyday media environments, thus allowing people to make more informed decisions on which media they invite into their lives. The human subject is understood here as a posthuman subject, as opposed to the standalone, exceptional being with roots in the Enlightenment. The posthumanist approach understands the human subject as

constantly becoming through the myriad of constituting relations in their life. While it is not possible to completely understand the complexity of all interrelations that constitute us, the more we can become aware of how we relate with the world through these transformed aspects of our selves, the greater chance we will have for reclaiming some of our agency, which arguably is the main goal of media literacy.

In this chapter I provide an overview of the current trend of an ever increasingly media-saturated world and how media literacy currently responds. I discuss the importance of the technological medium, the technological relation, and describe the importance of better understanding the human subject. I share the overall structure of this book and briefly touch upon the various fields that will be addressed.

Situating the Research

My own personal research interest began by focusing specifically on the effect of ICTs on museum visitor experience.

Investigating the

mediating relations between humans and technologies led me to an approach in philosophy of technology called post-phenomenology.

While this helped me to understand the mediating role of technologies, it also raised unanswered questions as to exactly how the subject was being transformed in its relation with technology. This then led me to broaden my focus and attempt

to more completely understand the subject as embodied and situated in a complex network of a multiplicity of relations, one group of these relations being technological. This led me to develop an approach that reflects this interrelationality and that can be an effectively used for media literacy.

It is fairly common for people in the developed Western world to live in a media-saturated environment. However, far from being new, this trend began in earnest with Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which eventually led to an exponential increase in literacy and a democratization of information, education, and knowledge (Martin & Cochrane, 1994; Ong, 2012; Postman, 2006; Strate, 2014). The printing press paved the way for communication through mass replication and broad dissemination. Today, as we enter into the second decade of the twenty-first century, there is a ubiquity of screened-communication technologies that allow us, for the most part, to communicate whenever and wherever the mood strikes. The ubiquity of ICTs such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops—sometimes referred to as technomedia (Han, 2008)—is the everyday environment within which we live, and this has become 'normal' and unremarkable for a large part of the world—simply part of how things are. Unless noted otherwise, the ICTs I refer to are digitally networked devices that are prevalent in much of the world today.

In the United States, 'Digital media use has increased considerably, with the average 12th grader in 2016 spending more than twice as much

time online as in 2006' (Twenge et al., 2019: 329). In the European Union (EU), while television is still the most commonly used medium—84% watch it every day or almost every day and 94% watch it at least once per week—the number of people who use the internet is catching up, with 65% of EU citizens using it daily or almost daily and 77% using it at least once per week (European Commission, 2018: 4). And throughout the world, a 2017 Pew Research global survey showed that while smartphone ownership has remained steady for developed nations—at around 72%—it is increasing in developing nations, growing from approximately 25% in 2013/2014 to 42% in 2017 (Poushter et al., 2018: 4).

footnote one. It was not the production of books (since books were already being produced), but rather the re-production that printing enabled, making it possible for a large number of people to own a copy of a certain book title.

footnote two. Unless otherwise noted, general pronouns such as 'we' refer to the majority of people living in the contemporary developed Western world.

This environment of ubiquitous ICTs brings many benefits. With our GPS-enabled smartphones we rarely become lost. Finding a place to eat in an unfamiliar town, a place with good reviews and the cuisine of our choice, is now quite easy. Keeping in touch with a large number of friends is as simple as checking our social media feed. By allowing notifications to be sent to us, updates from our 'friends' are delivered directly to our phones, where we can simply glance down to attend to

them. These ICTs enable a robust interconnection with our sociocultural world.

In this saturated media environment, the media tend to disappear into the background of our awareness.³ They become part of the environment in which we live. This immersion, as Figure 1.1 reflects, is especially visible with the number of smartphones in use and how often people are engaged with them. As Galit Wellner (2016) describes, smartphones have a wall/window trait. They create an inclusive ‘window’ to a virtual world and community while also creating an alienating ‘wall’ to whatever and whomever is in the person’s immediate surroundings. This reflects the idea that all technologies are non-neutral and have both enabling and constraining aspects to them (Ihde, 1990).

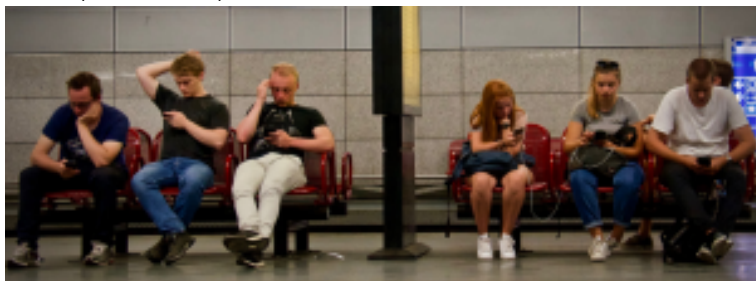


Fig. 1.1 Waiting for the train. Brussels-Luxembourg station, Brussels. Photo by author (2019), [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

footnote 3 See Marshall McLuhan’s use of figure/ground in Logan, 2011; McLuhan et al., 1977.

While many people embrace the changes and innovations in media technologies, others are questioning, pointing out the drawbacks and costs of such changes. The Center for Humane

Technology warns, ‘The companies that created social media and mobile tech have benefited our lives enormously. But even with the best intentions, they are under intense pressure to compete for attention, creating invisible harms for society’ (Center for Humane Technology, n.d.). There is increasing concern about the amount of influence that the dominant GAFAM⁴ (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft) technology companies have (cf. Harris 2019, 2020; Hill, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Additionally, we should not only be concerned with these companies and the content of media messages, but we also should pay attention to the actual technology itself. While there have been certain fields of media studies that focus on the technology or medium (media ecology, mediatization,⁵ medium theory), the field of media literacy has mostly avoided addressing the effects of the technological medium in a rigorous manner.

For all that, our daily lives are interconnected with more than media technologies. There are sociocultural relations such as normativity, power, and language. There are both positive and less than positive issues with our minds and bodies that influence how we relate with media technologies. In addition, we are always located within a specific time and place, both of which relate to media technologies (Innis, 2008). These groups of relations interrelate and inter-influence each other, contributing to the creation of the ever-changing human subject. Salman Rushdie (2006) posits, ‘To understand just one life, you must swallow the world’ (145). I take this

to mean that everything is interconnected, and in order to really know something, we must realize how it is interconnected with everything.

To put this another way, in order to understand any one mediating technology, we must understand all the mediating interrelations that affect us as human subjects. While achieving this level of comprehension is implausible, it alludes to the complexity and challenge of fully understanding the effects of media technologies on a human subject. The more we can understand about these complex interrelations, the greater chance we will have for reclaiming some of our agency, which I believe is one of the primary goals of media literacy. Therefore, in an age of ubiquitous smartphones and other communication technologies, implementing the approach developed in this book can enable media literacy to identify and situate the complex interrelations, such as the sociocultural (normativity, power, language) and the technological, which contribute to the continual constitution of human subjects.

footnote number four Microsoft is not always included, making it GAFA.

Footnote number five Adolf (2011) states ‘mediatization research is about the inherent, the structural role of the media system as a whole for the way we organize and (re)produce our social relations’ (154).

Media Literacy

The field of media literacy attempts to help educate people—especially the young—in order to become more skilled and aware users of media by primarily looking at ‘four components: access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation’ (Livingstone, 2004: 5). Sonia Livingstone describes how these components work together as a dynamic learning process. She outlines how learning to create content helps one better understand and analyze professionally produced content, and the ‘skills in analysis and evaluation open the doors to new uses of the internet, expanding access, and so forth’ (5).

Media literacy is vital to our everyday engagement with ICTs because of their everydayness (Kim, 2015; Onge, 2018). The field of media literacy attempts to shed light on how we use, and are potentially used by, media. With media technology everywhere in our lives, it becomes ordinary; commonplace. These technologies are part of the fabric of our existence, the ordinary environment within which we exist. For example, according to a recent Nielsen report, the average adult (over eighteen years of age) in the U.S. spends around 10 1/2 hours each day involved with some kind of media⁶ (Nielsen, 2019: 3). We live in this mediatized environment and now, more than ever, it is important to have a comprehensive media literacy program that helps us better understand the effects of our media-rich environment. With this in mind, I explore the current approaches in media literacy.

footnote number six Nielsen (2019) defines media as ‘TV, TV-connected devices, radio, computers, smartphones, and tablets’ (3).

Four Approaches to Media Literacy

Media literacy focuses on education in order to help people, especially youth, develop the skills to create (produce) with media technologies, as well as to critically analyze and evaluate media and media messages. Rather than creating grand sociological theories, the focus of media literacy is mostly pragmatic, concerned with helping the user improve their ‘ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts’ (Livingstone, 2004: 3). Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2005; 2007) identify four specific approaches to media literacy: media arts education, the media literacy movement, a protectionist approach, and critical media literacy. While these approaches—which I will briefly describe next—can be perceived as individual approaches, in practice they can be combined with each other, which offsets some of the drawbacks inherent in each approach when used independently.

The approach of media arts education focuses specifically on helping teach students ‘to value the aesthetic qualities of media and the arts while using their creativity for self-expression through creating art and media’ (Kellner & Share, 2007:

7). Here, media is a skill to be learned. The approach of the media literacy movement has ties to print literacy and focuses on the competencies needed in order to be perceived as being 'literate'. Kellner and Share (2005) state that media literacy 'attempts to teach students to read, analyze, and decode media texts in a fashion parallel to the advancement of print literacy' (372). Both of these approaches tend to perceive media in a neutral manner.

However, the protectionist approach typically perceives media technologies in a more determining manner. Some philosophers and media theorists approach media and technology as something that people, especially children, should be protected from. There are valid concerns for a protectionist approach to focus on. Jean Twenge et al. (2018) find, 'Adolescents who spent more time on screen activities were significantly more likely to have high depressive symptoms or have at least one suicide-related outcome, and those who spent more time on nonscreen activities were less likely' (9). Educating people on possible dangers and negative effects of media falls within this protectionist approach.

The approach of critical media literacy has increased the scope of media literacy by adding the critical study of how messages contain underlying stereotypes, marginalization, and exploitation. Livingstone (2004) writes, 'to focus solely on questions of skill or ability neglects the textuality and technology that mediates communication. [...] there is not only skill involved but also an interpretive relationship with a complex,

symbolically-encoded, technologically-mediated text' (8). This addition improves the ability of media literacy to explore and bring to light important issues that are embedded in media messages (Kellner & Share, 2005; Lemke, 2006). On the whole, critical media literacy continues to focus on the symbolic content of the message. While this is important, I believe that if the borders of media literacy can be expanded to include the influence of the actual technological medium as well as the broader context within which the media are used, then a space is created for media literacy to be even more inclusive and effective.

These four approaches will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. The approaches are representative of what is currently happening in media literacy. However, this is not meant to imply a comprehensive reflection of the entire field, which is constantly developing. I will endeavor to include a few of the voices that are encouraging the development of the field. I believe that media literacy can benefit by expanding, and the goal reflected by my research is to create an inclusive and situating approach to do just that.

Footnote number seven From domestication theory arose the concept of double articulation, which 'provides an inclusive move from the semiology to the sociology of media use' (Silverstone et al., 1991: 219). Here, the media object (the television set being the one primarily studied) is examined as a material object embedded within a broader (domestic) context.

Benefits of Expanding Media Literacy

Supporting the expansion of media literacy, David Morley (as cited in Krajina et al., 2014) says, ‘Media questions are important, then, but they only seem to me to be really significant if they are set in a far wider frame, rather than focusing just on media technologies themselves’ (684). One way to increase this frame is through domestication theory,⁷ which parallels aspects of media literacy. Roger Silverstone (1994, 2006) developed domestication theory. Together with Morley, Silverstone began researching television ‘in a broader framework’ (Morley & Silverstone, 1990: 31) in order to understand ‘the meanings of both texts and technologies, [...] as emergent properties of contextualized audience practices’ (32). Domestication theory focused beyond simply the text and analyzed ‘a whole range of overlapping, determinate and indeterminate social and cultural practices which together define—for particular viewers at particular times in particular places—their relationship to the medium’ (Silverstone, 1989: 108).

While domestication theory has worked fairly well theoretically, it has been criticized for the challenge of empirically applying the theory (Hartmann, 2006). Even with the inclusion of the media-as-object, domestication theory still lacks a robust way of investigating the effects of the medium. While domestication concerns itself primarily with social theory, it focuses less on educating the individual as media literacy does.

What is still missing is a concentrated approach to investigating the effects of a specific medium on individuals and societies.

While domestication theory includes attention to media objects such as television sets, it often does so in an anthropological or ethnographic approach (cf. Horst, 2012; Lesage, 2013) with an emphasis on the context within which the object resides. Morley (2009) states, ‘we need a new paradigm for the discipline, which attends more closely to its material as well as its symbolic dimensions’ (114).

The study of media and communications can also have an interdisciplinary focus. Shaun Moores (2005) explains, ‘media have to be understood in their broad social and cultural contexts’ (3). He suggests that it is a common misconception that ‘media studies are simply about “studying media” in isolation’ (3). Contextualizing ideas from Moores and domestication theory counters a more narrowly defined approach to media literacy, and lends support to enhancing media literacy through a situating approach.

Beyond media literacy are other media-related fields researching the impact of ICTs. Some of these are areas that focus on the technological features of media, but their approach can often be more functional. Examples of this are digital literacy (Koltay, 2011; Nichols & Stornaiuolo, 2019); data literacy (Koltay, 2015); and the digital detox movement (Bauwens et al., 2019; Rauch, 2018; Ugur & Koc, 2015).

Additionally, there are disciplines that can provide insights outside of media and communications, which focus on the

relation between humans and technologies; these include post-phenomenology, actornetwork theory (ANT), and the general field of philosophy of technology. Also, scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway offer viewpoints from within philosophical posthumanism that focus more on the human side of human-technology relations. They focus on concepts such as de-centering the human and making sure marginalized groups are included in any definition of 'human'.

The Non-neutrality of Technological Relations

In order to investigate the influence of the technological medium I implement two approaches: a microperceptual and a macroperceptual. The microperceptual approach focuses on the embodied and embedded perspective of a human subject. The macroperceptual approach focuses on the broader socio-cultural context that the particular human subject exists within. Don Ihde (1990) says, "There is no microperception (sensory-bodily) without its location within a field of macroperception and no macroperception without its microperceptual foci" (29). Both the microperceptual and macroperceptual views are entangled and necessary in order to comprehend overall the effects of media and to fully become media literate.

While the four approaches in media literacy (cf. above) are effective in what they do, there are several concepts from other

fields of study that can help create a more robust approach. In order to better understand technological objects, and our relations with them, the fields of postphenomenology and media ecology excel at analyzing technologies, covering the micro level of the embedded and embodied human subject, as well as the sociocultural macro level respectively. Both also stress relationality as a means to understand how we are constituted and transformed by the technological relations in our lives.

Technological Mediation as Relation: A Micro Approach

Relationality is one of the foundational concepts of the posthuman approach that I develop as well as being fundamental to postphenomenology's concept of technological mediation. Technological mediation describes how our technological relations are not neutral, but without succumbing to technological determinism. Jan Bergen and Peter-Paul Verbeek (2020) say, 'technological mediation aims to take technological artifacts seriously, recognizing the constitutive role they play in how we experience the world, act in it, and how we are constituted as (moral) subjects' (1). Postphenomenology specifically analyzes the technological mediation using the formula: I-technology-world. As humans, we are never standalone beings but always in relation; these relations are non-neutral, 8 contribut-

ing to the co-constitution of our selves, the specific technology, and the world (cf. Ihde, 1990; Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015; Smith, 2015; Van Den Eede, 2016; Verbeek, 2005). The term ‘constitution’ is used to describe the specific coming together or unique arrangement that takes place in the process of these relations.

Postphenomenology describes four types of technological relations: embodied (where we perceive the world through the technology, such as with eyeglasses); hermeneutic (where we read the technology to better understand the world, such as with a thermometer); alterity (where we interact with the technology as a quasi-other, such as with an ATM machine); and background (which affect us but mostly go unnoticed, such as a heating and cooling system for one’s house). Postphenomenology excels at investigating the microperceptions experienced by people when they interact with the technologies in their lives. Postphenomenology also acknowledges macroperceptions, what Ihde (1990) calls cultural hermeneutics. However, the sociocultural component is not as emphasized in practice as the microperception. This is where media ecology can contribute to our understanding of technology as an environment.

8 The term non-neutral is used to indicate that a relation is not completely determining but also is not completely neutral.

9 Ivan Kalmar (2005) suggests, ‘if McLuhan’s name no

longer rings as it once did, it is because history has paid his ideas the compliment of making them commonplace' (227).

Media Environments: A Macro Approach

Media ecology is a macro approach that describes media environments. This means that the approach often investigates the broader effects that media has on cultures and societies. Marshall McLuhan (1994) is the person most often associated with media ecology. McLuhan consistently attempted to get society's attention focused on the hidden influence of the medium that helped shape the media's content. His famous aphorism, 'The medium is the message' (7) was one such attempt. He often explained it through the figure/ground analogy where one's usual focus is on the figure (in this case the media's content) and the ground (in this case the medium) goes unnoticed. While McLuhan popularized the study of media, the field of media literacy rarely works closely with his ideas.⁹ Instead, media literacy was 'developed through the work of Len Masterman in England and Barry Duncan in Canada' (as cited in Jolls & Wilson, 2014: 68). Duncan (2010) credited the work of McLuhan for inspiring him in his study of media but still held that the primary focus of media literacy was to understand and study representation.

In contrast, media ecologists focus on understanding media as environments and how those environments affect society.

Harold Innis (2008) writes about the differences that various mediums afford. For instance, Innis discusses the biases of media relating to time and space. He describes heavy media such as clay or stone tablets as being more permanent (able to move through time) but too cumbersome to move very well through space. Papyrus or radio is just the opposite; easy to move across space, but less permanent to move very far through time. This bias affects the type of content that can be 'carried' by the medium. For example, Innis criticizes radio as a medium that 'accentuated the importance of the ephemeral and of the superficial' (82). So, while it is important to analyze the content of media as critical media literacy does, it is also fruitful to analyze the medium itself.

Statements such as the above from Innis have contributed to the criticism that media ecology is technologically deterministic, with their focus on how media technologies influence individual and social behavior. However, before McLuhan popularized looking at the medium, media studies primarily focused on the content of media messages, heavily influenced by semiotics. As most people in media studies were already focused on the content, McLuhan worked to shed light on what was difficult to perceive, which he did by using dramatic and sweeping statements such as the already cited 'the medium is the message', or 'in all media the user is the content' (as cited in McLuhan & Zingrone, 1997: 266).

Most media ecologists have simply been trying to include the influence of the medium in the discussion and do not

claim that the medium is all determining, only that it is not neutral. Lance Strate (2017: 34) states this quite clearly:

The term *technological determinism*, [...] has been linked to the field of media ecology. For the most part, it is a label applied by critics, rather than a term used, let alone embraced, within the field. As there is no doctrine of technological determinism, or arguments that explicitly state such a position within our field, its use amounts to a straw man¹⁰ argument used to dismiss media ecological scholarship, rather than subject it to serious consideration.

Which Human Subject?

While technological relations bring some agency to the technological object side of the human-technology relation, Tamar Sharon (2014) points out that disciplines such as postphenomenology focus more on ‘breathing life into objects [...] than delving into the implications of having breathed life out of subjects’ (9). Sharon proposes that we take a closer look at what is going on with the subject. As we focus on the effects of media on the subject, it is important to identify which human subject is being discussed. I am not referring to the ideal Enlightenment subject: autonomous and exceptional in the world, reflecting a subject/object duality. Instead, the subject is always-in-relation and is continually being constituted

through a complex interrelated network of relations, what I refer to as a posthuman subject.

Rather than a humanist way of understanding the subject, I employ a post-humanist approach, using philosophical posthumanism, which is quite different from transhumanism. While transhumanism does focus on the entanglement of technology and the human, it does so from an ‘ultrahumanist’ (Onishi, 2011: 103) approach. The two fields use the term posthuman in two very different ways. Transhumanists use the word to describe an evolutionary shift for the human that they foresee occurring—primarily through technological means—into vastly more intelligent and efficient beings. Max More (2013) states that by ‘thoughtfully, carefully, and yet boldly applying technology to ourselves, we can become something no longer accurately described as human—we can become posthuman. Becoming posthuman means exceeding the limitations that define the less desirable aspects of the “human condition”’ (4).

footnote number 10 Philosophical strawmen arguments are arguments where the person criticizing a concept first defines the concept without providing all of the context or nuances, allowing them to easily identify flaws.

Philosophical posthumanists, however, use the term posthuman as a way to distance themselves from the traditional idea of the human, based primarily on Enlightenment and modern ideas of the autonomous, standalone, and exceptional human individual. In this case, posthuman refers to a

post-humanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualist approach to understanding the human (Ferrando, 2019). Posthumanism stresses that the subject is constituted through its relations, what Karen Barad (2007) calls intra-action, and will be explored more deeply in Chapter 4. The approach I develop is centered on the human subject as understood by philosophical posthumanism.

Situating Media Literacy with Intrasubjective

Mediation

How can we keep everything straight? On the one hand, it is important to focus on specific technologies and how they affect the individual. On the other hand, it is important to focus on how the broader sociocultural relations—such as power, normativity, or language—affect us. There are technological and sociocultural environments all entangled and all contributing to our own constitution. Maren Hartmann (2006) points out the question that has not yet been solved: ‘how to adequately research the complexity of the combination of media content and media context to paint a picture of the overall whole’ (89).

One important word used throughout this book is ‘situating’. The term ‘situate’ means, ‘To put (something) in a spec-

ified) context; to describe the circumstances surrounding (something)’ (OED online, 4th definition). The approach developed is precisely dedicated to facilitating this. It creates a simple structure that can help guide the investigation into the complex interrelated processes that affect our relations with media.

The following research questions helped guide my understanding of the transforming impact of ICT technologies in our lives and also to inform the creation of the new approach developed. My research questions are as follows:

1. How can we specifically analyze and understand the interrelating micro and macro effects of media technologies on human subjects? [Chapters 3 and 4]
2. How do media relations interrelate with other relations—such as socio-cultural, time and space, and mind and body—in their constitution of the human subject? [Chapter 5]
3. How can an instrument be developed in order to tether our investigations, keeping us grounded to an overarching inclusive framework while we delve deeply into the specific relations that contribute to our constitution and enhance media literacy? [Chapters 5 and 6]

In order to help guide an investigation into the various relations, the approach developed leverages the concept of intra-subjective mediation, which is the idea that we are—and

continue to be—mediated by the constituting aspects of all of our relations. The approach investigates both the current and continuing impact from relations, which in the case of media technology will help us to become more media literate by understanding the broader effects of media technologies. The framework serves to create a situating cartography, 11 which captures the main interrelating groups of relations that contribute to the constitution of the human subject. This supports Shaun Moores’ (2016) call for a non-media-centric media literacy. By focusing on one aspect of media literacy, we can easily lose sight of others. By creating a situating instrument, we can tether our approach to the broader, encompassing framework while allowing our focus to narrow momentarily into each specific constituting relation.

footnote 11 11 I use the term cartography as a facilitator of exploration rather than as a prescriptive map.

Research Significance and Design

While the ubiquitous smartphone is likely the most common ICT that comes to mind for those in the Western globalized world, there are plenty of other technological devices (such as ebook readers and tablets), often networked, which make up the tapestry of our world today. Looking around at people, especially when they are in a forced pause—waiting for a doctor’s visit, for a train, etc. (see Fig. 1.1)—often they are looking

down at some technology rather than looking around and engaging with their immediate environment. They are immersed in technology that virtually transports them elsewhere. Consider the following insight from Yoni Van Den Eede et al. (2017b: xxv):

With the onset of mobile communication technology, media are no longer ‘over there’; they are moving toward us, into us. Looking at the history of media, one perceives almost the evolution of an organism becoming more and more complex, diverse, and ubiquitous.

This technology can be a book, an ebook, smartphone, game console, or any of the other technologies that permeate our contemporary world. It is easy to become so distracted by the constant presence of technology in our lives that we do not recognize how many of our actions are being mediated in some way by these technologies. Instead, we tend to focus on posting and sharing, liking and commenting; simply living our mediated lives. The challenge for media literacy in this ubiquity and transparency is the fact that these mediating technologies are not registering in our awareness.

footnote 12 Semiotics, the study of words and language—sign and signifier—is mostly outside the scope of this book. However, it is quite important, so there is a place for it within the framework/instrument I develop.

Use of Language

Though it is rather obvious to state that language¹² plays a key role in communication throughout this book, I want to take a moment to acknowledge its importance. Especially as I use words like ‘human’ in new ways (for instance the difference between what is referred to the human by humanists, transhumanists, or posthumanists). The specific words I use greatly affect the success, or lack thereof, of the ability to transmit ideas to the reader. Each word is a choice that has both benefits and limitations. Words are limited in their ability to faithfully represent the intended meaning behind them. In addition, words cut and separate; they are often thought of as individual carriers of meaning. Words also have historical use and cultural meanings attached. Different groups of people embody different ways of viewing the world and its relations, which affects a reader’s understanding of particular words. An example of the challenge of using words is trying to describe an interconnected and interrelated individual when the word ‘individual’ has been used to imply autonomy and separation. Kenneth Gergen (2009: xxvii) describes this issue quite well:

The very idea of individual persons is a byproduct of relational process. But how can I describe this process without using a language that inherently divides the world into bounded entities? To be more specific, by relying on common conventions of writing, I will invariably rely

on nouns and pronouns, both of which designate bounded or identifiable units. The very phrase, 'I rely on you....' already defines me as separate from you. [...] Try as I may to create a sense of process that precedes the construction of entities, the conventions of language resist. They virtually insist that separate entities exist prior to relationship.

In this book I constantly struggle with words that divide and separate while I attempt to use them in ways that gather and combine. For instance, I often use the term 'subject' and refer to technological 'objects', but rather than meaning them in a dualist Cartesian split, I mean them to be constituted in relation to each other and not as standalone. Additionally, instead of using 'myself' or 'ourselves' I separate the terms from each other in order to highlight the self-subject that I am focusing on. My goal is to highlight, but not separate in any Cartesian sense.

I have also chosen to use the present tense when citing someone. I want to stress a current engagement with the concepts and words from people, even if those people are no longer living. My intention is to keep my philosophical approach as contemporary as possible, even when engaging with older philosophical ideas.

The words 'media' and 'medium' can also benefit from further explanation. While media is plural for medium, in today's contemporary

Western world it is often used to refer to mass media, as in ‘the media’. However, it is also used to refer to communication devices, as in technological media. For this book I will specifically use the term medium (or mediums for plural) to refer to the media technology that performs media content—examples being television, newspapers, and smartphones. I will use the term ‘media’ as a more general term and one primarily directed at content (unless used as ‘media literacy’).

I recognize that the term posthuman is one that can challenge some readers and may not be readily understood. However, I view this as beneficial since the comfort and ease which many find using the word human is exactly what the posthuman approach is trying to undermine.

By using posthuman I hope to bring the reader’s attention to figuring out exactly what is meant. This questioning of human or posthuman is one of the main goals of the approach described in this book.

And finally, is the approach described best called an approach, a method, a cartography, a cartographic method, a framework, or an instrument? Each word carries the sediment of historical use and each reader will interpret these words through their own understanding. My goal is to make it as accessible as possible without either putting on academic airs or making it too specific. Deleuze’s cartography is appropriate, and calling it a posthuman cartography would be fine for people in the field of posthumanism. However, there are different ways of using the term ‘cartography’. One way is a pre-

scriptive and controlled manner. This is the typical ‘map’, with lines of demarcation and separation, cutting a representation of reality into categories of differentiation. This is not the way I am using the term. Therefore, I ultimately decided to call it a ‘posthuman approach’ to stress its interrelational focus as well as to connect it with the various ‘approaches’ used in media literacy.

Designing Interdisciplinary Research and a Transdisciplinary Solution

My research is an interdisciplinary exploration of media technologies and how our relation with media contributes to the constitution of our subjectivity. Marilyn Stember (1991) defines interdisciplinary as bringing ‘interdependent parts of knowledge into harmonious relationships through strategies such as relating part and whole or the particular and the general’ (4). While the research I conducted has been interdisciplinary, the solution of the posthuman approach can be considered transdisciplinary. Wendy Austin et al. (2008) describes how transdisciplinary solutions can often emerge spontaneously from interdisciplinary research ‘when discipline-transcending concepts, terminology, and methods evolve to create a higher level framework’ (557). This reflects the process I experienced in doing this research.

The need for the original interdisciplinarity arose from my own research on museum selfies (Lewis, 2017); from this work, I realized the limitation of using only postphenomenology to investigate how my museum experience was being affected by the mediating technology that I was using. I felt that postphenomenology was not completely able to capture the complexity of constituting relations that I was experiencing, and there were more relations affecting my experience than the technological. This limitation led to more deeply exploring the concept of the human subject in its involvement with technologies than what postphenomenology provided. I discovered that by investigating several fields of inquiry, there were useful insights from each field for the overall development of my culminating approach. The fields I investigated, all being interdisciplinary themselves, were: postphenomenology, philosophical posthumanism, complexity, media literacy, and media ecology. However, as Van Den Eede (2016: 103) notes,

Notwithstanding much feverish talk about inter- and multi-disciplinarity, real and substantial dealings between disciplines remain hard to come by. Paradoxically, that even counts for disciplines that are in themselves eclectic and composed of elements hailing from many different domains.

My initial research question of how technology affects the human subject steered me down several different paths, finally depositing me, in a circular fashion, back to my starting point.

In fact, it was my investigation as to what was happening to me while taking a museum selfie that drove me to realize that I needed a new approach that did not seem to exist. An approach that would help me understand all of the influencing relations that were acting upon one another during my experience taking museum selfies.

In order to manage the expectation of the reader, it is important to note that my research does not reflect either a typical manuscript within continental philosophy or a typical book in media and communications studies. For example, many books in continental philosophy focus on a deep analysis of the writings of a specific philosopher, and in media and communications studies, at least where I was conducting my research in Brussels, it is most common to do an empirical study. Instead, my goal is to engage contemporarily with a variety of philosophers and philosophical approaches. Using the words of other philosophers and researchers honors the fact that they wrote the words and that the words spoke to me, but I take responsibility for using them for my own context and in my own way. Through this process I create an approach that is pragmatic and helpful in learning to understand the daily effects that media technologies have on us as human subjects.

The Layout of the Chapters

This book is divided into two parts. In Part I—Chapters 2 through 4—I develop the background concepts drawing upon

media literacy, postphenomenology, media ecology, and philosophical posthumanism. However, the book does not need to be read by starting at the beginning. Some readers may want to skip the initial foundational chapters and simply get right to Part II—Chapters 5 and 6—where I develop the posthuman approach, both the overarching general frame, as well as a pragmatic instrument that shows how to implement the concepts into media literacy. Instructors who would like to use the approach without specifically framing it within media literacy can focus on Chapters

3 through 6. One option that I have used with university students is an hour lecture for each of the Chapters 3 through 6. This builds the foundation for then having the students use their specific technological relation in order to experientially engage with the instrument described in Chapter 6.

Specifically, Chapter 2 explores the various aspects of media literacy, from the five core concepts (cf. Fig. 2.1), to the four aspects outlined by Kellner and Share (2005, 2007). Additionally, I look to domestication theory, as first identified by Silverstone (2006; see also Haddon, 2007; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), which leads to the idea of double and triple articulation of media technologies (Courtois et al., 2013; Livingstone, 2007). The concept of triple articulation emphasizes the content of the media, the medium itself, and the context that the media is used in. This facilitates the move for media literacy to go beyond the traditional four approaches and connects to the next chapter.

In Chapter 3, postphenomenology and media ecology emphasize analyzing the technological relations on micro and macro levels. I first investigate postphenomenology, which focuses on humantechnology relations. This creates the foundational building block of my approach: the embodied relation. I explore various concepts that are articulated in postphenomenology, such as the non-neutrality of technology, multistability, sedimentation, and technological mediation as constitutive.

Secondly, I investigate media ecology, where the focus is specifically on the medium. I explore the idea of media as environments within which cultures can grow. Neil Postman (1970) states that media ecology studies information environments in order to ‘understand how technologies and techniques of communication control the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information; and how, in turn, such information configurations or biases affect people’s perceptions, values, and attitudes’ (186). However, if media literacy is often too focused on the content, then media ecology can be accused of being too often focused on the medium, to the detriment of other influencing factors. There should be a balance and a manner to include all of the influencing relations; it is this gap that I intend to eventually fill through the approach developed.

In Chapter 4, the investigation focuses on the subject that is being constituted through the technological relations described in chapter three. I use philosophical posthumanism,

as opposed to a humanist or transhumanist approach, to situate the post-humanist subject within a non-anthropocentric and non-dualist frame. Posthumanism also approaches the human subject as complex and always changing. I investigate the concept of complexity that is used in posthumanism—and occasionally used in media ecology—and I demonstrate how this term is fundamentally different from a mechanistic or causal approach to understanding the world.

With the background and fundamental concepts having been firmly established in the first four Chapters, the new framework is presented

in Chapter 5. This framework allows for a clearer understanding of all of the relating and interrelating effects of media on the human subject,

situating not only the technological and cultural, but the relations of time and space, as well as mind and body. I bring all the main concepts together in order to offer a comprehensive framework for situating media literacy.

In Chapter 6, I demonstrate how the framework can be employed by applying it to analyze a museum selfie. This leads to the development of a generic instrument for self-inquiry (or one could say an autoethnographic inquiry) into moments of media use, which can be used for enhancing media literacy. As previously mentioned, it was in trying to understand the constituting effect of museum selfies that I realized I needed a more inclusive approach in the beginning of my research. Within Chapter 6, the complex interrelationality of all of the

contributing factors that occur while taking a museum selfie is demonstrated. The museum selfie is a contemporary phenomenon that captures many issues investigated in this research. I conclude by creating an exercise that can be used for teaching media literacy. This exercise can be downloaded by going to the 'Additional Resources' tab at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0253#resources>. This should be considered a starting point for further exploration into how this posthuman approach might be implemented for the purpose of media literacy education.

Concluding Thoughts

At the convergence of the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2017) and the sixth mass extinction (Cafaro, 2015), we find our selves at a crossroads. Being media literate is but one fundamental aspect of life in a time of complex planetary existence. Being able to situate whatever we study is critical in order to maintain perspective and not fall prey to any one specific discipline or way of thinking. While I have attempted to be broad in scope for understanding media, media literacy, and communications, there are important ways of using media literacy that I only examine in a cursory manner, since a more comprehensive study is beyond the focus of a single book. Language is one such area. Signs and their ability (and inability) to transfer information, specifically looking into encoding and decoding, is a large area of research already established within

media and communications; however, it is beyond the scope of this book. Ethics and normativity, both immensely important, are also only lightly touched upon because, in my opinion, the first important step before being able to ethically or morally judge is to have awareness of the situation. This book describes an approach that can help develop the awareness necessary that can then allow us to critically judge.

John Culkin (1967) concisely sums up the focus of this book with the words, ‘We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us’ (70). I investigate the transformative effects of the tools we use daily in our lives, specifically ICTs. The paradigmatic example of ICTs that I will often use throughout is the smartphone. These technologies permeate our existence, especially in the Western world. ‘It takes less and less deliberate action on our part to engage with media or ICTs. No longer do we need to place ourselves behind a computer to go online; we carry “the online” constantly in our pockets or on our wrists’ (Van Den Eede et al., 2017b: xvii). For many of the people in the Western world, everyday life is completely entangled with media technologies, so much so that these technologies are no longer in the forefront of our attention; they have faded into the background.

It is vital that media literacy steps in and plays a role in helping us become aware of the everyday media technologies in our lives and the influences they have upon our selves and society (cf. Kim, 2015; McLuhan, 1994; Silverstone 1994; Strate, 2017). As Catherine Adams and Terrie Lynn Thompson

(2016) say, it is about understanding the digital and ‘making its effects and affects visible’ (2). In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of media literacy, we need a more complete understanding of how human subjects are constituted through all of their relations. We need to develop a right view, an orientation that allows us to better situate, and therefore more fully understand, our technological relations in order for us to make better decisions, to judge what and how to engage with the ubiquitous technologies in our everyday lives. The posthuman approach I have developed accomplishes this by situating the complex interrelating and constituting relations of human subjects and media technologies.

Media Attributions

- Screenshot 2025-10-28 091408

OLD TO NEW MEDIA

Social media have evolved through human cultural practices along with technological affordances.

Diana Daly

Key points

- Social media evolution bridges cultural practices and technological changes.
- Blending old and new technologies is evident, such as the iconic shutter sound of digital cameras.
- Diverse methods, beyond traditional media, have been historically used for broad communication.
- User-generated content challenges the traditional one-way flow of information.
- Major platforms like Google and Facebook profoundly influence industries, local

economies, and cultures.

- Web 3.0, driven by Tim Berners-Lee's mission, aims to give users control over their data, challenging the current paradigm of data ownership on social networks.

In this chapter

- Section 1: Media convergence
 - Student insights: How I got my first phone (video by Aditya Kumar, Spring 2021)
- Section 2: The history of communicating with many at once
 - Student insights: My first encounter with technology (video by Anna, Spring 2021)
- Section 3: A millennial shift: Web 2.0 as user contributions
 - Student insights: Simpler times (video by Luis A. Ruiz, Spring 2021)
 - Student Insights: Generations on

Social Media (writing by Jaden Fernandez, Spring 2021)

- Section 4: Dominating today: The platform economy
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 - Student Insights: Old vs. New Media (audio & writing by Tyler Amberg, Fall 2021)
- Virtuality 3.0: SXSW in Austin, TX — Social Media and Ourselves podcast
- Core Concepts
- Core Questions
- How will AI affect workers? Tech waves of the past show how unpredictable the path can be

It is important to understand the relationships between older media and social media. By older media, I mean the industry-produced form of mass communication available in

the US before digital social media became a thing, such as television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, etc.

Older media can be referred to by other names, such as traditional media. And then there are subcategories of older media: broadcast media are one subcategory of older media, including television and radio, that communicates from one source to many viewers at once. Print media are a paper-based subcategory of older media such as newspapers, books, and magazines, that many users access.

Section 1: Media convergence

New digital media devices inherit many qualities and functions of older media and forms of communication.



Mobile Phone Evolution: The shapes of mobile phones have evolved over time to become less similar to older analog phones. [Cell phone evolution](#) by Anders, Public Domain.

Here's an example: When your phone camera snaps a digital photo, it probably makes [this sound](#) or something like it. That sound is the sound of a shutter opening and closing. It is a sound that **analog** (non-digital) cameras have to make in order to function.

Digital cameras don't have shutters; they function through chips that sense light coming into the lens. So why do so many digital cameras make that shutter sound? Because developers wanted your device to signal

to you that the photo was taken, and that sound has become associated with picture taking in our society. Media scholar Henry Jenkins calls this type of blending of old and new media "technological convergence." (Convergence just means coming together while moving through time.) Technological convergence is one of [several types of media convergence](#) that Jenkins writes are crucial to understanding our media world today.

Our technologies are full of convergences with older, tradi-

tional media helping us make sense of new media. Some signs of technological convergence go away over time as we become more comfortable with technologies. For example, mobile phones were once shaped more like analog phones, which helped people feel more comfortable calling and talking on them. However, as they gained more entertainment-related affordances, they began to appear more like remote control devices.

Student insights: How I got my first phone (video by Aditya Kumar, Spring 2021)



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<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=70#h5p-4>



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<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=70#h5p-298>

Respond to this case study: What expectations went into your first desire for a networked device? How were they fulfilled, or not fulfilled, when you got one? What do you recognize about owning a connected device now that you didn't back then?

Section 2: The history of

communicating with many at once

Traditional media can be limiting when viewed as the only influence on new social media. Think of a famous athlete's Facebook post seen and raucously responded to by thousands of people. Would that have been possible through traditional media like a paper newspaper or radio broadcast? No. But now imagine it in this ancient amphitheater in Syria (below). That athlete could have shouted an insult at an opponent, and gotten roars of approval and disapproval from the crowd. Spectators may even have gotten into fights with one another. Those types of interactions have a long social history.



The Bosra Amphitheater in Syria: This amphitheater from the ancient Roman empire afforded viewership by a large crowd that also interacted with one another.

Humans can communicate to broad and distant audiences using many other means outside of print or broadcast media. These include:

- Vocalization and voice amplification
- Staging for visibility
- Oversize objects
- Movement and dance repertoires
- Songs and repetition

Some of these means of communication are very old. But the smartest developers and users of new media let every possible means of communication and visibility inspire their designs and practices.

It is important to recognize that when we use media, we communicate and spread our ways of interacting with these media, not just the content delivered by the media. Theorist Marshall McLuhan referred to this with the phrase, “The medium is the message.”

When developers consider new features, they have to consider what is present in the cultures that will interact with those media. If a feature relies upon brand new methods of interaction, it increases the likelihood that those media will confuse users. See one interesting way people are looking at new gestures developed in the digital age here: [Panorama Giant Gestures Video](#).

Student insights: My first encounter with technology (video by Anna, Spring 2021)



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<https://unr.press-books.pub/intromediasociety/?p=70#h5p-5>



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can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=70#h5p-6>

Section 3: A millennial shift: Web 2.0 as user contributions

It is with traditional media in mind that New York University Journalism professor Jay Rosen wrote [The People Formerly Known as the Audience](#) in 2006. He claimed that these people were taking over the media by using social media, and that his statement was their “collective manifesto.” He claimed the people were speaking out to resist “being at the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak.”

Today’s media exist in a different era from the turn of the millennium. Rosen reminds us that broadcasters used to refer to viewers as “eyeballs.” Think about what that metaphor means. An eyeball has only two powers: To look, and to look

away. There are plenty of media content creators who still only care about whether or not people are looking. But far more now allow users to “take part, debate, create, communicate, [and] share.” It increases their viewership, for one thing. And whereas the traditional media model involved advertising to the individual, the new model involves persuading the individual to advertise your product to their contacts.

The term Web 2.0 refers to sites that afford user contributions, such as likes and votes. O'Reilly Media coined the term Web 2.0 in 2004; [you can read about that here](#). They were referring to social media sites popping up all over the web at that time. These new sites were different than the static sites of the 1990s and 2000s, the “Web 1.0” era. Web 1.0 sites would provide information or maybe some entertainment, but would not allow user contributions. You might say they were designed for eyeballs only – although creative users found ways to connect on Web 1.0, as we will learn when we learn about the Zapatistas in Chapter 5.

Web 2.0 sites that emerged in the early 2000s offered new capabilities, or affordances, to users. With Web 2.0 affordances, users can weigh in with likes and votes. They can comment or write their own posts. They can upload content, like images and videos. They can connect with others, and offer their own profiles and content to connect to.

Student insights: Simpler times (video by Luis A. Ruiz, Spring 2021)



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Tools of change: Online cultures

The result of Web 2.0 is sites that are shaped by user cultures. Culture is a concept encompassing all the norms, values, and related behaviors that people who have interacted in a social group over time agree on and perpetuate. Think about the Web 2.0-enabled social media spaces you frequently visit. Perhaps when you spend time on Tumblr, you see that people talk about their emotions, and you talk about your own. Meanwhile, in League of Legends chat, you don't talk about your emotions because you know you will get attacked if you do. On Facebook and LinkedIn, you might wear a high-buttoned shirt, as you have seen is the norm; but you might appear in a robe on Snapchat or a bikini on Instagram. Culture encompasses how users talk to each other, present themselves for one

another, and take cues from and influence each other as they collectively decide what's in and what's out.

Software platform developers do influence culture in their user designs. For example, Facebook has its own shirt buttoned up rather high, with its plain white background and limitations on user customization of profiles. Online cultures do take some cues from developers, and users are restricted or guided by their affordances. But users have a lot of agency as they develop and share cultures within these sites.

Student Insights: Generations on Social Media (writing by Jaden Fernandez, Spring 2021)

memes and internet culture that
they do?"\n\nHe shrugged \"You
have a good point. I think you're

probably correct, but we will know with time.\n\nThis is a conversation I think about a lot when I reflect upon my childhood and my years so far as a young adult. Unlike my parents, I grew up with technology around me. I was a baby who watched The Wiggles on television, and played Tetris on my dad's old blackberry. It evolved into playing Webkinz and Club Penguin, and the kids at school were suddenly talking about making Twitter accounts at grade 5. Twitter was something I wasn't allowed to have back then. I had an iPod and I played games on it where I gave people cool hairstyles or took care of pet dragons. These are all memories I look upon very fondly.\n\nThen my relationship with technology changed around middle school. I downloaded the

social media platform Instagram alongside all my peers and I was playing around with it, posting pictures of my pets. Soon enough, **microcelebrities** that I would watch on youtube started joining the platform, and soon I was scrolling through posts of these people who I idolized and realized: my body doesn't look like that.\n\nSoon, while trying to grow my photography account, I was getting sucked into this vortex of people's **selfies** where they didn't have any acne, unlike me; or their bikini pictures where their stomach was completely flat, unlike mine.\n\nI didn't realize the effect this was having on me until high-school where I will admit that I grew resentful of the way my body looks. It took a couple of photography classes for me to real-

ize: most of this, if not all, was due to the magical powers of Adobe Photoshop. I unfollowed all of these Instagram models and instead pushed myself to follow more photography accounts that didn't make me hate my body.

It took a while for my relationship with social media to heal after that. However, my relationship with technology itself was flourishing. I was learning and creating art through Adobe Photoshop and a DSLR camera. I was using the photography studio at my school daily, and pushing out photos that I was extremely proud of.

Around the time I went into college was when my social media healed enough to start being more active there. Instead of Instagram, which I post on rarely, I chose a more casual platform to me: Twitch. I

started, and still continue to, stream every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday night.\n\nI met a few online friends through that platform that I love to play, stream, and converse with. Some live a state over, and some live all away across the world in Japan.\n\nI look forward to every Tuesday through Thursday, excited to play Stardew Valley, Uno, Valorant, Call of Duty: Cold War, or any other game that I want to play then; either on my own or with my newfound friends. This schedule has given me something to look forward to and a social life that is fulfilling during the Covid Pandemic.\n\nIn the very end, I would say my relationship with tech is rapidly expanding, with learning new things about stream equipment and how to apply them to make my

stream more fun for both me and my viewers. I also realize that I am not obligated to join every social media platform and that is perfectly okay. This newfound casualty of Twitch as my main social media platform, alongside all the friends I found through there warm my heart and make me feel less alone. I finally feel like I belong in the digital world."}" data-sheets-userformat="{\"2\":8961,\"3\":{\"1\":0},\"11\":3



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Respond to this case study: How has your relationship with social media changed over time? Consider both how you have changed on a personal level and how the technology itself has evolved. Have you swapped platforms? Developed new habits? Found or left communities?

Section 4: Dominating today: The platform economy

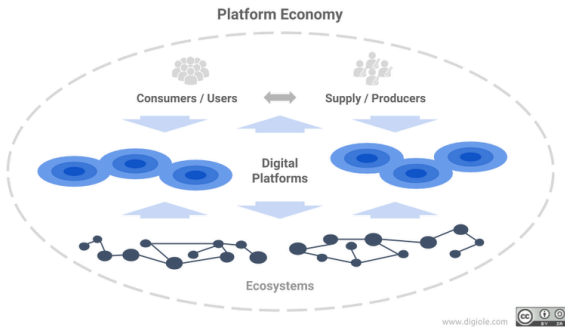
...we are in the middle of a contest to define the contours of what we call the “platform society”: a global conglomerate of all kinds of platforms, which interdependencies are structured by a common set of mechanisms.”

– José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell, [Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space](#). Social Media + Society, July-December 2015: 1.

Human-to-human connection is what social media is supposed to be about. This belief, this *hope*, was an impetus for this book when I began writing it in 2016. Historically, the human-to-human connection was also what the internet itself

reached for, at least in the dreams of its creators. This Web 1.0 or the “read-only” web as it would later be called was quite limited in its reach compared to today. And yet...that potentially infinite web of networks was still a wonder, and a site of international connections and information wars (as you’ll see in Chapter 5 with the Zapatistas).

Then what happened? Well on the surface, the web simply became more social. By the early 2000s with Web 2.0 and the “read/write web,” great excitement and euphoria surrounded the participatory cultures that blossomed on Web 2.0 sites. The wonder of the web refracted across our lives, as we marveled at how easily we could connect with one another. This world of connections broadened our human imaginations and expectations in irreversible ways. And many were overjoyed when, by 2009, all this human connection grew teeth – which is to say viability in the form of real currency exchange – with the “sharing economy” that enabled regular folk to share services and goods with one another. Platforms that began as tiny businesses with few assets gained tremendous value as the places to go to socialize online, with family, customers, friends, and influencers. The more real or potential network connections we had who used a platform, the more certain we became that we had to use it too. In the platform economy, the more, the merrier. These **network effects** continue to drive audiences to platforms at dizzying rates, rapidly [eclipsing](#) product pipelines and business models that dominated in times past.



Visualizat
ion of
platform
economy
key
elements.
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Behind the visible connections, all this sociality also marked the beginning of voracious – yet invisible – intermediaries. We were giddily giving up our data in exchange for the peer-to-peer exchange of services, a backroom exchange with implications few would recognize for nearly another decade.

And today? Welcome to the “platform society,” in which we are connected to one another, but only through platforms that derive immense power from and over our human connections.

What are platforms?

I define a **platform** as follows:

Platform: An ecosystem that connects people and companies while retaining control over the terms of these con-

nections and ownership of connection byproducts such as data.

Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon: These are the major platforms that [José Van Dijck](#) argues have defined how society and both public and private life function today. These platforms reach deeply into human lives worldwide, with their publicly understood purposes forming only a fraction of their activities and profits. And rippling from these big four platforms are smaller ones, which emulate their models in various ways. These platforms and their stakeholders transform not just what we buy and enjoy but what we need to live and thrive: how we educate, how we govern and are governed, and how we structure our societies.

The impact of globally operating platforms on local and state economies and cultures is immense, as they force all societal actors—including the mass media, civil society organizations, and state institutions—to reconsider and recalibrate their position in public space. (Van Dijk and Poell, 1.)

Platforms have a profound effect on how societal life is organized. Airbnb has changed not just the hospitality sector, but also neighborhood dynamics and social life. Uber has not only affected the taxi industry; it has affected the construction of roads and public transportation services. We do not yet vote through platforms, yet they have had irreversible effects on our elections. Today almost every sector of public life has become

platformized: Higher Education. News and Journalism. Fitness and Health. Hospitality. Transportation. And in these platforms, transactions that are visible to consumers are undergirded by other transactions in which consumers become unwitting producers, their data a form of currency that subsidizes the transactions they chose to engage in in the first place.

Section 5: Future directions in the online world

With so much human activity and cultural expression enabled in Web 2.0, what is Web 3.0? Look this up on the web and you will find no shortage of responses. There is no consensus – no agreement among experts or among users. We don’t even know if we are already using Web 3.0, because it is hard to know where Web 2.0 ends.

Surely one valuable perspective on the present and the future of the internet would come from Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989. (It was released to the public in the 1990s; [read more of that history here.](#))

Today Tim Berners-Lee has a new mission – to make sure we really are connected by the internet. He describes what drove him to pursue this mission this way:

“Now people feel very disempowered, because the end result is that they’re telling their computer who their

friends are, and who's in the photographs, and planning things and designing things — and those plans and designs and friendships are sucked up and held by these social networks. And they're not really social networks, they're silos.”

The data you create as you move across online spaces is often controlled and owned by those spaces. Berners-Lee is now working to develop new methods of linking data across virtual space without relying upon governments, corporations, or the many others with an interest in controlling that data. You can read more about this new mission in [this TechCrunch article](#).

“Right now we have the worst of both worlds, in which people not only cannot control their data, but also can't really use it,” Berners-Lee said in the project's announcement last year. “Our goal is to develop a web architecture that gives users ownership over their data.”

Student Insights: Old vs. New Media (audio & writing by Tyler Amberg, Fall 2021)



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Respond to this case study: What affordances do you take for granted? How would your day-to-day life change if a technology you relied upon was no longer available? What might you substitute or repurpose to fill that need?

Virtuality 3.0: SXSW in Austin, TX — Social Media and Ourselves podcast



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Virtuality 3.0: SXSW in Austin, TX

Release date: April 1st 2022

The SMO podcast team was at SXSW 2022 with the University of Arizona Wonder House. In this episode, Diana sets out to disentangle the culture of the city of Austin and the hyperconnected projection that is

SXSW. Are they in a codependent relationship? What has SXSW done to Austin's music scene? Why do even tech-savvy people prefer f2f to online? And what does all this mean for the next frontier of tech experiences, Virtuality 3.0? Interviews with Austin residents and visitors include Thor Harris of Swans, Luke Savisky of the 1990 film Slacker, and the crew of the food truck Cocina de Carnival aka Big Bertha.

[LISTEN](#) • [LISTEN WITH TRANSCRIPT](#)

Respond to this podcast episode...How did the podcast episode "Virtuality 3.0: SXSW in Austin, TX" use interviews, student voices, or sounds to demonstrate a current or past social trend phenomenon? If you were making a sequel to this episode, what voices or sounds would you include to help listeners understand more about this trend, and why?

Core Concepts and Questions

Core Concepts

analog

not digital. This term technically refers to reliance on processes that are continuous rather than enacted through specific values (digits), but it can be informally used to mean nearly anything that is not digital.

broadcast media

one subcategory of older media, including television and radio, that communicates from one source to many viewers

culture

a concept encompassing all the norms, values, and related behaviors that people who have interacted in a social group over time agree on and perpetuate

net neutrality

a shorthand name for a key set of features that have made the internet what it is today

network effects

the more a platform is used, the more likely that platform is where we go to interact with family, or friends, or customers, or all of these. In other words, in the platform economy, the more, the merrier

platform

an ecosystem that connects people and companies while retaining control over the terms of these connections and ownership of connection byproducts such as data

print media

a subcategory of older paper-based media such as newspapers, books, and magazines, that many users access individually

technological convergence

blending of old and new media. For example, cellular phones were once shaped more like analog (non-digital) phones

Web 2.0

sites that afford user contributions, such as likes and votes

Core Questions

A. Questions for qualitative thought:

1. What are examples of qualities that digital media have inherited from traditional media other than those discussed here? Try to think of some that don't make the new media work better.
2. Can you give an example of a site that allows you to create and share? And then of one that still treats you like little more than "eyeballs"? Explain.
3. Do you think you are part of "the people for-

merly known as the audience?” Is it still possible to feel that you are only an audience (not a participant) in the age of social media? Or are there different terms we should use now?

4. Try to conceptualize a platform that you use. Make it a place, familiar or imaginary. How is it organized? Who is there? How are they behaving?

B. Review: Which is the best answer?



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C. Game on!



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Related Content

Consider It: How will AI affect workers? Tech waves of the past show how unpredictable the path can be



Personal computers started an information technology revolution. Will AI bring similarly dramatic changes?

[Bettmann via Getty Images](#)

[Bhaskar Chakravorti](#), [Tufts University](#)

The explosion of interest in artificial intelligence has drawn attention not only to the astonishing capacity of algorithms to mimic humans but to the reality that these algorithms could displace many humans in their jobs. The economic and societal consequences could be nothing short of dramatic.

The route to this economic transformation is through the workplace. A [widely circulated Goldman Sachs study](#) anticipates that about two-thirds of current occupations over the next decade could be affected and a quarter to a half of the work people do now could be taken over by an algorithm. Up to 300 million jobs worldwide could be affected. The consulting firm McKinsey [released its own study](#) predicting an AI-powered boost of US\$4.4 trillion to the global economy every year.

The implications of such gigantic numbers are sobering, but how reliable are these predictions?

I lead a research program called [Digital Planet](#) that studies the impact of digital technologies on lives and livelihoods around the world and how this impact changes over time. A look at how previous waves of such digital technologies as personal computers and the internet affected workers offers

some insight into AI's potential impact in the years to come. But if the history of the future of work is any guide, we should be prepared for some surprises.

The IT revolution and the productivity paradox

A key metric for tracking the consequences of technology on the economy is growth in [worker productivity](#) – defined as how much output of work an employee can generate per hour. This seemingly dry statistic matters to every working individual, because it ties directly to how much a worker can expect to earn for every hour of work. Said another way, higher productivity is expected to [lead to higher wages](#).

Generative AI products are capable of producing written, graphic and audio content or software programs with minimal human involvement. Professions such as advertising, entertainment and creative and analytical work could be among the first to feel the effects. Individuals in those fields may worry that companies will use [generative AI to do jobs they once did](#), but economists see great

potential to boost productivity of the workforce as a whole.

The Goldman Sachs study predicts productivity will grow by 1.5% per year because of the adoption of generative AI alone, which would be [nearly double the rate from 2010 and 2018](#). McKinsey is even more aggressive, saying this technology and other forms of automation will usher in the “[next productivity frontier](#),” pushing it as high as 3.3% a year by 2040.

That sort of productivity boost, which would approach rates of previous years, would be welcomed by both economists and, in theory, workers as well.

If we were to trace the 20th-century history of productivity growth in the U.S., it galloped along at [about 3%](#) annually from 1920 to 1970, lifting real wages and living standards. Interestingly, productivity growth slowed in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the introduction of computers and early digital technologies. This “[productivity paradox](#)” was famously captured in a [comment from MIT economist Bob Solow](#): You can see the computer age everywhere [but in the productivity statistics](#).

<https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/i96wK/10/>

Digital technology skeptics blamed “unproductive” time spent on social media or shopping and argued that earlier transformations, such as the introductions of electricity or the internal combustion engine, had a [bigger role in fundamentally altering the nature of work](#). Techno-optimists disagreed; they argued that new digital technologies [needed time to translate](#) into productivity growth, because other complementary changes would need to evolve in parallel. Yet others [worried that productivity measures were not adequate](#) in capturing the value of computers.

For a while, it seemed that the optimists would be vindicated. In the second half of the 1990s, around the time the World Wide Web emerged, productivity growth in the U.S. [doubled](#), from 1.5% per year in the first half of that decade to 3% in the second. Again, there were disagreements about what was really going on, further muddying the waters as to whether the paradox had been resolved. Some [argued](#) that, indeed, the investments in digital technologies were finally paying off, while an [alternative view](#) was that managerial and technological innovations in a few key industries were the main drivers. Regardless of the explanation, just as mysteriously

as it began, that late 1990s surge was short-lived. So despite massive corporate investment in computers and the internet – changes that transformed the workplace – how much the economy and workers' wages benefited from technology remained uncertain.

Early 2000s: New slump, new hype, new hopes

While the start of the 21st century coincided with the [bursting of the so-called dot-com bubble](#), the year 2007 was marked by the arrival of another technology revolution: [the Apple iPhone](#), which consumers bought by the millions and which companies deployed in countless ways. Yet labor productivity growth started stalling again in the mid-2000s, [tick-ing up briefly in 2009](#) during the Great Recession, only to return to a slump from 2010 to 2019.

Throughout this new slump, techno-optimists were anticipating new winds of change. AI and automation were becoming all the rage and were expected to transform work and worker productivity. Beyond traditional industrial automation, drones and advanced robots, capital and talent were pouring

into many would-be [game-changing technologies](#), including autonomous vehicles, automated check-outs in grocery stores and even [pizza-making robots](#). AI and automation were projected to push productivity growth [above 2%](#) annually in a decade, up from the 2010-2014 lows of [0.4%](#).

But before we could get there and gauge how these new technologies would ripple through the workplace, a new surprise hit: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic productivity push – then bust

Devastating as the pandemic was, worker productivity [surged after it began in 2020](#); output per hour worked globally hit 4.9%, the highest recorded since data has been available.

Much of this steep rise was facilitated by technology: larger knowledge-intensive companies – inherently the more productive ones – switched to remote work, [maintaining continuity](#) through digital technologies such as videoconferencing and communications technologies such as Slack, and [saving on commuting time and focusing on well-being](#).

While it was clear digital technologies helped boost

productivity of knowledge workers, there was an [accelerated shift to greater automation](#) in many other sectors, as workers had to remain home for their own safety and comply with lockdowns. Companies in industries ranging from meat processing to operations in restaurants, retail and hospitality [invested in automation](#), such as robots and automated order-processing and customer service, which helped boost their productivity.

But then there was yet another turn in the journey along the technology landscape.

The 2020-2021 surge in investments in the [tech sector collapsed](#), as did the hype about autonomous vehicles and pizza-making robots. Other frothy promises, such as the [metaverse's revolutionizing remote work or training](#), also seemed to fade into the background.

In parallel, with little warning, “generative AI” [burst onto the scene](#), with an even more direct potential to enhance productivity while affecting jobs – at massive scale. The hype cycle around new technology restarted.

Looking ahead: Social factors

on technology's arc

Given the number of plot twists thus far, what might we expect from here on out? Here are four issues for consideration.

First, the future of work is about more than just raw numbers of workers, the technical tools they use or the work they do; one should consider how AI affects factors such as workplace diversity and social inequities, which in turn have a profound impact on economic opportunity and workplace culture.

For example, while the broad shift toward remote work [could help](#) promote diversity with more flexible hiring, I see the increasing use of AI as likely to have the opposite effect. Black and Hispanic workers are [overrepresented](#) in the 30 occupations with the highest exposure to automation and [underrepresented](#) in the 30 occupations with the lowest exposure. While AI might help workers get more done in less time, and this increased productivity could increase wages of those employed, it could lead to a severe loss of wages for those whose jobs are displaced. A 2021 paper found that [wage inequality tended to increase the most](#) in countries in which

companies already relied a lot on robots and that were quick to adopt the latest robotic technologies.

Second, as the post-COVID-19 workplace seeks a balance between in-person and remote working, the effects on productivity – and opinions on the subject – will remain uncertain and fluid. A [2022 study](#) showed improved efficiencies for remote work as companies and employees grew more comfortable with work-from-home arrangements, but according to a separate 2023 study, managers and employees [disagree](#) about the impact: The former believe that remote working reduces productivity, while employees believe the opposite.

Third, society's reaction to the spread of generative AI could greatly affect its course and ultimate impact. Analyses suggest that generative AI can boost worker productivity on specific jobs – for example, one 2023 study found the staggered introduction of a generative AI-based conversational assistant [increased productivity of customer service personnel by 14%](#). Yet there are already [growing calls](#) to consider generative AI's most severe risks and to take them seriously. On top of that, recognition of the astronomical [computing](#) and [environ-](#)

[mental costs](#) of generative AI could limit its development and use.

Finally, given how wrong economists and other experts have been in the past, it is safe to say that many of today's predictions about AI technology's impact on work and worker productivity will prove to be wrong as well. Numbers such as 300 million jobs affected or \$4.4 trillion annual boosts to the global economy are eye-catching, yet I think people tend to give them greater credibility than warranted.

Also, "jobs affected" does not mean jobs lost; it could mean jobs augmented or even a transition to new jobs. It is best to use the analyses, such as Goldman's or McKinsey's, to spark our imaginations about the plausible scenarios about the future of work and of workers. It's better, in my view, to then proactively brainstorm the many factors that could affect which one actually comes to pass, look for early warning signs and prepare accordingly.

The history of the future of work has been full of surprises; don't be shocked if tomorrow's technologies are equally confounding.



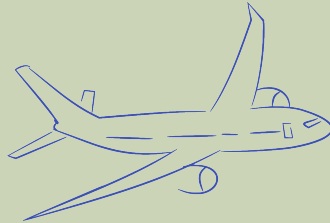
Learn what you need to know about artificial intelligence by [signing up for our newsletter series of four emails](#) delivered over the course of a week. You can read all our stories on generative AI at [TheConversation.com](#).

[Bhaskar Chakravorti](#), Dean of Global Business, The Fletcher School, [Tufts University](#)

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Hear It: Air Facebook

Platforms can be difficult to understand and conceptualize. Humor can help; so can illustration, and imagination.

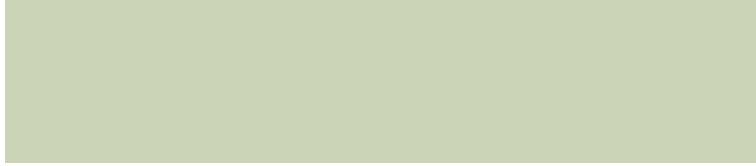


Here is how I imagine one platform that's been significant in my life, but that I find it difficult to leave due to network effects.



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ECONOMICS AND AUDIENCES

CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL ECONOMY

Contents

- [3.1 What is Political Economy?](#)

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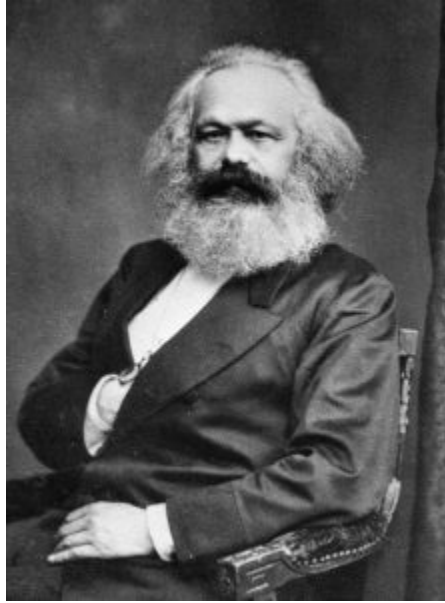
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3.1 POLITICAL ECONOMY

This section explores various ideas connected to the notion of political economies of media. Political economy (PE) is an approach to studying media whose focus is attenuated towards the ways in which media is produced, distributed and consumed, rather than on analysing the interpretations of the **signs** and symbols found within texts. The combination of the terms ‘political’ and ‘economy’ which make up PE is an explicit reference to the fact that media texts are produced within specific and historically contingent systems which are not merely an ideologically neutral form of exchange, but are conditioned by a range of complex interactions between nation states, international organisations, legal institutions and frameworks, cultural traditions and heritages, other organisations (such as media corporations), **technologies**, and economic pressures. In other words, PE focuses upon the ways in which politics and economics are not separate entities, as they are often treated, but that economics and politics are fields which are best understood as being entangled – meaning that they are functionally inseparable – and that understanding elements of this entanglement is pivotal to understanding the way that any society and culture works.

A History of Modern Political Economy

The history of modern political economy traces back to the works of Adam Smith and Dave Ricardo, who writing in the 18th and 19th Century outlined a model which was broadly supportive of the developments of economic markets and free trade, and was based upon a labor theory of value, which suggested that the value of the goods and commodities produced is directly related to the amount of labor which goes into making that product. Smith and Ricardo's work was taken up in the mid 19th century by Karl Marx who in 1867 published *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, which functioned as a critique of the emergent political economy of capitalism during the industrial revolution. Marx's major contentions are worth exploring here, as his work remains a foundation for studies of PE, and the basic concepts and categories he proposed are still commonly employed within media studies today, almost 150 years after he devised them.



[Karl Marx](#), philosopher and German politician – public domain.

Marx begins *Capital* by identifying the **commodity** – a material entity which can be bought or sold – as the basic unit on which capitalist economies are built, and then proceeds to distinguish between the use-value and exchange value of a commodity. Whereas use-value relates to the value inherent in the way that a good is used, be it to feed someone, provide primary resources for manufacturing or provide information or entertainment to someone, exchange value refers to the fluctuating value which is attached to those goods. Indeed, during the time of the industrial revolution when Marx was writing, the spatial distribution of goods and markets meant that financial spec-

ulators were able to amass vast sums (by the standards of the period) by purchasing goods in one location and moving them to another location before selling them at greatly increased prices. This holds true in the modern case, as well. Consider the example of smart phones which rely on supply chains that rely on cheap goods and labor in other countries to produce products with high markup costs in markets like the various North American and Western European markets. Whilst the use-value of these goods remained constant – they would be used in the same way in both areas – their exchange-value varied considerably, allowing a particular privileged class of people (those with the financial resources to buy large quantities of goods and transport them to another city) to exploit the productive labour of others (those who actually produced the goods in the first place) in order to further entrench their wealth. This is a crucial point, as it reveals that Marx's approach to political economy reveals ways that capitalism is dependent upon a system whereby the productive labour of one social group is exploited by another, wealthier class who effectively own the means of production and can further entrench their elite financial status through financial speculation which the working class who create the commodities themselves cannot participate in. Pivotal to Marx's work then, were the social relations between different classes within the emergent capitalist society of which he was a part, and the ways in which privileged classes, which he terms the bourgeoisie,

exploit the labour of the working classes, whom Marx calls the proletariat.

Marx builds upon the notion of a **labor-theory of value**, contending that all exchange value is effectively derived from the amount of time someone had to spend working to create a commodity. This quantifiable temporal unit, however, is itself approached as something which is dynamic and changes depending on social development and structuring. Marx uses examples drawn from the changes to the textile industry within the industrial revolution, in which the introduction of a range of new technologies such as the power-loom – which effectively halved the time that was required to weave a given length of yarn into cloth – transformed the socially accepted amount of time required to produce commodities. Whilst there were still artisans hand weaving after the invention of the power-loom, they only received half the wage they had done previously.

Another important distinction which Marx makes with respect to value, is the introduction of the concept of surplus-value. Whereas the use-value of a commodity relates to the work of the labourer in producing it, under capitalism, Marx posits that the exchange value cannot merely be a direct representation of use-value, as in addition to the work of producing the commodity itself, capitalists (factory owners and merchants) are required to add value to the commodity in order to extract profits from its sale and subsequent circulation within markets. These added costs to the exchange value of

commodities are what Marx terms surplus value. This again is used by Marx to suggest that capitalism is an inherently exploitative socio-economic system, as this means that it is predicated upon the capitalist classes from extracting value which is removed from the use-value of goods, and this is what allows them to make a profit.

Furthermore, in a social situation in which advances in science and technology frequently involve the insertion of machines which can reduce the amount of labour required to produce commodities – a process which is still very much relevant to a contemporary situation where digital technologies such as non-linear editing software, digital cameras and cloud-based server systems can allow the production of media with dwindling amounts of labour time – the tendency over time is for the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. This basically states that because technology advances over time, equal quantities of commodities can be produced in diminishing temporal durations, which entails that their exchange value will depreciate if all else is equal. Consequently, Marx argues that in order to maintain and grow profits, capitalists have to enact more and more repressive conditions within the workplace to counteract the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

Philosophically, Marx inverts G.W. Hegel's idealist perspective, contending that:

‘The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,

but their social existence that determines their consciousness’
Marx, 1859 p4

Marx then espouses a materialism, in which the actually existing social relations conditions the ways in which people think. As social relations condition people’s expectations of what can be understood to be a ‘natural’ situation, but which is in fact a culturally and ideologically constructed historical situation, Marx argues that:

‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: ie, the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production. Marx and Engels 1976:44

This notion of a material structure which politically conditions certain forms of ideologically motivated behaviours can be understood as central to the structuralist notions which are close to what we find in PE. **Structuralism** is the notion that social institutions and discourses have a hidden structure (laws, rules, etc), which can effectively be revealed through forms of detailed research. A large volume of PE work within media studies can be understood as seeking to uncover elements of how the structure of the media works in relation to the dominant mode of capitalist production, which in a contemporary context entails centring on the production of atomistic individual consumers who see life as a neo-Darwin-

ian struggle based on notions surrounding competition, which relates closely to the idea of the market.

Consequently, Douglas Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2001:18/19) contend that a PE approach to contemporary media systems is one that works to:

Highlight that capitalist societies are organized according to a dominant mode of production that structures institutions and practices according to a logic of commodification and capital accumulation. Cultural production and distribution is accordingly profit- and market-oriented in such a system... In the present stage of capitalist hegemony, political economy grounds its approach within empirical analysis of the actual systems of cultural production investigating the constraints and structuring influence of the dominant capitalist economic system and a commercialised system of culture. Inserting texts into the system of culture in which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay

Vincent Mosco (1996) sees political economy as a means of looking beyond just the production and distribution of media goods and services, but rather as focusing with “studying the power relations of society.” In other words, as Peter Golding and Graham Murdock (1991) see it, political economy is inherently concerned with the struggle between the social good and capitalism as a system of organization. In this way, political economy is not just concerned with production and distribution, but also about the struggle over meaning and how we

take part in it, particularly through the choices we make about goods and services.

One example of these perspectives was offered by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who were members of the Frankfurt School. In a 1944 essay, they argued that as the production of cultural goods – things like books, films, and music – came to be dominated by emerging forms of industrial production that the goods produced would have the potential to influence members of society. Such goods, typically part of popular culture, tended to be mass produced, homogenized, and easily consumed, resulting in an increasingly passive society that would be easily manipulated. They called this organized production **the culture industry**.

As with many theories, how we have thought about the culture industry has changed since it was first introduced. It was recognized that rather than a single culture industry, there were many **cultural industries**. Each of these industries competes for the time, attention, and resources of those consuming their goods and services. Moreover, while the cultural industries included those places concerned with mass media and popular culture, they also included the arts, sports, and fashion as well as education. Further, as scholars like Bernard Mieve and David Hesmondhalgh wrote, each industry operated by its own logics, emphasizing particular types of products and particular ways of producing them. These industries influence and are influenced by society at large, sometimes through the content they produce, but also through matters of policy and

law. Concerns about the production of culture remain central to the political economy approach.

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Media Attributions

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CHAPTER 4: CULTURAL INDUSTRIES, INSTITUTIONS, AND AUDIENCES

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4.1 CULTURAL INDUSTRIES, INSTITUTIONS, AND AUDIENCES

Political Economies of Mass Culture

Whilst PE has been applied as a way of exploring and understanding the media since the 1960s and 70s, the ways in which it has been used can be characterized as being divided into two fairly distinct approaches which stem from roots in Europe and the USA. Within Europe, the cultural and political tradition of social(ist) democracy entailed that the model of broadcast media such as television and radio were dominated by public service broadcasters such as the **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)**, who were state funded organizations whose services were free at the point of contact and featured no commercial advertising. Consequently, early PE approaches to broadcasting within these countries adopted a Marxist approach which was heavily focused upon the relations between political governance and the media industries,

exploring ways that regulation and legislation impacted upon the media whilst also exploring the links between commercial organizations and sections of the press. By contrast, in the USA the lack of a social democratic tradition and politics saw the media organized along strictly commercial lines, which led to PE approaches to media being more focused on the economics of media ownership than their European counterparts.



[Raymond Williams](#) by Gwydion Williams – public domain.

In the UK, Raymond Williams was a key figure concerned

with the study of media and culture within the university system, and his writing made some important revisions to Marxism which were central to the political economy of culture. Marx's materialism posited that the socio-economic reality of material experience and commodity production formed the **base** of society, whereas cultural content such as communications and media were seen as the **superstructure** which grew out of the base. Numerous Marxist readings of culture subsequently argued that as the economic base determines the cultural superstructure, the superstructure simply presents an ideological reflection of the base. Williams, however, contested these notions, arguing that:

We have to reevaluate determination towards the setting of limits and exertion of pressure, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And crucially, we have to revalue 'the base' away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process. Williams 1973 p6

In terms of PE, this intervention contends that the understanding of what counts as the socially productive forces constituting the economic base of society is not solely confined to commodities, but that there are a wide range of forces which produce things, and that these forces are historically contingent, they change over time. For example, confining produc-

tivity to commodities would contend that whilst the labor involved in producing a guitar is socially productive, the activities of the guitarist who plays the instrument is consigned to being a superstructural detail. Williams' position, however, is that both elements must be understood as productive forces, and so the line between base and superstructure becomes blurred, although not erased, as Williams also argues that the distinction remains useful so long as the absolute prescriptions it had been used to suggest are refined. With regards to the PE of media, this is a vital move which means that media, and other cultural forms can themselves be understood as socially productive forces, rather than mere reflections of an economic system. So media's role within society become more complex and nuanced than simple repetitions of ideologically motivated claims. Rather, media become an integral part in the production and circulation of meaning and **ideologies**. As such, the PE of media is understood as an important factor which exerts pressures and sets limits upon the forms and approaches that media encompass.

Another key development within the PE of media is the recognition that there exist a number of additional factors surrounding the production of media texts which render them distinct from other forms of commodity. Most products and services can be classified as either **private** or **public goods**. Private goods are ones which a single entity purchases, owns, and consumes, while public goods are ones that are shared, consumed, and paid for by a larger group. For example, a cam-

era, a cup of coffee, or an article of clothing are examples of private goods, while roads or electricity are classic examples of public goods. Media products, however, tend to function differently. One key difference noted by Nicholas Garnham (1990 p160) is that unlike computers, cameras, coffee and clothing:

[t]he cultural commodity is not destroyed in the process of consumption. My reading of a book or watching of a film does not make it any less available to you. Moreover, the products of the past live on and can be relatively easily and cheaply reproduced anew. Thus it has been difficult to establish the scarcity on which price is based. And thus cultural goods (and some services such as broadcasting, for technical reasons) tend towards the condition of a public good.

It is worth noting that Garnham is writing before the advent of widespread networked **digital** communications here, so the media and cultural commodities he refers to were stored on media such as vinyl records, videotape, film and paper. Even so, the key notion here is that unlike many other forms of commodity, cultural and informational goods such as media do not often have the same relations to scarcity. Whereas, if I drink a cup of coffee and you cannot drink the same cup, we can both read the same book. This is because the bulk of the productive work is in the production of the informational content of the text, rather than the assemblage of paper and ink. Consequently, in order to maintain a high price for cultural goods,

an artificial sense of scarcity has to be manufactured by those who control the **distribution** of media.

Institutions

So what are institutions? We sometimes talk of things like banking institutions, or medical institutions, which sometimes evoke ideas of institutions as places, whereas institutions are really a mechanism of society. We create institutions as a way to govern and maintain society – they are structures that hold together social life. For example, we sometimes speak of the family as an institution. We are not referring to some discrete object when we talk about family – we are interested in the relationships that we have grouped together under the label of family. Different societies have different groupings under that label. For some, it might be the nuclear family. For other societies, it might be the extended family, or some other set of relations beyond notions of biology. What is important to remember is that each institution reflects and supports the values of the society in which it is situated.

Societies build and maintain institutions to create and perpetuate acceptable modes of behavior and interaction that help propagate and stabilize that society. In capitalist societies, banks are considered an institution in that they refer to a relationship of labor and capital. In the economic crashes of the early 21st century, banks were said to be destabilizing. This

means that the relationships that form the institutions of banking were seen to be weakening, and as such, we saw a commensurate change in the notions of labor and capital, and their relationships and roles within society.

Social relations that are codified into institutions therefore have within them some measure of power. And this is where we come back to discourses. Institutions produce discourses as part of the interaction of their social relations, and these discourses reflect and reinforce the dominant ideologies that support and maintain these institutions. It is only when these discourses are challenged that we see the institutions challenged, and sometimes this leads to an institutional change which reflects the changing values in a society.

That's a lot of looping around, so let's take a look at an example that has a number of different communicative elements. Let's look at smoking.

Smoking as a social issue and a personal behavior has now entered the public health discourses. It is now related to and reflects a negative social position – smoking is seen to be socially undesirable, and these negative connotations are framed in terms of health and wellness.

This is a relatively recent change. In the first half of the 20th century, smoking occupied a different institutional position, and was part of a different set of discourses related to relaxation and social desirableness. In the immediate post-war period, smoking was seen as a masculine pursuit, and women did not smoke publicly until smoking as a sign entered into dis-

courses around female enfranchisement and the gendering of power. With the rise of public relations, discourses of smoking as a socially acceptable activity for both men and women were constructed by the early ad men, reflecting a developing institutional idea of feminine power. They even came up with the tagline ‘torches of freedom.’ (Bernays) Smoking was a public performance of power, prestige, and luxury and so the sign of smoking became associated with such discourses.

To propagate the business of smoking (a very profitable industry) as the first negative health impacts of smoking became apparent, the discourses surrounding smoking shifted again, and we started to see the rise of the early medical and health rhetorics to counteract the negative discourses of smoking-related illnesses. So in the advertising around cigarettes from 1960 to 1990, we can see a tension between two competing institutional discourses – smoking as being good for you (social discourse) and smoking as being bad for you (medical/health discourse).



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Slowly, over the decades, the smoking-as-unhealthy discourse

gained dominance, and smoking shifted more fully to fit into discourses of health and social wellness as the institutional landscape around medicine, the human body and leisure were renegotiated to take into account these new relationships and the new signification of smoking cigarettes.

Now, smoking is something of a social taboo, reflecting the new dominant ideologies around smoking and the relationships that represents between smoking and health, and evoking medical discourses and symbols and language of not only ill-health, but also signifiers of shame and ostracism.



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can view them online here: <https://unr.press-books.pub/intromediasociety/?p=112#oembed-2>

We can see similar trajectories of discourses and institutions regarding race, class and gender throughout history. Over time, as new ideologies gained social power, old institutions underwent a period of disruption, and new institutions, new sets of social relations, were built up in their place.

Studying Social Institutions

Like economics, PE can also be used to understand social institutions in terms of their relations to each other. We might do this by looking at **macro-economic** phenomena, which are large scale economic interactions. Examples might include examining a nation or national market, a particular industry, or the ways a particular good or service is produced. Among the range of macro-economic topics PE researchers have examined is the flow of information and entertainment internationally; the concentration of media industries such as film, recorded music, news, or video games; and environmental consequences of high-tech media products. In contrast, PE might also look at micro-economic phenomena, which are smaller scale economic interactions. Examples here might be a particular company or type of labor, a particular product, or the behavior of individuals economically. PE researchers have examined how particular media companies like Disney and Google have evolved and impacted both the industries they are involved in and the cultural consequences of their products, the challenges faced by women and other historically-marginalized groups working in high-tech industries, and how new formats of television production have impacted production among other topics.

Typically, in studying social institutions this way, PE researchers need to understand the difference between **industries**, **sectors**, and **markets**. An industry can be thought of as

all the types of economic activity and institutions related to a particular area of production. For example, the film industry involves not only the labor in producing a film – actors, directors, lighting, etc. – but also the labor involved in distributing the film – which might include marketers, control board operators, and even the person who takes your ticket at the theater – but also all the various resources needed for those – including everything needed to make and sell the cameras and projectors, the products sold in theaters, and a variety of other things.

Sectors represent a subset of an industry concerned with a single area of production. Theaters represent a single sector of the film industry. In contrast, markets represent the moment where a good or service is bought and sold. It might be a physical space but not necessarily. **Markets** might also be examined in terms of a particular product, such as the market for documentary films, or in terms of geography, such as the U.S. theatrical market. Much of political economic research concerns itself with questions of concentration in markets, sectors, and industries.

Understanding media in this way allows us to see some common trends in how media institutions develop. One possibility is that institutions might undergo **horizontal integration**, which is when it acquires other institutions in the same sector. For example, a radio company like Clear Channel Communications which owns a number of radio stations might purchase more stations. Another possibility for those institutions to undergo **vertically integration**, which is when they acquire

institutions from across sectors in a particular industry. Consider the company Sony which began as a hardware manufacturing company, but which acquired film production studies and video game developers as a way to guarantee content for its hardware. Finally, we might see examples of **conglomeration**, which is when an institution joins with other institutions, typically across industries. The work of Janet Wasko on Disney is particularly illustrative of these tendencies (Wasko, 2005, 2020). Disney began as a film production company but eventually acquired properties in a variety of other industries including radio, broadcast television, cable tv, books, and magazines. When an institution becomes a conglomerate, it might seek to take advantage of the various components to maximize profit. Again, using Disney as our example, when a new Disney cartoon is created, the company works to promote and profit on that new product by developing related products in all of its other institutions, so there won't just be a movie, but a ride at the theme parks, merchandise at its stores, books about the cartoon, stories in its magazines about the film, and references to it on its various radio and cable stations. Maximizing the profitability across the full range of a company or conglomerate's holdings is called **synergy**.

The Audience Commodity

Canadian scholar Dallas Smythe (1981) is often cited as intro-

ducing a further key element to PE approaches to media, inverting the assumption central to prior approaches to PE which focussed upon meanings, messages and information as the central commodity which relates to media. Smythe instead contends that the economic relationship which is the primary driver of media as an industry is one whereby **audiences** – or more specifically the attentive capacities of audiences – are sold to advertisers.

This approach makes sense when moving to the commercialized American media context, as it sharply departs from many European countries which, until the **deregulation** and **privatizations** of **neo-liberal** regimes under leaders such as Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, were dominated by public service broadcasting, in which there was often no commercial advertising as the media was funded by central governments as a public good with a mandate to both inform and entertain the public. However, when we approach contemporary global media networks, the role of public service media has generally receded, with commercial networks providing a far greater proportion of media content in countries like the UK than in the 20th Century, when there only existed a handful of television channels, and almost half the content was created in house by the BBC.

A very similar broadcasting history can be observed within the New Zealand context. Up to the 1980s the broadcasting scene, in both radio and television, was dominated by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, an organization very like

the BBC in terms of funding, structure and monopoly power. However, its descendants, TVNZ and RNZ, are competing with commercial interests, for audience attention, funding and content, in a very different media market.

The notion of the audience commodity is useful in conceptualizing the PE of media, as it further refines the boundaries of what can be understood as a commodity, but does so in a way which helps to explore exactly why and how a vast amount of contemporary media – newspapers, television, radio, and websites amongst other modes – is funded. These forms are typically free or very cheap at the point of access for the ‘**consumer**,’ but the economic cost of production is paid for by the insertion of advertising into the media being viewed. The media is thus not paid for by the audience (the cost of a printed newspaper comes nowhere near covering the costs of the paper, printing, journalists, designers, copy editors etc that went into the production of the newspaper, and watching television or surfing the web is usually free) but is funded by the advertisers, who are purchasing the attention of an audience. Buying advertising time during peak hours, or in a more popular newspaper, costs proportionally more precisely because the number of eyeballs the advertising reaches is enlarged. It is the influence of the audience commodity as measure via ratings that has come to dominate the economic decisions surrounding much of media production, particularly in television (see Meehan 2005 and 2012; Meehan & Riordan, 2002).

This economic situation is also of **critical** relevance to the

ideological context of media content. As the media is funded by commercial (primarily corporate) organizations, the materials which are produced by this system are highly unlikely to be overtly critical of corporate capitalism and consumerism. Indeed, there have been notable cases whereby advertisers have threatened to withdraw funding from television networks if particular programs are aired as they are concerned that this will negatively affect **brand** connotations. An example of this is highlighted in the video below, an extract from the feature-length documentary film *The Corporation* (dir. Joel Bakan 2004)

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JOURNALISM ECONOMICS

COMMODIFICATION OF NEWS

Introduction

The phrase “commodification of news” refers to *the process through which news is translated into a commodity*, or a good or service designed to earn its producer a profit when it is sold in a market.

News has been treated as a commodity in much of the world in recent decades. However, it is different from most other commodities. Since the invention of the telegraph, news has been a weightless product that can be transported over vast distances nearly instantaneously. It also has limited exclusivity and a short individual lifespan, as news quickly loses value as it ages and can be quickly repackaged by competitors. Additionally, one person’s consumption of news does not diminish its supply to the next person (unlike a pint of ice cream from Trader Joe’s). As such, the economics of news is unique in many ways, especially in a digital environment.

Commodities are responsible only to the marketplace. They are indifferent to the quality of democracy or the values of a society so long as buying, selling, and private profit-making are permitted. Put another way, the more news is treated as a market commodity, the less certain it is to supply the kind of information a democratic society requires.

Audiences and Advertising

Within the context of commodities, commercial journalistic organizations typically operate in a *dual-product market*. They produce and market one product (*news*) so they can produce another product (*audience attention*) that can then be sold to advertisers, who covet audiences for their products.

This relationship is particularly important because the majority of revenue for most commercial journalistic organizations today comes from advertising, and not *directly* from audiences via things like subscriptions. Indeed, since the invention of mass advertising, news has generally been subsidized (e.g., newspapers) or outright paid for (e.g., broadcast TV newscasts) by someone other than the audience. This has allowed news content to be more affordable for — and thus accessed by — mass audiences, who receive the content for *far* less than it costs to produce it.

This dual-product market is further characterized by *mutual interdependence*: Journalistic organizations need advertising revenue to subsidize their journalistic activities, but the amount of advertising revenue is often related to the

amount of audience attention that the organization can deliver. Put another way, in order to increase the revenue necessary to produce quality journalism, journalistic outlets must deliver larger numbers of readers, viewers, or listeners — even as, one would hope, quality journalism is what helps to bring in larger audiences.

The Newsroom 'Wall'

To combat the potentially negative influences of this interdependence on journalists' ability to serve as truth-seekers, professional journalistic organizations tended to implement throughout the 20th and 21st century *a metaphorical 'wall'* separating the business side of the organization from its newsroom operations. On one side of the wall, journalists and editors developed content for citizens, with limited regard for the business implications of their reporting. On the other side, managers and sales staff worked with advertisers to sell the audience attention.

The purpose of the 'wall' was to grant journalists greater autonomy, or independence from business concerns, which would allow the organization to produce *journalism*. The 'wall' itself was often implemented through different social rules (and even physical obstacles) that reduced interactions between members of each side. This might include placing business personnel on one floor of a building and newsroom personnel on another, and having them report to different sets of supervisors. This was possible in large part because jour-

nalism was already a *very* profitable enterprise for much of the past century. (Although it may seem comical now, major newspapers were regarded as cash cows three decades ago.)

Such a separation was reasonably effective for much of the past century. However, it was not always impervious. For example, the *news hole* (the amount of space available for news in a product like a newspaper) was often dependent on the amount of advertisements that were sold for that edition. If there were more advertisements, there would be more newspaper pages, and thus more space for news content. Additionally, workers on the business side would sometimes pressure editors, with varying success, to push for content that was advertising-friendly. This did not necessarily mean producing stories that were favorable to specific advertisers, like a happy story about Trader Joe's. Instead, it meant ensuring the news product had *some* happy stories in it. That's because Trader Joe's would be happier if its advertisement appeared next to a story that already left the audience member in a positive emotional state, which in turn would make them more likely to transfer that feeling of happiness to the product being sold by Trader Joe's.

The industry's economic challenges have resulted in that line becoming even more blurred in recent years, though. For example, one source of revenue newsrooms now tap into is called *native advertising*. This involves a newsroom having a team of 'content creators' (sometimes comprised of former journalists) who work directly with potential advertisers to cre-

ate semi-advertisements that look and feel like a typical journalistic story. Such stories are often distinguished by being labeled as ‘sponsored content’ or with some other aesthetic signifier to show that they are not journalistic stories produced by the journalists at that organization. However, readers and viewers do not often make that distinction — indeed, the very appeal to advertisers is that those distinctions will not be made and that audiences will mistake native ads for editorial content. Although profitable, the downside to such efforts is that they may erode audiences’ trust in a journalistic organization.

Market Failure

The tension between treating news as a market commodity and practicing journalism as a public service has been a central dilemma in journalism for over a century. Notably, advertising was first welcomed rather than criticized because it promised to end, or at least ease, the dependency of journalism on the political parties that used to finance newspapers. In the Utopian vision of ad-supported journalism, advertising would enable market forces to empower audiences, resulting in the production of news information that was even more useful to them. Conversely, others worried that market sensitivities would seed market-driven journalism characterized not by “all the news that’s fit to print” but rather “all the news that’s fit to sell.”

Scholars have argued that quality journalism provides multiple fundamental benefits to a democratic society that the mar-

ket fails to adequately compensate. For example, all members of a society benefit when voters are well-informed and thus able to choose wise leaders and reward good governance. Similarly, all members of a society benefit from the deterrence of corruption and abuse that results from an actively monitorial journalistic environment, as bad-faith actors weigh the costs of getting caught against the benefit of doing a bad thing. Yet, in a market-oriented system, not everyone pays for news. In fact, only a very small proportion of people do. This creates a *free rider problem*, where people can experience many of the benefits of a product without having to pay for it. Consequently, what is civically valuable but goes unrewarded in the marketplace — such as expensive public-service journalistic investigations — ends up being under-produced, since there's no economic incentive for it.

Scholars have also found that the more responsive a newsroom is to market forces, the less it tends to serve the public interest through civic-minded efforts like 'watchdog' journalism. Again, this makes sense on multiple levels under *rational-choice theories* of economics. Rational managers and owners who seek to maximize their (or their investors') economic return should produce the least expensive content that can generate the largest audience of subscribers and/or consumers that are attractive to advertisers. Rational advertisers should seek the largest audience of potential customers at the lowest cost while favoring outlets that produce softer, simpler stories that leave potential consumers in a positive emotional state.

And, audiences are not themselves paragons of rational self-interest. They do not always financially reward the content that benefits them the most in the long run.

The confluence of these factors results in what economists call *market failure*, where there is inefficient production and distribution of goods and services within a free market resulting from the fact that the individual incentives for rational behavior do not lead to the best outcomes for a group (or society). This has become especially apparent as the economic underpinnings for commercial journalism in many parts of the world, including the United States, have been significantly challenged by sociotechnical disruptions.

For example, the newspaper advertising market enjoyed robust growth from 1950 to 2000, and then declined to the 1950 levels in the next 12 years alone. Consequently, newsroom employment in the United States declined by 51% between 2008 and 2019. Additionally, hundreds of small community newspapers in the United States have been forced to close, creating a situation where in 2019, almost half of U.S. counties had a single local newspaper (that was often only published weekly). The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 only increased those economic pressures: A third of U.S. newspapers experienced layoffs that year, with large-circulation newspapers being most affected.

This has required commercial newsrooms to significantly rethink how to serve their civic objectives while remaining economically viable — efforts that have, at least recently, guided

them toward further diversifying their revenue models in order to make up for drastic losses in advertising. Even among local and national television journalism outlets, which have been less affected by those trends, there are more intense economic (and political) pressures to move away from expensive public-service journalism. There have been many calls to address the market failures within journalism, but the challenge has persisted.

Key Takeaways

- News is a unique commodity in that it often has a short lifespan, it is easily copied, and its supply does not diminish as it is consumed.
- Commercial journalistic organizations often serve two markets at the same time: audiences and advertisers. Advertisers subsidize the content that audiences need and audiences give advertisers the attention they seek.
- Historically, professional, commercial journalistic organizations separated journalists from business-people by creating a metaphorical ‘wall’ in the newsroom that promoted newsroom independence and autonomy.
- In many countries, including the United States, commercial journalism operates within a context of market failure in terms of serving of the public good. A number

of happy coincidences allowed that system to work reasonably well for many decades. However, those coincidences no longer hold true.

AUDIENCE MEASUREMENT AND BUILDING

Introduction

The term “audience measurement” refers to *the goal-oriented process of collecting, analyzing, reporting, and interpreting data about the size, composition, behavior, characteristics, and preferences of individuals interacting with particular media brands or products.*

Historically, journalists and journalistic organizations had only very crude measures of what news audiences were interested in — and how (and to what extent) they were engaging with that content. For example, journalists would often turn to their friends and family, or perhaps to letters to the editor, for cues about what people were interested in and how their work was resonating with audiences. Journalistic organizations, in turn, would hire consultants to conduct focus groups, survey their readers, or ask broadcast audiences to keep a diary of the programs they watched.

Those methods came with significant limitations. First, they only provided partial data because they drew on small samples

of people, who were often sampled in ways that made it hard to generalize findings to an entire audience. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the information was self-reported. This meant that people might say they wanted more information about international affairs because they thought that's what they *should* say — after all, most of us want to seem cultured, even to strangers — when in fact the news they craved was information about Ryan Gosling's latest film.

Audience Analytics and Metrics

The digitization of news has significantly changed how audience interests and consumption are measured. Specifically, digital systems enable *passive, mass tracking*. This means that when a person accesses a story, the infrastructure helping to serve that content — that is, the computer systems belonging to the journalistic organization and, often, other companies as well — will automatically record the fact that the content was accessed. These systems also often record additional information, including when that person accessed the content, where (roughly) they accessed it from, on what device, and how much time they spent with that content.

Those systems and information aggregation efforts are often called *audience analytics*, which is effectively a form of audience measurement that was not possible before the internet age. While it comes with its own limitations — for example, this system alone cannot give journalists a clear picture of how people *feel* about the content they access — it differs from past

approaches in that it can gather information about *all* members of the audience, and that information is not limited to what audiences *want* to report. It is a more complete record, quantitatively speaking.

These systems can be used to automatically personalize content by linking it to past records of a news consumer's behavior. For example, if the journalistic organization's tracking systems know a specific audience member frequently accesses content about Ryan Gosling, it may choose to put that content in more prominent positions on its website (or suggest it as the next article for this user to read) because the system infers from past data that this individual wants to stay on top of news about Ryan Gosling.

Additionally, those systems produce what are often called *audience metrics*, or aggregate measures about the audience. These include the number of unique people who were exposed to a particular piece of content, where those individuals came from (not just geographically but also the website or platform that led them to that content), and how much time the average person spent with that content, or perhaps even how far the average person scrolled down the page. Thus, a journalist or journalistic organization can have a more quantified sense of how many people read their story and how they interacted with it, instead of just assuming a lot of people did because their group of friends, who likely share the same interests, found it interesting.

Journalists and newsrooms historically marginalized audi-

ence measurement data because they often viewed it as an intrusion on their journalistic autonomy and independence. Put another way, drawing on their role orientations and occupational ideology, they would often believe they had to give audiences certain kinds of news — regardless of how popular it might turn out to be — because it was a civic necessity to do so.

While there was always some tension over this, the high profitability of journalism made it easier for journalists to resist perceived intrusions in the past. The combination of these new technologies and the economic challenges faced by commercial media in recent years have resulted in even greater pressure to use audience analytics and metrics to *more efficiently* cater to audience desires — and made it riskier for journalists to resist such pressures.

Such systems and information do not exist to solely further economic objectives, though. Audience analytics and metrics *can* and arguably *should* be used to find ways to better understand what audiences want *in order to make civically important content more appealing to them* — whether in terms of its substance or simply how and where it is presented, as well as to encourage greater audience engagement and loyalty. Additionally, researchers have found little evidence that highly professionalized newsrooms like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* are blindly making news decisions based on audience metrics alone. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that these technologies and cultural artifacts have changed how

journalists think about their work and the ways in which they perform it.

Bundling and Journalism

For much of its history, commercial news media has been a *bundled product*. What this means is that a person rarely bought a single piece of news, or even *just* news. Instead, they bought a single product that included local news, national news, sports news, and arts news — as well as comics, classifieds, and advertisements. This allowed journalism to be produced in an efficient way insofar as it allowed journalistic outlets to make money from two mutually dependent sources — audiences and advertisers — with a single media vehicle (e.g., a newspaper). Classifieds are emblematic of this: A local business would pay the journalistic outlet a fee to list a job opening in the newspaper while local citizens would pay the outlet for the cost of the newspaper to find a new job openings. A similar arrangement existed for engagement announcements and obituaries, which were also bundled in.

Content that was cheaper to produce (e.g., post-game reports from local high school football games) also helped subsidize more expensive content (e.g., an investigative series on local corruption). Put another way, citizens often bought the newspaper because they cared about their local sports teams and would perhaps stick around for, and benefit from, the investigative series. The journalistic organization, for its part, tended to see the investigative series as more central to its mis-

sion and as a potential status marker — such stories are usually the ones that receive major journalism awards — and viewed its cheaper and more popular content as a way to pay for it.

This dynamic has changed considerably in recent years. Audiences are now less likely to go directly to a journalistic outlet's homepage or app, and they are far less likely to seek out a single source to satisfy all of their information needs. Put differently, an individual may go to *The Boston Globe* for coverage of regional politics and policy, to BuzzFeed for entertainment news, to a local sports enthusiast's blog for analysis of high school football, and to the British Broadcasting Corporation, or BBC, for coverage of international affairs. As such, news has become *unbundled* in many ways as journalistic outlets place all of their news online for free or under a 'soft' paywall knowing that individuals will only access *some* of the content. That, in turn, results in advertising revenue only being generated for those things that *are* accessed, putting pressure on commercial outlets to focus on narrower sets of content that can pay for itself.

Moreover, journalistic outlets have lost their monopolies on some of those key dual-channel revenue sources. For example, people now go to websites like Craigslist and Indeed for classifieds, and to Facebook to discover who is getting engaged (and perhaps who has died). There is also a plethora of free and paid entertainment alternatives that far exceed what journalistic outlets have ever been able to offer.

Because of this evolution in the news industry, the struc-

tural advantages and subsidies that enabled commercial journalism to operate as it did in the past no longer exist in such advantageous ways.

Key Takeaways

- Journalistic outlets have always tried to measure different aspects of their audiences and their audiences' wants, but audience analytics and metrics have enabled more quantifiable measurements of individual audience members and of audiences as a whole.
- There is now great economic pressure on journalistic outlets to make use of audience metrics in guiding editorial decisions. However, professionalized newsrooms still draw heavily upon their conceptions of newsworthiness when making those decisions.
- Journalistic products are no longer bundled in the ways they were before. This has both reduced their ability to subsidize expensive, civic-minded news through cheaper, more popular content and reduced the opportunities to generate revenue from non-news content.

THIRD-PARTY PLATFORMS

Introduction

Today's journalism environment is deeply influenced by *third-party platforms*, or *technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers*. Those platforms have significantly altered how news is monetized, distributed, and engaged with, and have consequently disrupted key financial support mechanisms for journalism in market-oriented media systems around the world.

Many journalistic organizations have experienced what may appear to be a paradox at first sight: They now have access to a far larger *potential* audience than ever before through their digital distribution channels — and, in fact, often have more readers, viewers, and listeners than ever before — yet they have seen a drastic reduction in advertising revenue.

The reason for this is two-fold. The first reason is that the cost for placing an advertisement on an organization's digital offerings is exponentially lower than the cost for placing an advertisement on that same organization's analogue offerings. Put another way, it is a lot cheaper to place an ad on the *Daily Hampshire Gazette's* website than it is to place that same ad on its newspaper. This is due in part to the fact that online audiences have historically been seen as less valuable by producers and advertisers alike. However, it is also due to the increased supply of content online. If an advertiser wants to reach a particular kind of audience offline, they have a far more limited set of media vehicles — such as the lone newspaper for an entire

county and the few broadcast channels that cover that area. Conversely, there is a seemingly limitless supply of media vehicles online, such as the billions of websites that exist.

The second reason is that much of today's advertising is managed through third-party platforms that not only govern pricing but also take a hefty cut. For example, if UMass wanted to promote its excellent Journalism Department to an international audience, it might work directly with *The Japan Times* to publish an advertisement in its newspaper. However, if UMass wanted to advertise on *The Japan Times'* website, it may need to work with an intermediary like Google's AdSense, which might handle all of the online advertising for *The Japan Times* (as well as for millions of other websites).

This is the case for many journalistic organizations today, and it comes with many implications. The most important of these is that there is downward pressure to keep ad rates low online. Specifically, UMass may reason that its goal is to reach people outside the U.S. who are interested in journalism — and it may not care if those people are found on *The Japan Times'* website or elsewhere on the web. Thus, they will use an ad-tech intermediary (like Google's AdSense) to target their ad to a certain demographic and set a maximum price. Google's AdSense may then allow *any* website visited by *any* user matching that demographic — based on a profile that the ad-tech company has created from different data points — to show UMass' ad so long as a website accepts UMass' pricing limits. (Ad-tech systems do allow for black-listing, too. This

means that some websites are not eligible to show an ad if they contain certain keywords. While this is usually restricted to offensive language, it can be extended to sensitive topics, like human rights abuses. That, in turn, may discourage the production of news stories about those topics.)

All of those decisions are made by automated systems in microseconds through what is called *programmatic advertising*, and it often results in lower ad prices because a rational advertiser will seek to advertise on the websites that require the least amount of money while delivering the desired audience. This pushes websites to accept lower rates in order to ensure they have advertisements to serve. On top of this, those intermediaries charge the websites a service fee for each ad shown. Thus, not only are journalistic outlets receiving less money for each ad but they also receive just a portion of that amount.

It is therefore unsurprising that while digital ad spending has grown immensely, much of those gains have been highly concentrated among a few companies. Specifically, Google and Facebook alone are estimated to receive more than half of *global* digital ad spending, with China-based Alibaba coming in a distant third.

In short, many of the gains in digital advertising are not being realized by journalistic outlets; the uptick in online ad revenue has not come close to replacing the losses in offline ad revenue for many journalistic outlets; and many journalistic outlets still rely on their offline products for the majority of their advertising revenue, even as they have much larger audi-

ences online. This helps us understand why some traditional media companies still orient themselves, at least in part, around media vehicles that are widely seen as being phased out along generational lines (e.g., a newspaper): Such outlets generally have more control over, and can extract more value from, their legacy products.

Distributional Intermediaries

Third-party platforms are not limited to advertising, though. In the United States, much of Europe, and elsewhere in the world, a small group of Silicon Valley-based companies — namely Google, Facebook, Apple, and Twitter — largely control the social media, web search, and mobile application platforms that audiences use to find and access news.

Because of their positions as intermediaries, *those companies generally realize many of the economic benefits from news production while not suffering its costs*. For example, a platform like Facebook benefits from user-generated content like its users' posts (including any news they may break); from the fact that many people rely on Facebook to be their primary news source, via the links that are shared by their friends; and from the many journalistic outlets that use Facebook themselves in order to promote their content (often by offering portions of it for free on the platform). All of this participation comes at relatively negligible cost to Facebook, because it does not pay any of these people for the very content that makes its platform worthwhile.

At the same time, platform owners seek to avoid expensive legal and gatekeeping responsibilities by claiming to be distinct from media organizations. Put another way, they often claim to only offer neutral, technical infrastructures in order to avoid the public interest obligations that governments have historically placed on broadcasters and that society expects from traditional journalistic outlets. After all, such platforms tend to claim, they do not produce journalistic content of their own, and their platforms are governed by supposedly impartial algorithms, rather than humans, to determine what to show audiences and how to show it. Therefore, the argument is that such neutrality should shield platforms from journalistic responsibilities, or from legal risks like accusations of libel. (This is, of course, a weak argument. Their algorithms reflect the values and/or economic interests of platform owners, and the algorithms exercise a form of judgment when they promote content that is expected to elicit further engagement on the platform.)

Third-party platforms also create loyalty challenges for journalistic outlets. In the past, audiences tended to go directly to trusted outlets to find information. Put another way, they *actively* sought it out. Today, audiences increasingly go to news aggregators like Apple News, or they *wait for news to find them* on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. As users are shown an array of news from a lot of different news brands, they begin to disassociate the content from the brand itself. Put differently, researchers have found

that, after reading a news story, less than half of people would remember the journalistic organization that published the story if the individual found the story on social media. (However, most people could remember which social media platform they used to find it.) In contrast, 80% of people who found that same story on a journalistic organization's website were able to remember who published it. In short, social media platforms end up receiving more of the credit for the content published by journalistic outlets than the journalistic outlets themselves. That, in turn, reduces the worth of the organization's brand and the incentive to produce high-quality content in order to help the brand stand out in a crowded marketplace.

The massive size of these third-party platforms — Facebook alone counts billions of users worldwide — and their structural positions as intermediaries make it difficult for journalistic outlets to ignore them. Moreover, they are difficult to displace. Such platforms are subject to *network effects* in which a product or service becomes more useful as more people use it, creating conditions for monopolies or outsize power. Consequently, many journalistic outlets believe they must not only have a presence on those platforms but that they must engage with audiences there, too, even as such participation further tethers them to these platforms. Put another way, journalistic outlets are forced to weigh the short-term benefits of tapping into new audiences and remaining relevant on popular platforms against long-term concerns about ceding further control over their content and processes. While more journalistic out-

lets have begun to distance themselves from *some* third-party platforms in recent years, such efforts often come at great risk.

Key Takeaways

- Third-party platforms refer to technical systems that mediate exchanges between content producers and consumers. This includes social media platforms like Facebook, search platforms like Google search, and ad-tech platforms like Google AdSense.
- Although digital advertising has grown immensely over the past decade, it has not come close to replacing the revenue lost from non-digital advertising for most journalistic outlets. This is due in part to different pricing regimes and the ad-tech intermediary platforms that pervade online spaces.
- Distributional intermediaries like Facebook and Apple News have benefited greatly from the economic benefits of news production yet bear little of its costs. They have also sought to reduce their media-related responsibilities by claiming to be neutral platforms rather than media companies.
- Although these platforms have introduced many challenges to a range of journalistic outlets — especially traditional organizations — those outlets have often found

the cost of non-participation on platforms to exceed those of participation.

NON-PROFIT JOURNALISM

Introduction

Non-profit journalistic outlets *are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from market failures, or advancing a particular social cause.*

Non-profit outlets have long been a part of many media systems. For example, in the U.S., *The Associated Press* was founded as a non-profit cooperative in 1846 in order to lower newsgathering costs among its commercial and non-commercial members. Over time, it has helped ensure that audiences in different parts of the country have access to high-quality information from around the U.S. and abroad. Globally, journalism outlets like *The Guardian* in the United Kingdom and *Malaysiakini* in Malaysia operate in the spirit of promoting high-quality journalism and providing alternative voices, especially in tightly controlled media environments where commercial and state-sponsored media are afraid of challenging those in power.

Non-profit media have seen considerable growth over the past two decades as the economics of commercial journalism have been disrupted. Put another way, for much of the 20th

and 21st centuries, a happy coincidence enabled the market, via advertising and subscription revenue, to support the existence of a robust, ad-supported journalistic sector. There is, however, no reason why that model *has* to work to adequately support journalism's public-service responsibilities. Indeed, the drastic drop of advertising revenues and the reluctance audiences have shown for paying for online content in high-choice environments has illustrated how vulnerable that model is.

Objectives, Norms, and Funding

Many of the non-profits established over the past two decades have been founded by journalists who used to work for commercial outlets and became concerned about the ability of commercial media to provide public-service journalism. This is especially the case in democratic societies that lack a strong, state-supported, public-service broadcasting system. Non-profit journalistic outlets often seek to produce the types of content that their founders are concerned is in short supply elsewhere — often because such content is perceived to go unrewarded by market forces. This includes expensive genres like investigative journalism and international journalism, as well as topics that are deemed to be intractable or less-captivating to mass audiences, such as homelessness and mass incarceration.

Many non-profit journalistic outlets share some of the dominant role orientations, norms, and news values associated with

journalism in a particular context. For example, conceptions of newsworthiness at non-profits are not wholly different from those at their commercial counterparts. Instead, they are tweaked and, most importantly, less encumbered by economic concerns. Moreover, for these outlets' content to be considered journalism by audiences, it must still resemble to some extent the forms and formats recognized as journalism within that context — which the dominant, typically commercial or state-supported, outlets play a large role in shaping.

Non-profit outlets often raise funds from an array of sources. The two primary sources tend to be *audience-derived contributions* and *philanthropic grants*. Audience-derived contributions may include the subscription fees often found in commercial media, but it typically also includes voluntary donations and crowdfunding campaigns. Philanthropic grants often come from other non-profit organizations and foundations that are devoted to promoting the civic good. For example, the Knight Foundation is a major philanthropic organization in the United States, and it will sometimes provide upwards of \$100 million in grants each year to help advance journalism in the U.S. For most other foundations, journalism constitutes a portion of their giving, which is often related to a focus on democracy, community, or education. Researchers have estimated that between 2009 and 2017, foundations provided more than \$9 billion worldwide in order to advance journalism — though a significant portion of that was in the United States.

However, those two sources alone are rarely sufficient for non-profit journalistic organizations. Many also draw upon advertising and sponsorships as supplemental revenue sources, though their dependence on advertising is generally lower than that of their commercial counterparts. They also engage in a range of additional revenue-generating activities, like hosting conferences, social events, workshops, and webinars — though these activities usually only account for a small proportion of overall revenue. Additionally, non-profit journalistic outlets benefit from favorable tax status in some countries (including the United States), meaning that contributions to them are tax-deductible and they themselves have to pay fewer taxes.

Impact and Sustainability

The dependence on philanthropic funding does not come without entanglements. Such funders typically receive more requests for funding than they can fund, and they thus tend to require organizations to justify the merit of their requests by demonstrating their *impact* and *sustainability*.

Impact is immensely difficult to measure and demonstrate. Funders will often develop different ways of understanding impact, which may include measures of the reach of a project (i.e., how many readers, viewers, or listeners it attracted), the impact(s) it had on policy and governance (e.g., if it resulted in the passing of new legislation or ousting of a corrupt figure), and the coverage it helped generate from other news organizations (e.g., local investigations resulting from a national dataset

compiled by the non-profit). However, such developments can be difficult to track and to tie directly to the non-profit's work, and they may not become apparent for a long time. Moreover, the measures of impact imposed by a funder can significantly shape the journalism produced by a non-profit journalistic outlet — in both positive and negative ways.

Many (though not all) funders also ask non-profit organizations to demonstrate a path toward self-sustainability. A substantial amount of the funding comes as so-called 'seed grants' that are intended to help an organization get off the ground, with the expectation that the organization will find sufficient revenue sources over time to no longer require assistance from that particular funder. Indeed, many non-profit journalistic outlets tend to face an inflection point around their fourth or fifth year of operation, and many that fail to establish themselves financially by then are forced to close. Philanthropic funding can thus be an unstable and temporary source of revenue.

Impact and sustainability often become linked in practice within the context of non-profit journalism. One way to demonstrate impact is to point to a growing, loyal audience, which can then be monetized through donations and subscriptions. Additionally, in order to reach a larger audience and increase the impact of a story, non-profit journalistic organizations will often partner with larger, commercial journalistic outlets to distribute the work. For example, the non-profit ProPublica launched its first investigation in 2008 in partner-

ship with the popular CBS television program 60 Minutes, and it has since worked with *The New York Times*, BuzzFeed, and NPR to increase its reach. In some instances, the works are collaborations — both the non-profit outlet and the commercial outlet devote some resources to producing a story — but oftentimes, the non-profit provides the content for free simply to reach more people. This is because some non-profits tend to publish infrequently, and their own websites and distribution channels tend to have smaller audiences. Thus, even when funders are directly supporting a non-profit like ProPublica, they are also offering indirect subsidies to the commercial organizations that use the non-profit's work.

Finally, it should be noted that although we have focused on funding for *organizations*, there is also a robust sector of philanthropic funding for *freelance journalists* (journalists who work independently and are not attached to any one organization). Such journalists may then work with an established journalistic outlet, such as PBS, or even a non-traditional partner (e.g., Netflix) to ensure wider distribution of their work.

Key Takeaways

- Non-profit journalistic outlets are not driven by commercial concerns but are instead dedicated to furthering a public-service mission, filling gaps resulting from mar-

ket failures, or advancing a particular social cause.

- Non-profit journalistic outlets typically get the majority of their funding from subscribers or donors and from philanthropic foundations that support issues and perspectives they believe are not adequately covered by other media.
- Non-profit journalistic outlets must often demonstrate their impact and pathway to sustainability in order to receive financial support from philanthropic foundations. They will also sometimes work in partnership with commercial outlets to increase their reach.

STATE-SUPPORTED JOURNALISM

Introduction

State-supported journalism refers to *journalism that is directly supported by state governments*. This includes both public funding for independent, self-governed journalistic outlets and ventures as well as direct management of state-owned and state-supervised media apparatuses.

State-supported journalism is often promoted by governments that feel responsible for safeguarding and fostering sustainable, critical, and high-quality journalism options that serve the public instead of commercial media owners, share-

holders, and advertisers. In these cases, state-supported journalism is argued to be a necessary response to the market failure paradigm wherein self-regulated markets prove to be inefficient or incapable of producing news that serves the public interest. Therefore, state support is needed as a correction, in order to support journalism that can monitor and hold accountable the institutions of government, commerce, and civic life.

However, state-supported journalism can also encompass what are commonly called *state-controlled media*, wherein the government funds media organizations to more efficiently reach large audiences with the government's messaging. Under that information regime, the media organization often works to advance the political interests of the state by serving as the state's mouthpiece. Those interests may be advanced both domestically and internationally.

Independent State-Supported Journalism

Many countries around the world, from Argentina to Afghanistan to Albania to Australia, have some kind of state-supported journalistic outlet. These outlets are typically rooted in radio and television broadcasting, though there are some instances of state-supported print media and digitally native media. This is due in large part to the natural scarcity of broadcasting frequencies: There are only so many airwaves that broadcasting devices can use, and those frequencies have historically been treated as public goods.

However, any form of government support for journalistic media raises questions about the independence of the media producers. Put another way, how can a government foot the bill for journalists without unduly influencing (if not outright intervening in) the editorial process?

One way to do this is to establish an *independent governance model*, as is the norm in many European countries. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation, or the BBC, operates as a public service broadcaster that is funded directly by citizens through an annual license fee that is set and collected by the government. Those funds are then transferred to an independent company with a board of directors that oversees the general direction of the BBC and an executive committee charged with overseeing its day-to-day operations. By creating a managerial structure that is largely separate from the British government, the BBC is generally able to remain independent from it. Additionally, it operates under a royal charter that charges it to produce public-interest journalism that advances the interests of the citizens of the entirety of the United Kingdom. While it is not free from criticism (especially from public officials who feel scorned), its journalistic arm (BBC News) is not only well regarded internationally but is the largest broadcast newsgathering operation in the world.

Europe has been particularly successful in developing a public policy framework that grants state subsidies to journalists and journalistic outlets that serve the public interest, advance accountability and transparency, and contribute to critical

thinking and well-informed debate among citizens. Such efforts may include direct cash payments to selected projects or general incentives (e.g., reduced rates for mailing news media) that play a vital role in creating favorable economic conditions for a public-interest culture in journalism.

Moreover, those frameworks often help support *public-service broadcasters* — organizations like the BBC in the United Kingdom, France24 in France, and NRK in Norway — that are designed to produce public-service journalism and are often among the biggest news producers in their countries. Researchers have found that countries with well-regarded public-service broadcasters tend to have better-informed citizens.

While the United States does offer some level of government support for journalism, its efforts pale in comparison to its European counterparts. For example, less than 1% of National Public Radio's (NPR) funding comes from the federally funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) or from federal agencies and departments. Most of NPR's funding comes from corporate sponsorships and dues paid by member stations across the country. Those member stations, in turn, receive just 12% of their funding from the CPB and other federal, state, and local government sources. In short, public media in the U.S. receives a relatively small amount of state support. Instead, most public and non-profit journalistic outlets in the U.S. rely on charitable contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations (e.g., crowdfunded journalism and philanthropic funding).

State-Controlled Media

In the absence of structures to protect the independence of journalists, state-supported media can become state-controlled media. Under this environment, organizations will seek to *appear* journalistic but functionally serve as propagandist organs of a government. This does not need to involve fabrication on the part of the organization, or the production of disinformation. Instead, it may simply involve the systematic exclusion of stories and perspectives that are critical of the state, and the systematic over-inclusion of stories and perspectives that are favorable to the state. (However, such outlets may, and some often do, produce false information that reflects positively on the government.)

For example, the Xinhua News Agency serves as the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China. It is by far the biggest and most influential media organization in China, and it is arguably the world's largest news organization in terms of personnel. In addition to operating within China, it also has more than 170 news bureaus — or satellite offices — worldwide, making it one of the most international news organizations in the world.

Xinhua has been routinely criticized for its deep connection to the Communist Party of China, and its governance structure places it under the direct supervision of party officials. As such, Reporters Without Borders has called it “the world's biggest propaganda machine.” Nevertheless, it has served as

a crucial instrument for communicating its citizens' needs to party officials, and for (favorably) conveying the party's policies and initiatives to citizens.

Xinhua has also served as an instrument for increasing China's foreign influence. It delivers its content through multiple mediums, including print, broadcast, and online, and in multiple languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, English, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian. In recent years, Xinhua has acquired commercial real estate in New York's Times Square, bolstered its English-language reporting staff, and started an English-language satellite news network. Such efforts are capable of producing strong journalism — especially about matters only loosely related to China — but they are generally driven by a desire to spread perspectives that are aligned with those of the Chinese state.

State-controlled journalism is not limited to China. It is present under many authoritarian regimes, including Eritrea, North Korea, and Turkmenistan. Additionally, even in semi-democratic societies, state-controlled media may exist and reflect the political positions of ruling parties. In some cases, the dominant perspectives conveyed by such outlets change drastically as political power transitions between parties, making state-controlled media a bellwether of power.

Key Takeaways

- State-supported journalism refers to journalism that is directly supported by state governments.
- Strong, independent public-service journalistic outlets can emerge in media systems that receive substantial state support. Many European countries have well-regarded public-service broadcasters that promote a well-informed citizenry.
- State subsidies can also support state-controlled media outlets that are designed to promote the viewpoints of ruling parties and serve as instruments for advancing foreign influence.

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

PREPARING A NEWS STORY

This unit focuses on the different types of journalism that exist and best practices for coming up with story ideas. It includes:

- Types of Journalism
- Opinion-Based Journalism
- Story Ideas
- Misinformation and Disinformation

TYPES OF JOURNALISM

Introduction

Although “journalism” is a singular term, which may imply a homogeneous entity, it is helpful to think of it as an umbrella term for a number of distinct forms, practices, and genres. Put another way, journalism has many looks, can be produced in many ways, and can be about many things.

There are many ways to categorize different types of journalism. One helpful schema involves three dimensions: *media vehicle*, *beat*, and *method*. A single story is likely to be shaped by its categorization within each dimension. For example, you may have a television (media vehicle) segment about politics (beat) reported through a breaking news approach (method). That story would be tailored to meet the expectations (and advantages) of each of those dimensions, from its storytelling structure to the depth of the report.

Media Vehicle

There are a number of different media vehicles that can be used for conveying journalism. These include text-oriented (e.g.,

newspapers or online articles), audio-oriented (e.g., radio or podcasts), and visual-oriented (e.g., television or photography).

The media vehicle matters because it offers certain technical affordances (possibilities and limitations). For example, photojournalism relies primarily on still photographs to convey the essence of a development or issue. A photojournalist may need to capture multiple facets of a complex issue through a single, representative photograph — perhaps a melting glacier with a skeletal polar bear in the foreground. Put another way, the photojournalist may need to aim to convey a thousand words with just one shot. (They also write accompanying photo captions, but those rarely exceed a couple of sentences.) Alternatively, the photojournalist may be tasked with producing a photo essay, wherein they piece together multiple photographs that capture different dimensions of an issue in a manner that conveys a narrative. Photojournalism shoots can involve candid, heat-of-the-moment reporting (e.g., documenting a battle in a conflict zone) as well as documenting daily life for a particular group of people (e.g., homeless veterans).

Similarly, news produced for a television newscast is likely to differ in important ways from news produced for an online news article. For example, a story about local opioid addiction rates may need to be condensed into a three-minute TV segment. That might involve just 200 words of voice-over narration on the journalist's part. In contrast, an average article on the BBC's website is roughly 750 words in length. (If they're

writing for *The New York Times*, that's closer to 1,000 words.) The shorter length for the newscast requires the journalist to hone in on a narrower aspect of the issue, or perhaps offer a more superficial account of its many aspects. Moreover, the style of writing differs: Writing for the ear is distinctly different from writing for the eyes.

Beat

Reporting jobs are often oriented around either *beat reporting* or *general assignment reporting*.

Beats are niche categories of journalistic coverage in which individual journalists may specialize. A beat can be a topic, a person, or an institution, though they are most commonly niche topics. For example, a political journalist might cover the politics beat, the election beat, or the Kamala Harris beat — or all three. Beat reporters immerse themselves in their beats and gain specialized insights and knowledge of the key stakeholders, actors, trends, and influences within those beats over time. As they do so, they become experts in those beats, and that expertise appears in the stories they identify and cover. Moreover, by virtue of repeatedly covering the same topics or people, beat reporters tend to develop deep and specialized sourcing networks, often resulting in elevated access to some sources and exclusive information.

Beats are not just genres. They may require distinct

approaches to newsgathering and involve different audience expectations for storytelling structures. Consider the film beat: It may involve a mixture of reported and objective pieces (e.g., news about the latest film Ryan Gosling has signed on to), short lifestyle features (e.g., a non-combative and abridged interview with Gosling about his morning workout routine), and subjective opinion pieces (e.g., a review of Gosling's latest movie). By contrast, the courts beat is more likely to have inverted pyramid-style stories detailing incidents and events derived from reviews of court documents, or reports about arguments in an on-going case. (Audiences are unlikely to expect short interviews with judges about their morning case review routine.)

Common beats include business, courts and crime, education, film, food, health, international affairs, music, politics, science, sports, style, and technology. Some outlets (especially niche publications) have even more specialized beats, like Big Tech, Medicare, or Green Energy. Many journalistic outlets organize their staffs and their editorial content based on distinctions between specialized beats, meaning that they will have a reporter (or group of reporters) who occupy a particular physical space in the newsroom and publish primarily on a dedicated portion of the news product (e.g., a "Science" section) based on their beat. While many journalists focus on a single beat, some journalists may be tasked with covering multiple beats — especially during times of newsroom cutbacks.

Not all journalists are assigned to a beat, though. Some jour-

nalists' expertise lies in their ability to quickly learn new topics and make sense of them for non-specialized audiences. These journalists are often called general assignment reporters because they may be tasked with covering an entertainment story one day and a court story the next. The need to cover such a wide array of topics often comes at a cost, though: General assignment reporters are typically more likely to get facts wrong (especially with an unfamiliar topic), may struggle to offer deep coverage, and their sourcing network for a topic may be sparse or superficial. Nevertheless, many journalistic outlets will complement their beat reporters with at least one general assignment reporter in order to have a frequent and predictable stream of news stories and to help round off the outlet's news coverage as needed.

Method

Journalism may also be distinguished based on the approach to reporting that is used. Examples of common approaches are *breaking news reporting*, *straight news reporting*, *feature reporting*, *enterprise reporting*, *investigative reporting*, and *advocacy reporting*.

Breaking news reporting involves covering a development with a particular emphasis on timeliness. Breaking news stories depict current events, recent developments, and information that is generally just coming to light. For example, this might

include a shooting outside a bar. Breaking news stories are often updated regularly as news develops and as journalists uncover new information about the sometimes ongoing event. Put another way, breaking news reporting doesn't aim to deeply report multiple aspects of a development and package it as a single, stand-alone news product. Instead, it concedes its incompleteness and focuses on unearthing and describing the most recent developments.

Straight news reporting aims to synthesize recent developments and contextualize them into a stand-alone news product. It is similar to breaking news reporting in that it emphasizes the timely presentation of information in a clear, quick, and straight-to-the-point manner — often by using a story structure like the inverted pyramid. However, compared to breaking news reporting, there is more of an emphasis on sense-making and contextualizing information, with the expectation that a story will be more complete and not require constant updating (even if the event is still developing).

Feature reporting allows journalists to take a more creative approach to the information they present. While the news-gathering methods may be similar to those of traditional reporting, the newswriting approach is quite different. First, they are typically written with a more open-ended and less-strict story structure. Feature stories often apply creative storytelling techniques, such as playful or poetic language, narrative structures, detailed anecdotes, and multi-part vignettes. Second, because of their more open-ended writing styles and less

strict relationship to timeliness, feature stories are often long-form and *evergreen*. Evergreen stories are not tied to a specific time peg, or timely event. They are designed to maintain their relevance to audiences for a longer period of time.

Enterprise reporting relies heavily on original reporting driven by a journalist. It is called enterprise reporting because it requires an enterprising journalist who is able to develop their own story ideas, sources, and means of gaining access to information. (The opposite of enterprise reporting would be reporting that relies primarily on press releases, press conferences, or news that is given in some way to a journalist rather than uncovered by that journalist.) Enterprise reporting often involves creative and advanced reporting methods, such as public records requests, data collection and analysis, and access to historical documents. The result is often, though not always, a longer-form and in-depth news product.

Investigative reporting is a particularly rigorous form of reporting and one of the most powerful types of journalism for advancing the public's knowledge. Investigative reporters dedicate themselves to the sleuth-like pursuit, through a wide variety of investigative techniques, of information about a niche topic that is often difficult to access. The subjects of investigative reporting are frequently topics of deep conflict and vast public importance, such as political or corporate corruption, violence, crime, financial malfeasance, or other cases of wrongdoing and injustice. Investigative journalists dedicate weeks, months, and even years to the dogged pursuit of a specific per-

son, entity, or topic in order to bring their subject to public light. This type of journalism is strongly associated with *watchdog journalism* because of the role it plays in holding powerful actors accountable. In this case, investigative journalists are the metaphorical watchdogs who seek to make the actions of the powerful transparent to their audiences. (However, watchdog journalism is a broader form of journalism that also includes traditional, day-to-day reporting on the mundane matters of governance, such as attending School Board meetings.) Investigative stories often take the shape of long-form stories (or a series of shorter stories) because of the amount of reporting and information they comprise.

Advocacy reporting is a form of reporting that distinguishes itself by formulating a clear opinion, or substantiating an existing one, with timely, factual information. This approach outwardly rejects the norm of neutrality, and instead aims to promote a cause or intervention. For example, advocacy reporting may focus on illustrating the plight of young undocumented immigrants by including anecdotes about the challenges they face, statistics about the prevalence of the issue, and offering the journalist's evaluation of a key policy presently being considered by lawmakers. Such reporting is typically labeled as a "news analysis" or presented as an author's column in an Opinion section. However, it may also be the approach to reporting that defines the identity of a journalistic outlet (and is therefore not segregated from the other reporting done by that outlet). Not all opinion pieces warrant the label of

advocacy reporting, though. Many are better categorized as “opinion writing” if they do not follow at least some of the staple practices of journalism, like verifying information.

Hard vs. Soft News

Another way of categorizing journalism is through the distinction of “hard” and “soft” news.

Hard news journalism refers to breaking news and reports about serious or hard-hitting topics that are both timely and of civic interest. They are usually based on factual information and rigorous research. Political journalism, business journalism, and watchdog journalism are all typically recognized forms of hard news.

Soft news journalism refers to reports about predominantly lifestyle and entertainment affairs, or other topics of human interest. While such journalism may involve rigorous research, it is also more open to interpretive and literary accounts. Sports journalism, entertainment journalism, and celebrity coverage are all typically recognized forms of soft news.

Although this categorization schema is quite popular — it is not uncommon to hear those terms in the newsroom — it is also arguably over-simplistic and does a disservice to certain genres. Specifically, hard news is often used to connote a superior form of journalism, and is often talked about within the industry as being more important (and pure) than soft news.

However, consider the case of a rigorously reported investigative piece unearthing corruption in a multi-billion dollar sports league, resulting in criminal prosecution of league executives. It would be a disservice to label that as soft news — with its implied inferiority — simply because it is “a sports story.” Conversely, a puff piece on a politician designed to help a journalist gain access hardly warrants the label of hard journalism.

Instead, it is more fruitful to view journalism through a more nuanced typology that takes into account dimensions like the media vehicle, beat, and reporting method associated with that piece of journalism. This focuses less on a short-sighted heuristic for determining a story’s import based on its genre and instead allows us to think more about the norms and expectations associated with a journalistic form.

Key Takeaways

- One way to categorize different types of journalism is to focus on three dimensions: media vehicle, beat, and method.
- The media vehicle matters because it offers certain technical opportunities and limitations, and will have some associated norms. Most media vehicles can be sub-categorized under text-oriented, audio-oriented, and visual-oriented, but hybrid forms also exist.

- Reporting jobs are often oriented around either beat reporting or general assignment reporting. Beats refer to niche categories of coverage that journalists may specialize in.
- Journalism may also be distinguished based on the journalist's approach to reporting. Common approaches include breaking news reporting, feature reporting, and investigative reporting.
- Journalism is also sometimes categorized under labels of “hard” news and “soft” news, with the former encompassing genres like crime and politics, and the latter genres like entertainment and sports. Although popular within the industry, this typology is arguably overly simplistic and problematic.

OPINION-BASED JOURNALISM

Introduction

Opinion-based journalism has deep roots in U.S. journalism. Early U.S. newspapers regularly featured opinionated political coverage that reflected the ideals and perspectives of the papers' owners or the parties who subsidized their production. The resulting newspaper coverage was frequently partisan and subjective in a way that would seem foreign even today.

However, the relationship between journalism and objectivity grew closer over time. This was most notable in the early 20th century, when newspapers began to move toward a more neutral presentation of information in order to attract larger audiences. (By sticking to a middle ground and giving voice to multiple perspectives, journalists could more easily appeal to audiences supporting different sides of an issue. That, in turn, increased subscriptions and newspaper circulation.) Today, both objectivity and neutrality — and the image of an independent journalist providing “just the facts” — are idealized norms of U.S. journalism. Indeed, the most common complaint about journalism in the U.S. is that it is “too biased.”

This goal of gathering information objectively and presenting it neutrally has not led to the disappearance of opinion in U.S. journalism. Today, the two cohabit, sometimes uncomfortably, across organizations and the industry at large. At more traditional journalistic outlets, they are sometimes physically separated, with clearly labeled “News” and “Editorial” or “Opinion” sections. Some outlets, especially newer, digitally native ones, pool opinion and objective reporting together into a single stream. (This is not simply an old-media versus new-media distinction, though. Some newer outlets do maintain a clear separation in order to appear more professional by adhering to the traditional norms.) Additionally, some U.S. outlets reject the objectivity and neutrality norms altogether, believing that the best journalism is subjective.

Even as U.S. journalism moved toward the norm of objectivity, editors and publishers still saw an important role for subjective opinion pieces. They were vehicles through which opinion journalists, experts, and members of the community could weigh in on public issues and offer social commentary. Indeed, opinion-based journalism and editorial content have long been seen as central to the journalistic role conception of providing a public forum for vigorous debate. This remains the case today.

Types of Opinion-Based Journalism

There are several types of opinion-based forms of journalism. The most common ones are *editorials*, *op-eds*, and *columns*. Another type of journalism that is sometimes associated with opinion-journalism is the *news analysis*.

Editorials

An editorial is an opinion piece written to persuade audiences to adopt a specific perspective or take a specific action in response to an issue. For example, an editorial about a U.S. Presidential election might encourage audiences to vote for a particular candidate, or even just simply to vote. Editorials present a series of key points intended to advance an overarching argument. Although editorials are intentionally subjective, they often include reported and verified facts that make a case for their argument, such as polling data and other statistics that indicate the favorability of the position the editorial writer is arguing for. This factual basis is sometimes drawn from the editorial writer's original reporting, but it is more often drawn from information first unearthed through the outlet's objective news coverage.

Although editorials are often written by a single author, the decision about which side of an issue an outlet will favor in its

editorial coverage is a group decision. Outlets that publish editorials usually feature an editorial board comprised mostly of different section editors and managers, who vote on an issue before the editorial is assigned to a board member for writing. When the editorial is published, it comes to represent the collective perspective of a outlet's editorial board — and through them, of the outlet itself. Editorials are usually published anonymously (without a byline) to maintain the perception that they represent the views of the editorial branch of the outlet rather than an individual journalist or editor. In the case of a newspaper or online news site, editorials usually appear on the Editorial Page or in the Opinion section of the publication. This separation is intended to make clear to readers that this content is opinion-based and should not be confused with the reported, fact-based content that appears elsewhere in the news product.

Op-Eds

The term “op-ed” is short for “opposite of the editorial page.” Like an editorial, an op-ed is a subjective opinion piece produced for the purpose of persuading its audiences to adopt a point of view or action in response to a topic for which there are multiple sides. Unlike an editorial, an op-ed generally represents the opposite side of an issue than what the editorial already took. For example, an op-ed may contend that a climate change bill supported by outlet in an editorial is too

costly and burdensome to businesses. Additionally, opposing op-eds may be featured in instances where the organization has not published an editorial.

Op-eds are generally written by a freelance or guest writer who is not employed by or associated with the outlet. This includes elected officials, political candidates, academics, and public intellectuals. They are distinguished as such through their bylines, which clearly identify the author and their affiliation.

Columns

Columns are opinion-based pieces that are broader in nature than either editorials or op-eds. While they are written from the author's point of view, and often include first-person language, they are not limited to advocating for a particular action or point of view. Columns can tackle any number of subjects through a variety of different lenses, as long as they present a personal experience or perspective related to the topic they cover. A columnist could, for example, share their experience as a soldier abroad, advocate for the adoption of gender-inclusive bathrooms, tell a story about adopting their first dog, or relate any number of first-person experiences or opinions.

Journalistic outlets sometimes employ recurring columnists dedicated to specific beats, such as film criticism, sports, fashion, and domestic advice. They may also employ a columnist who opines or reflects on a different topic each week. For

example, such a columnist might relay their thoughts on legalizing a drug one week and their experience helping their eldest child move in to a college the next.

Additionally, outlets may feature editorial cartoons by a professional cartoonist (or license cartoons from different cartoonists). Editorial cartoons have proven to be particularly influential at different points in U.S. history, often by lampooning powerful individuals and capturing public sentiment in a humorous but striking manner. Several journalistic outlets also regularly reserve space for user-generated opinion content, such as letters to the editor (or, more recently, tweets and posts from audience members).

News Analyses

News analyses are pieces of journalism that aim to place news events or developments (e.g., the proposal of major legislation by a political party) within a broader context. Rather than focusing on the latest details about the event or development, the primary objective of these pieces is to situate the event or development within a broader history or trend. Put another way, news analyses aim to combat information overload by synthesizing the existing coverage and describing how it fits into a bigger puzzle. This involves describing relevant background, historical details, and both supporting and contradicting factual information.

News analyses are typically written by journalists (especially

beat reporters), and *not* traditional opinion writers. While these pieces are *not* intended to convey the author's explicit opinions, the act of synthesizing and contextualizing the information involves a higher degree of interpretation than so-called 'straight' news stories. As such, news analyses are often clearly labeled as analyses, though they may appear alongside typical news stories (and not on dedicated opinion sections).

Key Takeaways

- Despite its modern relationship with objectivity and neutrality, U.S. journalism has maintained a role for subjective opinion pieces. Namely, they're vehicles through which opinion journalists, experts, and members of the community can weigh in on a public issue.
- Opinion journalism includes editorials, op-eds, and columns, as well as editorial cartoons and user-generated opinion pieces like letters to the editor. Such journalism usually aims to persuade readers (though they must still draw upon a factual foundation to be opinion *journalism*). Additionally, journalists may produce news analyses that aim to contextualize more episodic news stories.
- Opinion pieces usually appear in the Editorial Page or Opinion section of a news product. This separation is intended to make clear to readers that this content is

opinion-based and should not be confused with the reported, fact-based content that appears elsewhere in the product.

STORY IDEAS

Introduction

One of the most important — and consistently underrated — skills a journalist must have is the ability to find and pitch compelling story ideas. This is an advanced journalistic skill that takes time and instincts to develop. Journalists who have good story ideas quickly distinguish themselves from newsroom peers who do not. While editors might suggest or assign story ideas to a reporter when the reporter is beginning their journalistic career, that reporter will be expected to eventually find and develop their own story ideas.

When it comes to finding story ideas, journalists benefit from the fact that they are human beings with their own lives and interests and often exist within the same cultures and places as their sources and audiences. By sharing some of the same experiences and reality as the people who consume their work, journalists develop instincts over time about the communities they cover and serve. They come to understand what those people value, what interests them, and what their information needs are. And, the more they understand their audience, the better their story ideas will be.

Identifying Story Ideas

It is not uncommon for aspiring journalists to wonder: Where do story ideas come from?

The answer is, for good and bad, that story ideas come from absolutely everywhere. Journalists develop story ideas through a huge variety of means and sources. However, most of these methods are a result of following one's curiosity and establishing relationships with key people and topics. Journalists also use their professional instincts and their shared understanding of journalistic news values to decide when a story idea is a good one that will serve the needs and wants of the communities they cover. Indeed, part of what defines many journalists' sense of professional identity is the 'sixth sense' they develop about knowing how to find (and then report) a good news story.

Such a sixth sense takes time to develop, though. Here are a few tips for helping aspiring journalists find good journalistic story ideas.

Encourage Your Curiosity

Ask questions. Ask more questions. And then when you're done, ask a few more questions.

Don't be afraid to unleash your curiosity, even when you're in social situations outside of your professional life. If you see an interesting flyer on a wall outside your favorite coffee shop,

check it out. If you notice a hole in a story your friend just told you, ask about it. If you don't understand how a process works, find out.

Some of the best story ideas arise organically from reporters noticing holes, gaps, or problems in the world around them and then following up on those gaps. If you have questions, there's a good chance other people out there do, too. Don't be afraid to ask questions and doggedly pursue answers. Your future audiences will be glad you did.

Keep Your Ears Open

Always listen to the people around you: in real life, on social media, and through your own news consumption. By keeping your ears open, engaging with the people and world around you and learning new things, you will become exposed to new ideas and information that could help you find story ideas (in addition to becoming a more well-rounded person). A potential story idea could come from a stranger's post in a Facebook group you belong to, from an overheard conversation at the grocery store, or from an anecdote a friend shares at a party. Over time, you will hone your instincts and become more quick and comfortable recognizing story ideas in even the most unexpected places.

Develop a Niche

Another good way to develop story ideas over time is to dedicate yourself, in part, to a specific topic or community. If you like music, do you have a favorite genre? If you follow local politics, is there a specific movement or topic you find to be under-served? If you like sports, is there a specific team or fandom that you follow?

Going deep on a particular person, topic, or beat can help you familiarize yourself with (and develop relationships with) the key stakeholders pertaining to that beat. Once you have identified a niche, continue to follow it and learn more about it. For example, you might follow a hashtag related to that topic, join a Facebook group about that topic, go to a lecture or reading about that topic, read books about that topic, or go to a performance about that topic. By becoming an expert on that beat, you can ensure that you are able to stay on top of the latest trends and questions, and that you are sufficiently informed to write something insightful about it.

Consume Journalism

This cannot be overstated: consume journalism! (This is doubly true if you cover a beat. See what other journalists are covering, and how they are covering it.) Consuming journalism will not only help you become more knowledgeable of current events but it will also help you become a more versatile news

producer. For example, it can help you learn about different journalistic story structures and stylistic norms.

You can also get great story ideas from consuming journalism. For example, you may come across an interesting story that focuses on the national level, leaving the local angle wide open for you to report on. You may also find that you have some questions after consuming a news piece. Focus your reporting on answering those questions or addressing gaps in the story. (Again, chances are other people will have similar questions.) Oftentimes, an existing news story offers the needed spark for a follow-up that extends or builds upon existing coverage of a topic or issue.

Trust your instincts. Chances are that if you are interested by an idea, your audience (whom you'll come to know over time as a journalist) will be interested as well. Once you have identified a story idea, think about the news values your idea might fulfill and how the idea might inform and interest audiences. Use that information to form the basis for the next step in the life cycle of a story idea: pitching it to your editor.

Key Takeaways

- While editors may assign story ideas to a journalist during the early stages of the journalist's career, that journalist will be expected to find and develop their own story

ideas over time.

- Ideas can come from many places. You are surrounded by them. Some helpful strategies are to encourage your curiosity, keep your ears open, develop a niche, and consume lots of journalism.
- Trust your instincts. If you are interested by an idea, there is a good chance that there is an audience out there for it.

CHAPTER 6: MEDIA, DEMOCRACY, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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- Chapter 6.2: Media and Democracy

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6.1: HABERMAS AND THE “PUBLIC SPHERE”

Jürgen Habermas first articulated his idea of a “public sphere” (German: *öffentlichkeit*) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, translated to English in 1989). Describing the *öffentlichkeit* as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed,” and into which “[a]ccess is guaranteed to all citizens,” Habermas established a conceptual ideal space where all citizens would be able to gather and discuss matters of common interest in an “unrestricted fashion” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). While theoretically innocuous, such a space has never existed in practice because a truly equitable society has not yet been established.

To understand the utility of the Habermasian public sphere model, as well as the common critiques against it, a general understanding of how the model works is helpful. The public sphere is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed, and it is constituted in every conversation in which individuals come together to form a [public](#). (Habermas, 1991, 398). Habermas saw several necessary conditions for the public sphere to function in a way that meaningfully serves a wide section of a population. First, it needs to be open to all

citizens, who assemble freely to express their opinions in public discussions. In this realm they are not acting as or on behalf of a business or any private interests, but rather as an individual who is dealing with common matters of general interest.

Because potential topics of discussion are numerous, the public sphere may be divided into smaller and more cohesive conversations which focus on specific issues. A political public sphere holds public discourse about topics connected to governing and political practice. For example, an environmental or “green” public sphere offers space for citizens to discuss the interests of a range of stakeholders – from activists and experts to corporate interests and elected officials – as individuals. In this space they would be able to share their concerns about environmental issues and to express demands about the crafting or enforcement of relevant regulations (Pezzullo & Cox, 2018). This exemplifies Habermas’s second condition for a functional public sphere: as a realm in which public opinion is formed, it mediates between the state and society.

The Habermasian model of a public sphere holds a normative claim. That is, he describes a space which can only exist in an ideal democratic state, where equal participation and consideration are available to everyone. This condition is a difficult one to fill for many reasons, but primarily because civil rights and political representation have not yet been guaranteed to all citizens in any democracy (i.e. regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ability, race or ethnicity, economic class, education, etc.). Therefore, critics of Habermas’s model have offered

several alternatives. The most well-known of these was articulated by feminist scholar Nancy Fraser, who pointed out that it is often difficult – if not impossible – to separate matters of public and private concern, especially for historically marginalized groups. She suggested that such groups in practice formed their own spaces, which she called subaltern counter publics (Fraser, 1992).

Whether an idealized public sphere is possible – or even desirable – has become a rather moot point as nations and populations grew too large for face-to-face communication. Certainly there is utility in single-issue publics and in counter publics, but interpersonal conversations about “matters of common interest” are no longer sufficient to transmit the concerns of citizens directly to their elected officials. Over time, we in some ways shifted our understanding about political discourse to include mass media (specifically news media, or “the press”). But how does the press fit into American democracy, and how should we expect media to serve us as citizens?

6.2: MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

One key tenet of most modern democratic societies is the separation of government powers into independent branches. In the United States, there are three such branches: a legislature that makes the laws (the legislative branch is further divided into two Congressional bodies, the House of Representatives and the Senate); a judiciary that interprets and applies the law; and an executive that carries out the administration and operations of governing (centered around a Chief Executive – the president – who is surrounded by a group of agencies that support him in the implementation and oversight of public policies).

In the United States, the operation of democracy is also affected by powerful businesses through political donations and lobbying. In 2010, the Supreme Court's (5-4) *Citizens United v. FEC* [ruling](#) removed constraints on corporate political spending, further amplifying the voice of business in democratic debate. And according to the Center for Responsive Politics, the communication and electronics corporate sector, comprised of internet and telecom service providers, printing and publishing firms, and media content producers, spent over

\$110 million dollars in 2020 hiring advocates to urge elected officials to support or reject specific legislation.

As the populations of the global democratic powers grew larger, participation in democracy required the dissemination of knowledge to a more diverse and geographically vast citizenry. Mass media developed to meet this requirement, first in the form of print newspapers, followed by radio and television, and the Internet. Ideally, media should act as citizen resources, “provid[ing] citizens with what they need to be active participants in social and political life” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005, p. 29). To achieve this ideal, two things should be expected of news media: distribute reliable information to as much of the population as possible, and serve as a watchdog to help root out corruption among those in power.

To meet the first expectation, the media should play a basic role as a provider of information that is necessary for rational democratic debate. This idea is so important to the character of our democracy that the people’s right to free press, unencumbered by government censorship, is protected in the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States. A healthy representative democracy is predicated on the electorate (all eligible voters) making informed choices; this in turn rests on the quality and veracity of information that they receive.

The second expectation – that the press should act as a “watchdog,” alerting the public to abuses of power – rests primarily on news media and journalists who monitor the func-

tioning of democracy by exposing excesses and corruption, and holding those in power accountable. Because of this role, the news media have historically been regarded as the [fourth estate](#), supplementing the three branches of government by providing additional checks and balances.

The media, as an American institution, once served as a primary credible source of news and information for U.S. citizens, but many factors (aggressive criticism from the Trump administration, the proliferation of unreliable online news outlets, a tendency to lean on sensationalism to attract audiences in difficult economic times) have recently undercut the trust and respect afforded to them by the American public. Furthermore, as the corporate sector's power in the democratic process has grown, the watchdog function of the media has been complicated by their own corporate structure.

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CHAPTER 7: MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT

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7.1 GOVERNMENT REGULATION OF MEDIA

The U.S. federal government has long had its hand in media regulation. Media in all their forms have been under governmental jurisdiction since the early 1900s, when experts started becoming aware of the effects that wire- and radio-based communication would have on commerce, national security, and citizen safety. Since that time, regulatory efforts have transformed as new forms of media have emerged and expanded their markets to a larger audience.

In the early 20th century, two important U.S. regulatory agencies appeared. Under the auspices of the federal government, these agencies — the **Federal Trade Commission** (FTC, founded in 1914), and the **Federal Communications Commission** (FCC, founded in 1934) — have shaped American media and their interactions with both the government and audiences. This section describes the origin, purpose, and current function of each agency.

Federal Trade Commission

The first stirrings of the FTC date from 1903, when President

Theodore Roosevelt created the Bureau of Corporations to investigate the practices of increasingly larger American businesses. In time, authorities determined that an agency with more sweeping powers was necessary. On September 26, 1914, the FTC came into being when President Woodrow Wilson signed the FTC Act into law, creating an agency designed to “prevent unfair methods of competition in commerce” (ftc.gov). From the beginning, the FTC absorbed the work and staff of the Bureau of Corporations, operating in a similar manner, but with additional regulatory authorization. In the words of the FTC,

Like the Bureau of Corporations, the FTC could conduct investigations, gather information, and publish reports. The early Commission reported on export trade, resale price maintenance, and other general issues, as well as meat packing and other specific industries. Unlike the Bureau, though, the Commission could...challenge “unfair methods of competition” under Section 5 of the FTC Act, and it could enforce...more specific prohibitions against certain price discriminations, vertical arrangements, interlocking directorships, and stock acquisitions (Federal Trade Commission).

Role of Antitrust Legislation

Since the late 19th century the federal government has sought to encourage competition in certain consumer markets – including by regulating aspects of companies’ business prac-

tices. Most notably, it has tried to discourage the formation of monopolies by passing several antitrust acts.

During the 1880s, Standard Oil was the first company to form a trust (a unit of business made up of a board of trustees, formed to monopolize an industry), an “arrangement by which stockholders...transferred their shares to a single set of trustees. (Our Documents, 1890). With corporate trustees receiving profits from the component companies, Standard Oil functioned as a monopoly (a business that economically controls a product or a service). The Sherman Antitrust Act was put into place in 1890 to dissolve trusts such as these. The Act stated that any combination “in the form of trust or otherwise that was in restraint of trade or commerce among the several states, or with foreign nations” was illegal (Our Documents, 1890).

The Sherman Antitrust Act served as a precedent for future antitrust regulation. The 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act and the 1950 Celler-Kefauver Act expanded on the principles laid out in the Sherman Act. The Clayton Act helped establish the foundation for many of today’s business and media competition regulatory practices. Although the Sherman Act established regulations in the United States, the Clayton Act further developed the rules surrounding antitrust, giving businesses a “fair warning” about the dangers of anticompetitive practice (Gongol, 2005). Specifically, the Clayton Act prohibits actions that may “substantially lessen competition or

tend to create a monopoly in any line of commerce” (Gongol, 2005).

The problem with the Clayton Act was that, while it prohibited mergers, it offered a loophole in that companies were allowed to buy individual assets of competitors (such as stocks or patents), which could still lead to monopolies. Established in 1950 and often referred to as the Antimerger Act, the Celler-Kefauver Act closed that loophole by giving the government the power to stop vertical mergers. (Vertical mergers happen when two companies in the same business but on different levels—such as a tire company and a car company—combine.) The act also banned asset acquisitions that reduced competition (Financial Dictionary).

These laws reflected growing concerns in the early and mid-20th century that the trend toward monopolization could lead to the extinction of competition. Government regulation of businesses increased until the 1980s, when the United States experienced a shift in mind-set and citizens called for less governmental power. The U.S. government responded as deregulation became the norm.

The Structure and Purposes of the FTC

As we’ll see in the next section, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) provides most of the nation’s media regulations. However, the FTC also has a hand in regulating the

media industry. As previously discussed, the FTC primarily dedicates itself to eliminating unfair business practices, but in the course of those duties it has limited contact with media outlets.

Since the early 1980s, the United States government has become increasingly business-friendly, including within regulatory bodies such as the FTC. An unsettling example of this trend was the FTC Improvements Act (1980), a Regan-era piece of legislation that affected several industries, including media. In the late 1970s, advised by a task force of experts on children's health and psychology, the FTC was considering restrictions to the televised marketing of sugared products to children. Since children have limited ability to understand the purpose of advertising, the Commission reasoned that such ads qualified as an unfair and deceptive practice affecting commerce (prohibited under the original FTC Act). This proposal drew the attention of food and beverage producers, who pressured Congress to intervene. The result of their influence, the FTC Improvements Act, states that "The Commission shall not have any authority to promulgate any rule in the children's advertising proceeding...on the basis of a determination by the Commission that such advertising constitutes an unfair act or practice...affecting commerce" (Beales, 2004). In short, although marketing sugary food and drink to children has a detrimental effect on their health, the FTC's ability to protect them as consumers was effectively removed.

A more recent One example of the FTC's media regulatory

responsibility is the National Do Not Call Registry. In 2004, the agency created this registry to prevent most telemarketing phone calls, exempting such groups as nonprofit charities and businesses with which a consumer has an existing relationship. Although originally intended for landline phones, the Do Not Call Registry allows individuals to register wireless telephones along with traditional wire-based numbers.

Federal Communications Commission



President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Federal Communications Commission in 1934 as part of the New Deal. Attribution: [FDR Presidential Library & Museum – 61-406](#).

Since its creation by the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC has been “charged with regulating interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable” ([fcc.gov](#)). Part of the New Deal—President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Great Depression-era suite of federal programs and agencies—the commission worked to establish “a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service” (Museum of Broadcast Communications).

The responsibilities of the FCC are broad, and throughout

its long history the agency has enforced several laws that regulate the ownership of media. A selection of these laws include the 1941 National TV Ownership Rule, which stated that a broadcaster cannot own television stations that reach more than 35 percent of the nation's homes; the 1970 Radio/TV Cross-Ownership Restriction, which prohibited a broadcaster from owning a radio station and a TV station in the same market; and the 1975 Newspaper/Broadcast Cross-Ownership Prohibition, which discourages ownership of a newspaper and a TV station in the same market (PBS, 2004). These regulations were meant to encourage diversity in media ownership and to prevent domination of the media industry by a small handful of powerful conglomerates. All of them were relaxed over time, and have been erased in practice by the FCC under the Trump administration. Deregulation of the media industry – a decades-old trend – accelerated under Chairman Ajit Pai, a staunch supporter of free market ideology who was nominated to the Commission by President Obama in 2012 and elevated to lead the body by President Trump in 2017.

The Present Structure and Purposes of the FCC

The FCC contains three major divisions: broadcast, telegraph, and telephone. Within these branches, subdivisions (bureaus and offices) allow the agency to more efficiently carry out its tasks. Four bureaus are key to the regulation of mass media: the

Media Bureau, the Wireline Competition Bureau, the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau, and the International Bureau.

The Media Bureau oversees licensing and regulation of broadcasting services. Specifically, the Media Bureau “develops, recommends and administers the policy and licensing programs relating to electronic media, including cable television, broadcast television, and radio in the United States and its territories” (Federal Communications Commission). Because it aids the FCC in its decisions to grant or withhold licenses from broadcast stations, the Media Bureau plays a particularly important role within the organization. Such decisions are based on the “commission’s own evaluation of whether the station has served in the public interest,” and come primarily from the Media Bureau’s recommendations. The Media Bureau has been central to rulings on children’s programming and mandatory closed captioning.

The Wireline Competition Bureau (WCB) is primarily responsible for ensuring that “all Americans have access to robust, affordable broadband and voice services,” with special attention to serving “schools, libraries, health care providers, and rural and low-income consumers” (Federal Communications Commission). “rules and policies concerning telephone companies that provide interstate—and, under certain circumstances, intrastate—telecommunications services to the public through the use of wire-based transmission facilities (i.e. corded/cordless telephones) (Federal Communications Commission).” Formerly, the The WCB regulates access to the

physical infrastructure such as utility poles and rights-of-way that are necessary to deliver broadband (telecommunications lines with multiple channels that allow different signals to be carried simultaneously) services to customers, and promotes market growth and competition. wireless-based communications in the United States., the WCB maintains its large presence in the FCC by “ensuring choice, opportunity, and fairness in the development of wireline telecommunications services and markets” (fcc.gov). In addition to this primary goal, the bureau’s objectives include “developing deregulatory initiatives; promoting economically efficient investment in wireline telecommunications services; and fostering economic growth” (fcc.gov). The WCB recently ruled against Comcast regarding blocked online content to the public, causing many to question the amount of authority that the government has over the public and big businesses.

Another prominent bureau within the FCC is the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau (WTB). The rough counterpart of the WCB, this bureau oversees the “licensing of all wireless services, from fixed microwave links to amateur radio to mobile broadband services” (Federal Communications Commission). mobile phones, pagers, and two-way radios, handling “all FCC domestic wireless telecommunications programs and policies, except those involving public safety, satellite communications or broadcasting, including licensing, enforcement, and regulatory functions (Federal Communications Commission).” The WTB also regulates wireless services related to

public safety and facilitates bidding in spectrum auctions. balances the expansion and limitation of wireless networks, registers antenna and broadband use, and manages the radio frequencies for airplane, ship, and land communication. As U.S. wireless communication continues to grow, this bureau seems likely to continue to increase in both scope and importance.

Finally, the International Bureau is responsible for representing the FCC in all satellite and international matters. A larger organization, the International Bureau's goal is to "connect the globe for the good of consumers through prompt authorizations, innovative spectrum management and responsible global leadership (Federal Communications Commission)." In an effort to avoid international interference, the International Bureau coordinates with partners around the globe regarding frequency allocation and orbital assignments. It also concerns itself with foreign investment in the United States, ruling that outside governments, individuals, or corporations cannot own more than 20 percent of stock in a U.S. broadcast, telephone, or radio company.

Move Toward Deregulation

Media deregulation took off during the Reagan administration, when economic policy turned toward reducing government oversight of "free markets." Reagan's appointee to lead the FCC, former media industry lawyer Mark Fowler, imme-

diately began overturning existing rules, including those that placed caps on market access. Fowler's well-known argument that televisions were mere household appliances – “toasters with pictures” – supports the administration's commitment to allowing the laws of supply and demand to determine the ownership structure of the media industry (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005). Between 1981 and 1985, lawmakers dramatically altered laws and regulation to give more power to media licensees and to reduce that of the FCC. Television licenses were expanded from 3 years to 5, and corporations were now allowed to own up to 12 separate TV stations.

The shift in regulatory control had a powerful effect on the media landscape. Whereas initially laws had prohibited companies from owning media entities in more than one medium, consolidation created large mass-media companies that increasingly dominated the U.S. media system. Before the increase in deregulation, eight major companies controlled phone services to different regions of the United States. Today, however, there are four (Kimmelman). Companies such as Viacom and Disney own television stations, record companies, and magazines. Bertelsmann alone owns more than 30 radio stations, 280 publishing outlets, and 15 record companies (Columbia Journalism Review). Due to this rapid consolidation, Congress grew concerned about the costs of deregulation, and by the late 1980s, it began to slow the FCC's release of control.

Today, deregulation remains a hotly debated topic. Some

favor deregulation, believing that the public benefits from less governmental control. Others, however, argue that excessive consolidation of media ownership threatens the system of checks and balances and further amplifies the corporate voice. Proponents on both sides of the argument are equally vocal, and it is likely that regulation of media will ebb and flow over the years, as it has since regulation first came into practice.

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7.2 THE LAW AND MASS MEDIA MESSAGES

Media law has been a much-debated topic ever since the first U.S. media industry laws appeared in the early 1900s. The contention surrounding media law largely stems from the liberties guaranteed under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which includes the freedom of the press.

Generally speaking, media law comprises two areas: telecommunications law, which regulates radio and television broadcasts, and print law, which addresses publications such as books, newspapers, and magazines. Despite differences between the two areas, many media laws involve First Amendment protections. This section explores several areas of media law: privacy, libel and slander, copyright and intellectual property, freedom of information, and equal time and coverage.

In 1974, Congress passed the **Privacy Act**, which “protects records that can be retrieved by personal identifiers such as a name, social security number, or other identifying number or symbol” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). This act also regulates how agencies can collect, store, and use information and requires agencies to tell individuals when they are collecting information about them. Designed to ensure that all First Amendment guarantees remain honored,

the act requires all public and private agencies to function within its boundaries.

Under the Privacy Act, media personnel must be careful to avoid revealing certain information about an individual without his or her permission, even if that portrayal is factually accurate. Privacy laws, including the Privacy Act, “limit...your ability to publish private facts about someone and recognize...an individual’s right to stop you from using his or her name, likeness, and other personal attributes for certain exploitative purposes (Citizen Media Law Project).” Members of the media can avoid the pitfalls of privacy laws by maintaining a professional relationship with a community. To avoid liability, journalists and other media professionals are encouraged to report or comment only on “matters of legitimate public interest and only portray people who have a reasonable relationship to [their] topic (Citizen Media Law Project).” In 2005, a legal dispute arose between congressional aides Robert Steinbuch and Jessica Cutler. Steinbuch sued Cutler for publishing information about their intimate relationship; however, the case was dismissed when the court decided that Cutler had only provided facts that were already publicly known (Citizen Media Law Project).

Libel and Slander

Media outlets also must be wary of committing acts of defama-

tion. These occur when false statements about an individual are printed, broadcast, spoken, or otherwise communicated to others. Two different types of legal protections, **libel** and **slander** laws, exist to prevent such defamation from taking place. Although defamation encompasses both categories, they are separate concepts. Libel refers to written statements or printed visual depictions, while slander refers to verbal statements and gestures (Media Law Resource Center). State jurisdiction largely covers libel and slander laws, but they are nearly identical throughout the United States.

As with privacy laws, print and broadcast journalists can protect themselves from defamation lawsuits by carrying out responsible reporting. Media personnel are legally protected when communicating a report outweighs any potential damage to a person's reputation. However, when journalists do not report responsibly, the legal and financial consequences can be devastating. In the 2007 case *Murphy vs. Boston Herald*, the Boston Herald newspaper was sued for misquoting Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Ernest Murphy. The court ruled that the false quote was published with a malicious intent and awarded Murphy \$2.1 million in damages (Wall, 2005). In the more famous case of Linda Tripp in 1998, Tripp was charged with secretly recording phone conversations between President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Tripp faced a prison sentence of 10 years for slander and illegal documentation; however, the case was dropped in early 2000 due to witness bias (Van Natta Jr., 2000).

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Copyright laws fall under federal jurisdiction and are, therefore, identical across the country. As you learned in [Chapter 4 “Newspapers”](#), Congress first established U.S. copyright and patent protections in 1790 and, despite revisions and updates, has maintained some form of copyright law to this day. With coverage of a wide range of materials, copyright law encompasses “almost all creative work that can be written down or otherwise captured in a tangible medium (Citizen Media Law Project).” This includes literary works; musical works; dramatic works; pictorial, graphic, and sculptural works; motion pictures and other audiovisual works; sound recordings; and even architectural works. Once a work has achieved copyright, the copyright owner must grant permission for that work to be legally reproduced. After a certain number of years, a copyright expires and the work enters the public domain.

Copyright does not, however, protect facts. This is of particular importance for news media. Despite the length of time it takes to uncover facts, no individual or company can own them. Anyone may repeat facts as long as that person does not copy the written story or broadcast in which those facts were communicated.

Intellectual property law protects “products of the mind,” including copyrights, patents, open licenses, trademarks, trade

secrets, URLs, domain names, and even components of television programs (as David Letterman found out when he moved from NBC to CBS, and was forced to leave certain aspects of his TV show behind). Intellectual property law generally follows the same guidelines as copyright law, and the associated legislation seeks “to encourage innovation and creativity, with an ultimate aim of promoting a general benefit to society (Citizen Media Law Project).” The role of copyright and intellectual property in the mass media will be covered in greater detail later in this chapter.

Freedom of Information Act

President Lyndon B. Johnson first signed the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** into law in 1966. By requiring full or partial disclosure of U.S. government information and documents, the act “helps the public keep track of its government’s actions, from the campaign expenditures of city commission candidates to federal agencies’ management of billions of dollars in tax revenues (Citizen Media Law Project).” Because it allows everyone access to federal documents and information that otherwise would go unreleased, FOIA is particularly important for those working in the news media.

Although the act covers a large range of agencies, some offices are exempt from FOIA. The act provides access to the public records of the executive branch of the U. S. government

but does not include documents from the current president, Congress, or the judicial branch (Citizen Media Law Project). Because FOIA pertains to individuals and information in high levels of government, the process of accessing information can be complicated. Those who are interested must become skilled at navigating the complex set of procedures to offer citizens accurate information. Although FOIA allows any person for any reason access to the records, journalists who work for mainstream media organizations often receive perks such as the waiving of fees and expedited processing (Citizen Media Law Project).

The Equal Time Rule

Falling under broadcast regulations, the Communication Act's **Section 315**—also known as the Equal Time Rule—requires radio and television stations to give equal opportunity for airtime to all candidates. Essentially, Section 315 ensures that TV and radio stations cannot favor any one political candidate over another.

Passed by Congress in 1927, the equal opportunity requirement was the first major federal broadcasting law. Even then, legislators feared that broadcasters and stations would still be able to manipulate elections. Although candidates cannot receive free airtime unless their opponents do as well, the law doesn't take into consideration campaign funding. Well-

funded candidates who can afford to pay for airtime still have an advantage over their poorly funded peers.

News programs, interviews, and documentaries are exempt from the requirements of Section 315. This allows media outlets to report on the activities of a candidate without also having to cover the activities of his or her opponent. Presidential debates fall under this exemption as well and are not required to include third-party candidates.

Section 315 also prohibits media from censoring what a candidate says or presents on air. Recently there has been controversy over campaign ads picturing aborted fetuses. Citing Section 315, the FCC allowed these television ads to continue to run (Museum of Broadcast Communications).

The Fairness Doctrine

As discussed in [Chapter 7 “Radio”](#), the Fairness Doctrine was enacted in 1949, when applications for radio broadcast licenses outpaced the number of available frequencies. At the time, concerns that broadcasters might use their stations to promote a particular perspective encouraged the creation of the radio-specific version of Section 315. The FCC thus instituted the Fairness Doctrine to “ensure that all coverage of controversial issues by a broadcast station be balanced and fair (Museum of Broadcast Communications).”

The FCC took the view...that station licensees were “pub-

lic trustees,” and as such had an obligation to afford reasonable opportunity for discussion of contrasting points of view on controversial issues. The commission later held that stations were also obligated to actively seek out issues of importance to their community and air programming that addressed those issues (Museum of Broadcast Communications).

The Fairness Doctrine was considered controversial among journalists who felt that it infringed on the rights of free speech and freedom of press granted in the First Amendment. The doctrine was dissolved during the 1980s with the Reagan administration’s deregulatory efforts. We can see these effects today with the popularity of political talk radio.

The Digital Millennium Copyright Act

In 1998, Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) to bring order to the then-largely-unregulated online arena. As discussed in [Chapter 13 “Economics of Mass Media”](#), the DMCA prohibits individuals from either circumventing access-control measures or trafficking devices that may help others circumvent copyright measures. Under this act, it is illegal to use code-cracking devices to illegally copy software, and websites are required to take down material that infringes on copyrights. (You’ve experienced this regulation yourself if

you've ever visited YouTube or Google Video and found that a video has been removed due to copyright claims.)

The DMCA does allow webcasting (the broadcasting of media over the Internet) as long as webcasters pay licensing fees to the companies that own the material. This allows sites such as Hulu to legally stream movies and TV shows to viewers. The DMCA also protects institutes of higher education, including distance-learning programs, from certain copyright liabilities (Online Institute for Cyberspace Law and Policy).

One of the most controversial aspects of the DMCA is that, while it requires websites to remove copyrighted material, it does not require websites to monitor their content. A 3-year-long court battle between media giant Viacom and the Google-owned website YouTube was recently waged over this factor. Viacom argued that YouTube infringed on its rights by hosting copyrighted videos. Google responded that while YouTube may include copyrighted material, it is not required to scan every user-uploaded video for copyright infringement. When a claim is brought against a YouTube video, the video is removed—beyond that, the website is not responsible for content. The judge ruled in favor of Google, stating that it was indeed protected under the DMCA. While many saw this as a victory for Internet freedom, others warned that it would have future consequences for the protection of copyright holders (Rosenbaum, 2010).

Key Takeaways

- The Privacy Act works to guarantee privacy to individuals and controls how personal information is used. Defamation in the written form (libel) or the spoken form (slander) is illegal in the United States.
- Section 315 (Equal Time Rule) ensures that broadcast media cannot favor any one candidate over another by granting one more time than another. The Fairness Doctrine ensured that radio stations offered equal time to opposing viewpoints.
- The Freedom of Information Act grants the public, including the news media, access to many government documents. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act, established in 1998, extended existing copyright laws to encompass and protect information online.

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7.3 CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Free Speech and Its Limitations

The value of free speech is central to American mass communication and has been since the nation's revolutionary founding. The U.S. Constitution's very first amendment guarantees the freedom of the press. Because of the First Amendment and subsequent statutes, the United States has some of the broadest protections on speech of any industrialized nation. However, there are limits to what kinds of speech are legally protected—limits that have changed over time, reflecting shifts in U.S. social values.



Artist Shepard Fairey, creator of the iconic Obama HOPE image, was sued by the Associated Press for copyright infringement; Fairey argued that his work was protected by the fair use exception. Attributions: [Shepard Fairey](#) by Fuzheado licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#); [Obama HOPE Portrait](#) by Shepard Fairey in the National Portrait Gallery.

Definitions of **obscenity**, which is not protected by the First Amendment, have altered with the nation's changing social attitudes. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, ranked by the Modern Library as the best English-language novel of the 20th century, was illegal to publish in the United States between 1922 and 1934 because the U.S. Customs Court declared the book obscene

because of its sexual content. The 1954 Supreme Court case *Roth v. the United States* defined obscenity more narrowly, allowing for differences depending on community standards. The sexual revolution and social changes of the 1960s made it even more difficult to pin down just what was meant by community standards—a question that is still under debate to this day. The mainstreaming of sexually explicit content like *Playboy* magazine, which is available in nearly every U.S. airport, is another indication that obscenity is still open to interpretation.

Regulations related to obscene content are not the only restrictions on First Amendment rights; **copyright law** also puts limits on free speech. Intellectual property law was originally intended to protect just that—the proprietary rights, both economic and intellectual, of the originator of a creative work. Works under copyright can't be reproduced without the authorization of the creator, nor can anyone else use them to make a profit. Inventions, novels, musical tunes, and even phrases are all covered by copyright law. The first copyright statute in the United States set 14 years as the maximum term for copyright protection. This number has risen exponentially in the 20th century; some works are now copyright-protected for up to 120 years. In recent years, an Internet culture that enables file sharing, musical mash-ups, and YouTube video parodies has raised questions about the fair use exception to copyright law. The exact line between what types of expressions are protected or prohibited by law are still being set by

courts, and as the changing values of the U.S. public evolve, copyright law—like obscenity law—will continue to change as well.



Attempts to censor material, such as banning books, typically attract a great deal of controversy and debate. Attribution: [Banned Books Display At The Lacey Library](#) – Timberland Regional Library – [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

To fully understand the issues of censorship and **freedom of speech** and how they apply to modern media, we must first explore the terms themselves. **Censorship** is defined as suppressing or removing anything deemed objectionable. A common, everyday example can be found on the radio or television, where potentially offensive words are “bleeped” out. More

controversial is censorship at a political or religious level. If you've ever been banned from reading a book in school, or watched a "clean" version of a movie on an airplane, you've experienced censorship.

Much as media legislation can be controversial due to First Amendment protections, censorship in the media is often hotly debated. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press (Case Summaries)." Under this definition, the term "speech" extends to a broader sense of "expression," meaning verbal, nonverbal, visual, or symbolic expression. Historically, many individuals have cited the First Amendment when protesting FCC decisions to censor certain media products or programs. However, what many people do not realize is that U.S. law establishes several exceptions to free speech, including defamation, hate speech, breach of the peace, incitement to crime, sedition, and obscenity.

Classifying Material as Indecent, Obscene, or Profane

To comply with U.S. law, the FCC prohibits broadcasters from airing obscene programming. The FCC decides whether or not material is obscene by using a three-prong test.

Obscene material:

1. causes the average person to have lustful or sexual thoughts;
2. depicts lawfully offensive sexual conduct; and
3. lacks literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

Material meeting all of these criteria is officially considered obscene and usually applies to hard-core pornography (Federal Communications Commission). “Indecent” material, on the other hand, is protected by the First Amendment and cannot be banned entirely.

Indecent material:

1. contains graphic sexual or excretory depictions;
2. dwells at length on depictions of sexual or excretory organs; and
3. is used simply to shock or arouse an audience.

Material deemed indecent cannot be broadcast between the hours of 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., to make it less likely that children will be exposed to it (Federal Communications Commission).

These classifications symbolize the media’s long struggle with what is considered appropriate and inappropriate material. Despite the existence of the guidelines, however, the process of categorizing materials is a long and arduous one.

There is a formalized process for deciding what material falls into which category. First, the FCC relies on television audiences to alert the agency of potentially controversial mater-

ial that may require classification. The commission asks the public to file a complaint via letter, e-mail, fax, telephone, or the agency's website, including the station, the community, and the date and time of the broadcast. The complaint should "contain enough detail about the material broadcast that the FCC can understand the exact words and language used (Federal Communications Commission)." Citizens are also allowed to submit tapes or transcripts of the aired material. Upon receiving a complaint, the FCC logs it in a database, which a staff member then accesses to perform an initial review. If necessary, the agency may contact either the station licensee or the individual who filed the complaint for further information.

Once the FCC has conducted a thorough investigation, it determines a final classification for the material. In the case of profane or indecent material, the agency may take further actions, including possibly fining the network or station (Federal Communications Commission). If the material is classified as obscene, the FCC will instead refer the matter to the U.S. Department of Justice, which has the authority to criminally prosecute the media outlet. If convicted in court, violators can be subject to criminal fines and/or imprisonment (Federal Communications Commission).

Each year, the FCC receives thousands of complaints regarding obscene, indecent, or profane programming. While the agency ultimately defines most programs cited in the complaints as appropriate, many complaints require in-depth

investigation and may result in fines called notices of apparent liability (NAL) or federal investigation.

FCC Indecency Complaints and NALs: 2000–2005

Year	Total Complaints Received	Radio Programs Complained About	Over-the-Air Television Programs Complained About	Cable Programs Complained About	Total Radio NALs	Total Television NALs
2000	111	85	25	1	7	0
2001	346	113	33	6	6	1
2002	13,922	185	166	38	7	0
2003	166,683	122	217	36	3	0
2004	1,405,419	145	140	29	9	3
2005	233,531	488	707	355	0	0
Source						

Violence and Sex: Taboos in Entertainment

Although popular memory thinks of old black-and-white movies as tame or sanitized, many early filmmakers filled their movies with sexual or violent content. Edwin S. Porter’s 1903

silent film *The Great Train Robbery*, for example, is known for expressing “the appealing, deeply embedded nature of violence in the frontier experience and the American civilizing process,” and showcases “the rather spontaneous way that the attendant violence appears in the earliest developments of cinema (Film Reference).” The film ends with an image of a gunman firing a revolver directly at the camera, demonstrating that cinema’s fascination with violence was present even 100 years ago.

Porter was not the only U.S. filmmaker working during the early years of cinema to employ graphic violence. Films such as *Intolerance* (1916) and *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) are notorious for their overt portrayals of violent activities. The director of both films, D. W. Griffith, intentionally portrayed content graphically because he “believed that the portrayal of violence must be uncompromised to show its consequences for humanity (Film Reference).”

Hays Code

Although audiences responded eagerly to the new medium of film, some naysayers believed that Hollywood films and their associated hedonistic culture was a negative moral influence. This changed during the 1930s with the implementation of the Hays Code. Formally termed the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, the code is popularly known by the name of its author, Will Hays, the chairman of the industry’s self-

regulatory Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA), which was founded in 1922 to “police all in-house productions (Film Reference).” Created to forestall what was perceived to be looming governmental control over the industry, the Hays Code was, essentially, Hollywood self-censorship. The code displayed the motion picture industry’s commitment to the public, stating:

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them by the people of the world and which have made motion pictures a universal form of entertainment.... Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purposes of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking (Arts Reformation).

Among other requirements, the Hays Code enacted strict guidelines on the portrayal of violence. Crimes such as murder, theft, robbery, safecracking, and “dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc.” could not be presented in detail (Arts Reformation). The code also addressed the portrayals of sex, saying that “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing (Arts Reformation).” This was interpreted to include non-heterosexual relationships, which were virtually absent from film and television

until the 1970s. When queer characters did appear in Code-era media, they were dehumanized, vilified, and demonized.



As the chairman of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, Will Hays oversaw the creation of the industry's self-censoring Hays Code. Attribution: [Latest Portrait Study of Will Hays](#) – public domain.

As television grew in popularity during the mid-1900s, the strict code placed on the film industry spread to other forms of visual media. Many early sitcoms, for example, showed married couples sleeping in separate twin beds to avoid suggesting sexual relations.

By the end of the 1940s, the MPPDA had begun to relax the rigid regulations of the Hays Code. Propelled by the changing moral standards of the 1950s and 1960s, this led to a gradual reintroduction of violence and sex into mass media.

Ratings Systems

As filmmakers began pushing the boundaries of acceptable visual content, the Hollywood studio industry scrambled to create a system to ensure appropriate audiences for films, once again reasoning that self-regulation would serve their financial interest better than government oversight. In 1968, the successor of the MPPDA, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), established the familiar film ratings system to help alert potential audiences to the type of content they could expect from a production.

Film Ratings

Although the ratings system changed slightly in its early years, by 1972 it seemed that the MPAA had settled on its ratings.

These ratings consisted of G (general audiences), PG (parental guidance suggested), R (restricted to ages 17 or up unless accompanied by a parent), and X (completely restricted to ages 17 and up). The system worked until 1984, when several major battles took place over controversial material. During that year, the highly popular films *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins* both premiered with a PG rating. Both films—and subsequently the MPAA—received criticism for the explicit violence presented on screen, which many viewers considered too intense for the relatively mild PG rating. In response to the complaints, the MPAA introduced the PG-13 rating to indicate that some material may be inappropriate for children under the age of 13.

Another change came to the ratings system in 1990, with the introduction of the NC-17 rating. Carrying the same restrictions as the existing X rating, the new designation came at the behest of the film industry to distinguish mature films from pornographic ones. Despite the arguably milder format of the rating's name, many filmmakers find it too strict in practice; receiving an NC-17 rating often leads to a lack of promotion or distribution because numerous movie theaters and rental outlets refuse to carry films with this rating.

Television and Video Game Ratings

Regardless of these criticisms, most audience members find the rating system helpful, particularly when determining what is appropriate for children. The adoption of industry ratings for television programs and video games reflects the success of the film ratings system. During the 1990s, for example, the broadcasting industry introduced a voluntary rating system not unlike that used for films to accompany all TV shows. These ratings are displayed on screen during the first 15 seconds of a program and include TV-Y (all children), TV-Y7 (children ages 7 and up), TV-Y7-FV (older children—fantasy violence), TV-G (general audience), TV-PG (parental guidance suggested), TV-14 (parents strongly cautioned), and TV-MA (mature audiences only).

Television R

Rating	Meaning
TV-Y	Appropriate for all children
TV-Y7	Designed for children ages 7 and
TV-Y7-FV	Directed toward older children; i violence
TV-G	Suitable for general audiences; co strong language, and little or no s
TV-PG	Parental guidance suggested
TV-14	Parents strongly cautioned; conta language, and sexual or violent si
TV-MA	Mature audiences only
Source: Link to TV Guidelines http://www.tvguidelines.org/ratings.htm	

At about the same time that television ratings appeared, the Entertainment Software Rating Board was established to provide ratings on video games. Video game ratings include EC (early childhood), E (everyone), E 10+ (ages 10 and older), T (teen), M (mature), and AO (adults only).

Video Game Ratings System

Rating	Meaning	Examples of Games
EC	Designed for early childhood, children ages 3 and older	Nickelodeon BINGO, Winnie the Pooh ABC's, Elmo's World
E	Suitable for everyone over the age of 6; contains minimal fantasy violence and mild language	Tiger Woods PGA Tour, Little Big Planet, Frogger, Myst
E 10+	Appropriate for ages 10 and older; may contain more violence and/or slightly suggestive themes	Dance Dance Revolution, Tales of Monkey Island, Rock Band, Scribblenauts
T	Content is appropriate for teens (ages 13 and older); may contain violence, crude humor, sexually suggestive themes, use of strong language, and/or simulated gambling	Final Fantasy XIV, The Sims 3, Super Smash Bros. Brawl
Source: http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp		

Rating	Meaning	Examples of Games
M	Mature content for ages 17 and older; includes intense violence and/or sexual content	Quake, Grand Theft Auto IV, God of War, Fallout 3
AO	Adults (18+) only; contains graphic sexual content and/or prolonged violence	Playboy Mansion: Private Party, Manhunt 2
Source: http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp		

Even with these ratings, the video game industry has long endured criticism over violence and sex in video games. One of the top-selling video game series in the world, Grand Theft Auto, is highly controversial because players have the option to solicit prostitution or murder civilians (Media Awareness). The controversy hasn't hurt the producer's bottom line; the series' highly-anticipated sixth installment is expected in late 2020 and will be sold in family-friendly stores like WalMart and Target.

In 2010, a report claimed that “38 percent of the female characters in video games are scantily clad, 23 percent baring breasts or cleavage, 31 percent exposing thighs, another 31 percent exposing stomachs or midriffs, and 15 percent baring their behinds (Media Awareness).” Despite multiple lawsuits,

some video game creators stand by their decisions to place graphic displays of violence and sex in their games on the grounds of freedom of speech. In 2011, their free speech argument was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, who decided in favor of the industry in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants' Association*. The decision found that video games did not constitute “obscenity” under the First Amendment and therefore government does not have a compelling interest in limiting their distribution.

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7.4 OWNERSHIP ISSUES IN THE MASS MEDIA

Since its inception, the Internet has posed problems of ownership. Over the years, the government has struggled to find ways to introduce copyright protections into the online environment because, unlike other forms of media, the Internet enables users to make an unlimited number of copies of material and to transmit that information around the world (Rosenblatt, 1997). In this section, we explore the unique challenges presented in dealing with online copyright and intellectual property and the U.S. government's role in regulating those fields.

Online Creativity and Intellectual Property Rights

Congress passed the **Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)** in 1998 to establish a protocol for online copyright matters. Yet the nature of the Internet causes very different copyright and intellectual property issues than older forms of media do. Because of the ease of sharing information online,

for example, the DMCA has not worked as Congress expected (Electronic Frontier Foundation). Copying and sharing materials online is relatively simple and, as such, piracy and rights infringement run rampant. In fact, many have argued that despite the DMCA's attempt to stop piracy, in practice, it has done nothing (Electronic Frontier Foundation). Additionally, because information is disseminated so rapidly online, piracy opponents struggle with determining the rightful owner of a particular copyright.

The DMCA and its role in Internet policing have frustrated many online users and watchdog groups. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) claims that "the DMCA has become a serious threat that jeopardizes fair use, impedes competition and innovation, chills free expression and scientific research, and interferes with computer intrusion laws (Electronic Frontier Foundation)." In 2004, comic book company Marvel Entertainment sued game publishers NCsoft and Cryptic for copyright infringement in their online game *City of Heroes*. Marvel argued that players could use the character customization system in *City of Heroes* to make characters look almost identical to Marvel characters (Jenkins, 2004). Situations like this led groups such as the EFF to publically call for DMCA reform. Such disputes serve as reminders of the challenges inherent in issuing copyrights and intellectual property rights for the online industry.

Copyright Protection in Cyberspace

Certainly, the DMCA brought about major transformations by establishing copyright protection guidelines for the digital arena. However, in 1996—prior to the passage of the DMCA—the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) established two treaties designed to “update and supplement the major existing WIPO treaties on copyright and related rights, primarily in order to respond to developments in technology and in the marketplace (World Intellectual Property Organization).” The first of these, the WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT), was created to protect authors of literary and artistic works, including computer programs, original databases, and fine art (World Intellectual Property Organization). The second, the WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT), deals with “related rights,” or rights connected to copyright. This law was created to protect the rights of performers and producers of sound recordings (World Intellectual Property Organization). These treaties both ensure basic rights, such as compensation and acknowledgement for those who create works, and extend further protections (World Intellectual Property Organization).

Supported by the WIPO and the DMCA, new forms of communication now enjoy copyright protections. Copyright laws cover blogs and website content, provided that these sites

contain original writing (U.S. Copyright Office). Despite these developments, however, the Internet still poses challenges for copyrighted material. Because the web changes so quickly, maintaining copyright protection with the Copyright Office can be difficult. Presently, a work must be fixed and in a tangible form to be protected under copyright. Different, altered versions of the same work might not be covered under an original filed copyright claim. As such, authors publishing online must be careful to ensure that their work is protected.

The RIAA versus Piracy

Widespread piracy problems arose during the late 1990s with the popularization of technology allowing **peer-to-peer (P2P)** music sharing. Suddenly, software such as Napster, Scour, Aimster, AudioGalaxy, Morpheus, Grokster, Kazaa, iMesh, and LimeWire popped up on computers everywhere, allowing access to free music around the world—and fueling online piracy. However, in 2003, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) put the laws established by the DMCA into practice and began a campaign to stop music piracy. In response to the growing number of users, the organization announced that it had been gathering evidence against users sharing music on P2P networks. Rather than go after the software engineers, “the RIAA investigators targeted ‘upload-

ers’—individuals who were allowing others to copy music files from their ‘shared’ folders (U.S. Copyright Office).”

This data collection led to the RIAA filing more than 250 lawsuits against individuals in what has been called “an unprecedented legal campaign against its own customers (Electronic Frontier Foundation).” Among the first of these lawsuits was one against a 12-year-old girl who had to pay \$2,000 and publicly apologize to settle her case. Since then, the recording industry has filed, settled, or threatened legal actions against over 28,000 individuals (Electronic Frontier Foundation). Recently, the popular torrent site The Pirate Bay found itself under attack for allowing users to search for pirated copies of material. This case mirrors the case of Viacom versus YouTube, because the prosecution argued that The Pirate Bay was responsible for the material its users posted and downloaded. These lawsuits raise the question of whether websites are responsible for the actions of their users, an issue that looks to be central to future Internet legislation (Masnick, 2009).

The Law and Online Interactions

Many Americans use the Internet on a regular basis. However, although the Internet is a relatively new form of media, it is not exempt from media laws. Terms of service agreements, as well as legislation such as the 1986 Computer Fraud and Abuse

Act, regulate Internet use. As you will see in the following case studies, when it comes to criminal use, the Internet is not as anonymous as it seems.

TOS Agreements

All software and most Internet sites have a terms of service agreement to which its users must comply. **Terms of Service (TOS)** are legally binding rules that an individual must adhere to in order to use a particular piece of software or service. iTunes, for instance, makes users agree to use their downloadable material for noncommercial use only and states that Apple is not responsible for lost or corrupted files. Anyone who has installed a new piece of software or logged on to social networking sites has agreed to a TOS. Entrance into these sites or use of a program typically requires a user to read through legal guidelines and then click a box agreeing to abide by the stated rules.

Deterred by the length and legal jargon of the standard TOS, however, many people skip to the end and simply accept the terms without reading them carefully. iTunes, for instance, has a clause that states:

You may not use or otherwise export or re-export the Licensed Application [iTunes] except as authorized by United States law...the Licensed Application may not be exported or re-exported...into any U.S.-embargoed coun-

tries...You also agree that you will not use these products for any purposes prohibited by United States law, including, without limitation, the development, design, manufacture, or production of nuclear, missile, or chemical or biological weapons (Apple).

While not all Terms of Service are as extensive, an individual's breach of any TOS may result in suspension, restriction, or cancellation of account privileges, depending on the severity of the offense. As individuals become increasingly reliant on Internet services such as e-mail, calendars, and social networks, the potential for disruption is enormous.

The Case of Megan Meier

In 2008, a compelling court case arose regarding TOS violation. Lori Drew, a 49-year-old woman, was accused of using a fake MySpace account to convince 13-year-old Megan Meier to commit suicide. After Drew's daughter had a confrontation with Meier, Drew created an account pretending to be a teenage boy. At first she used the persona to flirt with Meier and uncover information about the teenager's social life and relationship to her daughter. Later, when Drew decided she had enough information, she broke off her friendship, telling Meier that the world would be better off without her. Later that day, a distraught Megan Meier hanged herself (Steinhauer, 2008). After Lori Drew's identity was revealed, Meier's

shocked parents filed charges against her. Despite the tragic events, whether Drew had actually committed a crime remained questionable. Eventually, prosecutors decided that:

Since there were no laws that applied in Missouri, the state where this tragedy occurred, [Drew] will face trial in California (the home of MySpace) where she will be charged with—of all things—TOS violations. Creating a false identity goes against MySpace’s terms of service and...as a result she will be facing 1 count of conspiracy and 3 counts of accessing a computer without authorization (Spalding, 2008).

The case is complicated and the charge unprecedented. As one author writes, “This raises the questions as to how much weight do online ‘contracts’ hold (Spalding, 2008).”

Prosecutors charged Drew under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA), although that law is designed primarily to reduce hacking into computer systems. In August 2009, a jury found Drew guilty of “misdemeanor counts of unauthorized access,” but commented that “the CFAA was not devised as a vehicle for criminalizing simple contractual violations on the Internet (Paul, 2009).” Although many believe that prosecutors pushed the charge too far, the Drew case brought TOS agreements to the attention of the public, shedding light on the complicated laws associated with Internet use.

Crimes on the Internet

Although cases such as Drew's have brought about unexpected challenges, other online cases have had less ambiguous results. One newly clarified aspect of online law involves the use of the Internet to commit a crime. Regardless of the supposed anonymity of online use, law enforcement agencies and courts can requisition Internet protocol (IP) addresses of suspected lawbreakers and trace their computers to discover their identities. This practice has brought many individuals to trial for criminal offenses committed over the Internet.

Online Hate Crimes and Anonymity

In 1998, a federal court found a 21-year-old Los Angeles man, Richard Machado, guilty of sending racist death threats to 59 Asian students. This case set a precedent because Machado was the first person to be convicted of an online hate crime for sending the message via e-mail. Machado had used a campus computer to send an e-mail to a group of mostly Asian students at University of California, Irvine, saying, "I personally will make it my life career to find and kill every one of [you]." Machado, a former UC Irvine student, signed the e-mail "Asian Hater." Prosecutors charged Machado with sending the threat based on the recipients' race or ethnicity and

interfering with their right to attend a public university (Macavinta, 1998).

The case signaled a new legal development because it was the first trial regarding hate crimes online. Prosecutor Michael Gennaco said of Machado's sentencing, "The jury has spoken that a line needs to be drawn in cyberspace. If you cross that line, you'll be subjected to the same criminal penalties you would be as if you use a telephone or post mail to do these kinds of acts (Macavinta, 1998)." Internet law specialists agree with Gennaco that the Internet is not and should not be treated differently from other communication methods; something posted online carries the same weight as a phone conversation or face-to-face interaction. This means that online anonymity is, in fact, not anonymous.

Despite the precedent of Machado's case, many people still mistakenly believe that the Internet will protect them from prosecution. Such was the case of Walter Edward Bagdasarian, who discovered that the government can trace supposedly anonymous posts using IP addresses. U.S. Secret Service agents arrested Bagdasarian, a Southern California man, in 2009 for "posting a racist note to a Yahoo message board in October [2008] expressing displeasure over Barack Obama's candidacy, and predicting 'he will have a 50 cal in the head soon (Poulsen, 2009).'" The case exemplifies both the ease with which authorities can and do trace criminal behavior online and their propensity to take such cases seriously.

What does the future hold for Internet legislation? Many

say that it will closely mirror that of other media outlets. Already there have been cases regarding Internet monopolies, defamation of users, and copyright infringement on message boards and personal websites (Netlitigation). Others argue that Internet regulation should take into account the differences between the use of the Internet and the use of other media; for example, an Arizona radio station that violates broadcasting laws is tried in Arizona, but where should an Internet podcaster be charged? If a user posts information on a community forum, is it protected under copyright? Does e-mail spam fall under the same regulations as telemarketing? What privacy rights should Internet users have? As the Internet grows and more issues are taken to court, authorities must come to terms with media issues in a constantly changing digital landscape.

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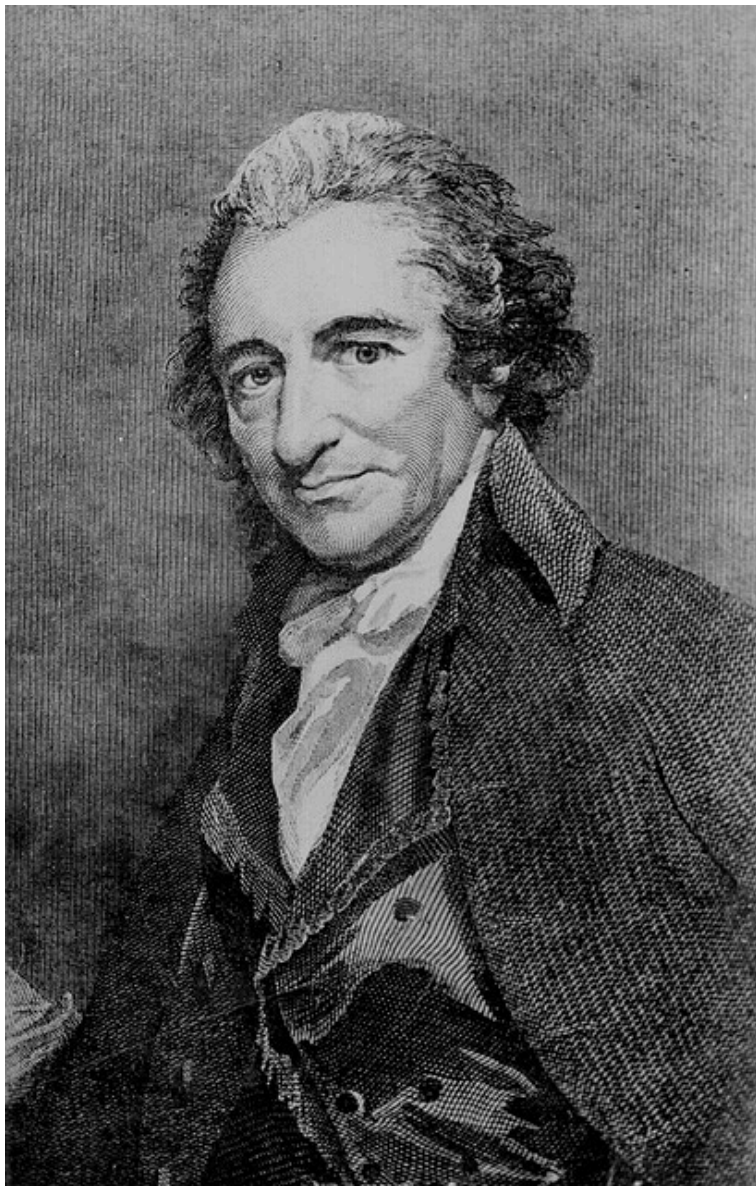
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7.5 DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND ITS POSSIBLE EFFECTS

The Role of Social Values in Internet-Based Communication

In a 1995 *Wired* magazine article, “The Age of Paine,” Jon Katz suggested that the Revolutionary War patriot Thomas Paine should be considered “the moral father of the Internet.” The Internet, Katz wrote, “offers what Paine and his revolutionary colleagues hoped for—a vast, diverse, passionate, global means of transmitting ideas and opening minds.” In fact, according to Katz, the emerging Internet era is closer in spirit to the 18th-century media world than to the 20th-century’s “old media” (radio, television, print). “The ferociously spirited press of the late 1700s...was dominated by individuals expressing their opinions. The idea that ordinary citizens with no special resources, expertise, or political power—like Paine himself—could sound off, reach wide audiences, even spark revolutions, was brand-new to the world (Creel, 1920).” Katz’s

impassioned defense of Paine's plucky independence speaks to the way social values and communication technologies are affecting our adoption of media technologies today. Keeping Katz's words in mind, we can ask ourselves two additional questions: How do commonly-held values shape our ideas of what online communication should look like? And how, in turn, does the Internet change our understanding of what our society values?



Thomas Paine is regarded by some as the “moral father of the Internet” because his independent spirit is reflected in the democratization of mass communication via the Internet.

Attribution: [Bass Otis – Thomas Paine](#).

In an era when work, discourse, and play are increasingly experienced via the Internet, it is fitting that politics have surged online as well in a recent phenomenon known as digital democracy. **Digital democracy**—also known as e-democracy—engages citizens in government and civic action through online tools. This new form of democracy began as an effort to include larger numbers of citizens in the democratic process. Recent evidence seems to confirm a rising popular belief that the Internet is the most effective modern way to engage individuals in politics. “Online political organizations...have attracted millions of members, raised tens of millions of dollars, and become a key force in electoral politics. Even more important, the 2004 and 2008 election cycles show that candidates themselves can use the Internet to great effect (Hindman, 2008).”

President Obama's Digital Campaign



President Barack Obama has been called “the digital candidate” for his use of digital technology during his 2008 presidential campaign. Attribution: shutterblog – YES WE DID! – [CC BY 2.0](#).

Perhaps the best example of a political candidate putting digital democracy to use is the successful 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama. On June 8, 2008, following Obama’s victory in the Democratic presidential primaries, The New York Times published an article discussing the candidate’s use of the Internet in his nomination bid. Titled “The Wiki-Way to the Nomination,” the article credits Obama’s success to his employment of digital technology: “Barack Obama is the victor, and the Internet is taking the bows (Cohen, 2008).”

Obama’s campaign certainly is not the first to rely on the

Internet. Another Democratic presidential hopeful, Howard Dean, famously built his campaign online during the 2004 election cycle. But the Obama campaign took full advantage of the possibilities of digital democracy and, ultimately, secured the Oval Office partially on the strength of that strategy. As one writer puts it, “What is interesting about the story of his digital campaign is the way in which digital was integrated fully into the Obama campaign, rather than [being] seen as an additional extra (Williams, 2009).” President Obama’s successful campaign serves as an excellent example of the possibilities of digital democracy.

Traditional Websites

Several existing political websites proved beneficial to the Obama campaign. Founded in 1998, the liberal website [MoveOn.org](#) has long used its popularity and supporter base to mobilize citizens to vote, lobby, or donate funds to Democratic campaigns. With more than 4 million members, [MoveOn.org](#) plays a noticeable role in U.S. politics and serves as inspiration for other like-minded digital efforts.

The Obama campaign gave a nod to the success of such sites by building a significant web presence. Websites such as [MyBarackObama.com](#) formed the foundation of these online efforts. However, the success of the Obama digital campaign came from its use of online media in all its forms. The cam-

campaign turned not only to traditional websites but also to social networking sites, e-mail outreach, text messages, and viral videos.

Social Networking

More and more, digital democracy demands that its users rely on these alternative forms of Internet outreach. Social networking site Facebook was the hub of many digital outreach efforts during the 2008 campaign. As of 2010, Barack Obama's official Facebook page boasts more than 9 million fans, and the Obama administration uses the page to send messages about the current political climate.

Individuals not part of the official campaign also established Facebook pages supporting the candidate. Mamas for Obama emerged just prior to the election, as did Women for Obama and the Michelle Obama Fan Club. The groups range in size, but all speak to a new wave of digital democracy. Other political candidates, including 2008 Republican presidential contender John McCain, have also turned to Facebook, albeit in less comprehensive ways.

E-Mail Outreach

The Obama campaign also relied on e-mail. In 2009, an article was published titled "The Story Behind Obama's Digital Cam-

paing” discussing the success of Obama’s use of the Internet. According to the article, 13.5 million people signed up for updates on Obama’s progress via the MyBarackObama.com website. The campaign regularly sent out e-mails to reach its audience.

Emails were short—never longer than 300 words—and never anonymous, there was always a consistency of voice and tone. Obama and other key figures in the campaign also contributed emails to be sent—“Michelle wrote her own emails...and more people opened those than her husband’s”—giving the campaign a personal touch and authenticity, rather than the impression of being simply churned out by the PR machine (Williams, 2009).

A combination of message and financial appeal, the e-mails were successful not only in reaching target audiences but also in earning valuable campaign dollars.

Two billion emails were then sent out, although...this email content was carefully managed, with individuals targeted with different “tracks” depending on their circumstances and whether they had already donated to the campaign.... By the end of the campaign the website had mobilized over 3 million people to contribute over \$500 million online (Williams, 2009).

Text Messaging

Additionally, Obama used text messaging to reach out to his

supporters. During the campaign, supporters could sign up to receive text messages, and attendees at rallies and other events were asked to send text messages to friends or potential supporters to encourage them to participate in Obama's campaign. Members of MyBarackObama.com were the first to discover his running mate selection via text message (Organizing for America). This tool proved helpful and demonstrated the Obama campaign's commitment to fully relying on the digital world.

E-Democracy

Perhaps even more impressive than the campaign's commitment to digital democracy were the e-democracy efforts of Obama's supporters. Websites such as Barackobamaisy-ournewbicycle.com, a gently mocking site "listing the many examples of Mr. Obama's magical compassion. ('Barack Obama carries a picture of you in his wallet'; 'Barack Obama thought you could use some chocolate')," ¹ emerged, but viral videos offered even stronger examples of Obama's grassroots campaign.



will.i.am #willpower Wrap Party at the Avalon in Hollywood, CA on August 13, 2012 The music video “Yes We Can,” created by the Black Eyed Peas’ will.i.am, was viewed more than 20 million times leading up to the 2008 presidential election. It is just one example of digital campaigning used by supporters of political

candidates. Attribution: [will.i.am in 2012](#) by Toglenn
licensed under a [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

One example of a supporter-created video was “Barack Paper Scissors,” an interactive game inspired by rock-paper-scissors. Posted on YouTube, the video logged some 600,000 views. The success of videos such as “Barack Paper Scissors” did not go unnoticed by the Obama campaign. The viral video “Yes We Can,” in which Barack Obama’s words were set to music by will.i.am (of the Black Eyed Peas), has been viewed more than 20 million times online. Capitalizing on the popularity of the clip, the campaign brought it from YouTube to its main website, thus generating even more views and greater exposure for its message.

Political Rumors Online

Although the Internet is a powerful tool for candidates, it also propagates rumors that can derail—or at least hinder—a politician’s career. Blog posts and mass e-mails can be created within minutes and then reposted or forwarded

in seconds. Thus, ideas spread like wildfire regardless of their relative truth. Snopes.com, a website dedicated to verifying or debunking urban legends and Internet rumors, has an entire search section dedicated to political rumors, ranging from shooting down a list of books supposedly banned by Sarah Palin to investigating whether actress Nancy Cartwright, best known as the voice of Bart Simpson, was once elected mayor of Northridge, California. The pages dedicated to major political figures such as President Obama can be huge; Obama's page, for example, lists more than 60 debunked rumors. Some of these rumors include the questioning of his U.S. citizenship, his decision to ban recreational fishing, and his refusal to sign Eagle Scout certificates.

Many of these online rumors are accompanied by "photographic evidence," thanks to technology such as Photoshop, which allows photographs to be manipulated with the click of a mouse. With such a spread of online rumors, savvy media consumers must be wary of what they read and seek out legitimate sources of information to verify the news that they receive.

Digital Democracy and the Digital Divide

Just as digital technology access issues can create the kinds of problems discussed in [Chapter 13 “Economics of Mass Media”](#), the digital divide can equally split the country’s involvement with politics along tech-savvy lines. Certainly, the Obama campaign’s reliance on modern technology allowed it to reach a large population of young voters; but in doing so, the campaign focused much of its attention in an area out of reach to other voters. In *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, author Matthew Hindman wonders, “Is the Internet making politics less exclusive?”² The answer is likely both yes and no. While the Internet certainly has the power to inform and mobilize many individuals, it also denies poorer citizens without digital access an opportunity to be part of the new wave of e-democracy.

Nevertheless, digital democracy will continue to play a large role in politics, particularly after the overwhelming success of President Obama’s largely digital campaign. But politicians and their supporters must consider the digital divide and work to reach out to those who are not plugged in to the digital world.

Internet Censorship Around the World

Is what you see on the Internet being censored? In [Chapter 11 “The Internet and Social Media”](#), you read about the debate between the search engine Google and China. However, Internet censorship is much more widespread, affecting people from Germany to Thailand to the United States. And now, thanks to a new online service, you can see for yourself.

In September 2010, Google launched its new web tool, Google Transparency. This program allows users to see a map of online censorship around the world. With this tool, people can view the number of times a country requests data to be removed, what kind of data they request be removed, and the percentage of requests that Google complies with. In some cases, the content is minor—YouTube videos that violate copyright, for example, are frequent offenders. In other cases, the requests are more formidable; Iran blocked all of YouTube after the

disputed 2009 elections, and Pakistan blocked the site for more than a week in response to a 2010 online protest. Perhaps most surprising is the amount of requests from countries not normally associated with strict censorship. Germany, for example, has banned content it deems to be affiliated with neo-Nazism, and Thailand refuses to allow videos of its king that it finds offensive. Between January and June 2010, the United States asked Google 4,287 times for information regarding its users, and sent 128 requests to the search engine to remove data. Eighty percent of the time, Google complied with the requests for data removal (Sutter, 2010).

What is the general trend in Internet censorship? According to Google, it's becoming more and more commonplace every year. However, the search engine hopes that its new tool will combat this trend. A spokesperson for the company said, "The openness and freedom that have shaped the internet as a powerful tool has come under threats from governments who want to control that technology." By giving users access to censorship numbers, Google allows them to witness the amount of Internet censorship that

they are subject to in their everyday lives. As censorship increases, many predict that citizen outrage will increase as well. The future of Internet censorship may be unsure, but for now, at least, the numbers are visible to all (Sutter, 2010).

1Cohen, “The Wiki-Way to the Nomination.”

2Hindman, 4.

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7.6 MEDIA INFLUENCE ON LAWS AND GOVERNMENT



In 2007, The Washington Post published a critical exposé on the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. In response to the public outcry, the U.S. Army launched an investigation and set about improving the facility. As demonstrated in this case, media coverage can directly influence people's lives. Attribution: [The Washington Post](#) – Max Borge – [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

Media have long had a voice and a role in politics. As you

have read in earlier chapters, even some of the earliest newspapers and magazines used their pages as a forum for political discourse. When broadcast media emerged during the 20th century, radio briefs and television reports entered the conversation, bringing political stories to the public's living rooms.

In addition to acting as a watchdog, media provide readers and viewers with news coverage of issues and events, and also offer public forums for debate. Thus, media support—or lack thereof—can have a significant influence on public opinion and governmental action. In 2007, for example, The Washington Post conducted a 4-month investigation of the substandard medical treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC. Because of the ensuing two-part feature, the Secretary of the Army and the two-star general in charge of the medical facility lost their jobs.

However, an ongoing debate exists over media's role in politics. Many individuals wonder who is really behind certain stories. William James Willis, author of *The Media Effect: How the News Influences Politics and Government* discusses this debate:

Sometimes the media appear willing or unwitting participants in chasing stories the government wants them to chase; other times politicians find themselves chasing issues that the media has enlarged by its coverage. Over the decades, political scientists, journalists, politicians, and political pundits have put forth many arguments about the media's power in influencing the government and politicians (Willis, 2007).

Regardless of who is encouraging whom, media coverage of politics certainly raises questions among the public. Despite laws put in place to prevent unbalanced political coverage, such as Section 315, a large majority of the public is still wary of the media's role in swaying political opinion. In a January 2010 survey, two-thirds of respondents said that the media has too much influence on the government. Additionally, 72 percent of respondents agreed that “most reporters try to help the candidate they want to win (Rasmussen Reports, 2010).” This statistic demonstrates the media's perceived political power along with the road the media must carefully navigate when dealing with political issues.

Propaganda and Other Ulterior Motives

Sometimes social values enter mass media messages in a more overt way. Producers of media content may have vested interests in particular social goals, which, in turn, may cause them to promote or refute particular viewpoints. In its most heavy-handed form, this type of media influence can become **propaganda**, communication that intentionally attempts to persuade its audience for ideological, political, or commercial purposes. Propaganda often (but not always) distorts the truth, selectively presents facts, or uses emotional appeals. During wartime, propaganda often includes caricatures of the

enemy. Even in peacetime, however, propaganda is frequent. Political campaign commercials in which one candidate openly criticizes the other are common around election time, and some negative ads deliberately twist the truth or present outright falsehoods to attack an opposing candidate.

Other types of influence are less blatant or sinister. Advertisers want viewers to buy their products; some news sources, such as Fox News or The Huffington Post, have an explicit political slant. Still, people who want to exert media influence often use the tricks and techniques of propaganda. During World War I, the U.S. government created the Creel Commission as a sort of public relations firm for the United States' entry into the war. The Creel Commission used radio, movies, posters, and in-person speakers to present a positive slant on the U.S. war effort and to demonize the opposing Germans. Chairman George Creel acknowledged the commission's attempt to influence the public but shied away from calling their work propaganda:

In no degree was the Committee an agency of censorship, a machinery of concealment or repression.... In all things, from first to last, without halt or change, it was a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventures in advertising.... We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was educational and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument

was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of the facts (Creel, 1920).

Of course, the line between the selective (but “straightforward”) presentation of the truth and the manipulation of propaganda is not an obvious or distinct one. (Another of the Creel Commission’s members was later deemed the father of public relations and authored a book titled *Propaganda*.) In general, however, public relations is open about presenting one side of the truth, while propaganda seeks to invent a new truth.



World War I propaganda posters were sometimes styled to resemble movie posters in an attempt to glamorize the war effort. Attribution: [Together We Can Do It!](#) – public domain.

Gatekeepers

In 1960, journalist A. J. Liebling wryly observed that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Liebling was referring to the role of gatekeepers in the media industry, another way in which social values influence mass communication. **Gatekeepers** are the people who help determine which stories make it to the public, including reporters who decide what sources to use and editors who decide what gets reported on and which stories make it to the front page. Media gatekeepers are part of society and thus are saddled with their own cultural biases, whether consciously or unconsciously. In deciding what counts as newsworthy, entertaining, or relevant, gatekeepers pass on their own values to the wider public. In contrast, stories deemed unimportant or uninteresting to consumers can linger forgotten in the back pages of the newspaper—or never get covered at all.

In one striking example of the power of gatekeeping, journalist Allan Thompson lays blame on the news media for its sluggishness in covering the Rwandan genocide in 1994. According to Thompson, there weren’t many outside reporters in Rwanda at the height of the genocide, so the world wasn’t forced to confront the atrocities happening there. Instead, the nightly news in the United States was preoccupied by the O. J. Simpson trial, Tonya Harding’s attack on a fellow figure skater, and the less bloody conflict in Bosnia (where more reporters were stationed). Thompson went on to argue

that the lack of international media attention allowed politicians to remain complacent (Thompson, 2007). With little media coverage, there was little outrage about the Rwandan atrocities, which contributed to a lack of political will to invest time and troops in a faraway conflict. Richard Dowden, Africa editor for the British newspaper *The Independent* during the Rwandan genocide, bluntly explained the news media's larger reluctance to focus on African issues: "Africa was simply not important. It didn't sell newspapers. Newspapers have to make profits. So it wasn't important (Thompson, 2007)." Bias on the individual and institutional level downplayed the genocide at a time of great crisis and potentially contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

Gatekeepers had an especially strong influence in old media, in which space and time were limited. A news broadcast could only last for its allotted half hour, while a newspaper had a set number of pages to print. The Internet, in contrast, theoretically has room for infinite news reports. The interactive nature of the medium also minimizes the gatekeeper function of the media by allowing media consumers to have a voice as well. News aggregators like Digg allow readers to decide what makes it on to the front page. That's not to say that the wisdom of the crowd is always wise—recent top stories on Digg have featured headlines like "Top 5 Hot Girls Playing Video Games" and "The girl who must eat every 15 minutes to stay alive." Media expert Mark Glaser noted that the digital age hasn't eliminated gatekeepers; it's just shifted who they are: "the edi-

tors who pick featured artists and apps at the Apple iTunes store, who choose videos to spotlight on YouTube, and who highlight Suggested Users on Twitter,” among others (Glaser, 2009). And unlike traditional media, these new gatekeepers rarely have public bylines, making it difficult to figure out who makes such decisions and on what basis they are made.

Observing how distinct cultures and subcultures present the same story can be indicative of those cultures’ various social values. Another way to look critically at today’s media messages is to examine how the media has functioned in the world and in the United States during different cultural periods.

Politics, Broadcast Media, and the Internet

Throughout their respective histories, radio, television, and the Internet have played important roles in politics. As technology developed, citizens began demanding greater levels of information and analysis of media outlets and, in turn, politicians. Here we explore the transformation of politics with the development of media.

Radio

As discussed in [Chapter 7 “Radio”](#), radio was the first medium through which up-to-the-minute breaking news could be broadcast, with its popularization during the 1920s. On November 2, 1920, KDKA in East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, became the first station to broadcast election results from the Harding-Cox presidential race, “becoming a pioneer in a brand new technology (American History).” Suddenly, information that would previously have been available only later in the newspapers was transmitted directly into American living rooms. The public responded positively, wanting to be more involved in U.S. politics.

As radio technology developed, “Americans demanded participation in the political and cultural debates shaping their democratic republic (Jenkins).” Radio provided a way to hold these debates in a public forum; it also provided a venue for politicians to speak directly to the public, a phenomenon that had not been possible on a large scale prior to the invention of the radio. This dynamic changed politics. Suddenly, candidates and elected officials had to be able to effectively communicate their messages to a large audience. “Radio brought politicians into people’s homes, and many politicians went to learn effective public-speaking for radio broadcasts (ThinkQuest).”

Television

Today, television remains Americans' chief source of political news, a relationship that dates back almost to the very beginning of the medium. Political candidates began using TV commercials to speak directly to the public as early as 1952. These "living room candidates," as they are often called, understood the power of the television screen and the importance of reaching viewers at home. In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower became the first candidate to harness television's popularity. Eisenhower stepped onto the television screen "when Madison Avenue advertising executive Rosser Reeves convinced [him] that short ads played during such popular TV programs as *I Love Lucy* would reach more voters than any other form of advertising. This innovation had a permanent effect on the way presidential campaigns are run (*Living Room Candidate*)."

Nixon–Kennedy Debates of 1960

The relationship between politics and television took a massive step forward in 1960 with a series of four televised "Great Debates" between presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Seventy million U.S. viewers tuned into the first of these on September 26, 1960. The debates gave vot-

ers their first chance to see candidates debate, marking television's entry into politics.



In 1960, candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon brought presidential debating to television screens around the nation. Attribution: [Replay](#) – jude_and_ed – [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

Just as radio changed the way politicians thought about their speeches, television emphasized the importance of their appearance. Shortly before the first debate, Nixon had spent 2 weeks in the hospital with a knee injury. By the day of the debate he was extremely underweight. In addition, he wore an ill-fitting shirt and refused to wear makeup. Kennedy, however, was fit, tan, and confident. The visual difference between the two candidates was staggering; Kennedy appeared much more presidential. Indeed, those who watched the first broadcast declared that Kennedy had clearly won the debate, while those who listened by radio said that Nixon had won. A record number of viewers watched the debates, and many historians have attributed Kennedy's success at the polls that November to the public perception of the candidates formed during these debates (Mary Ferrell Foundation).

War and Television

Later in the decade, rising U.S. involvement in Vietnam brought television and public affairs together again in a significant way. The horrors of battle were broadcast directly into U.S. homes on a large scale for the first time; although television had been invented prior to the Korean War, “the medium was in its infancy...[and] its audience and technology [were] still too limited to play a major role (Museum of Broadcast

Communications).” As such, in 1965 the Vietnam War became the first “living-room war.”

Early in the war, the coverage was mostly upbeat:

It typically began with a battlefield roundup, written from wire reports based on the daily press briefing in Saigon....read by the anchor and illustrated with a battle map.... The battlefield roundup would normally be followed by a policy story from Washington, and then a film report from the field.... As with most television news, the emphasis was on the visual and above all the personal: “American boys in action” was the story, and reports emphasized their bravery and their skill in handling the technology of war (Museum of Broadcast Communications).

In 1969, however, television coverage began to change as journalists grew more and more skeptical of the government’s claims of progress, and there was more emphasis on the human costs of war (Museum of Broadcast Communications). Although gore typically remained off screen, a few major violent moments were caught on film and broadcast into homes. In 1965, CBS aired footage of U.S. Marines setting village huts on fire, and in 1972, NBC audiences witnessed Vietnamese civilians fall victim to a napalm strike. Such scenes altered America’s perspective of the war, generating antiwar sentiment.

Political News Programming

The way that news is televised has dramatically changed over the medium's history. For years, nightly news broadcasts dominated the political news cycle; then round-the-clock cable news channels appeared. Founded by Ted Turner in 1980, CNN (Cable News Network) was the first such network. Upon the launch of CNN, Turner stated, "We won't be signing off until the world ends. We'll be on, and we will cover the end of the world, live, and that will be our last event...and when the end of the world comes, we'll play 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' before we sign off (TV Tropes)."

Twenty-four-hour news stations such as CNN have become more popular, and nightly news programs have been forced to change their focus, now emphasizing more local stories that may not be covered by the major news programs. Additionally, the 21st century has seen the rise of the popularity and influence of satirical news shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. The comedic news programs have, in recent years, become major cultural arbiters and watchdogs of political issues thanks to the outspoken nature of their hosts and their frank coverage of political issues.

Online News and Politics

Finally, the Internet has become an increasingly important

force in how Americans receive political information. Websites such as the Huffington Post, Daily Beast, and the Drudge Report are known for breaking news stories and political commentary. Additionally, political groups regularly use the Internet to organize supporters and influence political issues. Online petitions are available via the Internet, and individuals can use online resources to donate to political causes or connect with like-minded people.

Media and government have had a long and complicated history. Each influences the other through regulations and news cycles. As technology develops, the relationship between media and politics will likely become even more intermeshed. The hope is that the U.S. public will benefit from such developments, and both media and the government will seek out opportunities to involve the public in their decisions.

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MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Introduction

In 2017, the Collins Dictionary selected “fake news” as its word of the year. This was a nod to the popularization of the term in the United States during that time, and to broader concerns that the U.S. was entering a “post-truth” or “post-fact” era where inaccurate information was overloading the system, disrupting everything from journalism to business to politics.

However, *the term “fake news” is highly problematic*. First, its common use is highly imprecise: It covers a spectrum from simple and accidental mistakes to negligent behavior to planned and strategic manipulation. Second, the term carries a particular cultural meaning that was intentionally crafted to discredit journalistic outlets — regardless of how broadly (and imprecisely) the term is applied.

Scholars and linguists alike have thus cautioned against using the term “fake news,” and to instead draw upon more-specific terms to cover the associated issues. Chief among these are “misinformation” and “disinformation,” which similarly comment on the (in)accuracy of information while being cog-

nizant of the *intent* (or underlying motivations) of the communicator. While intent can be difficult to ascertain, the distinction is nevertheless useful in separating sloppy and accidental work from bad-faith efforts designed to confuse audiences, all the while carrying less of the cultural baggage connected to the term “fake news.”

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to *information whose inaccuracy is unintentional*. As media scholar Caroline Jack notes, journalists (and people in general) often make mistakes in the course of reporting new information. This may result from the journalist’s lack of understanding of a topic to their misinterpretation of a source’s claim (or failure to independently verify it) to their inability to disentangle conflicting information.

In all of these cases, the journalist may have made a simple error or been naive. At worst, they were negligent in not double-checking some information they opted to publish. However, the key for categorizing something as misinformation is that the journalist did not intend to deceive but simply made an error. Ideally, and under most journalistic codes of ethics, such errors will be quickly and clearly corrected.

An illustrative example of this was when the *Chicago Daily Tribune* famously misreported in an early edition that Governor Thomas Dewey had beat incumbent President Harry Tru-

man in the 1948 U.S. presidential election. The deadline for the early edition forced the newspaper to be printed before many states had reported results from their polling places. The *Tribune* therefore relied on the conventional wisdom of the day — many polls indicated Dewey would win by a wide margin — and the assessment of one of its veteran political analysts, and boldly proclaimed Dewey's victory. When the *Tribune* realized that the race was far closer than anticipated, it changed the headline of the late evening edition to reflect the closeness of the race. (By that point, however, more than 150,000 copies of the paper had already been printed with the erroneous headline.) Truman eventually won with a narrow margin, leading to much embarrassment for the *Tribune*.

More recently, major journalistic outlets have erroneously misidentified the perpetrators of attacks. For example, the *New York Post* famously featured, on a large cover photo and story, two individuals that were said to be the duo behind the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. The assertion, which came out of a crowdsourced investigation led by online sleuths on Reddit, turned out to be false. The *Post* also played a role in unintentionally promoting false rumors by retweeting claims that the New York Stock Exchange trading floor had been flooded during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. While these examples should not be simply excused as inconsequential mistakes — they can and do cause real-world harm to both the subjects of a story and to audiences — it is crucial to distinguish that they are not mali-

cious errors designed to sow confusion. They were instances of sloppy journalism.

As these examples also show, misinformation is most often produced during periods of unfolding crisis or fast-moving developments. Journalistic outlets have a duty to keep people informed, especially when their safety or well-being may be placed at risk (e.g., as news about a bombing begins to break). They thus face pressure to report and publish quickly, which increases the likelihood of making errors. This is doubly true when they compete for audience attention during those news-breaking stages, and are thus incentivized to “scoop” competing outlets by being the first to report a story.

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to *information that is deliberately false or misleading*. In these cases, the would-be journalist (and, more often, communicators operating outside of the journalism industry) are not simply making errors in the heat of the moment. Instead, they are seeking to sow confusion or promote a particular narrative that *they know* to be untrue (or, at best, only partly true).

For example, in the aforementioned case of news organizations misinforming the public about the New York Stock Exchange trading floor being flooded, the false information was deliberately seeded by individuals doing it “for the lulz.”

Put another way, those individuals had the intent to sow confusion — the confusion was their source of amusement — and they thus sought to disinform others by leveraging the naivete of some journalists (who were then retweeted by other journalists who trusted them, creating a cascade).

There are far more malicious examples of disinformation, however. For example, in September 2014, a number of sock puppet (fake) Twitter accounts began systematically spreading false reports about an explosion and toxic fume hazard at a chemical manufacturing plant in Louisiana. The coordinated effort also included stories appearing in spoofed (fake) versions of local news websites, fabricated YouTube videos, and even text messages that were sent to some local residents. No explosions had actually taken place, though. Researchers later traced those efforts to a state actor: a Russia-backed organization called the Internet Research Agency. Many intelligence services have identified the Internet Research Agency as being behind a number of efforts to destabilize U.S. politics by flooding social media with disinformation.

Disinformation is not limited to complete fabrications that lack any factual basis, though. It also includes the notion of *enrichment*, wherein information is selectively (and, again, intentionally) added or omitted in order to alter the meaning of a message. This may include intentionally decontextualizing information — which is a separate matter from failing to offer full context due to space constraints — as well as intentionally casting information in a misleading (or unfair) light. Enrich-

ment is more commonly found in disinformation produced by pseudo-journalistic outlets (especially highly partisan ones) than complete fabrications because it is easier for those would-be journalists to deny intent.

Discrediting Journalism

The term “fake news” is thus designed to lump together both intentional and unintentional errors in order to discredit the institution of journalism. Put another way, it is designed to blur lines in order to more easily ascribe malicious intent to journalists — and especially those who publish information that is critical of the accuser.

While the term may seem new to popular communication (or at least newly rediscovered in it), the denouncing of media and journalism through derogatory language is part of a long-standing strategy observed both within and beyond the United States. Allegations that the press are liars have been used as a political device by numerous leaders (especially in autocratic regimes) to silence oppositional and independent voices. Indeed, the very inception of the press was marked by allegations from political and religious leaders that ‘the public’ should not be allowed to publish unfiltered information and opinion, and that ‘the public’ would only be harmed by lower barriers to publication. Newspapers in particular were often

charged as being full of lies, bias, and distortion — or, more simply, as being vehicles for “fake news.”

However, the resurgence of the term is of particular concern to free press advocates who have observed important social consequences. Legally, the popularization of the term is credited with facilitating the passing of so-called “fake news” laws that give autocratic and pseudo-democratic states more power in regulating news media. Politically, the term is credited with increasing polarization and the fragmentation of audiences, which may now gather in echo chambers to avoid what it considers “fake news.” Socially, it has resulted in more acts of violence against journalists by regular citizens. This last change has been so pronounced even in the United States that global organizations like Reporters Without Borders have begun tracking domestic attacks against U.S. journalists.

Additionally, the term “fake news” is today applied in a wide array of contexts — many of which do not involve journalism at all. For example, it is not uncommon to see the term used to marginalize dissenting opinions, as with a political candidate who might charge their opponent with promoting “fake news” when they simply assert that their health care policy is better. It is even sometimes used in day-to-day disagreements between friends, like when one asserts that their preferred team is better. (“That’s fake news!”) Scholars have argued that the term has been deliberately seeded in such a wide array of contexts in order to equate any form of inconvenient information

with journalism and, in turn, make it easier to discredit journalism via the rhetorical device of “fake news.”

Seeding Mass Confusion

The strong resurgence of the term in recent years has been led largely (but not exclusively) by conservative commentators. It has been used most vociferously (and effectively) by former U.S. President Donald Trump who, in 2018, awarded what he called the “fake news award” to traditional U.S. media outlets.

Trump’s repeated claims that major news outlets lied about numerous aspects of his political and personal lives even as he made a range of demonstrably false claims at an unprecedented rate (for a high-ranking elected leader) has been linked to the notion of *gaslighting*. As media scholar Caroline Jack argues, this rhetorical and psychological strategy relies on the intentional orchestration of deceptions and biased narrations to not only confuse individuals but further distort audiences’ trust in their own perceptions and memories. The term “gaslighting” is also not new — it has been traced to a 1938 theatrical play — but it is useful in conceptualizing attempts by political actors to use misdirection, denial, and disinformation to help sow confusion and undermine trust in institutions.

More broadly, the use of systematic campaigns to confuse the public and undermine trust in institutions has occurred multiple times throughout history and across different inter-

national contexts. (These are different from *propaganda*, which is a more common effort to strategically use information to *increase* trust in institutions or build support for (or against) a cause.) For example, the former Soviet Union used the term *dezinformatsiya* to conceptualize coordinated state efforts to disseminate false or misleading information to journalistic media (among other forms of media) in targeted countries or regions. This was just one of their *aktivnye meropriyatiya*, or ‘active measures,’ employed by the state to strategically undermine and disrupt governance by opposing nation-states while strengthening the positions of allies. These measures included spreading disinformation through multiple channels (e.g., through fake grassroots campaigns, a practice also known as astroturfing) to widen existing domestic rifts, stoke existing tensions, and complicate international relations.

More recently, scholars have used the term *xuanchuan* (a nod to an existing Chinese term) to describe the use of coordinated posts on social media to flood conversational spaces with a mix of positive messages, negative messages, and attempts to change the subject as part of a broader misdirection strategy. Under this approach, the goal is not to simply promote false information but rather to overwhelm the system with information, making it harder for individuals to come across certain kinds of information. For example, analysts have pointed to China’s so-called “50 Cent Army” (or “50 Cent Party”) — groups of online commentators thought to number in the millions who are regularly employed by Chinese authorities — as

an example of the mobilization of large groups to systematically promote echo chambers, hijack hashtags, and steer public discourse away from sensitive topics.

It is important to note that although they can be useful in capturing specific approaches to seeding mass confusion, terms like ‘dezinformatsiya’ and ‘xuanchuan’ can also promote negative stereotypes and limit conversation. For example, there are also related non-state efforts to disrupt specific social campaigns, as when K-Pop fans banded together to hijack hashtags used to coordinate white supremacist activity. These terms should thus be used with care due to the cultural associations they elicit. Easier and cheaper access to powerful computers and high-speed internet connections have made it easier for individuals and small teams around the world to automate the production and amplification of disinformation in digital environments.

The resurgence of the term “fake news” and high-profile, coordinated disinformation campaigns have helped promote a rise in civic and governmental attempts to counter online misinformation and disinformation. In particular, several fact-checking organizations have emerged in recent years. These organizations aim to authenticate statements made by institutional sources (e.g., elected leaders), debunk social media hoaxes, and assess the legitimacy of particular information sources. However, several scholars have found that such interventions have made little headway in combating large-scale disinformation campaigns or restoring trust in journalistic

institutions. Thus, journalistic outlets are still seeking effective solutions to countering disinformation, all the while struggling to adapt to a fast-paced environment that makes it easier for them to produce misinformation themselves.

Key Takeaways

- “Fake news” is a highly problematic term that was crafted with the intention of discrediting journalism and blurring the lines between professional news products and general information. Its popularization has been credited with reducing trust in journalism and increasing violence against journalists.
- The terms “misinformation” and “disinformation” help to capture the range of inaccurate information in an accessible way. Misinformation refers to information whose inaccuracy is unintentional (e.g., getting some information wrong during a breaking news event). Disinformation refers to information that is deliberately false or misleading (e.g., an individual fabricating a statement or altering the meaning of a statement by intentionally omitting information in a selective way).
- Coordinated campaigns to disinform audiences have been credited with promoting polarization, stoking domestic tensions, and undermining trust in a range of

democratic processes. Such campaigns have been enacted by both state and non-state actors.

THEORIES OF MEDIA EFFECTS

WELLNESS

Alexandria Fripp

Key points

- Wellness is defined as a dynamic state of physical, mental, and social well-being, with a focus on low distress levels, overall good health, and a positive outlook.
- Social media's influence on physical health ranges from positive aspects like nutrition advice to negative effects such as body image concerns, with platforms like Instagram linked to issues like anxiety and depression.
- Social media's role in mental health is complex; it can be a tool for wellness, but also a source of damage, impacting emotional regulation, anxiety, and depression.
- The importance of social health is highlighted, especially during the pandemic,

where technology serves as a lifeline for connection, despite potential links between social media and social anxiety.

- Online platforms play a crucial role in connecting individuals dealing with illness, emphasizing communication technology's affordances, such as control, anonymity, visibility, and availability.
- Practical tips for maintaining a healthy relationship with social media are outlined, addressing the intentional design choices, self-reflection on the relationship, and active participation in curating online content.

In this chapter

- Section 1: Dimensions of Wellness and Well-being
- Section 2: Mental Health
 - Student insights: Darkness that Stems from Light (by Kyra Tidball, Spring 2021)
 - Student insights: Toxic Social Media

(by Perla, Spring 2021)

- [Section 3: Social Health](#)
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- [The Intern Series Part 1: Why the Hate? — The Social Media & Ourselves Podcast](#)
- [Core Concepts](#)
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- [Why it's important to think about social media use as a form of dissociation, rather than addiction](#)

Student insights: Toxic Social Media (by Perla, Spring 2021) "The Internet can crack us open to seeing so many things that we would have never encountered otherwise. And that's one of the most beautiful, miraculous things about it. But it can also divide our attention and make us feel fractured."

[Chris Stedman](#), author of [IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in our Digital Lives](#).

Is social media good for us? Is it bad for us? Can it be both? Research findings suggest many complex ways the use of social media platforms can impact our mental and physical health and well-being. In this chapter, we discuss a few relevant find-

ings on social media—along with the voices of students who are consistently negotiating these issues in their lives.

Section 1: Dimensions of Wellness and Well-being

According to the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA), **wellness** is defined as, “a dynamic state of physical, mental, and social well-being.” However, the term “wellness” has become so popular as a marketing buzzword that it has countless meanings to different publics. For clarity, in this chapter we have chosen to use the term **well-being**, defined by the APA as, “a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life.” In this section, we introduce the next part of the chapter as a dive into each of these three dimensions—with the understanding that these dimensions overlap and interact with one another regularly.

Physical health, and body image

One wellness dimension is physical health. Social media may be associated with physically health improvements due to nutrition advice or “fitspiration”, and to problems with physical health caused by learning of unhealthy behaviors. One striking link between social media and mental health lies along

the line of body image and satisfaction. For our social media aficionados, think about how many images of people we see each day. What do these folks look like? Do they have “[Instagram Face](#)”? Conventionally attractive? White? Thin? Able-bodied? Consider critically the seemingly perfect lives and bodies you see, comparing yourself to the images of these people, especially women, that may be surgically enhanced and/or heavily filtered.

Facebook, the parent company of Instagram, has conducted informal investigations of the app (Instagram) to see how it affected the relationship one has with their body. Approximately 32 percent of young women report feeling worse about their bodies after using Instagram. Moreover, the young women attribute Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression,” tying in the cyclical nature of depression and/or anxiety in relation to social media as shown by Hoge, Bickham, & Cantor (2017). Some of the adverse effects are thought to be Instagram specific such as social comparison, which is when people assess their own value in relation to the attractiveness, wealth and success of others.

The Facebook researchers state that social comparison is worse on Instagram than other platforms, asserting that TikTok is grounded in performance, Snapchat is “sheltered” by jokey filters that “keep the focus on the face.” Meanwhile, Instagram focuses heavily on the body and lifestyle. However, the research team concluded this in 2020. Their findings may not hold up to the current social media landscape, with the

prevalence of [Tik-Tok and the affordance of video filters to edit people's bodies](#). For Instagram specifically, the researchers note that essential aspects of the platform such as norms around sharing only the best moments and the pressure to look perfect combined with an “addictive product” can send young folks “spiraling toward eating disorders, an unhealthy sense of their own bodies and depression.” The internal researchers further state that the Explore page, curated by an algorithm can show harmful content.

In “[The Paradox of Tik Tok Anti-Pro-Anorexia Videos](#)” by scholars Logrieco, Marchili, Roversi, and Villani (2021) , the shifting stances around anorexia depiction content on TikTok is paradoxically encouraging harmful behaviors. The, “What I Eat in a Day,” format is a common form of this. Moreover, the numerous “Glo-Up” challenges on the platform reinforce beauty standards (and generally come with weight-loss), while staying away from fostering unconditional self acceptance. Like Instagram, there are beautification filters which slim and anglify the appearance of the face. What messages could people, especially people who do not fit racist, thin, or ableist societal standards of beauty internalize?

Meanwhile, many youth consider TikTok a respite from more overtly image-conscious apps like Instagram. Although Tik-Tok was released in 2016, the height of its popularity came about in 2020. Thus research has yet to catch up to the trends we are seeing on this platform. However, that does not mean that we should not think critically about how this platform is

used, what is happening on this app, and the media we consume from it, and all platforms we use, when considering their impacts on physical health.

Section 2: Mental health

Another wellness dimension we are exploring related to social media is the second dimension, mental health, including anxiety and depression, as well as emotional regulation. In the digital age, social media can play a powerful role in our stress, happiness, and mental health. Social media has the capability of being a powerful tool in our wellness. For instance, many “mindfulness” podcasts have social media accounts where they share health experts’ tips on mindful living.) However, social media also has the potential to damage mental health and well-being as well—and as whistleblowers revealed in 2021, social media platforms may be aware of these impacts, yet do little to stop them.

**Student insights: Darkness
that Stems from Light (by**

Kyra Tidball, Spring 2021)



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Respond to this case study: This student compares social media to drugs and asserts that people are often unaware of what they are getting into when they download it. Imagine you have the opportunity to help decide if warnings should come with social media downloads. Write a paragraph either (1) explaining whether you would support such warnings appearing, how they would function, and what they would say; or (2) why there should not be warnings, based on evidence. Then, write another paragraph in which you imagine you were introducing someone you care about to social media use

for the first time. What would you tell them is a healthy practice? Include the practice, and evidence of how you know it is healthy.

Emotional regulation is a vital part of mental health. Specifically, it is a skill developed in childhood and adolescence by experiencing strong emotions and developing internal regulatory processes. Having this skill is a tool. The lack of and problems with emotional regulation are associated with mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety, conditions that individuals who “overuse” the internet report using the internet to avoid. Moreover, research has shown that depression symptoms predict internet usage to regulate mood. Thus our internet and social media use can be seen as a feedback loop, using the internet to avoid emotions, not emotionally regulating, experiencing emotional distress, then back to using the internet to avoid emotions once more.

Social media can be a mixed bag when it comes to our mental health and well-being. Hoge, Bickham, and Cantor (2017) state that , “although there is evidence that greater electronic media use is associated with depressive symptoms, there is also

evidence that the social nature of digital communication may be harnessed in some situations to improve mood and to promote health-enhancing strategies.” They further state that much more research is needed to explore these possibilities. In what ways can social media help us connect with others and positively contribute to our mental well-being?

Student insights: Toxic Social Media (by Perla, Spring 2021)



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About the Video Creator: This video was created by Perla in iVoices Media Lab workshops in Spring 2021

Section 3: Social Health

Another important wellness dimension and another is social health. Access to technology was a lifeline for many at the start of the pandemic. We limited our in person social contact as many businesses, schools, restaurants, and workplaces shut down or reduced capacity for the initial quarantines. According to Pew Research Center (2021), the internet has been personally important to 90% of adults with 58% saying the internet has been essential. Since the beginning of the pandemic we have relied on the internet and digital world to connect with others, whether family, friend, or for school.

Pew Research Center (2021) reports that about 81% of Americans have utilized video calls since the onset of the pandemic, and many researchers have found sharp increases in social media use since the pandemic began. Social media have become vital connection points to work, school, and social networks—our connections to nearly all other people when in person contact was scarce. However, these findings are complicated by the digital divide, as affordability and connection issues are frequent barriers to internet access and thus to connection with other people.

We must also consider links between social media and **social anxiety**, or fear of embarrassment or humiliation, leading to the avoidance of social situations. The social media landscape is a wonderful way for us to connect to other human beings. On the other hand, it can lead to some distress as well. According to Hidge, Bickham, & Cantor (2017), the preference to communicate over text/IM/email over face to face increases the risk of social anxiety in folks that are more prone to develop it. Over time, choosing to substitute digital media for interpersonal communication to avoid feared situations (that can trigger anxiety) may become cyclically reinforced. Thus, this is yet another cycle. An individual prefers digital communication and displaces face-to face interactions, which may worsen the symptoms and severity of social anxiety, leading to the individual using the internet and social media again as an emotional outlet.

Social media has the potential to initiate and sustain rela-

tionships. Given the potential benefits of social media, perhaps we should consider how to navigate it intentionally to protect ourselves and well being. After all, these technologies will be with us for a while. It's not going anywhere any time soon. Knowing that, how can we protect ourselves and our mental well-being? Technology and people can mutually shape each other (Ellison, Pyle, and Vitak, 2022), but in order to do so we have to rethink our relationship to social media and realize how our behaviors can actively and positively contribute to the virtual landscape.

Connecting through Illness

In his book, *Coping with Illness Digitally* (2018), Communication researcher Stephen Rains outlines how the digital landscape connects folks to find community while living with illness. However, many of his findings can be generalized to how we connect and find community online generally in relation to our social health. The technologies we use to connect with each other in order to communicate can be referred to as communication technology. This includes our phones, messaging apps, blogs, and other platforms. The use of these according to Rains is motivated by a desire to overcome isolations, reach others similar to use, and strengthen existing relationships with friends and family. Communication technology is similarly used by a large number of American adults and settings like online communities, platforms, and blogs are

resources for support that is associated with well being. Informational and emotional support are common types of support found in online communities.

Rains identified four affordances to creating social support, including control, anonymity, visibility, and availability.

Control relates to the ability to manage aspects of human interaction, like editing a message before sending it. This is quite contrary to face to face interactions where one is unable to do that. This allows people to carefully curate messages.

Anonymity is the concealing of one's identity from others. This can be seen by the use of pseudonyms. Think back to the ASKfm days or how reddit is used to gather support. It allows folks to feel less nervous about asking questions online.

Visibility is the affordance that involves the degree of observable behavior online. This allows folks to observe their digital landscape (ie: a viral twitter thread) or who gets to see a post. In the area of social support, seeing how others go about a situation or do something can be a valuable resource to us.

Availability is the potential to connect with others when they are most needed (Rains, 2018).

Together, according to Rains, these affordances enable us to seek social support online to cultivate community, connect with friends and loved ones, and find support online.

Tips for a healthy life with social media

Read more about life balance and social media from NPR

[Link to NPR Episode on How to Have a Healthier Relationship with Social Media.](#)

NPR's Lifekit gives us some considerations to keep in mind when defining or rethinking our relationship to social media. Keep these in mind:

- Social media is designed to encourage repetitive behaviors and compulsions, but social media is not physically “addictive” in the same way as drugs and alcohol.
 - Features like pull to refresh, endless scroll, autoplay and the algorithms are intentional choices made to keep us on the apps by showing us more of what we might like
 - Push notifications, (Made) For You Pages, Click to See Image are all tactics to capture our attention
 - Remember: “Technology and people can mutually shape each other” (Ellison, Pyle, and Vitak, 2022). How might the above features keep us on platforms?
- Think of your relationship with social media as a meaningful one with the capacity to show certain aspects about ourselves. Ask yourself:
 - What does a healthy relationship look like to me?
 - What needs am I trying to meet right now?
 - Scan your body – how do you feel after an hour online?
- Be an active participant in your relationship – declutter

and reorganize

- Go through ‘following’ list on social media and clean it out – what is bringing joy and/or value into your life
- Block, mute, and other functions let you restrict the kind of content you don’t want to see, which further fine tunes your algorithm to you.

Section 4: Personal Conclusion

Is it possible to have a good relationship with social media? What steps can we take for positive impact?

Personally, I (Ally Fripp) can struggle with being bombarded by body types I feel are ideal that do not include mine. This weighs on me heavily some days, but I have to understand that these images are not always natural and real. Thus in order to give myself some tools combat this, I frequent a subreddit that spots body editing and am learning how to spot when other women use these filters and photoshop. Knowing that these folks don’t look the way they portray themselves on social media is comforting and fills the space in my mind for negative self comparisons.

Social media is here to stay for a while. And I actually do quite enjoy it. It can be a fun outlet. However, I can feel when it does take a toll on my mental health. Armed with the knowl-

edge presented in this chapter, I take steps to protect myself. This includes taking breaks from social media, limiting my time on it, and being critical of the content that I consume. Our relationships with social media.

The Intern Series Part 1: Why the Hate? — Social Media and Ourselves podcast



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The Intern Series Part 1: Why the Hate?

Release date: May 1st, 2021

iVoices intern Kris Kelley explores her experience being cyberbullied after appearing in a Disney commercial, to understand why trolls spread hate online. Music by Jonatha Chance and Airtone. Theme music by Gabe Stultz. Produced by Diana Daly and iVoices Media Lab.

[LISTEN](#) • [LISTEN WITH TRANSCRIPT](#)

Respond to this podcast episode...How did the podcast episode “The Intern Series Part 1: Why the Hate?” use interviews, student voices, or sounds to demonstrate a current or past social trend phenomenon? If you were making a sequel to this episode, what voices or sounds would you include to help listeners understand more about this trend, and why?

Core Concepts and Questions

Core Concepts

wellness

“a dynamic state of physical, mental, and social well-being,” according to the American Psychological Association (APA)

well-being

“a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life,” according to the American Psychological Association (APA)

Emotional regulation

a vital part of mental health, this is a skill developed in childhood and adolescence by experiencing strong emotions and developing internal regulatory processes

Social anxiety

fear of embarrassment or humiliation, leading to the avoidance of social situations

Core Questions

A. Questions for qualitative thought:

1. Think of a time when you have asked or you have seen other ask a question related to physical or mental health in a forum, on your story, or in any other online format. How did that go? What was that process like? Did people respond? If so, how did they respond?
2. Reflect on a moment when you encountered

an image on social media that made you question your own body image. How did you navigate those feelings, and did it influence your subsequent online interactions?

3. Look back an experience where you turned to social media for emotional support during a challenging time. How did the online community respond, and did it impact your emotional well-being?
4. Think about a time when you used social media to connect with others during the pandemic. How did this digital connection influence your sense of social health, and did it bring any unexpected challenges or benefits?

B. Review: Which is the best answer?



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C. Game on!



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Related Content

Read It: Why it's important to think about social media use as a form of dissociation, rather than addiction



When you dissociate, you become so absorbed in an activity that you lose track of time.

[Marc Dufresne/Getty Images](#)

[Amanda Baughan, *University of Washington*](#)

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had an

unfortunate Saturday routine. I would wake up in my studio apartment and immediately turn to my phone, telling myself that I would get breakfast after quickly checking Twitter.

An hour or so later, I would look up and realize what time it was – and how ravenous I'd become. I had become totally absorbed in looking at memes, snark and the 24 hour news cycle.

This experience sparked an idea: What if, instead of people becoming “addicted” to social media – as users [often characterize](#) their excessive engagement – they're actually dissociating, or becoming so engaged that they lose track of time?

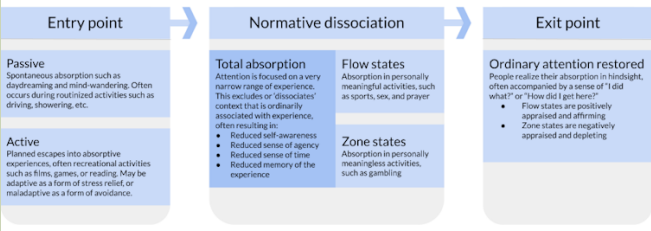
[I've researched people's social media use](#) for four years as a Ph.D. student at the University of Washington, and my collaborators and I decided to design a study to test this theory.

What is dissociation?

Many researchers think dissociation occurs on a spectrum. On one end, there is the kind of dissociation that is spurred by trauma [and associated with PTSD flashbacks](#).

Then there are [common, everyday experiences of dissociation](#), which involve attention being limited to a narrow range of experience. Everyday dissociation can be passive or active. Spontaneous daydreaming is a form of passive dissociation, while reading a book is an example of active dissociation. In both cases, you can become so immersed in a fantasy or story that time falls away and you lose track of your surroundings. You might not be able to hear someone calling your name from another room.

Dissociation is part of healthy cognitive functioning, as [mind-wandering helps you learn](#), and [combating stress through deeply engaging in hobbies can boost your mood](#).



Dissociation is a process that is defined by focused attention that leads to a reduced sense of the passage of time and reduced self-awareness.

[Amanda Baughan, CC BY](#)

What does dissociation look like online?

When online, however, dissociation can reflect zombie-like behavior – scrolling for hours without realizing it, not being aware to one's surroundings while scrolling, or scrolling on autopilot and then realizing you haven't actually paid any attention to what you've read. Have you ever seen someone so absorbed in their phone that they start walking across a street, oblivious to oncoming traffic? They're likely dissociating.

Typically, behavior like this [is classified](#) as [smart-phone or internet addiction](#).

However, researchers have begun to push back against the narrative of addiction to describe excessive smartphone use, [explaining that](#) the behavior – even if it's a source of distress – should not be considered addiction if it's better explained by an underlying disorder, is a willful choice, or is part of a coping strategy.

I am of the belief that choosing to play [Candy Crush](#) for three hours a day is not necessarily “addiction.” I do, however, think that the complete disconnect

people experience from their surroundings and sense of time passing is an interesting phenomenon to explore. Therefore, I wanted to understand if people are dissociating during their phone use.

In our study, we recruited volunteers to use a custom mobile app alternative to Twitter, called Chirp. Forty-three people used Chirp for four weeks, cycling through four different design interventions, coupled with in-app surveys. We then selected 11 of them to interview about the experience.

We found dissociation occurred in nearly half of our participants, and they often expressed a sense of disappointment afterwards, saying that they would have rather have engaged in a different activity with the amount of time they had spent online. However, some said their time on social media was meaningful to them, and the fact that they were connecting with real people was valuable, even as they dissociated.

Cultivating online agency

Understanding social media overuse as a byproduct of dissociation, rather than addiction, can help destigmatize social media use while empowering users.

This framing also helps explain why social media sits in a paradoxical position: people have frustrating relationships with social media platforms that they are simultaneously unwilling to quit.

Seeking escape from the present moment through deep absorption – including absorption in social media – is a natural, common, and often beneficial thing to do. However, when users spend much more time dissociating online than they would have consciously chosen for themselves, they become frustrated and conflicted. And many social media platforms exploit this tendency by keeping people “[on the hunt](#)” for new content through algorithmic design.

This suggests that it is possible for users to have healthy and satisfying relationships with social media – even when dissociating is involved – if the platforms can also help their users disengage.

How design can reduce dissociation

In our study, we deployed several interventions to help pause or reduce dissociation while scrolling on Chirp. One intervention that was particularly effec-

tive was requiring our participants to sort their content into lists by topic – say, news, sports and reality TV – rather than having all subjects appear as an avalanche of information on one main feed. People could then click different tabs to view their lists. We found that many users would only scroll through one or two tabs before exiting the app.

We paired this intervention with a “reading history” label that informed our users when they were “all caught up” with previously viewed tweets. Participants said that this helped them feel more in control and less likely to lose track of time.

Of course, many current social media companies, such as TikTok, rely on algorithmically-determined, constantly updating content. Similarly, on Instagram and Twitter, popular and trending content gets inserted into a feed of followed content. This makes it impossible to ever get “all caught up.”

In these cases, past research shows that many people would appreciate reminders to log off before [30 minutes of use](#). Otherwise they become disappointed with the time they’ve spent. These reminders could be inserted into regular content, which [is something TikTok already does](#).

Users can do this for themselves by becoming famil-

iar with the suite of digital well-being tools at their disposal. Viewing [usage page statistics](#) and [setting timeouts](#) is already available across many sites, although many of these settings are turned off by default.

However when more people use these tools, it signals to the companies that they should continue to invest time and resources into developing them.

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MEDIA EFFECTS

MEDIA DEPENDENCY THEORY

Introduction

Media dependency theory offers a helpful way to think about *the relationship between media and the fulfillment of different audience needs and goals*.

At the heart of the theory is the proposition that in industrialized and information-based societies, such as the one we presently live in, individuals come to rely on media to satisfy a range of different needs and goals. These include learning about where those individuals should go to vote as well as staying up-to-date about the latest fashion trends.

Before diving into this theory, it is helpful to be mindful of the fact that journalistic outlets are just *one group of social actors within a broader system of information*. This broader system includes other mass media actors, like movies and books. It includes other institutional actors, like politicians and non-media corporations. It includes personal contacts, like your friends and family members. It even includes your personal experiences, like your attendance at an event or a study abroad

experience that exposed you to a different culture. There are many other potential actors in that system, but this helps illustrate the notion that journalistic outlets operate within an environment made up of many different entities, each of which can offer at least some information that might be of interest to a particular audience member.

This perspective is helpful because it underscores the importance of understanding the *context* around people's interaction with information, which is crucial to understanding journalistic media's role in informing people. That, in turn, is an explicit rejection of earlier, more simplistic theories about the effects of mass media. For example, in the 1930s, scholars and popular intellectuals argued that mass media were incredibly powerful and that people generally accepted the information disseminated by mass media as-is. (This is called the *hypodermic needle* perspective.) At the same time, this systems perspective rejects the view that mass media have little to no effect — the *limited effects* perspective began to take hold as the hypodermic needle perspective lost popularity in the 1940s and 50s — as the magnitude of the effect is dependent on the context.

Journalistic Media and Relationships

Returning to media dependency theory, it posits that the impacts of journalistic media on people (and of people on journalistic media) depend on the context and the nature of the relationships within a network of social actors, technological actants, and audiences *that are relevant to that context*.

The theory further posits that *an individual's characteristics and goals* (e.g., how interested they are in some topic), *their personal environment and interpersonal network* (e.g., whether they know people with first-hand experience with that topic), and *the dominant media and social systems they live within* (e.g., how free they are to access news media they believe would be informative about that topic) all impact the extent to which they may depend on media for information about that topic.

For example, let's consider the topic of foreign election interference in the 2020 election. Perhaps, as someone passionate about politics, you were very interested in that topic — and thus have a personal goal of learning more about it. However, because you were (most likely) not an intelligence officer and lacked the security clearance needed to review intelligence reports yourself, you probably didn't have the ability to gain first-hand knowledge about that issue. Moreover, you might not have had any such intelligence officers in your friend or familial networks, so you didn't personally know someone with first-hand knowledge, either. You thus had to depend on people other than yourself (*third parties*) and those close to you for information. One such third party might have been a journalist who has been covering the topic of election interference for months as the National Security Correspondent for *The Washington Post*. As such, you might have come to depend on that journalist for what you believed to be trustworthy information about the topic. (Or, perhaps, you depended

on other journalistic outlets who themselves depended on the *Post*'s reporting for key details.)

However, that could change over time. Perhaps a reputable whistleblower leaked a series of private intelligence reports online. Now, you may find yourself dependent on the whistleblower for access to the information, as they controlled which of the intelligence reports were made available to the public. As you review the leaked documents, you may become less dependent on others' interpretation of the issue — including *The Washington Post*'s reporting. Put another way, as your information network changes, the kinds and degrees of dependence also change.

Importance of Journalistic Media

Although journalistic outlets are just one of many sets of constituents within information systems, they are often important. That's because people generally need journalistic media to function in modern societies, which are more co-dependent than ever before due to increased specialization and globalization. Put another way, personal contacts and experience are no longer enough to satisfy all (or even most) of the things a person needs to know in order to fully participate in modern social life.

Crucially, media dependency theory contends that *the degree of ambiguity about news information impacts the degree of media dependency*. Put another way, as news information becomes more ambiguous (less clear to you), audiences are pre-

sumed to become more dependent on journalistic outlets for understanding that news.

Ambiguity can come from many different sources. It might involve lack of knowledge about some phenomenon, such as whether a new technology developed by a rival nation poses a threat to your nation's security. It might involve rapid change associated with a phenomenon, such as whether an emerging coup d'état in a friendly nation might impact the diplomatic relationship between them and your nation. It might also involve simple disagreement among institutional elites about some phenomenon, such as which political group is more likely to be correct about the costs and benefits to a proposed renewable energy plan.

That proposition from media dependency theory can further be extended into an argument that *journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of emerging international affairs*. That is, people typically have less certainty (and thus more ambiguity) when it comes to the world beyond their immediate geographical sphere because they might not have recent (or any) personal experience in those contexts — perhaps they have never been to Cambodia — and they might not have any personal contacts who have expert knowledge or experience in those contexts. Because of this, people become more dependent on media depictions of those places, peoples, and issues, and on journalistic outlets when new developments are emerging about those places, peoples, and issues.

Exclusivity and Dependence

According to media dependency theory, *when a media organization has exclusive information, it tends to have more power within its relationship with an audience member* (and the broader ecosystem) because it increases the degree of information asymmetry. This is particularly true if the information is in demand to satisfy that individual's valued goals, and doubly so if access to such information is tightly controlled.

Exclusive information does not have to mean classified information, as with the earlier example. It might simply mean that they are the only source for that information at a given time, such as in the early hours following a chemical explosion at a local manufacturing plant. While local officials may eventually put out their account of the event via a televised press conference, people are likely to first hear about it from the breaking news coverage provided by journalists.

However, journalistic media do not inherently get to have exclusive information about breaking news (or confidential affairs). Indeed, some institutional actors, such as governments or private companies, can restrict both media access to important resources and individuals' access to certain journalistic outlets. In doing so, those institutional actors can try to reorient dependency away from journalistic media and toward their own version of events. For example, a private company may prevent news media from accessing that manufacturing plant or speaking to its employees. Similarly, government officials

in some countries may even prevent journalistic media from broadcasting information about the incident until those officials give their approval. Such intervention happens quite often in practice, to varying degrees.

It is important to note that media dependency theory was first proposed during a time of high media concentration, when there were relatively few major broadcast networks in places like the United States. Today's media ecology is far more complex, though. In particular, mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) and networked media (e.g., social media and messaging apps) have become important elements in today's media ecology. They allow individuals to serve as *intermediaries* between mass media and other people. That is, individuals and aggregators with large online followings can become key brokers of news information during an event and thus gain power — even if only temporarily — by virtue of others' dependence on them. Additionally, people can now more easily find videos and accounts of an event posted by a range of other people who observed it first-hand, thus reducing the exclusivity that any one actor might otherwise have.

Key Takeaways

- Media dependency theory is a systems-level theory that views journalistic outlets as just one group of actors

within a broader system of information.

- Media dependency theory focuses on understanding relationships within a system, with the strength of the relationships impacting the degree of dependency.
- Media dependency theory contends that the degree of ambiguity impacts the degree of media dependency. Journalism can be especially influential on people's understanding of things that they have limited personal experience with, such as international affairs.
- When a journalistic outlet has exclusive information, it has more power in a relationship as the relationship becomes asymmetric. However, different institutional actors, like governments and private companies, can restrict access to important media resources.

FRAMING THEORY

Introduction

Framing theory provides us with a helpful lens for understanding *how people develop their perception of reality*, and the role that journalistic outlets play in shaping those perceptions.

Framing is deeply indebted to another theoretical perspective — the *Social Construction of Reality* — which was formalized in 1966 by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. At its core, this perspective argues that a person's perception of reality is not entirely, or even mainly, objective.

Instead, what we perceive to be reality is actually a human and social construction that is deeply shaped by our previous lived experiences and the ways in which we are socialized via everyday interactions. As such, the theory contends, reality becomes socially constructed as we experience it and learn about it, and we each therefore develop differing perceptions of reality. Those differences may be fairly minor: Perhaps two witnesses agree that a police officer acted with the needed force in response to a threat but one of them thinks the officer could have toned things down a little. However, they might also be significant: Perhaps those two witnesses disagree over who the aggressor was, and whether any force was needed on the officer's part.

This perspective is important because it presumes that *individuals act based on their unique perceptions of reality*. For example, if someone perceives the officer to have acted with unnecessary force, they may be more likely to protest against police brutality than someone else who perceives that exact same situation to have involved an appropriate response. As this example suggests, the theory posits that different people experience different constructed realities — even when they inhabit the same spaces under the same present circumstances.

A World With Multiple Realities

It follows from this theoretical perspective that *the world consists of multiple perceived realities*. Those perceived realities are shaped by a range of factors, operating from an individual level

(e.g., one's preconceptions, perhaps resulting from their particular upbringing) to a social systems level (e.g., the dominant systems of thought within their culture). In short, while there may indeed be a singular 'true' reality out there, made up of material things and governed by the laws of physics, an individual's perception of that reality is just an *approximation* of it. And, sometimes, it's not a very accurate one.

A crucial implication of this perspective is that *it is simply impossible for journalism to mirror reality*. That is, if a journalist cannot fully capture a 'true' reality because of their human shortcomings, then they cannot possibly replicate it in their work. Instead, journalism is, at best, a good approximation of reality, with the journalist's job being to approximate that reality as best they can.

Even if one rejects the proposition that individuals inherently cannot mirror reality, there is also a practical issue at play that makes framing theory useful: Even if journalists could accurately replicate reality, they simply do not have the time or space to show *everything* about that reality. Instead, they can only show a small portion of it.

For example, consider a televised broadcast of a protest against police brutality. One may think that setting up a camera and pointing it at the crowd offers a mirror of reality — after all, it is a simple, mechanical recording of what's happening. However, the camera can only show one angle of what is happening. Depending on where it is placed, it may be too close and miss the entire scope of the crowd — or, it may be

too far and make the crowd appear small or miss important details about the interactions. As such, the journalist must make a choice to place the camera in the place that they believe offers the best representation (approximation) of the ‘reality’ of that event.

But journalists rarely ever just point a camera at something and call it a day. A large part of their job is *to make sense* of what is happening. Put another way, even if they just report ‘facts’ — and facts are themselves contentious things — they must still connect those facts. The process of making sense of reality is inherently an interpretive (and thus constructive) act.

Media Framing and Frames

One way to conceptualize that process of sense-making is through framing theory and, specifically, *media framing*. Sociologist Robert Entman refers to media framing as the process by which an individual “*selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating text*, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” That’s a lot to take in, so let’s break it down.

First, this conceptualization of the framing process — and there are other ways of conceptualizing it — involves two key sub-processes. The first is *selection*, or the choices about what to include or exclude about that perceived reality. The second is *salience*, or the choices about what to emphasize about that

perceived reality and what to downplay. These choices, again, are often driven by the necessity of communicating something within a finite amount of time or space — like a handful of live tweets or a 30-second broadcast segment.

Second, this conceptualization describes four main acts of framing. The first is *diagnosing problems*, or defining the issues associated with a topic. For example, the aforementioned broadcast segment on a protest may choose to diagnose the problem as police using excessive force against detainees *or* as the vilification of police. The second is *diagnosing causes*, or identifying what or who are the main forces driving the problem. For example, that segment may choose to focus on a hurtful culture within policing *or* an inadequate amount of police training. The third is *making moral evaluations*, which may include asserting whether the causal agents or the consequences of an issue are good or bad. For example, that segment may assert that these protests are good because they may serve as catalysts for change, *or* bad because the protests are divisive within society. The fourth is *recommending treatments*, which describe potential ‘solutions’ to the identified problems. For example, that segment may assert that systemic reform is necessary *or* that police should receive more support from other actors and institutions.

The result of that process is the *media frame*, which refers to the *written, spoken, graphical, or visual message that a communicator uses to contextualize a topic*, such as a person, event,

episode, or issue, within a text transmitted to receivers by means of mediation.

Again, there's a lot to unpack there, but the key takeaway is that media frames are the tools that communicators — including journalists — use to simplify and contextualize an issue or event. A single frame (or media text, like a news story) does not need to include all four of those acts of media framing. In fact, news stories rarely do, especially when they aim to be as neutral as possible.

Moreover, media framing and frames involve both conscious and subconscious processes of selection and salience. Put another way, a journalist may consciously adopt a particular frame because it addresses questions they believe their audiences will want answers to, even as they subconsciously reject alternative frames because they recall seeing those frames in recent coverage by a competitor.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that news stories often include information from different sources, which in turn shapes the frame. For example, a journalist may only diagnose the problems associated with the aforementioned protest with their words but add elements of moral evaluation to the story's frame by including quotes from a source that asserts the police acted in a brutal and unprofessional way.

Impacts of Journalistic Frames

Journalistic frames often impact audiences' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue. In this way, they influence

the realities that those audience members construct. This may include interpretations not only of basic elements, like what happened, but broader (and no less impactful) notions about what is most important or problematic about a topic or issue, who are the good and bad people involved, and what are or aren't sensible solutions to a given problem.

To illustrate this, consider the two following news briefs about two emerging treatments for a group of 600 people who have been infected by a dangerous virus.

The first news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 200 people will be saved. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a $1/3$ chance that all 600 people will be saved and a $2/3$ chance that nobody will be saved.

The second news brief notes that if Treatment A is adopted, 400 people will die. However, if Treatment B is adopted, there is a $1/3$ chance that nobody will die and a $2/3$ chance that all 600 people will die.

The depictions in those two news briefs are functionally equivalent, with Treatment A being the risk-averse option and Treatment B being the risk-seeking option. However, if a random set of 50 readers were shown the first brief and another 50 random readers were shown the second, the theoretical expectation is that the people shown the first brief — which is more positive — would be more likely to select the risk-averse option (Treatment A). In contrast, the readers who were shown the second depiction — which is more negative — would be more likely to select the risk-seeking option (Treatment B). This is

an example of what we call gain/loss framing, one of the many different approaches to framing in psychology.

However, the extent of those impacts is neither uniform nor universal. Modern theories of message processing reject the view that audiences are passive and just accept journalistic frames. Instead, audiences process those messages in light of their existing knowledge and attitudes, which is in turn shaped by their lived experiences and non-media messages (e.g., discussions with friends and family). For example, a person who has had a negative encounter with the police is generally more likely to accept a frame that centers them as the aggressor — or, conversely, to reject such a frame if their experiences have been exclusively positive.

Repeated exposure to particular frames can develop associations over time. For example, seeing repeated images of police brutality may link the concepts of police and brutality over time, such that when the concept of police is triggered — even in other contexts — the individual will also think about brutal actions. Alternatively, that repeated exposure may make it so that when the concept of brutality comes up, the individual may think of the police as an example. Such connections can be both strengthened and weakened by frames. For example, if that same individual is repeatedly exposed to media examples of police engaging in good deeds, the existing negative connections are challenged and may thus become weaker.

Journalistic frames tend to be most impactful in situations where individuals are highly dependent on journalistic media

for their understanding of an issue, and especially when there is greater ambiguity around an issue. That is because there are fewer preexisting associations, allowing the media associations to serve as the primary driver. Thus, journalistic frames are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to an individual.

Finally, it's also important to keep in mind that journalistic actors are themselves audiences. They therefore not only have their own lived experiences to draw upon but also regularly consume media messages crafted by other actors. As such, they are also impacted by repeated exposure to certain frames and associations. They may consequently go on to subconsciously repeat elements of dominant frames and associations within their work, which in turn reifies those frames and makes those associations even more salient within society. Conversely, those journalistic actors may seek to use their awareness of the dominant frames to challenge them by including counter-frames that weaken problematic associations.

Key Takeaways

- According to the Social Construction of Reality perspective, an individual's view of reality is not entirely (or even mainly) objective. Instead, it becomes socially constructed as that individual filters things through their

- own existing knowledge and experiences.
- The framing process involves both conscious and sub-conscious processes of selection (what to include or exclude) and salience (what to emphasize or downplay). Journalistic outlets can thus depict the same topic in different ways.
 - Media frames may impact individuals' understandings of and attitudes toward a topic or issue, but those impacts are not uniform or universal. That's because media frames interact with existing knowledge and attitudes.
 - Journalistic actors are themselves influenced by frames, and may therefore reinforce (or challenge) dominant associations through the framing choices in their work.

AGENDA SETTING THEORY

Introduction

Bernard Cohen famously wrote in his 1963 book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, that journalistic media “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

Although that statement came before the formalization of agenda-setting theory, it aptly captures its essence: Even if journalistic outlets have a limited ability to shape their audiences' attitudes toward an issue, they nevertheless exert influence over

how important the issue is *perceived* to be by those audiences. (That perceived importance may be very different from the actual importance of that issue according to other measures.)

While agenda-setting theory and framing theory both address the potential impact of journalistic media coverage, they are very different. Agenda-setting theory focuses on the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects media coverage to the formation of attitudes toward those issues.

Agenda-Setting Theory

In a nutshell, agenda setting refers to the process by which mass media — including journalistic media — present certain issues (e.g., gun violence) frequently and prominently, with the result being that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as being more important than others.

The central causal mechanism is a very simple one: *The more media attention an issue receives (issue salience), the more important it is perceived to be (by audiences)*. For example, if there is sustained journalistic coverage of immigration over the course of a few months, then news consumers will think that immigration is an important issue at that point in time — even if they don't have strong opinions about it.

Although the term 'agenda-setting theory' may be seen to imply a conspiratorial effort to manipulate public opinion, this is far from the case. It simply reflects twin processes: First, journalistic media are bound by time and space. For example, an

evening news broadcast often has just 22 minutes to transmit information about the day's most important issues and events. This forces journalists to focus on specific issues and simplify them, and thus make decisions about what they believe matters most to the audiences they serve. Even with a news website, where space and time to cover a topic are less restricted and an online editor could theoretically cram 500 stories on the homepage, journalists must still make decisions about how to organize the information they publish. Indeed, the decision about which story to place at the top of a website's homepage offers a salience cue — it is placed first because it is presumed to be the most important story.

The second process occurs on the audience side: Audiences turn to journalistic media because they have a need for orientation, or a desire to understand new or emerging situations. That need for orientation, in turn, is impacted by two elements: *relevance* and *uncertainty*. Relevance pertains to the question, “Do I think this issue is personally or socially important to me?” Uncertainty pertains to the question, “Do I feel I lack the information I need about this topic?” When both relevance and uncertainty are high, audience members pay greater attention to journalistic outlets' cues about salience, and thus the resulting agenda-setting effect is stronger.

Similarly, when the issue at question is *unobtrusive* — that is, it is an issue people have little to no personal experience with, such as international affairs — then they are more likely to rely on media cues for assessing the importance of that issue.

This may be countered by certain contextual factors, though. For example, scholars have found that agenda-setting effects are weaker in closed media systems (those tightly controlled by governments) with the idea being that people trust those journalistic media less. They thus actively seek out other sources of information and draw even more upon personal assessments.

Agenda-setting effects are therefore not uniform or universal. They are instead dependent on the context. Indeed, as Cohen wrote about the relationship between journalistic media and foreign affairs, “the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read.”

Intermedia Agenda Setting

Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens, politicians, and the like. They also influence one another. Within the context of agenda-setting, we refer to the process by which journalistic media influence one another as *intermedia agenda-setting*.

The core argument for this hypothesis is that just as regular citizens turn to trusted journalistic outlets for cues about what is important, journalistic outlets themselves turn to other journalistic media that they perceive to be leaders within a given context. For example, *The New York Times* may cover a story about U.S. troops withdrawing from Syria, which leads a local newspaper to perceive that to be an important issue and thus devote resources to covering a local angle about the same topic

(e.g., covering local families who might have a spouse or child returning home from deployment).

This has led to a broader argument that audiences have historically developed reasonably consistent perceptions of which issues are most important at a given point in time because journalistic outlets generally follow similar issue agendas. This does not mean that they all cover the exact same issues, and certainly not in the same way. Instead, it contends that dominant coverage patterns often emerge across media — such as a period of intense and widespread journalistic coverage of climate change, before that attention wanes and the issue later re-emerges as a priority — and that many people within similar contexts will often identify similar sets of issues as being “important” at a given point in time.

Intermedia agenda-setting has required some reconceptualization in recent years, though, because the news ecology has become more complex. The perspective was initially proposed during a time when traditional media dominated audience attention. This is no longer the case, as niche and alternative media have grown immensely — leading to more specialized information sources — and social media have transformed the ways people engage with news.

As such, while elite journalistic outlets like *The New York Times* may still shape the initial perception of issues and their import, active audiences will blend messages from a greater range of journalistic and non-journalistic media. This ostensibly weakens the *Times*’ agenda-setting power. Additionally,

the transformation of the distribution of news — which is also more social today — and the emergence of new ways for audiences to engage with journalistic actors has enabled those active audiences to increasingly shape media agendas themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Agenda-setting theory proposes that issues that receive relatively more media attention tend to be perceived by audiences as being relatively more important.
- Framing theory shares some conceptual similarities with agenda-setting theory, but they differ in that agenda-setting emphasizes the relationship between media coverage and the perceived importance of an issue, while framing theory connects coverage to attitude formation.
- The magnitude of an agenda-setting effect depends on the context. Agenda-setting effects are neither uniform nor universal.
- Journalistic outlets do not just influence ordinary citizens and politicians; they influence fellow journalistic actors. They can therefore create a feedback loop.

PRIMING THEORY

Introduction

In order to more fully understand the underlying processes for key theories about the impacts of media coverage and depiction, it is helpful to learn about how human memory works. Priming theory is a particularly helpful tool in that regard.

It is worth noting that priming theory — and associated models theorizing about the workings of human memory — come from social psychology and cognition, and it is not the only explanation for how humans make sense of the world. However, such models of human memory have proven to be enduring and influential when it comes to understanding the processing of information disseminated by journalistic outlets.

Priming Theory

In a nutshell, priming theory contends that media depictions *stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members*. For example, talking about “climate change” with a person might activate their thinking about “extreme weather” because, for that person, those two concepts have become related. Media depictions can strengthen (or weaken) the association between those concepts.

In this associative network model of memory, the *direction* and *strength* of the ties between ideas and concepts matter. For example, thinking about “extreme weather” may trigger “bad” most of the time, but thinking about “bad” may not trigger “extreme weather” (or trigger it only some of the time).

Additionally, stronger ties between two ideas or concepts will result in the faster recall of the association between them.

This model also differentiates between *explicit* and *implicit* memory. Explicit memory refers to things an individual actively tries to recall. This would include the answer to the question, “Who is the best professor you’ve ever had?” The key with this type of memory is that the individual can consciously recall the associations between “best” and “professor” and explain that information.

Implicit memory refers to things an individual does not try to *purposely* recall, such as how to ride a bicycle. The key with this type of memory is that it might take an individual a while to explain the related concepts (and they may not even be able to explain them well or at all), but they are able to subconsciously draw on all the requisite associations to not fall over when they start pedaling.

Priming theory contends that people do not make use of *all* of the associations they have developed. Instead, they take shortcuts to connect an information need — for example, how to make sense of a professor’s quality — to the previously stored associations *that are most readily available*. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on *recent associations* — such as recent journalistic coverage of the relevant issue(s).

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming

Agenda-setting theory connects to these understandings of how human memory works in two related ways. The first pro-

poses that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue results in an individual associating that issue with more concepts. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as there are more opportunities to trigger it). The second proposes that repeated journalistic coverage of an issue increases the availability of information related to that issue by bringing it to the top of an individual's mind. That, in turn, increases the likelihood that the issue will be triggered later (as the issue, and its related concepts, are relatively easy to access). Both of these ways influence perceptions about how important an issue is because of how easily it is recalled.

While framing theory draws upon many of the same core propositions about the causal mechanisms in human memory, it differs from agenda-setting theory in that it takes an extra step. Framing theory is not simply about the availability of information. Instead, it argues that media can also influence *attitudes toward those issues* by rewiring the associations between that issue and different concepts, such as by relating “climate change” to “bad” and “anthropogenic.”

Framing theory and priming theory have been connected to examine issues of stereotypes in journalistic depictions. For example, scholars have used those frameworks to assess journalistic outlets' role in promoting associations between the concepts of “people of color” and “poverty,” “crime,” and “urban blight.” Those associations may result from the overrepresentation of crime involving people of color in local television news coverage. Conversely, primes may be used

strategically to counter stereotypes, such as by depicting people of color as being successful, serving as community leaders, and inhabiting pleasant neighborhoods. In some cases, however, primes can result in the rejection of *the message* being primed. For example, a news story about a police officer acting in self-defense may be rejected as being false to someone who has had multiple negative encounters with police, as the depiction of the officer's actions may appear off-base to that person.

Limitations of Priming Effects

The effects of priming are neither uniform nor universal, though. In isolation, priming effects are often short-lived. They can last as little as 90 seconds and weaken over time if they are not triggered. However, repetition strengthens associations, and that can lead to more lasting effects over time. Indeed, many of our strongest associations are those promoted during our youth and reinforced over the course of our lives as a result of the contexts within which we live.

For example, higher amounts of local television news viewing will often involve more exposure to stories about crime that feature people of color as perpetrators. That, in turn, can result in greater concerns about people of color — or, at minimum, the perception that crime by people of color is an important issue.

Such an effect is not predicated on the words and associations made by journalists themselves, though. Although journalists may use careful language and avoid stereotypes, they

may choose to quote individuals who intentionally or unintentionally use language and frames that strengthen and weaken associations between concepts. Audiences often do not meaningfully differentiate between the journalists' words and those of their sources. This underscores the responsibility journalists have when selecting who and what to quote.

Additionally, media priming is most powerful when individuals have little existing knowledge about a target concept (e.g., “nuclear power”) and are therefore more susceptible to media-driven associations. Put another way, media primes are especially impactful when they involve contexts, people, and ideas that are new or foreign to audiences — that is, when audiences are most dependent on journalistic outlets for their understanding of something.

Individuals do not develop associations between topics through journalistic media consumption alone, though. First, news is incredibly complex, and there are often many competing cues within a single journalistic message (e.g., an article), which in turn trigger multifaceted responses. Second, media environments are also complex, with journalistic outlets operating alongside entertainment, popular culture, politics, and so on. Third, individuals establish associations — and, often, the strongest associations — based on their personal experiences or those relayed by other trusted sources, like their family and friends.

Thus, in order to fully understand a priming effect, one

must understand the environment and context around the prime.

Key Takeaways

- At its core, priming theory posits that media depictions develop relationships between concepts and stimulate related thoughts in the minds of audience members.
- Both agenda-setting theory and framing theory are premised on associative network models of human memory, which focus on the associations between concepts and the ease through which they may be recalled. However, they presume different pathways for the activation of concepts.
- Priming effects are often short-lived, but repetition strengthens associations and thereby allows effects to become more lasting.
- Priming effects are not uniform or universal. The magnitude of the effect of a prime depends on the context surrounding it.

NEWS AVOIDANCE AND FATIGUE

Introduction

News avoidance refers to a phenomenon where *audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time* due to either an active dislike for news or a preference for other kinds of media content.

Although many theories about the impacts of journalistic media implicitly assume that large portions of the public regularly consume those media, it is important to recognize that large segments of the population don't actually do that. Indeed, although more journalism is produced today than ever before, the number of people who avoid journalism has also increased in recent decades.

Moreover, audiences' journalistic media use is usually characterized by a combination of genres, such as sports journalism, political journalism, and environmental journalism. News avoidance is typically linked to the exclusion of certain genres and issues (though it may be extended to all journalistic media use). Put another way, some people (in fact, many) may routinely take in sports journalism but intentionally seek to avoid political journalism.

This development can have profound impacts on democratic societies that presumably rely upon a well-informed citizenry to self-govern because higher levels of news exposure have historically been linked to greater amounts of political knowledge and engagement. Second, news avoidance has negative economic consequences for journalistic outlets as it

reduces the potential size of its audience. That, in turn, can also have consequences for non-avoiders, as journalistic outlets have fewer resources with which to produce quality journalism.

Intentional and Unintentional Avoidance

There are many reasons why an audience member may engage in news avoidance, but they can usually be placed into one of two categories: *intentional avoidance* and *unintentional avoidance*.

Intentional avoidance is the consequence of individuals consciously tuning out news media. There are three main reasons why they engage in such behavior, all of which are linked to negative dispositions toward journalistic media.

The first reason is that they perceive news coverage to be too negative and pessimistic. While some audiences are drawn to particularly negative or pessimistic news (e.g., violent crime), such news has been linked to increases in negative emotions and decreases in an individual's well-being over time. The desire to seek positive emotions can thus result in intentional avoidance of news that is presumed to be too negative.

The second reason is that some audiences do not trust journalistic outlets. This may be due to a perception that certain groups of journalistic outlets — if not “the media” as a whole — are pushing their own political and economic interests by being selective about the topics they cover and the information they include in their coverage. The perception that such cover-

age will be biased against a person's viewpoints or perception of reality can thus encourage intentional avoidance.

The third reason is that there is always a massive amount of readily accessible journalistic products out there, which can create a feeling of information overload. Not only is there a seemingly endless pool of issues being covered at any given moment, but there is also a seemingly endless pool of stories about each issue — which is impossible for any single person to consume or process. That perceived overload can create stress, confusion, and anxiety, and thus result in intentional avoidance in order for a person to reclaim a positive emotional state.

There is also unintentional news avoidance, which is based on the audience member's relative preference for non-journalistic media. Put another way, the avoidance isn't because a person is actively seeking to avoid journalistic media but rather because their preference for another choice — perhaps a new movie featuring Ryan Gosling — is stronger. Indeed, scholars have argued that the large audiences drawn by television news broadcasts in the 1960s and 1970s were due in part to audiences watching the news while they waited for the evening entertainment programs to start (which followed the nightly newscasts).

News Fatigue

News avoidance does not have to reflect a permanent state wherein audience members *always* avoid certain kinds of jour-

nalistic products, or journalistic media altogether. Quite often, it is a temporary state, as when individuals feel overwhelmed and need to take a break from an issue.

For example, consider the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. After being exposed to several stories about the pandemic every day for months, a person may have felt the need to disconnect from their preferred news sources to keep their mental state from deteriorating. However, after taking a break, that person may have resumed taking in such stories — and perhaps needed another break later on.

We can call this phenomenon *news fatigue*, which connotes a temporary feeling of exhaustion that can be addressed through a period of disconnection (recharging). News fatigue can occur in relation to any kind of issue or genre, such as a royal wedding or political journalism. However, it is typically most pronounced when it comes to natural disasters, illnesses, poverty, and political issues that, by their very nature, already tend to engender negative emotional responses.

Compassion Fatigue

Similarly, there is a phenomenon called *compassion fatigue*, which refers to *the gradual lessening of compassion over time as a result of repeated exposure to traumatic phenomena*. For example, consider the refugee crisis resulting from the Syrian Civil War, wherein at least 13 million Syrians were estimated to have been displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. As the war dragged on over years, audiences around the world

moved from being shocked to becoming numbed in order to psychologically protect themselves from repeated exposure to the death and destruction featured in news reports about the war.

Compassion fatigue has been associated with increased feelings of hopelessness and negative attitudes. That, in turn, can lead to desensitization and even resistance to helping those suffering if the issue is perceived as being intractable, or impossible to manage or change. Consequently, individuals may seek to turn off certain emotions as best they can. Compassion fatigue can also impact political and economic support for initiatives to address that issue. For example, in the aforementioned example of the Syrian Civil War, well-informed but fatigued news consumers may be less likely to become involved in protests against the war than their less-informed but non-fatigued counterparts.

This phenomenon is not limited to news audiences or to journalism. It has been found to impact a range of professionals, including doctors, child welfare workers, and lawyers. However, it has been found to have profound impacts on journalists themselves — and especially foreign correspondents who are shuttled from one crisis to another. Those impacts involve not only their emotional and mental states but also the depictions (and tropes) they incorporate into their journalistic work.

Combating News Avoidance

Several strategies have been proposed to reduce the likelihood of news avoidance. The first is to engage in approaches to journalism like *constructive journalism* and *solutions journalism*.

Constructive journalism aims to rebalance journalism by accompanying a selection of predominantly negative news stories about an issue with more positive coverage that illustrates the bright spots — however few they may be — related to that issue. For example, this might involve stories about how some Syrian refugees were able to successfully relocate themselves and start new lives, or how a local non-profit helped provide needed aid to displaced refugees.

Solutions journalism aims to not only diagnose problems — like the reasons for the displacement of Syrians during the war — but also adopt a forward-looking perspective that identifies possible solutions. Solutions journalism also tends to offer concrete suggestions to audiences for how to become a part of possible solutions. This may include providing contact information for local nonprofits or identifying specific humanitarian aid legislation that is under consideration.

The second strategy is to look for ways to increase trust in news organizations, such as by being more transparent about how stories are reported and explaining the journalistic processes behind them. For example, this might entail appending an information box to a story that contains anonymous sources that explains the journalistic organization's policy on

granting anonymity. It may also include an explanation that a product reviewer was not paid for the review, but that the outlet may receive money if audiences purchase the product from an affiliated online store.

A third strategy that has received more attention in recent years is to provide *slow journalism* alternatives. This approach moves away from providing many short and episodic breaking news products (e.g., breaking news stories or tweets). Instead, it promotes providing fewer, longer, and more holistic news products (e.g., a well-reported and in-depth story published a couple of days after the news first broke). The approach is not intended to replace traditional journalism but simply to offer a complement for those who feel stressed by information overload.

Key Takeaways

- News avoidance refers to a phenomenon whereby audiences reduce their consumption of journalistic media over a continuous period of time.
- News avoidance may be the result of intentional and unintentional efforts, such as an active dislike for news or a simple preference for other media content.
- Intentional avoidance may be the byproduct of perceived over-negativity, lack of trust in news, and infor-

mation overload.

- Individuals may develop either or both news fatigue and compassion fatigue as a result of over-exposure to a particular issue.
- There are different strategies that journalistic actors can employ to reduce the likelihood of avoidance, though some measure of avoidance is inevitable.

INFLUENCES ON JOURNALISTIC MEDIA

This unit focuses on theories about the impacts of external factors on news production and distribution. This section includes:

- Hierarchy of Influences Model
- U.S. Journalistic Culture
- News Values
- Truth, Bias and Neutrality
- Gender and Racial Gaps
- Partisan and Geographic Biases

HIERARCHY OF INFLUENCES MODEL

Introduction

The Hierarchy of Influences Model is a useful framework for describing many of the things that affect the news content that audiences see, hear, and read. The model was proposed by media scholars Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese in their 1996 book, *Mediating the Message*. The crucial intervention of this model is that it helped formalize the idea that *there are a number of different factors that influence news content*, and that those factors *operate across different levels*, from the micro (individual) to the macro (society).

Put another way, individuals operate within larger social, economic, political, and technical systems and structures. Those systems and structures in turn influence how journalistic actors think and how they go about their work. That, in turn, influences the journalistic products that those actors produce.

The Hierarchy of Influences Model wasn't designed to propose or explain causal relationships, such as if X happens then Y will happen. Instead, it is particularly useful in helping us

appreciate that journalism isn't shaped just by journalists or the organizations they work for. It is also shaped by a number of other factors.

Levels of Analysis

The Hierarchy of Influences Model identifies five levels of influence: the *individual* level, the *routine* level, the *organizational* level, the *social-institutional* level, and the *social systems* level. These levels are ordered from the micro (smallest in scope) to the macro (broadest in scope), and the model presents them as a series of concentric circles.

Individual Level

The individual level refers to *the biographical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of an individual social actor*. For example, a journalist's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class status can all impact the news that person produces because previous life experiences associated with those attributes may color that person's interpretation of an issue or what they choose to prioritize when covering it. That journalist's personal values and beliefs (e.g., their religious beliefs or political attitudes) may similarly impact how they think about things. Even their role orientations, or what they think the purpose of journalism is and how journalism should

be done, will impact how a journalist will seek to cover an issue.

These factors, like many others in the model, are not always conscious influences. For example, a journalist may not knowingly decide that they have to adopt a particular story angle because they lean toward liberalism or conservatism. Instead, their political preference may subconsciously orient them toward a particular story angle precisely because they believe certain philosophies — like personal choice or the social good — are especially important (which is probably what led them to hold that political preference to begin with).

Routine Level

The routine level refers to *the patterned, repeated practices, forms, and rules that journalistic actors use to do their jobs*. For example, this may include news values, or the set of criteria journalists apply to determine the newsworthiness of information. If they deem controversy to be an important news value, then they are generally more likely to cover issues and events that are controversial. This is especially true when there is disagreement among institutional elites, such as political party leaders, regarding an issue.

Another such factor may be an institutional preference to appear balanced by offering “both sides” of an issue an equal voice. That often results in coverage that positions both voices as equally legitimate, even when that is not the case. For exam-

ple, anthropogenic climate change has long been considered a real phenomenon by leading scientists. However, for many years, journalistic coverage of climate change often gave voice to skeptics (who implied a lack of scientific consensus) to appear balanced.

Yet another such factor is a preference for certain styles of presenting information to audiences. One such style of writing is the inverted pyramid, which organizes information from most recent and important to least recent and important. This style is perceived as being efficient at quickly conveying important information, but it often comes at the expense of developing a compelling narrative. These factors operate at a higher level because they reflect what is seen as appropriate or normal among fellow journalistic actors.

Organizational Level

The organizational level refers to *the policies, unwritten rules, and economic imperatives within journalistic organizations* (or whatever other entity a journalistic actor works for). Journalistic outlets must balance commercial concerns with professional ones. This balancing act is often most difficult for for-profit organizations, as they are expected to generate profits even as important journalism is often *not* cost-effective. However, even non-profit media have to work within a set budget to remain viable and promote their work in a way that can attract funding from different benefactors (e.g., founda-

tions). As such, media ownership is often an important influence. While some owners (or ownership groups) are fairly hands-off (as long as economic objectives are met), others are more active in dictating coverage priorities and may even become directly involved in shaping the reporting of specific issues.

Additionally, the primary medium associated with a journalistic outlet (e.g., whether they see print as their primary media vehicle or if they focus on an online-first strategy) may also impact how they present information. After all, you wouldn't expect an organization that focuses on print journalism to invest much in interactive data visualizations that only work online.

A third factor might be the geographic location where that organization is based, and whether they have news bureaus (satellite offices) elsewhere. For example, if a journalistic outlet is based in a major East Coast city, the social make-up of the journalists will be more likely to reflect the values and priorities of that place, even when they cover stories elsewhere in the country or abroad.

Social-Institutional Level

The social-institutional level refers to *the norms, individuals, and organizations that operate outside a given journalistic organization*. There is some overlap here with the aforementioned routines level, but this level includes information sources,

other journalistic organizations, advertisers, and media policy, among other actors. For example, information sources (e.g., the witnesses a journalist may interview) can shape a news product by virtue of the words they choose to use and the information they choose to share — or, more simply, by being willing or unwilling to talk to the journalist in the first place. Some journalistic outlets can influence general news coverage themselves by serving as ‘pack leaders’ that other outlets seek to follow or imitate. They can also influence coverage by publishing stories that competing organizations may then choose to avoid (because those stories will be thought of as ‘already having been done’).

Advertisers can impact coverage by demanding that their ads only be shown alongside positive coverage. After all, they likely do not want their products to be associated with negative emotions or connotations. That, in turn, can result in important (but typically exhausting) stories receiving inadequate coverage, or having portions of a news product be reserved for more-positive feature stories. Conversely, advertisers can threaten to withdraw ads if they perceive that a journalistic outlet represents values that do not reflect their own.

Media policy can restrict what journalistic outlets can report on, or how they may report on those things. For example, some countries have strict state secrets laws that prevent journalistic outlets from publishing anything that the government deems to be threatening to national security. Similarly, some countries around the world have adopted “fake news” laws that

enable government authorities to fine (or shut down) journalists and outlets that produce news the authorities do not agree with. In both of these examples, media policy can have a “chilling effect” on what journalists choose to write (or write about). Conversely, some countries can adopt media policies that protect journalists from frivolous lawsuits by implementing serious penalties for individuals who sue journalists in bad faith.

Social Systems Level

The social systems level refers to *the symbolic frameworks of norms, values, and beliefs that reside at the societal level*. This is the most macro level, and it simply reflects the sorts of ideas that are more generally accepted within a broad society. For example, in the United States, capitalism remains the dominant economic system. This results in different issues being more likely to be framed in terms of how they might affect private ownership, free markets, and the pursuit of profit. Similarly, democratic values remain dominant within U.S. politics. That, in turn, leads to beliefs that the role of journalistic media in the U.S. is to inform citizens so they may better participate in self-governance. In less-capitalistic social systems, those same issues may be more likely to be framed primarily in terms of the collective good. Similarly, in autocratic social systems, journalists will be more likely to believe that their job is to help the government maintain social order.

Importance of Levels and Factors

The Hierarchy of Influences Model does not presume that any of the levels discussed here is more important than another. It also makes no claims about the directionality of influences. (For example, the social systems level is not theorized to be the one that shapes individuals, nor the other way around.) Instead, it views those levels as frequently acting upon one another: Individuals collectively shape values and norms at the social systems level, even as those values and norms help enable and restrict the behaviors of individuals within that society.

Similarly, each factor can operate independently from the other factors or in conjunction with one or more. For example, the influence of advertisers on a particular organization may be entirely independent from the dominant presentation style of that organization. Regardless of who is advertising or how much advertising there is, the organization may continue to use the inverted pyramid style of writing. However, if an organization is for-profit and has aggressive profit targets, then the existing influence of advertisers may become even stronger.

We have only covered a few of the factors identified by the Hierarchy of Influences Model here. There are dozens more, and you can learn more about them in the most recent edition of *Mediating the Message*. While it is less important to know how to classify each potential influence into a particular level,

it is very useful to simply recognize that a great many things can influence journalists and journalism, and that these influences can emanate from individuals to society as a whole.

It is important to note that journalism is rapidly changing as new social actors, technological actants, and journalistic activities emerge or become increasingly important. For example, companies like Facebook and Google have staked important positions within news production and distribution, even though they claim they are not media organizations themselves. Similarly, some new digital advertising technologies have made it harder for advertisers to know exactly where their ads will be placed online, and for online news organizations to know which ads will appear alongside their stories.

In short, as journalism (and the environments it operates within) changes, so do the factors that might influence it, as well as the nature and extent of the influence those factors exert. However, what remains unchanged is that journalism is regularly influenced in important ways by an array of different things.

Key Takeaways

- The Hierarchy of Influences Model describes the various factors that affect news content, organized on a continuum from a micro level to a macro level.

- The model identifies five levels: the individual level, the routine level, the organizational level, the social-institutional level, and the social systems level.
- The model does not presume that any one level is more important than another, or that influence runs in one direction. Instead, all of these forces are simultaneously acting upon the production of news content.
- Journalism is rapidly changing, and the nature and extent of each influence is changing with it.

U.S. JOURNALISTIC CULTURE

Introduction

According to media scholar Mark Deuze, journalism — namely, journalism in Western societies in the Global North — is generally comprised of five central values, which together make up what he calls the *occupational ideology of journalism*.

The first value is that journalists should provide a public service to the citizens of a given country. The second is that journalists should be impartial, fair, and objective. The third is that journalists must be independent in their work. The fourth is that journalists must have a sense of immediacy and the ability to quickly report emerging developments. The fifth is that journalists must have a strong sense of ethics that is consistent with a broader professional code of ethics.

Just because such a value system exists does not mean that the way journalism is practiced in those places actually reflects those values. Put another way, in some places, journalism is hardly impartial or independent in practice. However, those cultural values are important to how the majority journalists in those places develop their sense of identity, how they think

about their work, and how they collectively try to legitimize themselves to society. Such values also often come up in popular media about journalism, such as American movies that portray journalists as independent truth-tellers.

Breaking Down Journalistic Cultures

What Deuze is effectively suggesting is that although journalism may be practiced differently in different places, there is a general journalism culture that spans many of those places. However, although useful as a starting point, Deuze's theorizing is a reflection of Western ideology. For example, those values implicitly assume a separation of powers accomplished through systems of checks and balances, with journalistic media informally serving as one such check. Additionally, they also assume that journalistic outlets have the ability to remain independent from government. This is obviously not the case in many places.

Scholars have thus sought to move away from trying to find some universal journalistic culture and instead toward demarcating different aspects of journalistic cultures that allow for comparison across contexts (e.g., countries or regions). One such model comes from the Worlds of Journalism project, which has examined dozens of countries across five dimensions: journalists' sense of *editorial autonomy*, their *perceived*

influences, their role orientations, their ethical considerations, and their trust in institutions.

U.S. Journalistic Culture

Based on interviews conducted in 2013 by the Worlds of Journalism team, journalists in the U.S. tend to report a consistently high degree of editorial autonomy (independence), particularly in how they report news. For example, more than 90% of the U.S. journalists they interviewed said they had “complete” or a “great deal” of freedom in deciding what aspects of a story to emphasize, and almost 90% said they had freedom in selecting which news stories to report. This puts the U.S. on the high end of editorial autonomy globally, as journalists in other countries typically report having less independence in choosing what to cover and how to cover it.

Although journalists in the U.S. report high levels of autonomy, they also recognize a range of different things that influence their ability to do their work. For example, almost 70% of U.S. journalists said that time limits were “extremely” or “very influential” to their journalistic work, suggesting a pressure to publish quickly. Similarly, almost 70% reported that their editorial supervisors and the organization’s editorial policy were highly influential to their work — although far fewer reported feeling very influenced by the managers or owners of their news organizations. Moreover, U.S. journalists generally

do not perceive government censorship, advertising pressures, or pressure groups (such as industry trade associations and lobbyists) to have great influence on their work.

With regard to their role orientations, nearly all journalists in the U.S. said that it was “extremely” or “very important” to report things as they are — that is, to never fabricate information even if such fabrications would supposedly tell a ‘broader truth.’ The vast majority also believed it was important for them to educate their audiences and provide the information people need to make political decisions. Put another way, journalists in the U.S. generally believe that producing information that allows citizens to participate in civic and political processes is an important part of their (or their industry’s) job. In fact, U.S. journalists perceive acts of monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders to be among the most important functions of their job.

Notably, journalists in the U.S. generally believe they should be detached observers of events and should focus on allowing people to express their views in stories. (In contrast, few report believing in advocating for social change or striving to influence public opinion.) Relative to journalists around the world, this makes U.S. journalists more likely to value (and prioritize) the values of neutrality and offering balanced reporting. Additionally, U.S. journalists almost never see supporting national development or supporting government policies as important roles — a stark contrast to countries like China, Ethiopia, and

Thailand, where journalists are far more likely to show support for government officials and their policies in their reporting.

The idea that journalists should always adhere to professional codes of ethics, such as the one from the Society of Professional Journalists, received almost unanimous agreement among journalists in the U.S. (In contrast, the notion that ethics are a matter of personal judgment received support from only one in ten journalists.) Additionally, a situational approach to ethics was rejected by nearly two-thirds of the journalists, and an even larger majority said that even extraordinary circumstances were not enough to warrant setting moral standards aside. Put another way, journalists in the U.S. believe a strong professional sense of ethics is paramount to doing journalism, and they believe they should defer to the dominant set of ethical values promoted within the profession (rather than relying on their own personal ethics). Moreover, there are some practices that journalists widely reject. For example, most journalists in the U.S. considered publishing unverified content, altering photographs, claiming to be someone else, and paying people for confidential information to be unacceptable practices.

Finally, journalists in the U.S. have little trust in political and societal institutions. While they trust news media (their fellow journalists) more than any other institution measured, fewer than 40% of journalists said they had “complete” or “a great deal” of trust in news media. Other institutions that received *relatively* high levels of trust were the military, the

judiciary, and police. However, just over 1% of U.S. journalists had a great deal of trust in politicians and political parties in general, with 4% trusting the institution of the U.S. Congress and 11% trusting the Executive Branch. In general, this makes journalists in the U.S. far more skeptical of political and societal institutions than journalists in other countries. (Skepticism is, after all, a cherished value among U.S. journalists.)

Why Journalistic Cultures Matter

Journalistic cultures *shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think and, consequently, impact how they act.* There is, again, often a disconnect between what journalists think and what they do. Nevertheless, what they do is often influenced — at least initially — by what they think. For example, a journalist may choose to not go undercover or lie about their identity because they believe that violates a professional code of ethics — and they may thus try to get the story another way.

Additionally, journalistic cultures impact *what is seen as legitimate work among fellow journalistic actors.* That, in turn, impacts who and what are symbolically celebrated — that is, who gets treated as a “good” journalist by their peers or what gets treated as “good” journalism. Those symbolic rewards have material implications, such as increased job offers, job security, promotions, awards, and so on for those individuals

who are seen as “good” journalists by their fellow journalists, and for the journalistic products that journalistic actors perceive as being “good.”

Finally, journalistic cultures impact *how journalistic actors legitimize their work to society*. This, in turn, affects how societies think about journalism and the kinds of access and protections that other institutional actors (e.g., governments or sports teams) are willing to grant those journalists. For example, in a society where journalists are believed to provide important checks and balances to governmental authorities — as is the case in the United States — then that society is likely to support limited government intervention in news production and distribution.

It is important to note that journalistic cultures are not static, however. They can and do change over time. For example, the journalistic culture in the United States only adopted the journalistic value of neutrality as a central tenet in the 20th century. More recently, there have been rumblings within that culture to shift away from the value of “balance” and toward a “weight-of-evidence” approach, especially when it comes to covering scientific issues like climate change.

Key Takeaways

- Different countries have distinct journalistic cultures.

There is no single, universal way of doing journalism, though some values and norms are more common than others across contexts (e.g., countries and regions).

- Journalists in the U.S. express having a great deal of editorial autonomy, and say they can generally select what to cover and how to cover it.
- Journalists in the U.S. believe their primary role is to educate the public about civic affairs, and they believe professional codes of ethics should be closely adhered to.
- Journalists in the U.S. are very skeptical of the political and social institutions they cover.
- Journalistic cultures matter because they shape (and are shaped by) how journalists think, act, and legitimize themselves to their peers and to society.

U.S. NEWS VALUES

Introduction

News values are *the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories*.

News is not a ‘natural’ thing that just ‘exists.’ In the context of journalism, news is something that is constructed by editorial actors (e.g., journalists) and even by some technological actants (e.g., newswriting algorithms). The use of the term “constructed” here is not intended to imply that news is arbitrarily invented or that it is “fake” information. Instead, it simply recognizes that news is the product of human and technological interventions, and it is shaped by the contexts within which it is identified, gathered, verified, structured, and presented as a product that is recognizable as “news” by audiences.

After all, only a tiny fraction of the developments and events happening in the world at any given moment ever get covered as news by editorial actors and actants. First, journalists are unlikely to be aware of most of those developments. Second, only a small portion of the things they are aware of are deemed to be worthy of being constructed as news stories. To help them decide which developments are worthy of their time

and their audiences' attention, editorial actors apply the set of criteria we can call *news values*.

News Values

According to media scholars Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, most published news stories tend to include *at least one* of the following 15 elements:

- *Exclusivity*: The development is available first (or only) to a particular news organization (e.g., an exclusive interview with Mark Zuckerberg).
- *Power elite*: The development involves powerful individuals and organizations (e.g., the president of the United States).
- *Magnitude*: The development potentially impacts a large number of people, or impacts a few people significantly (e.g., a court ruling affecting thousands of immigrants' citizenship rights).
- *Relevance*: The development involves issues or groups that are perceived to be relevant to the organization's audience (e.g., a major local employer relocating to another state).
- *Surprise*: The development deviates from the norm or shows stark contrasts (e.g., a man who bites dogs).
- *Conflict*: The development involves controversies, argu-

ments, fights, or insurrections (e.g., a politician breaking away from their party).

- *Drama*: The development concerns an unfolding drama, such as battles or court cases (e.g., a major criminal trial).
- *Bad news*: The development has especially negative overtones, such as a death or tragedy (e.g., a plane crash).
- *Good news*: The development has especially positive overtones, including rescues or cures (e.g., development of a new vaccine).
- *Entertainment*: The development highlights human interest, unfolding drama, opportunities for humor (e.g., how to spend 36 hours in Bucharest).
- *Celebrity*: The development concerns people who are already famous (e.g., Ryan Gosling).
- *Audio-visuals*: The development has compelling photographs, video, audio, or can be illustrated with data visualizations (e.g., large protests).
- *Shareability*: The development is likely to generate sharing and comments on social media, e-mail, and messaging apps (e.g., content that is likely to ‘go viral’).
- *Follow-up*: The development advances a story already being covered by that journalistic outlet or other news organization (e.g., the result of a vote on legislation previously covered).
- *Journalistic outlet’s agenda*: The development fits the organization’s agenda and/or journalistic identity (e.g., it

focuses on a particular issue, like foreign policy).

In addition to these values, *timeliness* is a crucial factor. After all, *news* is typically presumed to be *new*, and journalists are thus sensitive to how recent the information is. However, news may also be *evergreen*, or not connected to breaking developments but part of an ongoing issue or event. For example, a timely story about homelessness may be produced when the city council approves additional funding for homeless shelters. However, a general story about homelessness can also be evergreen because homelessness is a persistent issue in many places. In practice, evergreen stories are also useful because they provide content for slower news days.

The more news values a potential story contains, the more likely it is to be seen as *newsworthy* and therefore receive coverage. News can therefore be understood as a *highly selective version of events* (and, arguably, nonevents) that have been chosen and packaged to match a news organization's objectives, its output requirements, and the information needs or entertainment wants that its target audiences are believed to have. This, in turn, highlights that the material attributes of a development or event — that is, what actually happened — only has *some* bearing on whether it is covered, how it gets covered, what information is emphasized, and who receives a voice in that coverage. For example, an online rant about immigrants may be seen as newsworthy solely because it was tweeted by a sitting U.S. president, and the coverage may focus on the

controversy around that rant (rather than the substance of its claims) because opposing party leaders subsequently traded barbs over it.

These news values also help us to appreciate why certain developments *do not* receive coverage. For example, an evening TV news broadcast may decide not to cover an event simply because it is unlikely to produce good visuals (e.g., a corruption investigation) or if the organization does not have access to those visuals (e.g., a governmental detention camp in a remote area of a foreign country). Instead, it may allot the limited time in its broadcast to an arguably less-important event that can produce more visually captivating images (e.g., an accidental house fire).

News Values as Ideology

News values are a reflection of the dominant ideologies within a journalistic culture. However, they have also been critiqued as examples of journalistic media straying from their stated missions. For example, in their influential Propaganda Model of news media, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that mainstream journalism tends to support the status quo in large part because, they argue, the selection of topics for news coverage ultimately privileges the perspectives of the most powerful while marginalizing the voices of less powerful sections of the population.

Crucially, Herman and Chomsky are not arguing that mainstream journalists do this intentionally or as part of a deliberate conspiracy to manipulate audiences. Instead, they argue that there are structural filters that impact what is selected as newsworthy, which in turn creates distortions that favor existing power brokers and marginalizes points of view regarded as being outside the mainstream. This is an example of critical theory, which seeks to interrogate power structures in media industries.

It is important to note that news values are relative. The aforementioned values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most reflective of journalistic cultures in democratic Western societies in the Global North, since those are the cultures that scholars have most studied. News values in autocratic regimes are likely to be different, as there may be less emphasis on values like conflict or exclusivity. We still have much to learn about news values in other parts of the world.

Key Takeaways

- News values are the benchmarks of newsworthiness against which journalists measure potential stories.
- The more news values that a potential story is deemed to fulfill, the higher the likelihood that it will be seen as newsworthy and receive coverage by journalistic media.

Conversely, stories are sometimes ignored precisely because they do not clearly adhere to these values.

- News values are, and serve as reflections of, ideologies within a journalistic culture.
- News values are relative. The values identified by Harcup and O'Neill are most representative of Western journalistic cultures in the Global North.

TRUTH, BIAS AND NEUTRALITY

Introduction

The concept of “truth” is central to journalism, and audiences expect journalists to provide truthful accounts and analyses of recent developments. And, yet, truth can be a very messy thing that is difficult to grasp.

According to the *realism perspective*, truth is a judgment that accurately describes, or corresponds with, the way the world actually is. That is, under this perspective, truth is a universal reality that is separate from subjective human perspectives. Most journalists in the United States subscribe to the realism perspective. They typically argue that “facts” exist, and that conveying these facts is an important aspect of doing journalism and of getting at the “truth.”

However, “facts” can be tricky things themselves. For example, consider the unemployment rate in the United States right now. One might think that to be a pretty simple, measurable “fact.” And, yet, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the primary body charged with measuring the unemployment rate in the United States, offers six different calculations of it. Its primary

calculation refers to the percentage of the labor force that is without a job and *has actively looked for work within the past four weeks*. However, it also considers the percentage of the labor force that has *been unemployed for 15 weeks or longer* to be a valid measure, as well as the percentage of the labor force that is unemployed *and is not actively looking for work because of discouragement* due to economic conditions.

In short, when audiences say they “just want the facts,” the question becomes: Which facts?

Subscribing to this more critical view does not require a person to reject the idea of “facts,” or to suggest that they are meaningless or entirely relative. But it does call attention to two things. First, *there are often multiple ways to measure complex facts*. (In contrast, it is typically easier to measure something simple like the number of students enrolled in a journalism course.) Second, *journalists have to work within the confines of time and space* — a story can only be so long — and this limitation naturally requires them to select some facts at the expense of others. Put another way, they rarely have the ability to list all the different permutations of the unemployment rate; they focus on the ‘best’ one.

Moreover, journalism involves more than just listing facts. It typically requires journalists to make sense of those facts, in order to help their audiences understand how certain information fits into a broader context and what the implications of those facts might be. Indeed, this is the very basis of framing theory and the sense-making function of journalism.

It is important to be cautious of arguments that “facts” do not exist, that “truth isn’t truth,” or that we should embrace “alternative facts,” though. While the critical view described above promotes inquisition, simplistic rejections of factual knowledge are often made in bad faith, in order to make competing measures of truth (or interpretations of it) seem equal when they are not actually equally supported by the evidence. This is especially true when people in positions of power (or grifters looking to develop a following) urge people to dismiss unfavorable or inconvenient information. Instead, it is important that audiences (and journalists) think critically about how “facts” were arrived at, and to avoid reflexively accepting or rejecting them.

Bias

Journalists’ inherent need to be selective often leads to allegations of journalistic bias, especially when audiences perceive news products to deviate from their worldviews and preconceptions. For example, in the United States, there is a widely held belief in public circles that journalistic media have a liberal bias. (To be clear, non-partisan studies of media bias have historically found little evidence of this. While journalists in the U.S. generally hold more liberal values, the professional emphasis on neutrality, balance, and a systematic approach to newsgathering limits one-sided coverage.)

Journalistic bias can be defined as *prejudice toward certain ideas, issues, perspectives, or groups or individuals in the production and distribution of journalistic content*. Allegations of journalistic bias often fall into one or more of the following three categories. The first, *issue bias*, pertains to a proclivity toward certain kinds of issues, such as an overemphasis on crime or immigration. The second, *framing bias*, refers to the propensity to frame issues through particular prisms, such as the threat immigrants might pose (as opposed to the benefits they might offer), or to routinely use certain language, such as “illegal immigrants” instead of “undocumented immigrants.” The third, *source bias*, refers to the differential treatment of a story depending on who the main actors are — as with offering more positive coverage to members of a certain political party. Source bias can also refer to a proclivity toward giving certain kinds of sources a larger (or any) voice within a news product, such as a journalist being more likely to quote government officials than activists or demonstrators.

Connecting all three of those categories is *visibility bias*, which involves the amount of attention or prominence given to certain kinds of issues, frames, or sources. For example, although a journalist may quote an equal number of sources from two opposing parties, they may routinely offer longer quotes in more prominent parts of a news story (e.g., near the top, which more people are likely to read) to one of the two parties. Similarly, visibility bias may become apparent when prime-time shows on cable news networks focus on stories

about immigrant misdeeds, with more positive coverage of immigrants relegated to less-watched daytime shows.

Neutrality and Balance

In order to combat allegations of bias, journalists often claim to be neutral and to offer “*a view from nowhere*” — that is, to offer a perspective without a position or that takes no side. A common way to enact that claim is to try to occupy a middle ground by simply capturing and broadcasting opposing viewpoints, and trying to give equal weight to competing sides of an issue. Crucially, such attempts take care to not convey the journalist’s own opinion on a matter.

This proclivity toward neutrality and balance is, itself, a form of bias, and it is especially prevalent among journalists in places like the United States. This is not to say that such an approach to doing journalism is bad but rather that it represents a predisposition toward a particular way of presenting news.

There are downsides to that approach, though. In trying to be neutral and balanced, a journalist may promote *false balance* by assigning equal blame or acclaim when one side is more culpable or deserving of it. For example, by taking the position that “all politicians lie” or that “both sides share blame” in order to appear neutral, a journalist may obfuscate the fact that some politicians make more verifiably false claims than others,

or that one side is more responsible for an outcome (e.g., by being less willing to negotiate a compromise). Put another way, journalists distort reality when promoting a false balance and they thus do a disservice to truth — and to news audiences.

Bad-faith institutional actors, including some political candidates and public officials, have taken advantage of this “view from nowhere” approach through concerted efforts to “work the refs,” especially in recent decades. If journalists are seen to be arbiters of truth — much as referees are the arbiters of rules within a game — then subjects of news coverage (e.g., a politician) can allege news media to be biased against them in order to intimidate journalists from scrutinizing their claims. (After all, critical evaluations by journalists can be pointed to as ‘further evidence’ of the alleged bias.) This is important because false or inaccurate claims carried by trusted journalistic outlets are granted legitimacy — that is, they may be seen as true (or be evaluated less skeptically) by audiences who presume journalists to have filtered out untruthful information.

Accuracy and Truth-Seeking

One element found in most definitions of “truth” is *accuracy*, or a focus on precision and the avoidance of errors. Accuracy is indeed central to journalism, and many aspiring journalists have failed a college assignment because they submitted a news story with a factual error in it.

However, accuracy is not, on its own, enough for satisfying truth. For example, it may be accurate to report that one person said that 75% of peer-reviewed studies about climate change say it is not a real phenomenon. After all, they may have said such a thing. However, it is not *true* that such a proportion of peer-reviewed studies say that. Similarly, it may be accurate to point a camera at a small crowd of people and zoom in so as to have them fill the frame, or to zoom out so as to make it look sparse. After all, neither picture was doctored or manipulated after the fact in any way. However, the resulting image's *connotation* that there was a large or small crowd may be an 'untrue' depiction of the event. Finally, it would be equally accurate to show a mug shot of a dejected person in a crime story or their happy, upstanding family photo. However, it can be difficult to ascertain which photo best represents the truth about what that individual is like.

In short, *accuracy must be supplemented by commitment to truth*. We can call that commitment "truth-seeking." This approach views truth as more of a process wherein the journalist aims to *approximate* truth as best as they can. Truth-seeking typically involves an objective approach to journalism, where journalists seek to systematically observe and record developments; interview sources with intimate knowledge about that development (like eye-witnesses); verify claims by seeking out generally accepted facts and official documents; and ultimately produce a story with the most truthful (plausible) representation of that development.

The process of truth-seeking recognizes that journalists are inherently biased. Put another way, it accepts the proposition that it is impossible for journalists to be unbiased because of their backgrounds and the structural constraints they work within. However, it recognizes that by systematically adopting what are regarded as best practices in journalism, journalists can *mitigate* some of those biases and not fall into traps like false balance, all the while striving toward the ambitious goal of reproducing truth.

It is important to note, however, that in some countries, journalistic outlets are openly biased and explicitly reject the values of neutrality and balance. For example, in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia, journalists typically believe that openly advocating for social change and staking clear positions regarding which side in a dispute has the superior argument — and sometimes substantiating those positions primarily through intuition or their agreement with ethical or religious principles — is a better way of serving truth. Put another way, different journalistic cultures approach truth-seeking in different ways.

Key Takeaways

- Facts are not ‘natural’ things that just ‘exist.’ Journalistic actors (and audiences) should therefore critically evalu-

ate facts and approach them with a healthy dose of skepticism.

- There are multiple forms of journalistic bias, such as issue bias, framing bias, and source bias.
- In the United States, journalists typically strive to appear neutral and to offer balanced accounts. However, bad-faith actors have taken advantage of this approach in various ways. This has forced journalists to reconsider whether that approach still serves citizens well.
- Accuracy is, by itself, insufficient for getting at the truth. However, it is an essential component of truth.
- Journalists will typically strive for truth-seeking by systematically adopting best practices in journalism, such as interviewing multiple people, verifying their accounts, and offering the best approximation of truth.

GENDER AND RACIAL GAPS

Introduction

For much of journalism's history in the U.S., women were seen largely as a market for news, rather than as a community that should be reflected in the news. Put another way, they were generally seen as consumers of news and not worthwhile subjects of it. Moreover, women's pathways into journalism were generally limited, with journalism being a *primarily* male profession for much of its history in the U.S. (and much of the world).

One of the ways in which women gained greater entrance and influence in U.S. journalism was through cultural journalism (coverage of lifestyle topics such as food, art, style, music, and other forms of entertainment) in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, what we currently understand to be cultural journalism can be traced directly back to the so-called "women's pages," which originally focused on the four Fs: family, fashion, food, and furnishings.

Those women's pages covered women's issues, which were seen as less important and were physically separated in publi-

cations from more ‘serious’ news topics. Moreover, the type of writing — which was less newsy and more personal — also distinguished such content from the ‘serious’ news. Consequently, the women’s pages largely featured coverage of trends (e.g., the latest fashion) and profiles of people (e.g., celebrities). Over time, though, the women’s pages influenced the creation of less gendered and more inclusive beats of coverage, such as *The Washington Post’s* style section.

However, this gendered gap between news and culture still appears in American newsrooms today. In the U.S., women journalists remain more likely to write about health and lifestyle topics. In contrast, they are less likely to write about economics, politics, or sports. They are also less likely to write for the opinion section.

More broadly, women are still less likely than men to be either journalists or subjects of journalism. According to a 2019 report from the American Society of News Editors, women make up roughly 42 percent of newsroom employees in the U.S., despite making up more than half of the U.S. population. According to a 2019 report by the Women’s Media Center, women journalists also only produce 37 percent of news stories. It is only in categories like entertainment (49% women), lifestyle and leisure (52% women), and health (58% women) that women have an equal (or greater) number of bylines than men. Men also dramatically outnumber women in news coverage in both text and images. That same report by the Women’s Media Center found that 77% of people men-

tioned in articles, and 70% of faces pictured in news articles, were male. These discrepancies suggest that male perspectives continue to dominate American news coverage, with female voices being peripheral.

These findings are particularly problematic because women greatly *outnumber* men in journalism education programs. According to the Columbia Journalism Review, two-thirds of people who graduate with a degree in Journalism or Mass Communication in the United States are women. As such, there are a variety of systemic factors within journalism — from broader social expectations to professional cultural values — that make it harder for women to enter (and succeed in) the professional practice.

One example of this is that there are distinct gender-based gaps in pay and hierarchy in American journalism. (This is also true in many other professions.) Those gaps further intersect with other factors, such as race and ethnicity. For example, white male journalists at *The Associated Press* earn an average of \$15,000 more than Black female journalists. Similarly, female employees of *The Washington Post* earn 86 cents for every dollar white male employees earn. In light of the already relatively low average salary in U.S. journalism, these obstacles can make it impossible for many women to enter or remain in journalism — especially if they come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Race and Ethnicity in American Newsrooms

Racial and ethnic disparity remains the largest and slowest-changing gap in American journalism, with white journalists greatly outnumbering journalists of color. According to a 2019 survey by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), people of color make up just 21% of newsroom employees in print journalistic outlets in the U.S. (This includes newspapers with an online presence, like *The Boston Globe*.) That number is only slightly improved when it comes to online-only outlets (e.g., *Quartz* or *The Huffington Post*), where journalists of color comprise almost 31% of employees. Furthermore, according to a 2020 survey by the Radio Television Digital News Association, about one-fourth of employees in local TV news are people of color, and just 15% of local radio journalism jobs in the U.S. are held by people of color. These gaps are particularly striking when you consider that 39% of the U.S. population is *not* white.

This is also true at major, national news outlets. For example, the ASNE survey found that the staffs of *The Boston Globe* (85% white), *The Los Angeles Times* (64% white), *The Wall Street Journal* (79% white), and *The Washington Post* (71% white) were largely white. These figures are particularly discouraging when you consider that the large coastal cities where U.S. journalistic outlets are disproportionately

located (including the aforementioned outlets) tend to have more diverse racial and ethnic populations than the average American city.

Notably, journalists of color are also less likely to hold management positions in newsrooms, with the ASNE survey finding that roughly 19% of managers at print *and* online-only outlets were people of color. Unsurprisingly, even within racial and ethnic categories, men are more likely to be either an employee or a manager. (The lone exception to this was among Asians, where women were more likely to hold both of those positions.)

These gaps are further exacerbated by a number of norms inherent to American journalism, such as the tendency for early-career journalists to take unpaid internships and the use of closed networks in hiring practices. Put another way, industry norms stack the deck against journalists from less-affluent backgrounds and those who are not well-connected. Researchers have also found a lack of diversity to exist in the faculties of journalism programs in higher education.

This demographic discrepancy is not new, and it is also not secret. American journalism organizations have called for change for a number of years, and individual journalistic outlets have begun in recent years to take accounting of their own gaps in representation (both within their newsrooms and within their coverage). For example, several journalistic outlets, such as NPR, document both their employment and coverage of women and people of color. And, in recent years, problem-

atic issues in representation at some news outlets have led to public changes of leadership and pledges to shift hiring and coverage practices. This has been driven in part by an emerging culture of peer critique under which journalistic outlets identify and critique cultural violations in each other's coverage.

However, increased attention doesn't guarantee increased representation. Indeed, it is unclear if the recent changes are emblematic of a moment in time or a sustained trend toward greater inclusivity within journalism. Additionally, although younger U.S. newsroom employees are equally likely to be male and female — and they're less likely to be white than their older counterparts — they are still much more likely to identify as white than with a minority racial or ethnic group.

The American public also recognizes these issues. According to a 2020 Gallup study, more Americans say that news media are doing poorly in reflecting U.S. diversity than say they are doing well. Additionally, approximately 69% of Americans believe that reflecting this diversity is either a "critical" or "very important" role of the media. However, the respondents to that survey were far more divided when it came to identifying how journalistic outlets could better fulfill that role.

Impact of Gender and Racial Gaps

These demographic gaps limit the stories that are covered by

American journalists by reducing the richness of the lived experiences found in the newsroom. As journalist Gabriel Arana wrote in a critique of journalism's failure to look like the communities it covers: "Ultimately, the value of diversity to journalism is not about skin color, gender, sexual orientation, or social class. It's about the stories people can tell." American journalism misses many important stories when it doesn't represent the population it serves.

In addition to creating gaps in coverage, this lack of representation can also lead to flawed or biased reporting practices, such as coverage that stereotypes specific communities and groups. According to *schema theory*, people organize knowledge into categories, or schemas, in their minds. People then retrieve these schemas when they are confronted with media messages that depict these categories. These schemas can become entangled with loaded cultural meanings that lend themselves to stereotypes. By creating and disseminating content, journalistic outlets also rely on pre-existing schemas, or mental shortcuts, to help quickly call up information within the minds of their audiences and to help them synthesize new information. (This psychological framework is similar to that of *priming theory* and associative network models of human memory.)

For example, crime coverage that features racial stereotypes can connect those stereotypes to particular groups. When presented with a news story about crime that features an unknown perpetrator, people are likely to draw upon existing

stereotypes and assume things about that unknown (e.g., that it was a Black male). Indeed, according to *The Marshall Project*, mainstream American journalists are less likely to cover Black victims of homicide, and when they do, that coverage results in less complex, less humane portrayals. That results in lower levels of empathy for Black victims (and Black people as a whole).

The same system of stereotype reinforcement comes into play with coverage of other groups and identities, too. One recurring paradox that persists in news coverage of gender is that of “*double binds*.” Double binds over-simplify complex and dynamic people, organizations, or groups into a one-dimensional, either-or narrative. For example, one common double bind used to depict powerful women is that of femininity vs. competence — essentially, the idea that competent women can’t be feminine and feminine women can’t be competent. This also appears in American journalistic coverage of female political candidates, which often plays up stereotypically feminine attributes (e.g., motherhood and attractiveness) while de-emphasizing stereotypically masculine attributes (e.g., leadership).

Journalists generally don’t *intend* to stereotype populations, oversimplify their experiences, or miss out on highly relevant story angles. Instead, journalists (like the general population) are simply ignorant about important issues and ideas that are more salient to members of communities and groups outside their own. Thus, more representative newsrooms can

be an asset precisely because they allow journalists to more readily and proactively identify and address problems with coverage — or the lack thereof. This can generate not only better journalism but also increase public trust in that journalism.

Key Takeaways

- Although women greatly outnumber men in American journalism higher education, men outnumber women in the profession itself. A variety of systemic factors within journalism — from broader social expectations to professional cultural values — make it harder for women to enter (and succeed in) the industry.
- The newsrooms at online-only journalistic outlets are more representative of the U.S. population than their traditional media counterparts when it comes to both gender and race, though such spaces are still far from being representative.
- Gaps in newsroom diversity are influenced by a variety of factors, including some American journalistic norms. These include the tendency for early-career journalists to take unpaid internships and the use of closed networks in hiring practices.
- American journalism misses many important stories when newsrooms don't represent the communities they

serve. In addition to creating gaps in coverage, this lack of representation can also lead to flawed or biased reporting practices, such as coverage that stereotypes specific communities and groups.

PARTISAN AND GEOGRAPHIC BIASES

Introduction

It is not uncommon to see politicians, public intellectuals, and regular citizens blame journalistic outlets for contributing to increasing political polarization and partisanship. Indeed, journalistic media are often accused of “twisting the facts” and “taking things out of context” to either fit a political agenda or to “get more clicks” for their stories.

In fact, a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 79% of Americans believed “news organizations” tend to favor one side when presenting the news on political and social issues. That belief was particularly salient among self-identified Republicans (91%), but it was also high among self-identified Democrats (69%). The 2020 survey data showed an increase in that perceived partisanship relative to Pew’s earlier surveys, suggesting that those concerns about journalistic media are only getting worse.

Moreover, increased concerns about people living in partisan media bubbles are being borne out, at least in part, according to recent research. A separate survey conducted by the Pew

Research Center in 2020 found that the attitudes and news consumption habits of Democrats and Republicans varied significantly along political lines. Self-identified Republicans distrusted two-thirds of the 30 news sources Pew asked about. Of the 10 remaining news sources, Republicans were more trusting of outlets that media analysts find to be politically slanted to the right, such as Fox News and conservative talk radio programs. Democrats, on the other hand, trusted 22 of the 30 (and distrusted eight of them). Notably, the eight sources Democrats *distrusted* overlapped with the 10 sources Republicans *trusted*. This is part of a seemingly growing gap in the news media use habits.

That same Pew survey found that Republicans also consume political news from mainstream outlets less frequently than Democrats. Of the 30 outlets examined, Fox News was the only news source that at least one-third of Republicans had consumed political news from in the week preceding the study. In contrast, Democrats reported consuming political news from CNN, NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, and/or MSNBC in the same week. CNN was the most frequently consumed and most trusted source of political news for Democratic news consumers, while Fox News was the most trusted and most frequently consumed outlet for Republicans.

What is perhaps even more alarming is that none of the 30 sources Pew Research studied in early 2020 was trusted by more than half of Americans. Sadly, this partisan gap in media use and perception is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. In

fact, the gap has only deepened between 2014 and 2020. Research from Pew conducted over that time suggests that Democrats' trust in established media outlets has stood firm while Republicans have become more distanced from — and distrusting of — those news outlets. For example, at least 15 of the news outlets Pew studied were trusted less by Republicans in 2020 than they were in 2014. And their distrust of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and CNN — outlets trusted by Democrats and generally well-regarded by media analysts — grew the most during that time.

Impact of Partisan Bias

These clear partisan divides in American news media consumption and trust are reflected — and influenced — by a variety of factors at national and local levels. It is important to note that politicians and powerful political actors have labeled U.S. journalists 'liberal elites' for decades, and talk radio has decried liberal bias in the 'mainstream media' since at least the 1980s. Put another way, the discrediting of journalistic actors as partisan agents is a phenomenon that goes back many years.

However, more recently, those attacks have become more common, targeted, and intense. Additionally, they have originated with actors at the highest levels of government. Most notable among these is former U.S. President Donald Trump, who frequently verbally attacked journalistic actors since he

was elected. Three months after taking office, Trump called the news media “the enemy of the American People” and “fake news” in a tweet that derided the New York Times, NBC, ABC, CBS, and CNN by name. Throughout his time in the Oval Office, Trump and his administration also prevented some journalists who regularly covered the White House for many years from attending its press briefings, and instead granted press passes to self-described journalists working at highly partisan media who offered favorable coverage. Members of the Trump administration also called journalists “sick people” who didn’t like the United States and wanted “to take away our history and our heritage.”

These partisan attacks on journalistic outlets encourage Americans to question, doubt, and in the most extreme cases, attack news and information that don’t align with a particular political viewpoint. When espoused by powerful political actors, these kinds of sentiments have proven to be contagious. Research shows that people who are exposed to allegations of “fake news” by elite actors (e.g., powerful politicians) both display less trust in journalistic media and are less likely to correctly identify what news is real.

Perceptions of political bias in journalism are also tied to perceptions of general bias. According to a 2018 Knight Foundation study, Americans consider 62% of news they consume on TV, in newspapers, and on the radio to be “biased,” and 44% of it to be inaccurate. The same study revealed that Americans also do not distinguish between bias and inaccuracy, gen-

erally finding that the journalistic outlets they believe to be biased are also promulgators of inaccurate information, and vice versa. This lack of trust has negative implications for media literacy. For example, people with more trust in news media are more likely to be able to distinguish real news from opinion.

Over time, audiences have also become conditioned to seek out news from the outlets that align most with their own political views while avoiding those that challenge their beliefs. This behavior is called *partisan selective exposure*. It creates a pattern in which people consume media content that reinforces their opinions and choose to opt out of divergent perspectives (that could alter their political beliefs). Put another way, they increasingly seek out *echo chambers*. Additionally, technological actants increasingly make it easier for people to unintentionally find themselves in a *filter bubble*, with search and recommendation algorithms prodding them toward content that reinforces their existing beliefs. (Consider the YouTube algorithms that automatically queue up a ‘suggested’ video when you finish watching the one you initially searched for. Such recommendations are often toward like-minded content.)

Over time, the exposure to partisan news influences audiences’ voting decisions and their political participation. For example, when audiences read only news that agrees with their political beliefs, they are more likely to simultaneously become radicalized and want to participate further in politics. This, in

turn, can create problems for democratic decision-making as highly motivated individuals become convinced that *they* are right — based on information (i.e., an understanding of the reality) that diverges widely from those who do not share their perspective. Such exposure also impacts support for particular policies. For example, a 2021 Pew Research Center study found that Republicans who selected only sources with right-leaning audiences (e.g., Fox News or talk radio) as their major sources of political news tended to be less open to international cooperation and had different foreign policy priorities than other Republicans. On the other hand, Democrats who selected only sources with left-leaning audiences (e.g., MSNBC or *The Washington Post*) tended to place a higher priority on multilateralism and addressing climate change, relative to other Democrats.

People who consume political news online or from non-mainstream sources are also more likely to believe that news information that reflects their own partisan beliefs is more credible than news that disagrees with their beliefs. Put another way, audiences who prefer online news media are particularly predisposed to seeking out news from *confirmatory* sources — that is, outlets that reinforce their worldviews. (This is not a function of technology but rather that online spaces offer easier access to a larger number of news sources, including highly partisan and pseudo-journalistic outlets.)

Moreover, through the psychological process of *motivated reasoning*, highly partisan news consumers are also likely to

treat counter-factual information (e.g., news that goes against their preconceptions) as false information. After rejecting that news, those reasoning processes may actually result in the false information becoming more entrenched in their original preconceptions. This presents a significant challenge to correcting inaccurate information, not least by journalistic fact-checking outlets (e.g., Politifact) that have found themselves under increased attack in recent years.

Motivated reasoning has been used to help explain the rapid growth of increasingly partisan news outlets. For example, as people's worldviews become more radicalized, motivated reasoning pushes them to move toward even more partisan outlets. Indeed, a 2021 Pew Research Center study found that although Fox News remained a primary news source for self-identified Republicans and Moderates, the more conservative Newsmax and One America News continued to grow — and were especially appealing to more conservative Republicans and older, White Americans. (Newsmax and One America News have generally been regarded by media scholars as poor sources of information.)

Coastal Influence

Of direct relevance to this public perception that U.S. journalistic outlets are politically biased is yet another demographic reality separating U.S. journalists from average Americans:

those journalists' geographical tie to large cities the East and West coasts. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center study, approximately 22% of newsroom employees in the U.S. live in Los Angeles or New York City. New York City alone is home to 12% of all U.S. newsroom staffers. Additionally, scholars have pointed toward an increased focus on national politics among political journalism in recent years (which is emblematic of similar changes in journalism writ large), resulting in much of that journalism originating from Washington D.C.

This coastal concentration is even stronger among online outlets. Forty percent of U.S. journalists working for online-only outlets live in the Northeast. Unsurprisingly, many of the most popular or established digital news sites are headquartered in major cities in that region of the country, such as New York City.

American journalism's strong ties to the coasts makes sense when you consider *cluster theory*, which points out the advantages industries gain and make use of when they establish themselves in specific regions. When businesses are clustered together in a specific geographic area, so are their actors, resources, and skills, which combined can promote innovation and give these clusters competitive advantages that make them more productive. However, such clustering also results in problems with representation. Indeed, the U.S. South is very much under-represented in terms of the number of journalists working there.

Coastal Impact

This tie to the coasts influences U.S. journalists and the work they publish. First, it undoubtedly contributes to the fact that journalists are indeed more politically liberal than the average American. While U.S. journalistic culture promotes the use of procedural tactics to mitigate the impact of that characteristic — such as by interviewing stakeholders on opposing sides and promoting balance — journalists themselves do tend to self-identify with traditionally liberal values.

Second, the realities of life in major cities and industrial hubs is undoubtedly different than the realities of life in smaller and more rural areas. Because of their concentration in the East and West Coasts of the country, journalists may be more likely to reflect a particular cultural experience. This can result in the stereotyping of those non-hub areas (and those within them) and the misrepresentation of their interests, attitudes, and beliefs.

Third, those areas are more expensive to live in than most of the country. Many would-be journalists thus cannot afford to live there — especially when they are starting off their careers and may be applying for unpaid internships. (They may also not *want* to live in such places.) This artificially limits the potential talent pool for journalists, and tends to systematically disadvantage journalists who do not come from wealthy and/or urban backgrounds.

Finally, this concentration of journalists and outlets on the

edges of the country can be a disservice to local journalism. Not only can it result in important local and regional issues being under-covered (or poorly covered) but the perception that journalists in the United States do not reflect their communities can have downstream impacts on trust in local journalism, too, if it is attached to a generalized ‘the media’ umbrella (and it often is). This makes it harder yet for local outlets to attain resources and audiences in today’s media attention economy.

Key Takeaways

- Republicans are less likely to trust (and more likely to actively distrust) U.S. journalistic outlets. In contrast, Democrats are more likely to trust those outlets. This gap has deepened over the past decade.
- Partisan selective exposure creates a pattern in which people consume media content that reinforces their opinions and opt out of divergent perspectives. Today, Americans’ news diets differ considerably and are often associated with their political alignment.
- U.S. journalistic actors are more likely to live on the East and West Coasts than the average American, and less likely to live in the South. This has raised concerns about the representativeness of U.S. journalism.

CHAPTER 2: MEDIA EFFECTS

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2.1 MASS MEDIA AND ITS MESSAGES

When media consumers think of media messages, they may think of televised public service announcements or political advertisements. These obvious examples provide a venue for the transfer of a message through a medium, whether that message is a plea for fire safety or the statement of a political position. But what about more abstract political advertisements that simply show the logo of a candidate and a few simple words? Media messages can range from overt statements to vague expressions of cultural values.

Disagreements over the content of media messages certainly exist. Consider the common allegations of political bias against various news organizations. During the 2008 run-up to the presidential election, ABC was accused of left-wing political bias in Charlie Gibson's interview of Sarah Palin, then a candidate for Vice President of the United States. Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly was accused of right-wing bias in his interviews with President Obama on the O'Reilly Factor. More recently, in 2020 President Trump accused the social media platform Twitter of political bias after it began fact-checking his tweets. Accusations of hidden messages or agenda-driven content have always been an issue in the media,

but as the presence of media grows, the debate concerning media messages increases. This dialogue is an important one; after all, mass media have long been used to persuade. Many modern persuasive techniques stem from the use of media as a **propaganda** tool. The role of propaganda and persuasion in the mass media is a good place to start when considering various types of media effects.

Propaganda and Persuasion

Encyclopedia Britannica defines propaganda simply as the “manipulation of information to influence public opinion (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia).” This definition works well for this discussion because the study and use of propaganda has had an enormous influence on the role of persuasion in modern mass media. Media theorists Herman and Chomsky (2002, p. 1) make clear that “the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace” that is marked by inequities in power and wealth.. In his book *The Creation of the Media*, Paul Starr argues that the United States, as a liberal democracy, has favored employing an independent press as a public guardian, thus putting the media in an inherently political position (Starr, 2004). The United States—in contrast to other nations where media are held in check—has encouraged an independent commercial

press and thus given the powers of propaganda and persuasion to the public (Starr, 2004).



Benjamin Franklin used a powerful image of a severed snake to emphasize the importance of the colonies joining together during the American Revolution. Attribution: [Join or Die](#) by Benjamin Franklin – public domain.

Like any type of communication, propaganda is not inherently good or bad. Whether propaganda has a positive or negative effect on society and culture depends on the motivations of those who use it. People promoting movements as wide-ranging as Christianity, the American Revolution, and the communist revolutions of the 20th century have all used propaganda to disseminate their messages (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). Newspapers and pamphlets that glorified the sacrifices at Lex-

ington and Concord and trumpeted the victories of George Washington's army greatly aided the American Revolution. For example, Benjamin Franklin's famous illustration of a severed snake with the caption "Join or Die" serves as an early testament to the power and use of print propaganda (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006).

The penny press made newspapers accessible to a mass audience and became a force for social cohesion during the 1830s (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). Magazines adopted a similar format later in the 19th century, and print media's political and social power rose. In an infamous example of the new power of print media, some newspapers encouraged the Spanish-American War of 1898 by fabricating stories of Spanish atrocities and sabotage (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). For example, after the USS Maine sunk off the coast of Havana, Cuba, some newspapers blamed the Spanish—even though there was no evidence—fueling the public's desire for war with Spain.

The present-day, pejorative connotation of propaganda stems from the full utilization of mass media by World War I-era governments to motivate the citizenry of many countries to go to war, a practice that has continued through the U.S.-Iraq conflict. Some media outlets characterized the war as a global fight between Anglo civilization and Prussian barbarianism. Although some of those fighting the war had little understanding of the political motivations behind it, wartime propaganda convinced them to enlist (Miller, 2005). World War I legitimized the advertising profession in the minds of

government and corporate leaders because its techniques were useful in patriotic propaganda campaigns. Corporations quickly adapted to this development and created an advertising boom in the 1920s by using World War I propaganda techniques to sell products (Miller, 2005).

In modern society, the persuasive power of the mass media is well known. Governments, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and political campaigns rely on both new and old media to create messages and to send them to the general public. The comparatively unregulated nature of U.S. media has made, for better or worse, a society in which the tools of public persuasion are available to everyone.

Media and Behavior

Although the mass media send messages created specifically for public consumption, they also convey messages that are not properly defined as propaganda or persuasion. Some argue that these messages influence behavior, especially the behavior of young people (Beatty, 2006). Violent, sexual, and compulsive behaviors have been linked to media consumption and thus raise important questions about the effects of media on culture.

Violence and the Media

On April 20, 1999, students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their Denver-area high school, Columbine High School, armed with semiautomatic weapons and explosives. Over the next few hours, the pair killed 12 classmates and one faculty member before committing suicide (Lamb, 2008). The tragedy and its aftermath captured national attention, and in the weeks following the Columbine High School shootings, politicians and pundits worked to assign blame. Their targets ranged from the makers of the first-person shooter video game *Doom* to the Hollywood studios responsible for *The Matrix* (Brook, 1999).

However, in the years since the massacre, research has revealed that the perpetrators were actually attempting a terrorist bombing rather than a first-person shooter style rampage (Toppo, 1999). But did violent video games so desensitize the two teenagers to violence that they could contemplate such a plan? Did movies that glorify violent solutions create a culture that would encourage people to consider such methods? Because modern culture is so immersed in media, the issue becomes a particularly complex one, and it can be difficult to understand the types of effects that violent media produce.



The 1999 Columbine High School shooting led to greater debate and criticism over violent video games. Attribution: [Columbine Massacre RPG](#) – Mentat Kilbernes – [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

A number of studies have verified certain connections between violent video games and violent behavior in young people. For example, studies have found that some young people who play violent video games reported angry thoughts and aggressive feelings immediately after playing. Other studies, such as one conducted by Dr. Chris A. Anderson and others, point to correlations between the amount of time spent playing violent video games and increased incidence of aggression (Anderson, 2003). However, these studies do not prove that video games cause violence. Video game defenders argue that violent people can be drawn to violent games, and they point to lower overall

incidence of youth violence in recent years compared to past decades (Adams, 2010). Other researchers admit that individuals prone to violent acts are indeed drawn to violent media; however, they claim that by keeping these individuals in a movie theater or at home, violent media have actually contributed to a reduction in violent social acts (Goodman, 2008).

Whether violent media actually cause violence remains unknown, but unquestionably these forms of media send an emotional message to which individuals respond. Media messages are not limited to overt statements; they can also use emotions, such as fear, love, happiness, and depression. These emotional reactions partially account for the intense power of media in our culture.

Sex and the Media

In many types of media, sexual content—and its strong emotional message—can be prolific. A study by researchers at the University of North Carolina entitled “Sexy Media Matter: Exposure to Sexual Content in Music, Movies, Television, and Magazines Predicts Black and White Adolescents’ Sexual Behavior” found that young people with heavy exposure to sexually-themed media ranging from music to movies are twice as likely to engage in early sexual behavior as young people with light exposure. Although the study does not prove a conclusive link between sexual behavior and sexually oriented media,

researchers concluded that media acted as an influential source of information about sex for these youth groups (Dohney, 2006). Researcher Jane Brown thinks part of the reason children watch sexual content is related to puberty and their desire to learn about sex. While many parents are hesitant to discuss sex with their children, the media can act like a “super peer,” providing information in movies, television, music, and magazines (Dohney, 2006).

Cultural Messages and the Media

The media sends messages that reinforce cultural values. These values are perhaps most visible in celebrities and the roles that they adopt. Actors such as John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe came to represent aspects of masculinity and femininity that were adopted into mainstream culture during the mid-20th century. Throughout the 1990s, basketball player Michael Jordan appeared in television, film, magazines, and advertising campaigns as a model of athleticism and willpower. Singers such as Bob Dylan have represented a sense of freedom and rebellion against mainstream culture.



Tonto from *The Lone Ranger* reinforced cultural stereotypes about Native Americans. Do you think this type of characterization would be acceptable in modern television
Attribution: [Lone Range with Tonto and Silver](#).

Although many consider celebrity culture superficial and a poor reflection of a country's values, not all celebrities are simply entertainers. Civil rights leaders, social reformers, and

other famous public figures have come to represent important cultural accomplishments and advancements through their representations in the media. When images of Abraham Lincoln or Susan B. Anthony appear in the media, they resonate with cultural and historical themes greatly separated from mere fame.

Celebrities can also reinforce cultural **stereotypes** that marginalize certain groups. Television and magazines from the mid-20th century often portrayed women in a submissive, domestic role, both reflecting and reinforcing the cultural limitations imposed on women at the time. Advertising icons developed during the early 20th century, such as Aunt Jemima and the Cream of Wheat chef, similarly reflected and reinforced a submissive, domestic servant role for African Americans. Other famous stereotypes—such as the Lone Ranger’s Native American sidekick, Tonto, or Mickey Rooney’s Mr. Yunioshi role in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—also reinforced American preconceptions about ethnic predispositions and capabilities.

Whether actual or fictional, celebrities and their assumed roles send a number of different messages about cultural values. They can promote courageous truth telling, hide and prolong social problems, or provide a concrete example of an abstract cultural value.

New Media and Society

New media—the Internet and other digital forms of communication—have had a large effect on society. This communication and information revolution has created a great deal of anguish about digital literacy and other issues that inevitably accompany such a social change. In his book on technology and communication, *A Better Pencil*, Dennis Baron discusses this issue:

For Plato, only speech, not writing, can produce the kind of back-and-forth—the dialogue—that’s needed to get at the truth...the text, orphaned by its author once it’s on the page, cannot defend itself against misreading.... These are strong arguments, but even in Plato’s day they had been rendered moot by the success of the written word. Although the literacy rate in classical Greece was well below 10 percent, writing had become an important feature of the culture. People had learned to trust and use certain kinds of writing—legal texts, public inscriptions, business documents, personal letters, and even literature—and as they did so, they realized that writing, on closer examination, turned out to be neither more nor less reliable or ambiguous than the spoken word, and it was just as real (Baron, 2009).

Baron makes the point that all communication revolutions have created upheavals and have changed the standards of literacy and communication. This historical perspective gives a

positive interpretation to some otherwise ominous developments in communication and culture.

Information

The Internet has made an incredible amount of new information available to the general public. Both this wealth of information and the ways people process it are having an enormous effect on culture. New perceptions of information have emerged as access to it grows. Older-media consumption habits required in-depth processing of information through a particular form of media. For example, consumers read, watched, or viewed a news report in its entirety, typically within the context of a news publication or program. Fiction appeared in book or magazine form.

Today, information is easier to access, thus more likely to traverse several forms of media. An individual may read an article on a news website and then forward part of it to a friend. That person in turn describes it to a coworker without having seen the original context. The ready availability of information through search engines may explain how a clearly satirical Onion article on the Harry Potter phenomenon came to be taken as fact. Increasingly, media outlets cater to this habit of searching for specific bits of information devoid of context. Information that will attract the most attention is often featured at the expense of more important stories. At one point

on March 11, 2010, for example, The Washington Post website's most popular story was "Maintaining a Sex Life (Kakutani, 2010)."

Another important development in the media's approach to information is its increasing subjectivity. Some analysts have used the term **audience fragmentation** to describe the way media consumers consume and filter information. Customized news feeds allow individuals to receive only the kinds of news and information they want and thus block out sources that report unwanted stories or perspectives. Many cultural critics have pointed to this kind of information filtering as the source of increasing political division and resulting loss of civic discourse. When media consumers hear only the information they want to, the common ground of public discourse that stems from general agreement on certain principles inevitably grows smaller (Kakutani, 2010).

News



President Barack Obama fired General Stanley McChrystal after a controversial *Rolling Stone* story in which McChrystal spoke poorly of the Obama administration was leaked on the Internet. Attribution: [Stanley McChrystal](#) – public domain.

Certainly, the Internet has affected the way that cultures consume news. The public expects to receive information quickly, and news outlets respond rapidly to breaking stories. On Mon-

day, June 21, 2010, for example, a spokesperson for Rolling Stone magazine first released quotes from a story featuring General Stanley McChrystal publicly criticizing members of the Obama administration on matters of foreign policy. By that evening, the story had become national news despite the fact Rolling Stone didn't even post it to its website until Tuesday morning—some time after several news outlets had already posted the entire story on their own sites. Later that same day, McChrystal issued a public apology, and on Wednesday flew to Washington where President Barack Obama fired him. The printed Rolling Stone issue featuring the article hit newsstands Friday, 2 days after McChrystal had been replaced (Timpane, 2010)

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2.2 MEDIA EFFECTS THEORIES

Early media studies focused on the use of mass media in propaganda and persuasion. However, journalists and researchers soon looked to behavioral sciences to help figure out the effect of mass media and communications on society. Scholars have developed many different approaches and theories to figure this out. You can refer to these theories as you research and consider the media's effect on culture.

Widespread fear that mass-media messages could outweigh other stabilizing cultural influences, such as family and community, led to what is known as the **direct effects model** of media studies. This model, which goes by several names, including **Magic Bullet Theory** and **Hypodermic Needle Model**, assumed that audiences passively accepted media messages and would exhibit predictable reactions in response to those messages. For example, following the radio broadcast of War of the Worlds in 1938 (which was a fictional news report of an alien invasion), some people panicked and believed the story to be true. In 1995, teenage couple Sarah Edmondson and Ben Darras went on a shooting spree that left one person dead and one paralyzed after they watched Natural Born Killers. In the best-known example, high schoolers Eric Harris

and Dylan Klebold listened to rocker Marilyn Manson and played the video game Doom before killing 13 people at Columbine High School in 1999. In each case, the news media seemed to draw a causal connection between the consumption of the media and those actions.

Challenges to the Direct Effects Theory

The results of the People's Choice Study challenged this model. Conducted in 1940, the study by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) attempted to gauge the effects of political campaigns on voter choice. Researchers found that voters who consumed the most media had generally already decided for which candidate to vote, while undecided voters generally turned to family and community members ("opinion leaders") to help them decide. The study, also referred to as the **"Two-step Flow Model"** or "Minimal Effects," thus discredited the direct effects model and influenced a host of other media theories (Hanson, 2009). These theories do not necessarily give an all-encompassing picture of media effects but rather work to illuminate a particular aspect of media influence.

Marshall McLuhan's Influence on Media Studies

During the early 1960s, English professor Marshall McLuhan wrote two books that had an enormous effect on the history of media studies. Published in 1962 and 1964, respectively, the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* both traced the history of media technology and illustrated the ways these innovations had changed both individual behavior and the wider culture. *Understanding Media* introduced a phrase that McLuhan has become known for: “The medium is the message.” This notion represented a novel take on attitudes toward media—that the media themselves are instrumental in shaping human and cultural experience.

His bold statements about media gained McLuhan a great deal of attention as both his supporters and critics responded to his utopian views about the ways media could transform 20th-century life. McLuhan spoke of a media-

inspired “global village” at a time when Cold War paranoia was at its peak and the Vietnam War was a hotly debated subject. Although 1960s-era utopians received these statements positively, social realists found them cause for scorn. Despite—or perhaps because of—these controversies, McLuhan became a pop culture icon, mentioned frequently in the television sketch-comedy program *Laugh-In* and appearing as himself in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall*.

The Internet and its accompanying cultural revolution have made McLuhan’s bold utopian visions seem like prophecies. Indeed, his work has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Analysis of McLuhan’s work has, interestingly, not changed very much since his works were published. His supporters point to the hopes and achievements of digital technology and the utopian state that such innovations promise. The current critique of McLuhan, however, is a bit more revealing of the state of modern media studies. Media scholars are much more numerous now than they were during the 1960s, and many of these scholars criticize McLuhan’s lack of methodology and theoretical framework.

Despite his lack of scholarly diligence, McLuhan had a great deal of influence on media studies. Professors at Fordham University have formed an association of McLuhan-influenced scholars. McLuhan's other great achievement is the popularization of the concept of media studies. His work brought the idea of media effects into the public arena and created a new way for the public to consider the influence of media on culture (Stille, 2000).

Agenda-Setting Theory

In contrast to the extreme views of the direct effects model, the **agenda-setting theory** of media stated that mass media determine the issues that concern the public rather than the public's views. Under this theory, which was first conceived by scholars McCombs and Shaw (1972), the issues that receive the most attention from media become the issues that the public discusses, debates, and demands action on. This means that the media is determining what issues and stories the public thinks about. Therefore, when the media fails to address a particular issue, it becomes marginalized in the minds of the pub-

lic (Hanson, 2009). As McCombs and Shaw note, “While the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (1972, p. 177).

When critics claim that a particular media outlet has an agenda, they are drawing on this theory. Agendas can range from a perceived liberal bias in the news media to the propagation of cutthroat capitalist ethics in films. For example, the agenda-setting theory explains such phenomena as the rise of public opinion against smoking. Before the mass media began taking an antismoking stance, smoking was considered a personal health issue. By promoting antismoking sentiments through advertisements, public relations campaigns, and a variety of media outlets, the mass media moved smoking into the public arena, making it a public health issue rather than a personal health issue (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). More recently, coverage of natural disasters has been prominent in the news. However, as news coverage wanes, so does the general public’s interest.



Through a variety of antismoking campaigns, the health risks of smoking became a public agenda. Attribution: [Weapons of mass destruction](#) – Quinn Dombrowski – CC BY-SA 2.0.

Media scholars who specialize in agenda-setting research study the salience, or relative importance, of an issue and then attempt to understand what causes it to be important. The relative salience of an issue determines its place within the public agenda, which in turn influences public policy creation. Agenda-setting research traces public policy from its roots as an agenda through its promotion in the mass media and finally to its final form as a law or policy (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Practitioners of the **uses and gratifications theory** study the ways the public consumes media rather than the effect media have on the public. First proposed by communication theorist Harold Lasswell in 1948, many other scholars have contributed to the development of this theory. According to Katz et al. (1974, p. 23):

The four – functional interpretation of the media was first proposed by **Lasswell** (1948) on a macro – sociological level and later developed by Wright (1960) on both the macro – and the micro – sociological levels. It postulated that the media served the functions of surveillance, correlation, entertainment, and cultural transmission (or socialization) for society as a whole, as well as for individuals and subgroups within society.

This theory states that consumers use the media to satisfy specific needs or desires. For example, you may enjoy watching a show like *Dancing With the Stars* while simultaneously tweeting about it on Twitter with your friends. Many people use the Internet to seek out entertainment, to find information, to communicate with like-minded individuals, or to pursue self-expression. Each of these uses gratifies a particular need, and the needs determine the way in which media is used. By examining factors of different groups' media choices, researchers

can determine the motivations behind media use (Papacharissi, 2009).

A typical uses and gratifications study explores the motives for media consumption and the consequences associated with use of that media. In the case of *Dancing With the Stars* and Twitter, you are using the Internet as a way to be entertained and to connect with your friends. Researchers have identified a number of common motives for media consumption. These include relaxation, social interaction, entertainment, arousal, escape, and a host of interpersonal and social needs. By examining the motives behind the consumption of a particular form of media, researchers can better understand both the reasons for that medium's popularity and the roles that the medium fills in society. A study of the motives behind a given user's interaction with Facebook, for example, could explain the role Facebook takes in society and the reasons for its appeal.

Uses and gratifications theories of media are often applied to contemporary media issues. The analysis of the relationship between media and violence that you read about in preceding sections exemplifies this. Researchers employed the uses and gratifications theory in this case to reveal a nuanced set of circumstances surrounding violent media consumption, as individuals with aggressive tendencies were drawn to violent media (Papacharissi, 2009).

Symbolic Interactionism

Another commonly used media theory, **symbolic interactionism**, states that the self is derived from and develops through human interaction. This means the way you act toward someone or something is based on the meaning you have for a person or thing. To effectively communicate, people use symbols with shared cultural meanings. Symbols can be constructed from just about anything, including material goods, education, or even the way people talk. Consequentially, these symbols are instrumental in the development of the self.

This theory helps media researchers better understand the field because of the important role the media plays in creating and propagating shared symbols. Because of the media's power, it can construct symbols on its own. By using symbolic interactionist theory, researchers can look at the ways media affects a society's shared symbols and, in turn, the influence of those symbols on the individual (Jansson-Boyd, 2010).

One of the ways the media creates and uses cultural symbols to affect an individual's sense of self is advertising. Advertisers work to give certain products a shared cultural meaning to make them desirable. For example, when you see someone driving a BMW, what do you think about that person? You may assume the person is successful or powerful because of the car he or she is driving. Ownership of luxury automobiles signifies membership in a certain socioeconomic class. Equally, technol-

ogy company Apple has used advertising and public relations to attempt to become a symbol of innovation and nonconformity. Use of an Apple product, therefore, may have a symbolic meaning and may send a particular message about the product's owner.

Media also propagate other noncommercial symbols. National and state flags, religious images, and celebrities gain shared symbolic meanings through their representation in the media.

Spiral of Silence

The **spiral of silence theory**, which states that those who hold a minority opinion silence themselves to prevent social isolation, explains the role of mass media in the formation and maintenance of dominant opinions. As minority opinions are silenced, the illusion of consensus grows, and so does social pressure to adopt the dominant position. This creates a self-propagating loop in which minority voices are reduced to a minimum and perceived popular opinion sides wholly with the majority opinion. For example, prior to and during World War II, many Germans opposed Adolf Hitler and his policies; however, they kept their opposition silent out of fear of isolation and stigma.

Because the media is one of the most important gauges of public opinion, this theory is often used to explain the inter-

action between media and public opinion. According to the spiral of silence theory, if the media propagates a particular opinion, then that opinion will effectively silence opposing opinions through an illusion of consensus. This theory relates especially to public polling and its use in the media (Papacharissi).

Media Logic

The **media logic theory** states that common media formats and styles serve as a means of framing our understanding of the world. Today, the deep rooting of media in the cultural consciousness means that media consumers need engage for only a few moments with a particular television program to understand that it is a news show, a comedy, or a reality show. The pervasiveness of these formats means that our culture uses the style and content of these shows as ways to interpret reality. For example, think about a TV news program that frequently shows heated debates between opposing sides on public policy issues. This style of debate has become a template for handling disagreement to those who consistently watch this type of program.

Media logic affects institutions as well as individuals. The modern televangelist has evolved from the adoption of television-style promotion by religious figures, while the utilization of television in political campaigns has led candidates to con-

sider their physical image as an important part of a campaign (Altheide & Snow, 1991).

Cultivation Analysis

The **cultivation theory** (Gerbner et al., 1994) states that repeated exposure to media, influences individuals' perception of reality and may cause individuals to develop an illusory perception of reality based on the most repetitive and consistent messages of a particular medium. This theory most commonly applies to analyses of television because of that medium's uniquely pervasive, repetitive nature. Under this theory, someone who watches a great deal of television may form a picture of reality that does not correspond to actual life. Televised violent acts, whether those reported on news programs or portrayed on television dramas, for example, greatly outnumber violent acts that most people encounter in their daily lives. Thus, an individual who watches a great deal of television may come to view the world as more violent and dangerous than it actually is – referred to by Gerbner and colleagues as the *Mean World Syndrome*.

Cultivation analysis projects involve a number of different areas for research, such as the differences in perception between heavy and light users of media. To apply this theory, the media content that an individual normally watches must be analyzed for various types of messages. Then, researchers

must consider the given media consumer's cultural background of individuals to correctly determine other factors that are involved in his or her perception of reality. For example, the socially stabilizing influences of family and peer groups influence children's television viewing and the way they process media messages. If an individual's family or social life plays a major part in her life, the social messages that she receives from these groups may compete with the messages she receives from television.

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2.3 METHODS OF RESEARCHING MEDIA EFFECTS

Media theories provide the framework for approaching questions about media effects ranging from as simple as how 10-year-old boys react to cereal advertisements to as broad as how Internet use affects literacy. Once researchers visualize a project and determine a theoretical framework, they must choose actual research methods. Contemporary research methods are greatly varied and can range from analyzing old newspapers to performing controlled experiments.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research technique that involves analyzing the content of various forms of media. Through content analysis, researchers hope to understand both the people who created the content and the people who consumed it. A typical content analysis project does not require elaborate experiments. Instead, it simply requires access to the appropriate media to analyze, making this type of research an easier and

inexpensive alternative to other forms of research involving complex surveys or human subjects.

Content analysis studies require researchers to define what types of media to study. For example, researchers studying violence in the media would need to decide which types of media to analyze, such as television, and the types of formats to examine, such as children's cartoons. The researchers would then need to define the terms used in the study; media violence can be classified according to the characters involved in the violence (strangers, family members, or racial groups), the type of violence (self-inflicted, slapstick, or against others), or the context of the violence (revenge, random, or duty-related). These are just a few of the ways that media violence could be studied with content-analysis techniques (Berger, 1998).

Archival Research

Any study that analyzes older media must employ archival research, which is a type of research that focuses on reviewing historical documents such as old newspapers and past publications. Old local newspapers are often available on microfilm at local libraries or at the newspaper offices. University libraries generally provide access to archives of national publications such as *The New York Times* or *Time*; publications can also increasingly be found in online databases or on websites.

Older radio programs are available for free or by paid down-

load through a number of online sources. Many television programs and films have also been made available for free download, or for rent or sale through online distributors. Performing an online search for a particular title will reveal the options available.

Resources such as the Internet Archive (www.archive.org) work to archive a number of media sources. One important role of the Internet Archive is website archiving. Internet archives are invaluable for a study of online media because they store websites that have been deleted or changed. These archives have made it possible for Internet content analyses that would have otherwise been impossible.

Surveys

Surveys are ubiquitous in modern life. Questionnaires record data on anything from political preferences to personal hygiene habits. Media surveys generally take one of the following two forms.

A descriptive survey aims to find the current state of things, such as public opinion or consumer preferences. In media, descriptive surveys establish television and radio ratings by finding the number of people who watch or listen to particular programs. An analytical survey, however, does more than simply document a current situation. Instead, it attempts to find out why a particular situation exists. Researchers pose ques-

tions or hypotheses about media, and then conduct analytical surveys to answer these questions. Analytical surveys can determine the relationship between different forms of media consumption and the lifestyles and habits of media consumers.

Surveys can employ either open-ended or closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions require the participant to generate answers in their own words, while closed-ended questions force the participant to select an answer from a list. Although open-ended questions allow for a greater variety of answers, the results of closed-ended questions are easier to tabulate. Although surveys are useful in media studies, effective use requires keeping their limitations in mind.

Social Role Analysis

As part of child rearing, parents teach their children about social roles. When parents prepare children to attend school for example, they explain the basics of school rules and what is expected of a student to help the youngsters understand the role of students. Like the role of a character in a play, this role carries specific expectations that differentiate school from home. Adults often play a number of different roles as they navigate between their responsibilities as parents, employees, friends, and citizens. Any individual may play a number of roles depending on his or her specific life choices.

Social role analysis of the media involves examining var-

ious individuals in the media and analyzing the type of role that each plays. Role analysis research can consider the roles of men, women, children, members of a racial minority, or members of any other social group in specific types of media. For example, if the role children play in cartoons is consistently different from the role they play in sitcoms, then certain conclusions might be drawn about both of these formats. Analyzing roles used in media allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the messages that the mass media sends (Berger, 1998).

In-Depth Interviews

The **in-depth interview** is a qualitative, anthropological research tool that is also useful in media studies. In-depth interviews take quantitative surveys one step further by allowing researchers to directly ask a study participant specific questions to gain a fuller understanding of the participant's perceptions and experiences. Lindlof and Taylor (2019, p. 3) provide a very useful explanation of interviews:

They resemble conversations between equals who systematically explore topics of mutual interest. Most of what is said and meant in these conversations emerges through collaborative interaction. Although qualitative researchers often go into interviews with an agenda, they usually do not impose much structure on these conversations.

In-depth interviews have been used in research projects that follow newspaper reporters to find out their reasons for reporting certain stories and in projects that attempt to understand the motivations for reading romance novels. In-depth interviews can provide a deeper understanding of the media consumption habits of particular groups of people (Priest, 2010).

Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical analysis involves examining the styles used in media and attempting to understand the kinds of messages those styles convey. Media styles include form, presentation, composition, use of metaphors, and reasoning structure. Rhetorical analysis reveals the messages not apparent in a strict reading of content. Studies involving rhetorical analysis have focused on media such as advertising to better understand the roles of style and rhetorical devices in media messages (Gunter, 2000).

Focus Groups

Like interviews, **focus groups** allow researchers to better understand public responses to media. Unlike a in-depth interview, however, a focus group allows the participants to establish a group dynamic that more closely resembles that of normal media consumption. In media studies, researchers can

employ focus groups to judge the reactions of a group to specific media styles and to content. This can be a valuable means of understanding the reasons for consuming specific types of media.



Focus groups are effective ways to obtain a group opinion on media. Attribution: [Focus Group](#) – Wikimedia Commons – [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Experiments

Media research studies also sometimes use controlled experiments that expose a test group to an experience involving media and measure the effects of that experience. Researchers then compare these measurements to those of a control group

that had key elements of the experience removed. For example, researchers may show one group of children a program with three incidents of cartoon violence and another control group of similar children the same program without the violent incidents. Researchers then ask the children from both groups the same sets of questions, and the results are compared.

Ethnography and Participant Observation

In **participant observation**, researchers try to become part of the group they are studying. Although this technique is typically associated with anthropological studies in which a researcher lives with members of a particular culture to gain a deeper understanding of their values and lives, it is also used in media research.

Media consumption often takes place in groups. Families or friends gather to watch favorite programs, children may watch Saturday morning cartoons with a group of their peers, and adults may host viewing parties for televised sporting events or awards shows. These groups reveal insights into the role of media in the lives of the public. A researcher might join a group that watches football together and stay with the group for an entire season. By becoming a part of the group, the researcher becomes part of the experiment and can reveal important influences of media on culture (Priest, 2010).

Researchers have studied online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*, in this manner. These games reveal an interesting aspect of group dynamics: Although participants are not in physical proximity, they function as a group within the game. Researchers are able to study these games by playing them. In the book *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, a group of researchers discussed the results of their participant observation studies. The studies reveal the surprising depth of culture and unwritten rules that exist in the *World of Warcraft* universe and give important interpretations of why players pursue the game with such dedication (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008).

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2.4 MEDIA STUDIES CONTROVERSIES

Important debates over media theory have questioned the foundations and hence the results of media research. Within academia, theories and research can represent an individual's lifework and livelihood. As a result, issues of tenure and position, rather than issues of truth and objectivity, can sometimes fuel discussion over theories and research.

Problems With Methodology and Theory

Although the use of advanced methodologies can resolve many of the questions raised about various theories, the fact remains that the use of these theories in public debate generally follows a broader understanding. For example, if a hypothetical study found that convicted violent offenders had aggressive feelings after playing the video game Doom, many would take this as proof that video games cause violent acts without considering other possible explanations. Often, the nuances of these studies are lost when they enter the public arena.

Active versus Passive Audience

A significant division among media studies theorists is the belief that audiences are passive or active. A **passive audience**, in the most extreme statement of this position, passively accepts the messages that media send it. An **active audience**, on the other hand, is fully aware of media messages and makes informed decisions about how to process and interact with media. Newer trends in media studies have attempted to develop a more complex view of media audiences than the active versus passive debate affords, but in the public sphere, this opposition frames many of the debates about media influence (Heath & Bryant, 2000).

Arguments against Agenda-Setting Theory

A number of criticisms have dogged agenda-setting theory. Chief among these is that agenda-setting studies are unable to prove cause and effect; essentially, no one has truly shown that the media agenda sets the public agenda and not the other way around. An agenda-setting study could connect the prevalence of a topic in the media with later changes in public policy and may conclude that the media set this agenda. However, pol-

icy makers and lobbyists often conduct public relations efforts to encourage the creation of certain policies. In addition, public concern over issues generates media coverage as well, making it difficult to tell if the media is responding to public desire for coverage of an issue or if it is pushing an issue on its own agenda (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2005).

Arguments Against Uses and Gratifications Theory

The general presuppositions of the uses and gratifications theory have drawn criticism. By assuming that media fulfill a functional purpose in an individual's life, the uses and gratifications theory implicitly justifies and reaffirms the place of media in the public sphere. Furthermore, because it focuses on personal, psychological aspects of media, the theory cannot question whether media is artificially imposed on an individual. Studies involving the uses and gratifications theory are often sound methodologically, but the overall assumptions of the studies are left unquestioned (Grossberg, et. al., 2006).

Arguments Against Spiral of Silence Theory

Although many regard the spiral of silence theory as useful

when applying its broadest principles, it is weak when dealing with specifics. For example, the phenomenon of the spiral of silence is most visible in individuals who are fearful of social isolation. Those who are less fearful are less likely to be silent if public opinion turns against them. Nonconformists contradict the claims of the spiral of silence theory.

Critics have also pointed out that the spiral of silence theory relies heavily on the values of various cultural groups. A public opinion trend in favor of gun control may not silence the consensus within National Rifle Association meetings. Every individual is a part of a larger social group with specific values. Although these values may differ from widespread public opinion, individuals need not fear social isolation within their particular social group (Gastil, 2008).

Arguments Against Cultivation Analysis Theory

Critics have faulted cultivation analysis theory for relying too heavily on a broad definition of violence. Detractors argue that because violence means different things to different subgroups and individuals, any claim that a clear message of violence could be understood in the same way by an entire culture is false. This critique would necessarily extend to other studies involving cultivation analysis. Different people understand media messages in varying ways, so broad claims can be prob-

lematic. Cultivation analysis is still an important part of media studies, but critics have questioned its unqualified validity as a theory (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

Politics and Media Studies

Media theories and studies afford a variety of perspectives. When proponents of a particular view employ those theories and studies, however, they are often oversimplified and can result in contradictory claims. In fact, when politicians and others employ media studies to validate a political perspective, this is a common result.

Media Bias

A good example of the ways that media can bolster political opinion is through coverage, which leads to the debate over **media bias**. One 1985 study found that journalists were more likely to hold liberal views than were members of the public. Over the years, many have cited this study to support the opinion that the media holds a liberal bias. However, another study found that between the years of 1948 and 1990, 78 percent of newspaper presidential endorsements were for Republicans (Hanson).

Media favoritism again became a source of contention during the 2008 presidential race. A random sampling of cam-

paign coverage in the run-up to the election found that 82 percent of stories featured Barack Obama, while only 52 percent discussed John McCain (Raasch, 2008). Allegations that the media favored Obama seemed to bolster the idea of a liberal bias. But other studies belied this belief. Research conducted during the election showed that favorable media coverage of Obama occurred only after his poll numbers rose, hinting that the media were reacting to public opinion rather than attempting to influence it (Reuters, 2008).



Allegations of media bias are a recurring theme in political debates. Attribution: [BBC – Report the Truth on Gaza protest](#) – The Weekly Bull – [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

Media Decency

Decency standards in media have long been an issue, and they continue to change in ways that are not necessarily predictable. Once banned in the United States for obscenity, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is now considered a classic of modern literature, while many schools have banned children's classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for its use of ethnic slurs. Because of the regulatory powers that government possesses over the media, decency is also an inherently political issue. As media studies have progressed, they have increasingly appeared in the debates over decency standards. Although media studies cannot prove a word or image is indecent, they can help discern the impact of that word or image and, thus, greatly influence the debate.

Organizations or figures with stated goals often use media studies to support those aims. For example, the Parents Television Council reported on a study that compared the ratio of comments about nonmarital sex to comments about marital sex during the hours of 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. The study employed content analysis to come up with specific figures; however, the Parents Television Council then used those findings to make broad statements, such as “the institution of marriage is regularly mocked and denigrated (Rayworth, 2008).” Because content analysis does not analyze the effect on audiences or analyze how material is presented, it does not offer a scientific way to judge whether a comment is mocking and denigrating marriage, so such interpretations are arguably unsupported by the

research. For example, researchers performing a content analysis by documenting the amount of sex or violence on television are not analyzing how this content is interpreted by the audience. They are simply noting the number of instances. Equally, partisan groups can use a number of different linguistic turns to make media studies fit their agenda.

Media studies involving violence, pornography, and profanity are inherently politically charged, and politicians have also conducted their own media studies. In 2001, for example, a Senate bill aimed at Internet decency that had little support in Congress came to the floor. One of the sponsoring senators attempted to increase interest by bringing a file full of some of the most egregious pornographic images he could find to the Senate floor. The bill passed 84 to 16 (Elmer-Dewitt, 2001).

Jack Thompson versus Violent Video Games

One of the most outspoken critics of violent video games is the now-disbarred lawyer Jack Thompson. Despite questionable use of media research, Thompson has made many claims referencing research. In an interview with CBS

News, Thompson stated that “hundreds of studies” existed that proved the link between violent video games and real violence. Later in the interview, he listed increasing school murder statistics as proof of the effects of violent video games (Vitka, 2005). In light of the media effects theories elucidated in this chapter, Thompson was obviously not being honest about the findings of video game–violence research and was making claims that no media effects scholar could confidently make.

Thompson initiated several lawsuits against Grand Theft Auto video game developer Take 2 Interactive, claiming that the company should be held liable for encouraging violent actions by minors. His lawsuits were thrown out of court, and he eventually came to a settlement with Take 2 Interactive—who had countersued—to drop all litigation (Jones, 2007). Thompson’s frivolous use of the legal system caused the state of Alabama to revoke his license to practice law in 2005, and, in 2008, the Florida Supreme Court disbarred him for life (Hefflinger, 2008).

Jack Thompson’s actions may seem extreme, but

he represents a common pattern of media study misrepresentation. Pundits, social reformers, and politicians frequently use the results of media studies to support their agenda without regard for accuracy. The use of media research to lend credence to a political opinion is widespread even as the public struggles to understand the effects of new media on culture.

Media Consolidation

Although media consolidation will be discussed in more depth in later chapters, the topic's intersection with media studies results deserves a place here. Media consolidation occurs when large media companies buy up smaller media outlets. Although government regulation has historically stymied this trend by prohibiting ownership of a large number of media outlets, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has loosened many of the restrictions on large media companies in recent years.

Media studies often prove vital to decisions regarding media consolidation. These studies measure the impact that consolidation has had on the media's public role and on the content

of local media outlets to compare it with that of conglomerate-owned outlets. The findings often vary depending on the group conducting the test. Other times tests are ignored entirely.

In 2003, the FCC loosened restrictions on owning multiple media outlets in the same city, citing studies that the agency had developed to weigh the influence of particular media outlets such as newspapers and television stations (Ahrens, 2003). In 2006, however, reports surfaced that a key study had been discarded during the 2003 decision. The study showed an increase in time allocated for news when TV stations were owned locally, thus raising questions about whether media consolidation was a good thing for local news (MSNBC, 2006).

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CONTENT DIVERSITY

EQUITY AND GENDER

Diana Daly

Key Points

- The chapter lays a crucial foundation by delineating the distinctions between equity and equality, setting the stage for a nuanced exploration of women's rights activism.
- Online movements transcend borders, uniting local and global initiatives against systematic violence, fostering a sense of shared purpose.
- Social media serves as a catalyst, amplifying private struggles into public conversations, providing visibility and support for marginalized voices.
- Complexities arise from the close coexistence of individuals identifying as "men" and "women," impacting activism dynam-

ics and communication patterns.

- Striking a balance between online privacy and visibility is explored, especially within the LGBTQIA+ community, shedding light on the challenges faced.
- Hashtags, exemplified by movements like #SaveDinaAli and #NiUnaMenos, play a pivotal role, fostering connectivity, spreading awareness, and sometimes succumbing to misinformation.
- The #MeToo movement, although not initially labeled creative online activism, prompts critical reflection on inclusivity and complexity amid its widespread impact.

In this chapter

- Section 1: What is equity? What is gender?
 - Student Insights: The dangers of social media (video by Sydney, Spring 2021)
- Section 2: Meming of hashtags and more
- Section 3: How social media can help

women's causes in particular

- Section 4: Demonstrations online and across the Americas against gender violence
 - Student Insights: Experiencing targeted hate online (audio & writing by iVoices Media Lab Student, Spring 2021)
- Section 5: The #MeToo Movement in the U.S.
- Girl Meets Chud — Social Media and Ourselves podcast
- Core Concepts
- Core Questions
- Black Lives Matter protests are shaping how people understand racial inequality

This is a chapter devoted to a selection of activist causes to improve the lives of women. We look closely at two online movements outside of the US, one in each hemisphere. Both integrate the global and the local; both work to liberate women from systematic violence. Then we look at a few movements in the US.

Section 1: What is equity? What is gender?



Stated simply, this chapter is about equity for women. Unlike equality, which means treating everyone the same, **equity** considers the different circumstances that may lead to different support needs, and adjusts support based on need. The concept of *equity* can be used when considering rights and resource allocation for many types of groups. It is used here, when referring to challenges women face that play out online, because those challenges can be invisible obstacles. What is salient – what stands out – about women’s movements are the ways the internet is used to enable public conversation around topics previously kept private. Social media in particu-

lar affords **exposure**, drawing matters society guards as private into the public sphere.

People who identify as “men” and people who identify as “women” have lived in the same neighborhoods and households across cultures and time periods. This quality makes gender relationships and activism distinct among activist movements. Issues that arise between groups of different ethnicities, races, and classes are often clearly expressed out in the open; but gender issues are not expressed as openly. Because men and women co-exist so closely in every community, issues between people of different gender identities tend to leak out in whispers and remain more hidden.

Student Insights: The dangers of social media (video by Sydney, Spring 2021)



*An interactive
H5P element
has been excluded from
this version of the text.*

You can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=88#h5p-37>



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=88#h5p-38>

Women as a gender identity: A disclaimer

In order to look closely at two important online movements for women, I have had to exclude many other movements, moments, and identities from this chapter. The premise of the chapter admittedly works against complex understandings of gender, by presenting “women” as a fixed identity group. The goal is to give you a selection of histories, tools, and examples to help you understand online activist movements.

As [the Wikipedia page on gender](#) reflects, a deep understanding of gender and sexuality must also consider where the

boundaries between genders come from and what is left unspoken when we rely on binary gender categories. Movements for the rights of transgender women have evolved within, alongside, and sometimes in response to movements by cisgender women, but these histories are often collapsed into a single narrative.

Saudi women: Online and driving change

Saudi Arabian laws and culture [enforce](#) a system of **male guardianship** over women, whereby every woman must get the approval of a male guardian for decisions about her body and life including passport applications, travel, and marriage. Online activism helps women who are resisting the system of male guardianship to connect with fellow activists, read the climate for what they are asking, and connect with specific publics who may support their causes.

[#savedinaali](#)

Like campaigns for other identity groups, many social media campaigns for women are branded as leaderless or have masked leadership. A particular feature of social media campaigns for women is the naming of the campaign after a woman who has been persecuted, even though she is not organizing the cam-

paign. Sadly, due to the violence women face that leads to these campaigns, the woman the campaign is named after is often one whose persecution has already ensued.

One example is the campaign to [#SaveDinaAli](#). Dina Ali fled Saudi Arabia but was detained in the Philippines and returned to her family, whom she said would kill her. It is unknown if Dina Ali is severely injured or even alive. However, organizers started the #SaveDinaAli campaign to help her and women in similar situations and draw attention to Saudi women's human rights abuses. Raising awareness around the situations of particular imprisoned women may lighten the punishment inflicted on them – though it does not guarantee safety or survival.

Recognizing the small beginnings of large media campaigns

Activist movements that become large usually began as small, local efforts for change. This is especially true around women's rights; whispers about a case or pattern of abuse first spread locally, then grow into regional or global social movements once it's clear that the abuse is systematic. Take for example the extensive [Human Rights Watch campaign to end Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia](#). It was many small campaigns like the one to save Dina Ali that led Human Rights Watch to produce a 2016 report entitled [Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System](#). The campaign uses the

hashtag #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship along with video and other content.

[Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#) is a large, global organization, but small movements gave them key examples and networks on which to build a larger campaign. HRW's decision to focus on Twitter as a platform required the organization to monitor smaller movements for evidence that Saudis would use and respond to Twitter hashtags for activism. Those small movements provided the core of the larger networks HRW would use in their campaign.

One prior online network example for campaigns for Saudi women is the campaign to allow them to drive. Women have been putting themselves on the front lines and driving – and celebrating this civil disobedience online. In 2011-2013 the hashtag #W2drive (women to drive) was used by Saudi activists to gather public interest in women's right to drive, as did the account @SaudiWomenSpring on Facebook.

Section 2: Meming of hashtags and more

The use of any hashtag can expand and complicate the spread of a message across a global audience, particularly if the meme flips to become sarcastic or changes direction.

Hashtags relating to Saudi women's rights led to numerous memes, but most just added force to the movement. #Togeth-

erToEndMaleGuardianship was of course translated – you might also say, imitated or memed – into Arabic, and it is that tag which Arabic-speaking social media users began spreading prolifically. #StopEnslavingSaudiWomen is another tag channeling similar publics. Like #HandsUpDontShoot in the Black Lives Matter movement, it is a phrase speaking directly to an oppressing force, telling them to change their behavior.

However, there is some evidence of the spread of misinformation through hashtags related to Saudi women. For example, [a story](#) about Saudi male scientists declaring women “not human” started out on a satirical website, but it spread to other publics – including some who believed it was true, and others who found it useful in spreading fear of Islam. As this example shows, hashtags are easy targets for **appropriation** – use for a different cultural purpose than originally intended.

From the Social Media & Ourselves Podcast and iVoices: Hearing from gamers on #backtothekitchen and comebacks in online game spaces

We produced the Social Media & Ourselves podcast with the iVoices project, with the goal of learning

from students about online life. In late 2021, one particular student story led me and a team of students down a new path of research. The story was [Girl Meets Chud](#), aired on December 1st, 2021.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://unr.pressbooks.pub/intromediasociety/?p=88#h5p-36>

In the episode, a student named Kiersten describes how she was driven into an unhealthy online relationship by pandemic loneliness and a toxic gaming environment where girls were regularly told to “Go back to the kitchen.” I thought, *wow*, people are still saying that to girls and women? And it led me to wonder: How did young players describe and respond to this phrase in networked publics?

[@superpink95](#)

Where my girl gamers at 🔥 creds to @dessyyc for the

sound 🍷 [#girlgamer](#) [#girlssupportgirls](#) [#fyp](#) [#rap](#) [#back-tothekitchen](#)

🎵 [original sound – Dessyy](#)

[@makingitwithabby](#)

Burning questions [@pearpopofficial](#) [#pearpop](#) [#women-whobuild](#) [#gobacktothekitchen](#) [#diyer](#) [#femalediye](#) [#femalediycollective](#)

🎵 [The Magic Bomb \(Questions I Get Asked\) \[Extended Mix\] – Hoàng Read](#)

By May I was working with a research team of one undergraduate and one graduate research assistant to analyze videos hashtagged [#gobacktothekitchen](#) and [#backtothekitchen](#) on TikTok. Work produced from this project was presented for the Association for Information Science and Technology annual conference. Here's the abstract:

This research arose from the iVoices project collection of student technology experiences guiding research. In response to students being told to “go back to the kitchen” while gaming and reading as “female”, our team analyzed TikTok for videos hashtagged [#gob-](#)

acktothekitchen and #backtothekitchen across a one-year period. We also performed deeper analysis on comeback appeals eliciting or offering suggestions of responses to “Go back to the kitchen” and related misogyny and their responses. We found videos were typically created by “girl gamers” toward whom “back to the kitchen” misogyny had been directed, and who tagged them to assign networked meanings to their experiences, encapsulate their struggles for broad publics, and find validation with users sharing similar experiences. A salient theme in comeback appeal posts was performing positions of power to gain leverage over aggressors, while comments frequently offered support from other “girl gamers” and reinforcement of misogynistic stereotypes by male-identified aggressors.

Section 3: How social media can help women's causes in

particular

To understand women's online movements, including those for Saudi women and women in the Americas (in the next section), it is important to consider relationship communication. First, let's consider who Saudi women can and cannot speak to and when or where those conversations take place. In traditional Saudi society, women have limited face-to-face contact; they rarely gather or communicate with people beyond their immediate family, and external communications may be under constant surveillance. This limits the communication of women activists with those who are geographically close to them and to moments of low surveillance.

However, communities devoted to women's activism can interact online on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and other social media platforms. So the most important affordance of social media for women's movements is this: movement organizers can orchestrate gatherings and strategies through the use of social media. An example of this is the campaign #women2drive, which Saudi women have been pushing for several years to challenge male guardianship incrementally by focusing on the right to drive.



women2drive is a campaign in Saudi Arabia that counteracts the prohibition of women in public spaces through online, networked publics.

Another affordance of social media for women's movements is this: social media can extend and deepen communication among activists, transforming short or casual encounters into opportunities for a more profound exchange of ideas. Social media can allow people who will be gathering in person

to get a sense before the event of what others are thinking. It also allows people to continue sharing their "**staircase thoughts**" after they leave the meeting (think of the old TV series *Columbo*, where the detective seems to be leaving the suspect alone but then turns around just before going downstairs and says: "Oh, there's just one more thing..."). Staircase thoughts are sometimes considered simply wit that we thought of too late. But [*l'esprit de l'escalier*](#) or "wit of the staircase" as French philosopher Denis Diderot called it, can deepen communication, especially in activist movements that involve covert communications.

A third affordance: Social media gathers and focuses global publics. The web is chaos! But social objects like hashtags cut across the chaos to connect publics focused on certain topics, at times despite great geographic dispersal and distance. Publics drawn to pay attention to



Staircase thoughts over mobile phones can deepen communication that was cut short or monitored in person.

online activism include people who are not necessarily organizers of an activist movement but who are paying attention to activist causes.

Some of the publics gathered by social media include large organizations with resources to support movements, leading to a fourth affordance in creating a global movement: Social media connects activists with their publics. Saudi women can feel the support of women activists across the globe with the hashtag #suffrage, and I imagine that is important at moments when the national culture seems to be changing too slowly. Connecting with supportive publics can also lead to organizational and financial support.

The publics gathered through hashtags around Saudi women's rights and specifically the push to end male guardianship in that country demonstrate how publics can build on and connect to one another, through hashtags among other tools. Saudi women have pushed to end male guardianship in

the past, and the gathering of publics by these early movements led to the taking up of the cause by larger organizations.

Section 4: Demonstrations online and across the Americas against gender violence



Ni Una Menos, Vivas Las Queremos. (Image: [First march of #NiUnaMenos in Buenos Aires, June 2015](#) by AnitaAD, CC BY-SA International 4.0)

Ni Una Menos, Vivas Las Queremos

Beginning in 2016, a new hemispheric movement was underway expressing outrage over violence against women in the Americas. **Ni**

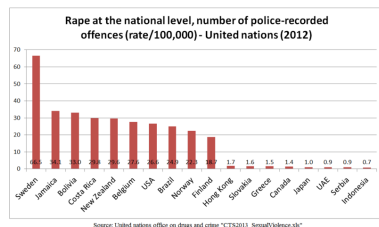
Una Menos began in the summer of 2014 in Argentina, culminating in an August 2016 demonstration in Lima that was [characterized as the largest demonstration ever seen in Peru](#). It was reactivated in South American cities including Buenos Aires and Rio Di Janeiro in October 2016, in [response to the drugging, rape, and murder](#) of a 16-year-old Argentinian girl.

Hemispheric hashtags coordinating these movements

include [#NiUnaMenos](#) (not one less or not one fewer) and [#vivaslasqueremos](#) (we want them alive) – proactively worded demands that not a single woman or girl be killed by systematic violence. This proactive framing makes every death cause for further protest.

One striking strategy in this movement is its theatricality. From [dressing as death in Mexico](#) to applying makeup to simulate bruised and bloodied faces and crotches in this [demonstration in Buenos Aires, Argentina](#), these movements rely upon visual impact. In the United States, it is common to embody the unjustly dead – in [#BlackLivesMatter](#), the [#icantbreathe](#) hashtag for Eric Garner and hoodie-posing to say “we are Trayvon Martin” are two of many examples of resurrection through performance. But this practice of embodying a bruised, bloodied woman is distinct from most feminist protests seen in the US.

The performative, graphic strategies in the Latin American [#niunamenos](#) demonstrations were not replicated in the massive Women’s March in the US in January 2017, although many women face violence in the US. Perhaps marchers in the US sought to embody the



Although the US has significant issues with sexual violence, protests do not usually include the graphic performances embodying the abused women that are seen in Latin American protests.

[“they go low, we go high” approach](#) – as in Michelle Obama’s speech at the DNC following the recording of Trump boasting of using his wealth and stature to grab women “by the pussy.” But the difference may come down to class more than nationality.

The performative demonstrations in Latin America reflect the grim reality of being unable to “go high” and hide abuse for many of its survivors. Many abused women wear visible bruises on their faces. The sounds of abuse are more evident on city streets and in smaller apartment buildings than in large houses and suburbs. Abuse of poor women is more visible than abuse of wealthier women – even when poor women don’t live on the streets, lower-class status is generally accompanied by a lack of personally owned or controlled space. As [Margaret Rodman has written](#), “The most powerless people have no place at all.” In these hemispheric demonstrations, the streets become women’s place, with demonstrators of all classes increasingly marching them. By making the marks of women’s abuse and murder public, they drag into the public eye what has long been understood as a feature of women’s private lives in the Americas.

Student Insights: Experiencing targeted hate online (audio & writing by iVoices Media Lab Student, Spring 2021)



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Respond to this case study: The author shared how online activism requires a balance between privacy and exposure, as well as some of the consequences of being visible as a marginalized group online. Drawing from our course discussions, the readings, and your experiences, how might the affordances and culture of a social media platform encourage or discourage activism?

Section 5: The #MeToo Movement in the U.S.

After this book was released, the #MeToo movement ensued, in late 2017. As I write this update, [the #MeToo movement is sweeping the US and other nations](#), as charges and evidence of long histories of sexual harassment and abuse circulate in the media and online. The movement has pervaded the academic and political spheres in the US and other nations as well.

Critiques of the #MeToo movement are also circulating. One example is the response [#whataboutus by working-class women](#) that draws attention to the limits of #MeToo in telling their stories. Another critique elevates [discomfort among feminists](#) with #MeToo's simplistic image of women as victims, and of the collapsing of such a vast range of behaviors into the concept of "harassment."

The creative online activism explored in these chapters is remarkable for its inclusiveness and complexity in the face of these critiques. Branding is hard. **Oversimplification** is a threat faced by any spreading movement; in this phenomenon, complex causes can be reduced to a simplistic phrase or meaning as the movement spreads. Oversimplification of a message seems inevitable for it to gain national or global traction, as cri-

tiques of the #MeToo movement charge. Yet the Black Lives Matter movement has remained complex, so why not #MeToo?

As of this writing, I do not include the US-based #MeToo among the movements I label creative online activism – yet. Although the Hollywood actresses whose accounts received the most attention are very visible, the movement’s strategies are not highly visual, or performative; rather, the movement has gained traction through the voices of people who already have access to significant public attention and national platforms. Imagine if they used their performance and visibility skills to redirect their audiences’ attention to working-class women and women in nations with oppressive regimes. I hope #MeToo advocates where the movement is most visible will turn attention to the women who need help most, rather than celebrating #MeToo as a simple success.

Social and activist movements take time. Decades may pass before the effects of a movement are in full view.

In the next chapter – as we explore cultural branding – keep activist movements in mind. But also remember that whereas the goal of cultural branding is immediate influence, the goal of social and activist movements is long-term cultural change.

Girl Meets Chud — Social Media and Ourselves

podcast



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Girl Meets Chud

Release date: December 1st 2021

When Kiersten made a gamer friend during a Siege Grind, it seemed like a solution to lockdown loneliness. Then she got to know him better. Contains offensive language. Edited by Gabe Stultz. Produced by iVoices Student Media Lab, which is supported in part by the Center for University Education and Scholarship.

[LISTEN](#) • [LISTEN WITH TRANSCRIPT](#)

Respond to this podcast episode...How did the podcast episode “Girl Meets Chud” use interviews,

student voices, or sounds to demonstrate a current or past social trend phenomenon? If you were making a sequel to this episode, what voices or sounds would you include to help listeners understand more about this trend, and why?

Core Concepts and Questions

Core Concepts

appropriation

use for a different cultural purpose than originally intended

equity

the goal of support through first considering the different circumstances that may lead to varying support needs, and then adjusting support based on need

exposure

the affordance of social media to draw matters society guards as private into the public sphere

male guardianship

the system in Saudi Arabia whereby every woman must get the approval of a male guardian for decisions about her body and life including passport applications, travel, and marriage

Ni Una Menos

translated from Spanish as “not one less”, this is a hemispheric movement expressing outrage over violence against women in the Americas, this movement began in Argentina and led to an August 2016 demonstration in Lima that was characterized as the largest demonstration ever seen in Peru

oversimplification

the threat faced by any spreading movement for complex causes to be reduced to a simplistic phrase or meaning as the movement spreads

staircase thoughts

the affordance of social media allows people who will be gathering in person also to get a sense of what others are thinking before they meet face-to-face and continue sharing their ideas after they leave the meeting

Core Questions

A. Questions for qualitative thought:

1. Start looking at hashtags online used alongside #MeToo and also look at stories posted in #MeToo over the last several years. In your groups, choose one or two posts to discuss. What do the stories using like hashtags have in common, and what are some ways that they differ?
2. What are some of the smaller impacts you have noticed in the years since #MeToo and companion hashtags and practices have come about? In your own experiences or those you know about.
3. If you were aware of the women's movements discussed in this chapter before, what had you heard about them? Do these movements influence you to think differently about women's roles in the cultures from which

these movements came? Explain.

B. Review: Which is the best answer?



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C. Game on!





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Related Content

Read It: Black Lives Matter protests are shaping how people understand racial inequality



Activists participate in a march urging Congress to pass voting rights legislation in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 28, 2021.

[Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc via Getty Images](#)

[Jelani Ince](#), *University of Washington* and [Zackary Dunivin](#), *Indiana University*

Considered to be the largest social justice movement since the [civil rights era](#) of the 1960s, [Black Lives Matter](#) is more than the scores of street protests organized by the social justice group that attracted hundreds of thousands of demonstrators across the world.

From its early days in 2014 after [Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown, Jr.](#) to [the protests](#) following the murder of [George Floyd](#) in 2020, Black Lives Matter has opened the door for social change by expanding the way we think about the complicated issues that involve race.

As [sociologists](#) who study how protests lay the groundwork for social change, we understand their necessity as a tactic to draw attention toward a movement's broader agenda.

In our [study](#) published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, we found that the Black Lives Matter was able to shift attention away from its protests and toward its agenda of building an anti-racist society.

Our report further revealed that Black Lives Matter

has changed how people learn about specific issues that involve race, such as [police violence](#), [mass incarceration](#) and other [systemic problems in Black communities](#) that would be intolerable in other communities.

Spikes in anti-racist searches

Social change, such as the anti-slavery movement in the 19th century, is not represented only by new legislation or Supreme Court decisions. It is also found in the public's ideas and conversations: what you and I think and talk about.

When people engage with a movement, such as joining a protest, they are more likely to learn about the movement's aspirations and plans to achieve their goals. In this way, protest opens the door for social change.



In this June 2020 photograph, a massive group of protesters is seated on the ground in New York City in a peaceful protest of the killing of George Floyd.

[Ira L. Black/Corbis via Getty Images](#)

In our digital age, researchers can measure what people are thinking about by analyzing activity on public internet platforms like [Google](#), [Wikipedia](#) and [Twitter](#). Social researchers can quantitatively measure social media activity and see how it changes over time and in response to particular events, such as Black Lives Matter protests.

Our study examined how street demonstrations facilitated an important initial step in creating social change: changing the way people think. Based on our research, we found that people began thinking

about racism from a broader and deeper perspective.

We conducted a large-scale quantitative analysis of news media, Google searches, Wikipedia page visits and Twitter from 2014 to 2020 to build a picture of the movement's impact on how Americans and the world understand the conditions of Black life in the U.S. over the past century.

Though Google doesn't share the actual number of people who search on its platform, the total number is estimated to be in the billions. For our data set of searched words and phrases, that number is likely to be as much as in the hundreds of millions.



Thousands of protesters march on World Anti-Racism Day on March 19, 2022, in London.

Guy Smallman/Getty Images

We found that during Black Lives Matter protests, digital search users think and talk about racial ideas, such as [systemic racism](#), [Michelle Alexander's book "The New Jim Crow"](#) and [white supremacy](#), up to 100 times more than they did in the weeks before the protests.

Over the years these spikes grew larger and included more diverse ideas.

In 2014 and 2015, for instance, we saw people using Google to search terms about police shootings and past victims of police homicide.

But in 2020 the search terms were much broader and included ideas like [prison abolition](#) and [redlining](#) – the discriminatory practice by banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions that resulted in segregated neighborhoods.

Importantly, the ideas that come into the public consciousness during protest don't simply disappear. They stick around. We found that six months after the 2020 George Floyd protests, social media searches of terms such as systemic racism and white supremacy were considerably higher than before the protests.

[Link to Graphic Depicting Online Search Statistics](#)

Social change?

After the murder of Floyd, journalists and researchers alike proclaimed that the United States was experiencing a “[racial reckoning](#).”

To understand the full scope of the reckoning and the possibility for change, it is important to know how people make sense of these events.

Large-scale digital data from platforms like Google, Wikipedia and Twitter shows us which ideas are attracting attention and when this attention is sustained.

In a sense, protests help create a “new normal,” in which anti-racism is an increasingly common way to talk about inequalities in American society.

The pathway toward change is not always simple.

Activists such as those in Black Lives Matter want people to rethink social problems, and many contemporary problems are rooted in historical failures to produce a just society.

The participants in the demonstrations of 2020 have an advantage that previous generations of activists did not: They witnessed the shortcomings of past

civil rights movements, as well as the limits of modern-day efforts to teach diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Certainly, increased attention does not always bring positive results.



Protesters demonstrate on Dec. 4, 2014, against the chokehold death of Eric Garner by a white police officer in New York City.

[Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images](#)

Our study also investigates the rise in opposition that overlapped with BLM attention.

On Twitter, hashtags such as “#AllLivesMatter” and “#WhiteLivesMatter” increased during BLM protests and periods of reactionary right-wing protest, such

as the Unite the Right [rally in Charlottesville](#), Virginia.

We found that countermovement activity did not decrease attention to the BLM movement and was always dwarfed by BLM-related social media activity. During the peak of the George Floyd protests in May and June 2020, for instance, there were about 750,000 #BlackLivesMatter tweets per day, compared with about 20,000 #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter.

The trend continued as time passed. In December 2020, #BlackLivesMatter tweets were posted about 10,000 times per day, compared with fewer than 1,000 for #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter.

The data suggests that the Black Lives Matter movement is having a lasting impact – as are the group's ideas.

[There's plenty of opinion out there. We supply facts and analysis, based in research. [Get The Conversation's Politics Weekly](#).]

[Jelani Ince](#), Assistant Professor of Sociology, [University of Washington](#) and [Zackary Dunivin](#), PhD Student in Sociology and Complex Systems, [Indiana University](#)

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ALGORITHMS

Invisible, Irreversible, and Infinite

Diana Daly

Key points

- Computers execute tasks through simple step-by-step instructions, breaking down complex actions.
- Human adaptability contrasts with computers' literal interpretation, evident in the need for explicit instructions.
- Human software developers significantly shape the capabilities of modern computers.
- Programming languages reflect biases, affecting the diversity of computer programming practitioners.
- The Three I's – Invisible, Irreversible, and Infinite – pose challenges in algorithmic

decision-making, leading to opaque, permanent, and extensive biases.

In this chapter

- Section 1: Humans make computers what they are
- Section 2: Two reasons computers seem so smart today
 - Student Insights: (Anti-)Social Media Algorithms (writing by Omar, Fall 2020)
- Section 3: Programming and bias
 - Student insights: First experience with technology (video by Blaze Mutware, Spring 2021)
- Section 4: How can computers carry bias?
- Section 5: Exacerbating Bias in Algorithms: The Three I's
 - Student Insights: microcelebrity in the age of algorithms (writing by Lily, Spring 2021)

- [Section 6: Fighting Unjust Algorithms](#)
- [Parasocial and Parasitical — Social Media and Ourselves podcast](#)
- [Core Concepts](#)
- [Core Questions](#)
- [Electronic Freedom Foundation's "Algorithms for a Just Future"](#)
- [Social media algorithms warp how people learn from each other, research shows](#)

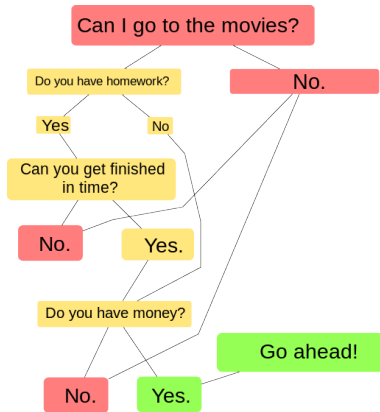
Nearly any software platform you use performs its work based on algorithms, which enable it to make rapid decisions and respond predictably to stimuli. An **algorithm** is a step-by-step set of instructions for getting something done, whether that something is making a decision, solving a problem, or getting from point A to point B (or point Z). In this chapter, we will look into how computing algorithms work, who tends to create them, and how that affects their outcomes. We will also consider whether certain algorithms should be used at all.

Section 1: Humans make computers what they are

Most platforms have many algorithms at work at once, which can make the work they do seem so complex it's almost magical. But all func-

tions of digital devices can be reduced to simple steps if needed. The steps have to be simple because computers interpret instructions very literally.

Computers don't know anything unless someone has already given them instructions that are explicit, with every step fully explained. Humans, on the other hand, can figure things out if they skip steps, and can make sense of tacit instructions. But give a computer instructions that skip steps or include tacit steps, and the computer will either stop working or get the process wrong without human intervention.



Algorithms: They can all be reduced to simple steps, which computers need in order to follow them.

Here's an example of the human cooperation that goes into the giving and following of instructions, demonstrated with a robot.

As an instructor, I can say to human students on the first day of class, "Let's go around the room. Tell us who you are and where you're from." Easy for humans, right? But imagine I try that in a mixed human/robot classroom, and all



A robot: Having a computer for a brain makes a robot a very simple-minded student. (Image: [Robot graphic](#) by DrSJS.)

goes swimmingly with the first two [human] students. But then the third student, a robot with a computer for a brain, says, "I don't understand." It seems my instructions were not clear enough. Now imagine another [human] student named Lila telling the robot helpfully, "Well first just tell us your name." The robot still does not understand. Finally, Lila says, "What is your name?"

That works; the robot has been programmed with an algorithm instructing it to respond to "What is your name?" with the words, "My name is Feefee," which the robot now says. Then Lila continues helping the robot by saying, "Now tell us where you're from, Feefee." Again the robot doesn't get it. At this point, though, Lila has figured out what works in getting

answers from this robot, so Lila says, “Where are you from?” This works; the robot has been programmed to respond to “Where are you from?” with the sentence, “I am from Neptune.”

In the above example, human intelligence was responsible for the robot’s successes and failures. The robot arrived with a few communication algorithms, programmed by its human developers. Feefee had not been taught enough to converse very naturally, however. Then Lila, a human, figured out how to get the right responses out of Feefee by modifying her human behavior to better match the behavior Feefee had learned to respond to. Later, the students might all run home and say, “A robot participated in class today! It was amazing!” They might not even acknowledge the human participation that day, which the robot fully depended on.

Section 2: Two reasons computers seem so smart today

What computers can do these days is amazing, for **two main reasons**. The first is cooperation from human software developers. The second is cooperation on the part of users.

```

1 /* This line basically imports the "stdio" header file, part of
2 * the standard library. It provides input and output functionality
3 * to the program.
4 */
5 #include <stdio.h>
6
7 /*
8 * Function (method) declaration. This outputs "Hello, world!" to
9 * standard output when invoked.
10 */
11 void sayHello() {
12     // printf() in C outputs the specified text (with optional
13     // formatting options) when invoked.
14     printf("Hello, world!");
15 }
16
17 /*
18 * This is a "main function". The compiled program will run the code
19 * defined here.
20 */
21 void main() {
22     // Invoke the sayHello() function.
23     sayHello();
24 }

```

Source code of a simple computer program: This code written in the C programming language will display the “Hello, world!” message.

First, computers seem so intelligent today because human software developers help one another teach computers. Apps that seem groundbreaking may simply include a lot of instructions. This is possible because developers have coded many, many algorithms, which they share and reuse on sites such as [GitHub](#). The more a developer is able to copy the basic steps others have already written for computers to follow, the more that developer can then focus on building new code that teaches computers new tricks. The most influential people known as “creators” or “inventors” in the tech world may be better described as [“tweakers”](#) who improved and added to other people’s code for their “creations” and “inventions.”

The second reason computers seem so smart today is because users are teaching them. Algorithms are increasingly designed to “learn” from human input. New algorithms auto-

matically plug input into new programs, then automatically run those programs. This sequence of automated learning and application is called artificial intelligence (AI). AI essentially means teaching computers to teach themselves directly from their human users.

If only humans were always good teachers.

Student Insights: (Anti-)Social Media Algorithms (writing by Omar, Fall 2020)

Social Media During School



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Respond to this case study: This writer used the research practice of observation to break down types of online spaces and practices. What are the benefits and challenges of drawing your knowledge about social media platforms from your own research? Demonstrate by studying the types of social media in your world.

Teaching machines the best and worst about ourselves



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In 2016, Microsoft introduced Tay, an AI online robot they branded as a young female. Their intention was for Tay to learn to communicate from internet users who conversed with her on Twitter – and learn what she did. Within a few hours, Tay’s social media posts were so infected with violence, racism, sexism, and other bigotry that [Microsoft had to take her down and apologize](#).

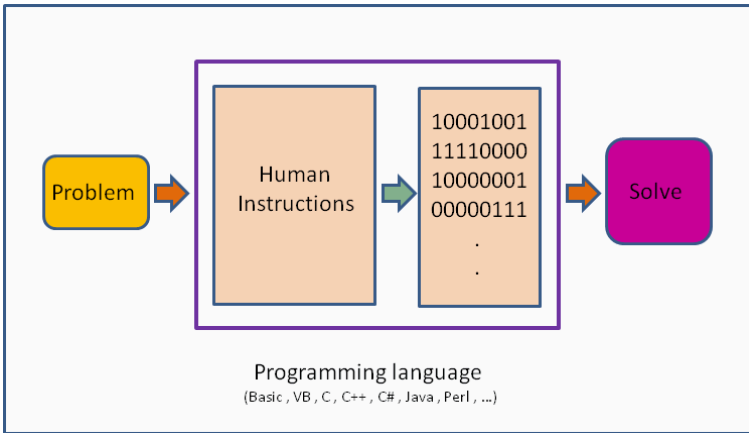
Microsoft had previously launched [Xiaolce](#), an AI whose behavior remained far less offensive than Tay, on Chinese sites including the microblog Weibo. However, the Chinese sites Xiaolce learned from were heavily censored. The English-language Twitter was far less censored, and rife with trolls networked and ready to coordinate attacks. [Developers and users](#)

[who were paying attention already knew Twitter was full of hate.](#)

Tay was an embarrassment for Microsoft in the eyes of many commentators. How could they not have predicted and protected her from bad human teachers? Why didn't Tay's human programmers teach her what not to say? It certainly involved a lack of research, since bots like [@oliviatasters](#) have been more successful and even benefited from a shared [list of banned words](#) that could easily be added to their algorithms.

In addition to these oversights, Tay's failure may also have been caused by a lack of diversity in Microsoft's programmers and team leaders.

Section 3: Programming and bias



Programming languages: Basic, C++, and Java are just a few of these. All translate human instructions into algorithms, which are instructions computers can understand.

Humans are at the heart of any computer program. Algorithms for computers to follow are all written in programming languages, which translate instructions from human language into the [computing language of binary numerals, 0's and 1's](#). Algorithms and programs are selective and reflect personal decision-making. There are usually different ways they could have been written.

Computer programming languages like Python, C++, and Java are written in source code. Writing programs, sometimes just called “coding,” is an intermediary step between human

language and the binary language that computers understand. Learning programming languages takes time and dedication. To learn to be a computer programmer, you either have to feel driven to teach yourself on your own equipment, or you have to be taught to program – and this is still not common in US schools.



A Google search for “tech geek”:

The many images of young white male “tech geeks” help explain why youth who are not white or male may feel out of place teaching themselves to code.

Because computer programmers are self-selected this way, and because many people think of the typical tech geeks as white and male (as suggested by the Google Image search to the right), people who end up learning computer programming in the US are more likely to be white than any other race, and are more likely to identify as male than any other gender.

Student insights: First experience with technology (video by Blaze Mutware, Spring 2021)



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Section 4: How can computers carry bias?

Many people think computers and algorithms are neutral – racism and sexism are not programmers’ problems. In the case of Tay’s programmers, this false belief enabled more hate speech online and led to the embarrassment of their employer. Human-crafted computer programs mediate nearly everything humans do today, and human responses are involved in many of those tasks. Considering the near-infinite extent to which algorithms and their activities are replicated, the presence of human **biases** is a devastating threat to computer-dependent societies in general and to those targeted or harmed by those biases in particular.



Google Glass was considered by some to be an example of a poor decision by a homogenous workforce.

Problems like these are rampant in the tech industry because there is a damaging belief in the US (and some other) societies that the development of computer technologies is antisocial, and that some kinds of people are better at it than others. As a result of this bias in tech industries and computing, there are not enough kinds of people working on tech development teams: not enough women, not enough people who are not white, not enough people who remember to think of children, not enough people who think socially.

Remember Google Glass? You may not; that product failed because few people wanted interaction with a computer to come between themselves and eye contact with humans and the world. People who fit the definition of “tech nerd” fell

within this small demographic, but the sentiment was not shared by the broader community of technology users. Critics labeled the unfortunate people who did purchase the product as “glassholes.”

Code: Debugging the Gender Gap

Created in 2015, the film [Code: Debugging the Gender Gap](#) encapsulates many of the biases in the history of the computing industry as well as their implications. Women have always been part of the US computing industry, and [today that industry would collapse without engineers from diverse cultures](#). Yet there is widespread evidence that women and racial minorities have always been made to feel that they did not belong in the industry. [And the numbers of engineers and others in tech development show](#) a serious problem in Silicon Valley with racial and ethnic diversity, resulting in [terrible tech decisions](#) that spread racial and ethnic bias under the guise of tech neutrality. Google has made some headway in achieving a more diverse workforce,

but not without [backlash founded on bad science](#).

Below is the trailer for the film. The film is available through most University Libraries and outlets that rent and sell feature films, and through [Finish Line Features](#).



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Section 5: Exacerbating Bias in Algorithms: The Three I's

In its early years, the internet was viewed as a utopia, an ideal world that would permit a completely free flow of all available information to everyone, equally. John Perry Barlow's 1996

[Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#) represents this utopian vision, in which the internet liberates users from all biases and [even from their own bodies](#) (at which human biases are so often directed). Barlow's utopian vision does not match the internet of today. Our social norms and inequalities accompany us across all the media and sites we use, and worsened in a climate where information value is determined by marketability and profit, as Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci explains in [this Ted Talk](#).

Because algorithms are built on human cooperation with computing programs, human selectivity and human flaws are embedded within algorithms. Humans as users carry our own biases, and today there is particular concern that algorithms pick up and spread these biases to many, many others. They even make us more biased by hiding results that the algorithm calculates we may not like. When we get our news and information from social media, invisible algorithms consider our own biases and those of friends in our social networks to determine which new posts and stories to show us in search results and news feeds. The result for each user can be called their echo chamber or as [author Eli Pariser](#) describes it, a **filter bubble** in which we only see news and information we like and agree with, leading to political polarization.

Although algorithms can generate very sophisticated recommendations, algorithms do *not* make sophisticated decisions. When humans make poor decisions, they can rely on themselves or on other humans to recognize and reverse the error; at

the very least, a human decision-maker can be held responsible. Human decision-making often takes time and critical reflection to implement, such as the writing of an approved ordinance into law. When algorithms are used in place of human decision-making, I describe what ensues as **The three I's**: Algorithms' decisions become *invisible*, *irreversible*, and *infinite*. Most social media platforms and many organizations using algorithms will not share how their algorithms work; for this lack of transparency, they are known as **black box algorithms**.

Student Insights: microcelebrity in the age of algorithms (writing by Lily, Spring 2021)

affordances of social media, our society has turned to using the platform for more selfish reasons- such as the fame granted when going viral.\n\nThere are some noticeable pros and cons that are intertwined

with media **spreadability**. This term highlights how media is continually spread and then passed on to others, continuing the chain.

At this point, almost everyone has had **exposure** through the media. In terms of spreadability, exposure happens much more quickly. One second a video is posted and the next, it could have thousands of views. This was the case with now famous influencer, Emma Chamberlain.

Currently, Emma Chamberlain has accumulated an astounding total of nearly ten million subscribers and counting. At only 19, she has established a huge platform for herself and when she started as a young high school girl nearly three years ago, I can guarantee she had no idea what was in store for her in terms of success. As of now, she has won three awards for her Youtube career: a People's Choice Award, a Shorty Award, and lastly, a Teen Choice Award. Her breakout Youtube fame allowed her to then write her own book, create a podcast, and even make and sell merchandise. All of this success due to a few viral videos that skyrocketed a young girl's career. How did her videos spread so quickly? Was her content really that appealing to her audience? Did she face any backlash? What type of content tends to go viral? Chelsea Galvin is here to

give her insight on these types of questions we all have.

Emma Chamberlain was just an ordinary girl from Belmont, California. Who else is a teenage girl from Belmont, California? My roommate Chelsea Galvin. She was a primary witness in Emma Chamberlain's claim to fame. Both girls are from the same hometown, attended the same high school, and had the same classes.

Chelsea is no stranger to the realm of social media. She uses popular apps such as instagram, tiktok, and snapchat (her favorite as of now). She is familiar with the various different

Algorithms that appear on her explorer and "for you" pages. She typically watches videos about house decor, food, and videos of friends just having fun.

She believes that Emma Chamberlain's content was relevant for teen girls today. Her content is "different from mainstream media and what we usually see on youtube" and is associated with certain algorithms that relate to young teens today. Ultimately, Emma Chamberlain became so well known for her unstaged and realistic content that she is now easily recognizable by so many people.

Although having a presence in the media may seem extremely desirable, there are always obstacles and hardships that must be overcome. Cancel

culture. Currently, this is a big part of having a media presence. Individuals must always be aware about what they post in order to avoid upsetting others, whether it is intentional or not.

As Chelsea describes it, "a lot of attention brings a lot of people just wanting to hate or ruin things for people" and I totally agree. We are all human and we all make mistakes but when those mistakes resurface online due to spreadability and a face in the media, those select individuals have a harder time than those who are not in the spotlight.

Ultimately anyone's content can spread and go viral, it is just a matter of time and good, relatable videos- like Emma Chamberlain posts. Both Chelsea and I believe that it is important to be educated on this topic, especially in times like this where social media plays a large role in our daily lives. We have both seen the more obstructive side of social media when content goes viral and we agree that it's vital to be prepared for the outcome.

It was a joy to chat with Chelsea and learn more about our perspectives on the media and what content is specific to our two feeds. I learned so much from her and her story and it really helped me conceptualize the term spreadability and how it occurs in reality."

} "data-sheets-userfor-

```
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Respond to this case study: how might a creator change their content to affect a platform's algorithm? How can creators and users learn more about the algorithms affecting them? How might platforms benefit from sharing more information about their algorithms? Why might they want to keep some things hidden from users?

Exposing Invisible Algorithms: Pro Publica

Journalists at Pro Publica are educating the public on what algorithms can do by explaining and testing black box algorithms. This work is particularly valuable because most algorithmic bias is hard to detect for small groups or individual human users. Studies like ProPublica's presented in the "Breaking the Black Box" series (below) have been based on groups systematically testing algorithms from different machines, locations, and users.



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Want to see more? There are four episodes in this series, available in full here: [Link to episodes](#)

[about Facebook](#). Following are links to these episodes with captions: [Episode 2](#) – [Episode 3](#) – [Episode 4](#).

Section 6: Fighting Unjust Algorithms

Algorithms are laden with errors. Some of these errors can be traced to the biases of those that developed them, as when a facial recognition system meant for global implementation is only trained using [data sets](#) from a limited population (say, predominantly white or male). Algorithms can become problematic when they are hacked by groups of users, as Microsoft's Tay was. Algorithms are also grounded in the values of those who shape them, and these values may reward some involved while disenfranchising others.

Despite their flaws, algorithms are increasingly used in heavily consequential ways. They predict how likely a person is to commit a crime or default on a bank loan based on a given data set. They can target users with messages on social media that are customized to fit their interests, their voting preferences, or their fears. They can identify who is in photos online or in recordings of offline spaces.

Confronting the landscape of increasing algorithmic control is activism to limit the control of algorithms over human lives. Below, read about the work of the Algorithmic Justice League and other activists promoting bans on facial recognition. And consider: What roles might algorithms play in your life that may deserve more attention, scrutiny, and even activism?

The Algorithmic Justice League vs facial recognition tech in Boston

MIT Computer Scientist and “Poet of Code” Joy Buolamwini heads the Algorithmic Justice League, an organization making remarkable headway into fighting facial recognition technologies, whose work she explains in the first video below. On June 9th, 2020, Buolamwini and other computer scientists presented alongside citizens at the Boston City Council meeting in support of a proposed ordinance banning facial recognition in public spaces in the city. Held and

shared by live stream during COVID-19, footage of this meeting offers a remarkable look at the value of human advocacy in shaping the future of social technologies. The second video below should be cued to the beginning of Buolamwini's testimony half an hour in. Boston's City Council subsequently [voted unanimously](#) to ban facial recognition technologies by the city.



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Parasocial and Parasitical — Social Media and Ourselves podcast





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Parasocial and Parasitical

Release date: September 1st, 2021

An interview with Dr. Victor Braitberg about the machinations by social media platforms that help us form online relationships – and help them profit from it all. Is this good? Bad? Or The Truman Show? Produced by Jacquie Kuru and Gabe Stultz.

[LISTEN](#) • [LISTEN WITH TRANSCRIPT](#)

Respond to this podcast episode...How did the podcast episode “Parasocial and Parasitical” use interviews, student voices, or sounds to demonstrate a current or past social trend phenomenon? If you were making a sequel to this episode, what voices or sounds would you include to help listeners understand more about this trend, and why?

Core Concepts and Questions

Core Concepts

algorithm

a step-by-step set of instructions for getting something done to serve humans, whether that something is making a decision, solving a problem, or getting from point A to point B (or point Z)

biases

assumptions about a person, culture, or population

black box algorithms

the term used when processes created for computer-based decision-making is not shared with or made clear to outsiders

filter bubble

a term coined by Eli Pariser, also called an echo chamber. A phenomenon in which we only see news and information we like and agree with, leading to political polarization

The three I's

algorithms' decisions can become *invisible*, *irreversible*, and *infinite*

why computers seem so smart today

cooperation from human software developers, and cooperation on the part of users

Core Questions

A. Questions for qualitative thought:

1. Write and/or draw an algorithm (or your best try at one) to perform an activity you wish you could automate. Doing the dishes? Taking an English test? It's up to you.
2. Often there are spaces online that make one feel like an outsider, or like an insider. Study an online space that makes you feel like one of these – how is that outsider or insider status being communicated to you, or to others?
3. Consider the history of how you learned whatever you know about computing. This could mean how you came to understand key terms, searching online simple programs, coding, etc. Then, reinvent that history if you'd learned all you wish you knew about computing at the times and in the ways you feel you should have learned them.

B. Review: Let's test how well you've been programmed. (Mark the best answers.)



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C. Game on!



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Related Content

Hear It: Electronic Freedom Foundation's "Algorithms for a Just Future"

<https://player.simplecast.com/72c98d21-5c9a-44fa-ae90-c2adcd4d6766?dark=false>

[Algorithms for a Just Future Audio Link](#)

EPISODE SUMMARY

The United States already has laws against redlining, but companies can still use other data to advertise goods and services to you—which can have big implications for the prices you see.

EPISODE NOTES

One of the supposed promises of AI was that it would be able to take the bias out of human decisions, and maybe even lead to more equity in society. But the

reality is that the errors of the past are embedded in the data of today, keeping prejudice and discrimination in. Pair that with surveillance capitalism, and what you get are algorithms that impact the way consumers are treated, from how much they pay for things, to what kinds of ads they are shown, to if a bank will even lend them money. But it doesn't have to be that way, because the same techniques that prey on people can lift them up. Vinhcent Le from the Greenlining Institute joins Cindy and Danny to talk about how AI can be used to make things easier for people who need a break. In this episode you'll learn about:

- Redlining—the pernicious system that denies historically marginalized people access to loans and financial services—and how modern civil rights laws have attempted to ban this practice.
- How the vast amount of our data collected through modern technology, especially browsing the Web, is often used to target consumers for products, and in effect recreates the illegal practice of redlining.
- The weaknesses of the consent-based models for safeguarding consumer privacy, which often mean that people are unknowingly waving away their privacy whenever they agree to a website's terms of service.
- How the United States currently has an insuffi-

cient patchwork of state laws that guard different types of data, and how a federal privacy law is needed to set a floor for basic privacy protections.

- How we might reimagine machine learning as a tool that actively helps us root out and combat bias in consumer-facing financial services and pricing, rather than exacerbating those problems.
- The importance of transparency in the algorithms that make decisions about our lives.
- How we might create technology to help consumers better understand the government services available to them.

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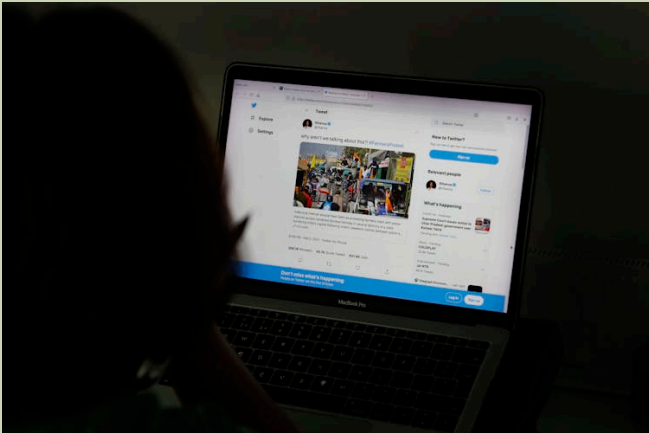
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Read it: Social media algorithms warp how people learn from each other, research shows



Social media pushes evolutionary buttons.

[AP Photo/Manish Swarup](#)

[William Brady](#), [Northwestern University](#)

People's daily interactions with online algorithms [affect how they learn from others](#), with negative consequences including social misperceptions, con-

flict and the spread of misinformation, my colleagues and I have found.

People are increasingly interacting with others in social media environments where algorithms control the flow of social information they see. Algorithms determine in part which messages, which people and which ideas social media users see.

On social media platforms, algorithms are mainly [designed to amplify information that sustains engagement](#), meaning they keep people clicking on content and coming back to the platforms. I'm a [social psychologist](#), and my colleagues and I have found evidence suggesting that a side effect of this design is that algorithms amplify information people are strongly biased to learn from. We call this information "PRIME," for prestigious, in-group, moral and emotional information.

In our evolutionary past, biases to learn from PRIME information were very advantageous: [Learning from prestigious individuals is efficient](#) because these people are successful and their behavior can be copied. Paying attention to people who violate moral norms is important because [sanctioning them helps the community maintain cooperation](#).

But what happens when PRIME information

becomes amplified by algorithms and some people exploit algorithm amplification to promote themselves? Prestige becomes a poor signal of success because people can fake prestige on social media. Newsfeeds become oversaturated with negative and moral information so that there is conflict rather than cooperation.

The interaction of human psychology and algorithm amplification leads to dysfunction because social learning supports cooperation and problem-solving, but social media algorithms are designed to increase engagement. We call this mismatch [functional misalignment](#).

Why it matters

One of the key outcomes of functional misalignment in algorithm-mediated social learning is that people start to form incorrect perceptions of their social world. For example, recent research suggests that when algorithms selectively amplify more extreme political views, people begin to [think that their political in-group and out-group are more sharply divided](#) than they really are. Such “false polarization” might be an [important source of greater political conflict](#).

[YouTube Video: Social Media and Political Polarization in the Media](#)

Need to Embed

Social media algorithms amplify extreme political views.

Functional misalignment can also lead to greater spread of misinformation. A recent study suggests that people who are spreading [political misinformation leverage moral and emotional information](#) – for example, posts that provoke moral outrage – in order to get people to share it more. When algorithms amplify moral and emotional information, misinformation gets included in the amplification.

What other research is being done

In general, research on this topic is in its infancy, but there are new studies emerging that examine key components of algorithm-mediated social learning. Some studies have demonstrated that [social media algorithms clearly amplify PRIME information](#).

Whether this amplification leads to offline polarization is hotly contested at the moment. A recent experiment found evidence that [Meta's newsfeed](#)

[increases polarization](#), but another experiment that involved a collaboration with Meta [found no evidence of polarization increasing](#) due to exposure to their algorithmic Facebook newsfeed.

More research is needed to fully understand the outcomes that emerge when humans and algorithms interact in feedback loops of social learning. Social media companies have most of the needed data, and I believe that they should give academic researchers access to it while also balancing ethical concerns such as privacy.

What's next

A key question is what can be done to make algorithms foster accurate human social learning rather than exploit social learning biases. My research team is working on new algorithm designs that increase engagement [while also penalizing PRIME information](#). We argue that this might maintain user activity that social media platforms seek, but also make people's social perceptions more accurate.

The [Research Brief](#) is a short take on interesting academic work.

[William Brady](#), Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations, [Northwestern University](#)

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MEDIA GLOBALIZATION

8.4 THE EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET AND GLOBALIZATION ON POPULAR CULTURE AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

It's in the name: *World Wide Web*. The Internet has broken down communication barriers between cultures in a way that could only be dreamed of in earlier generations. Now, almost any news service across the globe can be accessed on the Internet and, with the various translation services available (like Babelfish and Google Translate), be relatively understandable. In addition to the spread of American culture throughout the world, smaller countries are now able to cheaply export culture, news, entertainment, and even propaganda.

The Internet has been a key factor in driving **globalization** in recent years. Many jobs can now be outsourced entirely via the Internet. Teams of software programmers in India can have a website up and running in very little time, for far less money than it would take to hire American counterparts. Commu-

nicating with these teams is now as simple as sending e-mails and instant messages back and forth, and often the most difficult aspect of setting up an international video conference online is figuring out the time difference. Especially for electronic services such as software, outsourcing over the Internet has greatly reduced the cost to develop a professionally coded site.

Electronic Media and the Globalization of Culture

The increase of globalization has been an economic force throughout the last century, but economic interdependency is not its only by-product. At its core, globalization is the lowering of economic and cultural impediments to communication between countries all over the globe. Globalization in the sphere of culture and communication can take the form of access to foreign newspapers (without the difficulty of procuring a printed copy) or, conversely, the ability of people living in previously closed countries to communicate experiences to the outside world relatively cheaply.

TV, especially satellite TV, has been one of the primary ways for American entertainment to reach foreign shores. This trend has been going on for some time now, for example, with the launch of MTV Arabia (Arango, 2008). American popular culture is, and has been, a crucial export.

At the Eisenhower Fellowship Conference in Singapore in 2005, U.S. ambassador Frank Lavin gave a defense of American culture that differed somewhat from previous arguments. It would not be all Starbucks, MTV, or *Baywatch*, he said, because American culture is more diverse than that. Instead, he said that “America is a nation of immigrants,” and asked, “When Mel Gibson or Jackie Chan come to the United States to produce a movie, whose culture is being exported (Lavin, 2005)?” This idea of a truly globalized culture—one in which content can be distributed as easily as it can be received—now has the potential to be realized through the Internet. While some political and social barriers still remain, from a technological standpoint there is nothing to stop the two-way flow of information and culture across the globe.

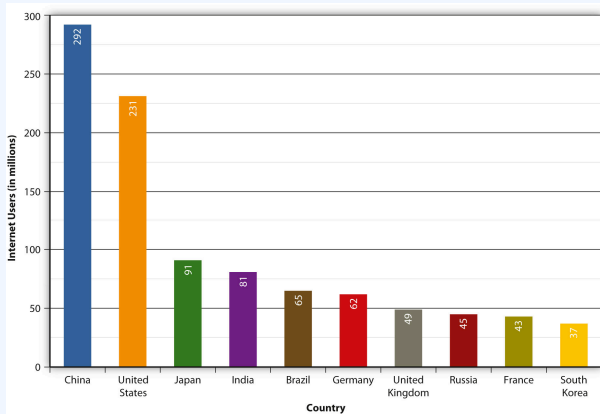
China, Globalization, and the Internet

The scarcity of artistic resources, the time lag of transmission to a foreign country, and censorship by the host government are a few of the possible impediments to transmission of entertainment and culture. China provides a valuable

example of the ways the Internet has helped to overcome (or highlight) all three of these hurdles.

China, as the world's most populous country and one of its leading economic powers, has considerable clout when it comes to the Internet. In addition, the country is ruled by a single political party that uses censorship extensively in an effort to maintain control. Because the Internet is an open resource by nature, and because China is an extremely well-connected country—with 22.5 percent (roughly 300 million people, or the population of the entire United States) of the country online as of 2008 (Google, 2010)—China has been a case study in how the Internet makes resistance to globalization increasingly difficult.

8.4 THE EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET AND GLOBALIZATION ON POPULAR CULTURE AND INTERPERSONAL



China has more Internet users than any other country.
Attribution: [Internet use graph](#). Image from
Understanding Media Culture ([CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0](#))

On January 21, 2010, Hillary Clinton gave a speech in front of the Newseum in Washington, DC, where she said, “We stand for a single Internet where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas (Ryan & Halper, 2010).” That same month, Google decided it would stop censoring search results on Google.cn, its Chinese-language search engine, as a result of a serious cyber-attack on the company originating in China. In addition, Google stated that if an

agreement with the Chinese government could not be reached over the censorship of search results, Google would pull out of China completely. Because Google has complied (albeit uneasily) with the Chinese government in the past, this change in policy was a major reversal.

Withdrawing from one of the largest expanding markets in the world is shocking coming from a company that has been aggressively expanding into foreign markets. This move highlights the fundamental tension between China's censorship policy and Google's core values. Google's company motto, "Don't be evil," had long been at odds with its decision to censor search results in China. Google's compliance with the Chinese government did not help it make inroads into the Chinese Internet search market—although Google held about a quarter of the market in China, most of the search traffic went to the tightly controlled Chinese search engine Baidu. However, Google's departure from China would be a blow to antigovernment forces in the country. Since Baidu has a closer relationship with the Chinese government, political dissidents tend to use Google's Gmail, which uses **encrypted**

servers based in the United States. Google's threat to withdraw from China raises the possibility that globalization could indeed hit road-blocks due to the ways that foreign governments may choose to censor the Internet.

New Media: Internet Convergence and American Society

One only needs to go to CNN's official Twitter feed and begin to click random faces in the "Following" column to see the effect of media convergence through the Internet. Hundreds of different options abound, many of them individual journalists' Twitter feeds, and many of those following other journalists. Considering CNN's motto, "The most trusted name in network news," its presence on Twitter might seem at odds with providing in-depth, reliable coverage. After all, how in-depth can 140 characters get?

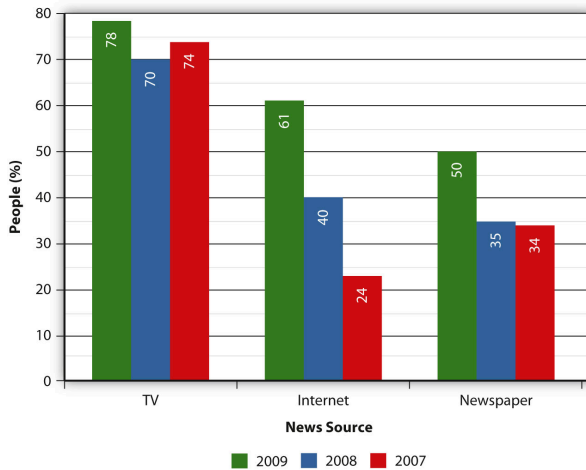
The truth is that many of these **traditional media** outlets use Twitter not as a communication tool in itself, but as a way to allow viewers to aggregate a large amount of information they may have missed. Instead of visiting multiple home pages

to see the day's top stories from multiple viewpoints, Twitter users only have to check their own Twitter pages to get updates from all the organizations they "follow." **Media conglomerates** then use Twitter as part of an overall integration of media outlets; the Twitter feed is there to support the news content, not to report the content itself.

Internet-Only Sources

The threshold was crossed in 2008: The Internet overtook print media as a primary source of information for national and international news in the U.S. Television is still far in the lead, but especially among younger demographics, the Internet is quickly catching up as a way to learn about the day's news. With 40 percent of the public receiving their news from the Internet (see [Figure 11.8](#)) (Pew Research Center for the People, 2008), media outlets have been scrambling to set up large presences on the web. Yet one of the most remarkable shifts has been in the establishment of online-only news sources.

8.4 THE EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET AND GLOBALIZATION ON POPULAR CULTURE AND INTERPERSONAL



Americans now receive more national and international news from the Internet than they do from newspapers.

Attribution: [News vs Internet Use Graph](#). Image from Understanding Media Culture (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The conventional argument claims that the anonymity and the echo chamber of the Internet undermine worthwhile news reporting, especially for topics that are expensive to report on. The ability of large news organizations to put reporters in

the field is one of their most important contributions and (because of its cost) is often one of the first things to be cut back during times of budget problems. However, as the Internet has become a primary news source for more and more people, new media outlets—publications existing entirely online—have begun to appear.

In 2006, two reporters for the *Washington Post*, John F. Harris and Jim VandeHei, left the newspaper to start a politically centered website called Politico. Rather than simply repeating the day's news in a blog, they were determined to start a journalistically viable news organization on the web. Four years later, the site has over 6,000,000 unique monthly visitors and about a hundred staff members, and there is now a Politico reporter on almost every White House trip (Wolff, 2009).

Far from being a collection of amateurs trying to make it big on the Internet, Politico's senior White House correspondent is Mike Allen, who previously wrote for *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Time*. His daily Playbook column appears at around 7 a.m. each morning and is read by much of the politically centered media. The different ways that Politico reaches out to its supporters—blogs, Twitter feeds, regular news articles, and now even a print edition—show how media convergence has even occurred within the Internet itself. The interactive nature of its services and the active comment boards on the site also show how the media have become

a two-way street: more of a public forum than a straight news service.

“Live” From New York ...

Top-notch political content is not the only medium moving to the Internet, however. *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) has built an entire entertainment model around its broadcast time slot. Every weekend, around 11:40 p.m. on Saturday, someone interrupts a skit, turns toward the camera, shouts “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night!” and the band starts playing. Yet the show’s sketch comedy style also seems to lend itself to the watch-anytime convenience of the Internet. In fact, the online TV service Hulu carries a full eight episodes of SNL at any given time, with regular 3.5-minute commercial breaks replaced by Hulu-specific minute-long advertisements. The time listed for an SNL episode on Hulu is just over an hour—a full half-hour less than the time it takes to watch it live on Saturday night.

Hulu calls its product “online premium video,” primarily because of its desire to attract not the YouTube amateur, but rather a partnership of large media organizations. Although many networks, like NBC and Comedy Central, stream video on their websites, Hulu builds its business by offering a legal way to see all these shows on the same site; a user can switch

from *South Park* to *SNL* with a single click, rather than having to move to a different website.

Premium Online Video Content

Hulu's success points to a high demand among Internet users for a wide variety of content collected and packaged in one easy-to-use interface. Hulu was rated the Website of the Year by the Associated Press (Coyle, 2008) and even received an Emmy nomination for a commercial featuring Alec Baldwin and Tina Fey, the stars of the NBC comedy *30 Rock* (Neil, 2009). Hulu's success has not been the product of the usual dot-com underdog startup, however. Its two parent companies, News Corporation and NBC Universal, are two of the world's media giants. In many ways, this was a logical step for these companies to take after fighting online video for so long. In December 2005, the video "Lazy Sunday," an SNL digital short featuring Andy Samberg and Chris Parnell, went viral with over 5,000,000 views on YouTube before February 2006, when NBC demanded that YouTube take down the video (Biggs, 2006). NBC later posted the video on Hulu, where it could sell advertising for it.

Hulu allows users to break out of programming models controlled by broadcast and cable TV providers and choose freely what shows to watch and when to watch them. This

seems to work especially well for cult programs that are no longer available on TV. In 2008, the show *Arrested Development*, which was canceled in 2006 after repeated time slot shifts, was Hulu's second-most-popular program.

Hulu certainly seems to have leveled the playing field for some shows that have had difficulty finding an audience through traditional means. *30 Rock*, much like *Arrested Development*, suffered from a lack of viewers in its early years. In 2008, *New York Magazine* described the show as a “fragile suckling that critics coddle but that America never quite warms up to (Sternbergh, 2008).” However, even as *30 Rock* shifted time slots mid-season, its viewer base continued to grow through the NBC partner of Hulu. The nontraditional media approach of NBC's programming culminated in October 2008, when NBC decided to launch the new season of *30 Rock* on Hulu a full week before it was broadcast over the airwaves (Wortham, 2008). Hulu's strategy of providing premium online content seems to have paid off: As of March 2011, Hulu provided 143,673,000 viewing sessions to more than 27 million unique visitors, according to Nielsen (ComScore, 2011).

Unlike other “premium” services, Hulu does not charge for its content; rather, the word *premium* in its slogan seems to imply that it could charge for content if it wanted to. Other platforms, like Sony's PlayStation 3, block Hulu for this very reason—Sony's online store sells the products that Hulu gives away for free. However, Hulu has been considering moving to

a paid subscription model that would allow users to access its entire back catalog of shows. Like many other fledgling web enterprises, Hulu seeks to create reliable revenue streams to avoid the fate of many of the companies that folded during the dot-com crash (Sandoval, 2009).

Like Politico, Hulu has packaged professionally produced content into an on-demand web service that can be used without the normal constraints of traditional media. Just as users can comment on Politico articles (and now, on most newspapers' articles), they can rate Hulu videos, and Hulu will take this into account. Even when users do not produce the content themselves, they still want this same "two-way street" service.

Top 10 U.S. Online Video Brands, Home and Work

Rank	Parent	Total Streams (in Millions)	Unique Viewers (in Millions)
1	YouTube	6,622,374	112,642
2	Hulu	635,546	15,256
3	Yahoo!	221,355	26,081
4	MSN	179,741	15,645
5	Turner	137,311	5,343
6	MTV Networks	131,077	5,949
7	ABC TV	128,510	5,049
8	Fox Interactive	124,513	11,450
9	Nickelodeon	117,057	5,004
10	Megavideo	115,089	3,654
Source: The Nielsen Company			

The Role of the Internet in Social Alienation

In the early years, the Internet was stigmatized as a tool for introverts to avoid “real” social interactions, thereby increasing

their alienation from society. Yet the Internet was also seen as the potentially great connecting force between cultures all over the world. The idea that something that allowed communication across the globe could breed social alienation seemed counterintuitive. The American Psychological Association (APA) coined this concept the “**Internet paradox.**”

Studies like the APA’s “Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being (Kraut, et. al., 1998)?” which came out in 1998, suggested that teens who spent lots of time on the Internet showed much greater rates of self-reported loneliness and other signs of psychological distress. Even though the Internet had been around for a while by 1998, the increasing concern among parents was that teenagers were spending all their time in chat rooms and online. The fact was that teenagers spent much more time on the Internet than adults, due to their increased free time, curiosity, and familiarity with technology.

However, this did not necessarily mean that “kids these days” were antisocial or that the Internet caused depression and loneliness. In his critical analysis “Deconstructing the Internet Paradox,” computer scientist, writer, and PhD recipient from Carnegie Mellon University Joseph M. Newcomer points out that the APA study did not include a control group to adjust for what may be normal “lonely” feelings in teenagers. Again, he suggests that “involvement in any new, self-absorbing activity which has opportunity for failure can increase depression,” seeing Internet use as just another time-

consuming hobby, much like learning a musical instrument or playing chess (Newcomer, 2000).

The general concept that teenagers were spending all their time in chat rooms and online forums instead of hanging out with flesh-and-blood friends was not especially new; the same thing had generally been thought of the computer hobbyists who pioneered the esoteric Usenet. However, the concerns were amplified when a wider range of young people began using the Internet, and the trend was especially strong in the younger demographics.

The “Internet Paradox” and Facebook

As they developed, it became quickly apparent that the Internet generation did not suffer from perpetual loneliness as a rule. After all, the generation that was raised on instant messaging invented Facebook and still makes up most of Facebook’s audience. As detailed earlier in the chapter, Facebook began as a service limited to college students—a requirement that practically excluded older participants. As a social tool and as a reflection of the way younger people now connect with each other over the Internet, Facebook has provided a comprehensive model for the Internet’s effect on social skills and especially on education.

A study by the Michigan State University Department of

Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media has shown that college-age Facebook users connect with offline friends twice as often as they connect with purely online “friends (Ellison, et. al., 2007).” In fact, 90 percent of the participants in the study reported that high school friends, classmates, and other friends were the top three groups that their Facebook profiles were directed toward.

In 2007, when this study took place, one of Facebook’s most remarkable tools for studying the ways that young people connect was its “networks” feature. Originally, a Facebook user’s network consisted of all the people at his or her college e-mail domain: the “mycollege” portion of “me@mycollege.edu.” The MSU study, performed in April 2006, just 6 months after Facebook opened its doors to high school students, found that first-year students met new people on Facebook 36 percent more often than seniors did. These freshmen, in April 2006, were not as active on Facebook as high schoolers (Facebook began allowing high schoolers on its site during these students’ first semester in school) (Rosen, 2005). The study concluded that they could “definitively state that there is a positive relationship between certain kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital (Ellison, et. al., 2007).” In other words, even though the study cannot show whether Facebook use causes or results from social connections, it can say that Facebook plays both an important and a nondestructive role in the forming of social bonds.

Although this study provides a complete and balanced pic-

ture of the role that Facebook played for college students in early 2006, there have been many changes in Facebook's design and in its popularity. In 2006, many of a user's "friends" were from the same college, and the whole college network might be mapped as a "friend-of-a-friend" web. If users allowed all people within a single network access to their profiles, it would create a voluntary school-wide directory of students. Since a university e-mail address was required for signup, there was a certain level of trust. The results of this Facebook study, still relatively current in terms of showing the Internet's effects on social capital, show that not only do social networking tools not lead to more isolation, but that they actually have become integral to some types of networking.

However, as Facebook began to grow and as high school and regional networks (such as "New York City" or "Ireland") were incorporated, users' networks of friends grew exponentially, and the networking feature became increasingly unwieldy for privacy purposes. In 2009, Facebook discontinued regional networks over concerns that networks consisting of millions of people were "no longer the best way for you to control your privacy (Zuckerberg, 2009)." Where privacy controls once consisted of allowing everyone at one's college access to specific information, Facebook now allows only three levels: friends, friends of friends, and everyone.

Meetup.com: Meeting Up

“IRL”

Of course, not everyone on teenagers’ online friends lists are actually their friends outside of the virtual world. In the parlance of the early days of the Internet, meeting up “IRL” (shorthand for “in real life”) was one of the main reasons that many people got online. This practice was often looked at with suspicion by those not familiar with it, especially because of the anonymity of the Internet. The fear among many was that children would go into chat rooms and agree to meet up in person with a total stranger, and that stranger would turn out to have less-than-friendly motives. This fear led to law enforcement officers posing as underage girls in chat rooms, agreeing to meet for sex with older men (after the men brought up the topic—the other way around could be considered entrapment), and then arresting the men at the agreed-upon meeting spot.

In recent years, however, the Internet has become a hub of activity for all sorts of people. In 2002, Scott Heiferman started [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com/) based on the “simple idea of using the Internet to get people off the Internet (Heiferman, 2009).” The entire purpose of [Meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com/) is not to foster global interaction and collaboration (as is the purpose of something like Usenet,) but rather to allow people to organize locally. There are Meetups for politics (popular during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign), for New Yorkers who own Boston terriers (Fairbanks, 2008), for vegan cooking, for board games, and

for practically everything else. Essentially, the service (which charges a small fee to Meetup organizers) separates itself from other social networking sites by encouraging real-life interaction. Whereas a member of a Facebook group may never see or interact with fellow members, Meetup.com actually keeps track of the (self-reported) real-life activity of its groups—ideally, groups with more activity are more desirable to join. However much time these groups spend together on or off the Internet, one group of people undoubtedly has the upper hand when it comes to online interaction: *World of Warcraft* players.

World of Warcraft: Social Interaction Through Avatars

A writer for *Time* states the reasons for the massive popularity of online role-playing games quite well: “[My generation’s] assumptions were based on the idea that video games would never grow up. But no genre has worked harder to disprove that maxim than MMORPGs—Massively Multiplayer Online Games (Coates, 2007).” *World of Warcraft* (WoW, for short) is the most popular MMORPG of all time, with over 11 million subscriptions and counting. The game is inherently social; players must complete “quests” in order to advance in the game, and many of the quests are significantly easier with multiple people. Players often form small, four-to five-person

groups in the beginning of the game, but by the end of the game these larger groups (called “raiding parties”) can reach up to 40 players.

In addition, WoW provides a highly developed social networking feature called “guilds.” Players create or join a guild, which they can then use to band with other guilds in order to complete some of the toughest quests. “But once you’ve got a posse, the social dynamic just makes the game more addictive and time-consuming,” writes Clive Thompson for Slate (Thompson, 2005). Although these guilds do occasionally meet up in real life, most of their time together is spent online for hours per day (which amounts to quite a bit of time together), and some of the guild leaders profess to seeing real-life improvements. Joi Ito, an Internet business and investment guru, joined WoW long after he had worked with some of the most successful Internet companies; he says he “definitely (Pinckard, 2006)” learned new lessons about leadership from playing the game. Writer Jane Pinckard, for video game blog 1UP, lists some of Ito’s favorite activities as “looking after newbs [lower-level players] and pleasing the veterans,” which he calls a “delicate balancing act (Pinckard, 2006),” even for an ex-CEO.

8.4 THE EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET AND GLOBALIZATION ON POPULAR CULTURE AND INTERPERSONAL



Guilds often go on “raiding parties”—just one of the many semisocial activities in World of Warcraft. Attribution: [gathering in Kargath before a raid](#) – monsieur paradis – CC BY-NC 2.0.

With over 12 million subscribers, WoW necessarily breaks the boundaries of previous MMORPGs. The social nature of the game has attracted unprecedented numbers of female players (although men still make up the vast majority of players), and its players cannot easily be pegged as antisocial video game addicts. On the contrary, they may even be called social video game players, judging from the general responses given by players as to why they enjoy the game. This type of play certainly points to a new way of online interaction that may continue to grow in coming years.

Social Interaction on the Internet Among Low-Income Groups

In 2006, the journal *Developmental Psychology* published a study looking at the educational benefits of the Internet for teenagers in low-income households. It found that “children who used the Internet more had higher grade point averages (GPA) after one year and higher scores after standardized tests of reading achievement after six months than did children who used it less,” and that continuing to use the Internet more as the study went on led to an even greater increase in GPA and standardized test scores in reading (there was no change in mathematics test scores) (Jackson, et. al., 2006).

One of the most interesting aspects of the study’s results is the suggestion that the academic benefits may exclude low-performing children in low-income households. The reason for this, the study suggests, is that children in low-income households likely have a social circle consisting of other children from low-income households who are also unlikely to be connected to the Internet. As a result, after 16 months of Internet usage, only 16 percent of the participants were using e-mail and only 25 percent were using instant messaging services. Another reason researchers suggested was that because “African-American culture is historically an ‘oral culture,’” and 83 percent of the participants were African American, the

“impersonal nature of the Internet’s typical communication tools” may have led participants to continue to prefer face-to-face contact. In other words, social interaction on the Internet can only happen if your friends are also on the Internet.

The Way Forward: Communication, Convergence, and Corporations

On February 15, 2010, the firm Compete, which analyzes Internet traffic, reported that Facebook surpassed Google as the No. 1 site to drive traffic toward news and entertainment media on both Yahoo! and MSN (Ingram, 2010). This statistic is a strong indicator that social networks are quickly becoming one of the most effective ways for people to sift through the ever-increasing amount of information on the Internet. It also suggests that people are content to get their news the way they did before the Internet or most other forms of mass media were invented—by word of mouth.

Many companies now use the Internet to leverage word-of-mouth social networking. The expansion of corporations into Facebook has given the service a big publicity boost, which has no doubt contributed to the growth of its user base, which in turn helps the corporations that put marketing efforts into the

service. Putting a corporation on Facebook is not without risk; any corporation posting on Facebook runs the risk of being commented on by over 500 million users, and of course there is no way to ensure that those users will say positive things about the corporation. Good or bad, communicating with corporations is now a two-way street.

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MEDIA FUTURES

FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

This unit focuses on the emerging trends and challenges in the field of journalism. This section includes:

- Social Media and News Production
- Social Media and News Distribution
- Computational Journalism
- Artificial Intelligence and Automation

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS PRODUCTION

Introduction

The term “social media” refers to *platforms that allow users to create a public profile, develop lists of connections (e.g., friends), traverse those connections by viewing others’ profiles and public messages, and add short posts of their own to the network (which may include text, images, videos, and links to things like news stories).*

While those platforms were not designed with journalism in mind, they became an important part of journalism starting in the 2010s and are now routinely factored into journalistic work. Journalists use social media to gauge public interest and sentiment, keep tabs on the competition, identify story ideas, find and verify sources, and promote and distribute their work. It has become so central to many journalists’ day-to-day activities that many journalistic outlets now have social media policies to guide journalists on how to appropriately use social media (and deal with some of the challenges it introduces).

Social Media and Newsgathering

While journalists have long looked to their friends and peers for story ideas and validation, they now increasingly turn to social media for those things. Journalists listen to the general public primarily through the use of hashtags and indicators of popularity (e.g., trending topics on Twitter). They also engage directly with particular members of the public by replying to social media messages they come across and through replies to comments they receive themselves.

While journalists have been critiqued for employing a pack mentality well before the popularization of social media, researchers have repeatedly found that journalists interact primarily with other journalists on social media. This has led to critiques that social media has intensified *professional insularity*. That is, they may be increasingly operating within echo chambers of their own. Additionally, it is now easier for journalists to see what their peers are up to (and which behaviors are being socially rewarded among their peer group), and follow the pack leaders (i.e., the most influential journalists). This is driven, at least in part, by a desire to reduce professional uncertainty. For example, journalists often look to signals from their peers to validate their belief that the topic for their story (or story idea) is indeed newsworthy.

News consumers and journalists are not the only people on

social media, though. The sources that journalists frequently turn to may use social media themselves (and often do so in strategic ways). Journalists, especially those who work a consistent beat, develop extensive lists of sources that they follow closely on social media. They not only read the sources' posts to learn new information for a story but also selectively disseminate (e.g., retweet) the juiciest information, such as an injury update from a star basketball player herself. In doing so, journalists who are active on social media take on an additional role: that of a *curator* of online information. Researchers have also found that journalists routinely turn to social media for "person on the street" reactions, often embedding tweets and Instagram posts in their stories as examples of the public's reaction to a development. This is, in many ways, a continuation of traditional journalistic practice that simply leverages a new tool.

Nearly all major news events today are *live-tweeted* or *live-blogged* in some capacity. Those terms refer to a relatively new practice of constantly posting short bits of developing information on a social media stream in real time during a news event, such as a press conference. That practice has become so ingrained for some journalists that they now take notes in the form of short social media updates (e.g., tweets).

Most U.S. journalists today use Facebook and Twitter to conduct research for their stories. Journalists also use these platforms to request help in verifying information, such as by asking native speakers to help translate information, having

locals visit the site where an incident allegedly took place, or having experts double-check complex or specialized information. For example, David Fahrenthold, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, won a Pulitzer Prize for his Twitter-assisted coverage of Donald Trump's claims of charitable givings. Fahrenthold periodically posted on Twitter lists of dozens of charities he intended to contact, and solicited help from his followers for finding people who could confirm or deny that Trump had donated to those organizations. After four months of work and countless tips from his followers, Fahrenthold found only one charity confirming that Trump personally donated to them over an eight-year period.

Personal Branding

Social media have become central to journalists' growing efforts to develop personal brands. As journalists have become more entrepreneurial — driven in part by economic uncertainty within the journalism industry — they have used their social media profiles as billboards for their work. This does not simply mean posting their stories on social media. It also means highlighting their credentials, training, and expertise in order to appear more authoritative.

Audiences don't just crave professional, authoritative work, though. They also value authenticity and connection. To that end, journalists now increasingly mix professional and per-

sonal information as part of their personal branding efforts — part of a phenomenon called *context collapse*. For example, many journalists will offer more commentary online than they do in their news stories. Additionally, journalists may post pictures of personal activities, such as attending a sporting event as a fan or playing with their dog. As audiences feel a stronger sense of connection with particular journalists, they become more loyal followers. That, in turn, increases the journalist's perceived value and reach, which can be translated into better job offers and higher salary — or just greater potential impact for their work.

The blending of personal and professional affairs on social media has presented challenges to both individual journalists and their employers. While some journalistic outlets *require* their journalists to maintain a presence on social media (and some even stipulate a minimum number of social media posts and interactions per week), they also frequently employ social media guidelines that limit what those journalists can do on those platforms. This often puts journalists in a bind. If they act too professional or scripted, their personal brand may suffer from a perceived lack of authenticity. However, if they are too lax and casual, they risk being disciplined by their employer.

Attempts to build a following on social media can also backfire for journalists. An attempt at humor may be ill-received, for example, resulting in intense backlash from followers. Additionally, the pseudo-permanence of online postings

means that commentary from years earlier — such as criticism of a source or public official — can come back to haunt a journalist, or be used as a weapon by critics to discredit that journalist. This is the case not only for journalists who specialize in objective journalism but also professional columnists and editors at lifestyle-oriented outlets. For example, in 2021, Alexi McCammond was forced to resign as editor-in-chief of *Teen Vogue* shortly after being promoted to the position when flippant tweets posted a decade earlier that espoused offensive stereotypes about Asian people resurfaced online.

Journalistic Ethics on Social Media

Can journalists advocate for social justice causes on social media? Can they use hashtags to participate in protest movements? Can they publicly admonish or defend alleged wrongdoers? The answers to these kinds of questions often depends on the journalistic outlet the journalist works for and the specific issue in question.

For example, *The New York Times*' in-house social media guidelines includes this cautionary clause: "Social media presents potential risks for The Times. If our journalists are perceived as biased or if they engage in editorializing on social media, that can undercut the credibility of the entire newsroom." *The Washington Post*'s social media policy includes a

more direct prohibition: “Post journalists must refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything — including photographs or video — that could objectively be perceived as reflecting political, racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism.” While these guidelines are not always strictly enforced, they do shape journalistic behaviors.

Journalistic social media guidelines aren’t always explicit, though. The reality of social media interactions today leaves plenty of room for interpretation (and accidental violation) of different journalistic norms, many of which have changed considerably in recent years. This includes the ways in which journalists share details about their reporting or how they should engage with audiences who critique their work. For example, social media often serve as the primary sites of toxic digital attacks against journalists (especially female journalists and journalists of color) and their sources. That online harassment can have severe consequences for their emotional and mental health. Social media can also tempt journalists to get sucked into online arguments with users who disagree with them, resulting in unproductive and alienating debates. In short, journalists today must navigate an ethical landscape that is arguably more complex than in previous times.

Key Takeaways

- Social media are now routinely factored into news production. Journalists use social media to gauge public interest and sentiment, keep tabs on the competition, identify story ideas, find and verify sources, and promote and distribute their work.
- Social media have enabled a new role for many journalists: that of a curator of online information. Many of today's news events are live-tweeted or live-blogged in some capacity.
- Social media have become central to journalists' growing efforts to develop personal brands. This often results in clashes with those journalists' employers, who advocate more professional social media use via their social media guidelines.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS DISTRIBUTION

Introduction

According to a 2021 survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 42% of Americans say they use social media as a source of news. (A separate survey by the Pew Research Center pegged that figure at 53%.) Additionally, 31% of Americans surveyed by the Reuters Institute reported sharing news through social media, messaging apps, or e-mail. Those numbers have grown considerably since 2013, when 27% of the population reported using social media as a source of news. These increases have occurred despite the fact that most Americans claim they have much lower levels of trust in the news they encounter on social media (especially when compared to traditional media, such as local TV news).

The rise of news consumption on social media has had a major economic impact on the journalism industry and has had broader impacts on audiences' knowledge about public affairs. In considering such impacts, it is important to remember that social media is just a tool — one that is capable of advancing both positive and negative developments. Some

undesirable changes to journalism and society are directly attributable to the rise of social media, such as changes to the technical infrastructures that govern the flows of information. However, many undesirable changes attributed to the rise of social media are actually symptomatic of other developments within society, such as the devaluing of expertise and declining trust in institutions.

Nevertheless, it is evident that journalists and journalistic outlets today must contend with news consumption and distribution patterns that are configured in no small part by social media.

News Knowledge and Content Moderation

According to a 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center, 74% of U.S. adults use YouTube, 68% use Facebook, 40% use Instagram, 25% use Twitter, and 15% use Reddit. Many of their users regularly consume news on those platforms — in the cases of Facebook and Reddit, more than half of users reported regularly getting news on those platforms. Social media are thus crucial platforms for linking news producers with news consumers.

However, researchers have also found that relying on social media as a dominant source of news can have a negative influence on one's knowledge and media literacy. For example, the

Pew Research Center found that people who received their political news primarily from social media had lower levels of knowledge about COVID-19 and were more likely to be exposed to false information. This is particularly concerning as Pew also found, in a separate study, that nearly half of Americans said they were getting at least some news or information about COVID-19 vaccines from social media.

The apparent paradox imbued in the fact that large numbers of people get news from social media even as they find it to be an untrustworthy source of information has also led to a shift in attitudes toward the governance of news information flows. According to a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center, nearly half of U.S. adults said that the government should restrict false information online, even if it means that people lose some freedom to access or publish content. (There was even greater support for having tech companies serve as the moderators.) This is not a uniquely American attitude. Elsewhere in the world, several authoritative regimes have passed so-called “fake news” laws that grant their governments greater powers to restrict the publishing of information. In many instances, such laws have been used primarily to punish critical journalism.

The partisan divide that complicates news consumption in the United States also appears on social media. In the Pew survey, support for having the U.S. government restrict false information online was sharply divided among partisan lines, with those who self-identify as Democrats being more than twice as

likely to support the restriction of false information as Republicans. In a separate study, the Pew Research Center found that 64% of Republicans believed that tech companies prioritize liberal viewpoints while just 28% of Democrats thought so. These beliefs, in turn, impact the extent to which individuals trust the news content they casually encounter on those platforms, especially if that content is not consistent with an individual's preconceptions.

Platform Dependency

In order to remain relevant in the information ecosystem, journalistic outlets must seek out audiences where they are. This has resulted in growing *platform dependency*, a phenomenon wherein journalistic outlets come to depend on platforms like social media (and thus place themselves at their whims) in order to gain exposure to news audiences. When those platforms make changes to their sites, the impacts can be significant — especially for journalistic outlets whose revenue models depend on audience engagement and advertisements.

For example, in 2015, Facebook decided to prioritize videos in the algorithms it uses to curate the personalized News Feed users see on the site. Many journalistic outlets subsequently invested heavily in bolstering their video teams in order to produce more video content. (This is sometimes called the “pivot to video” era.) Those investments sometimes required

laying off significant numbers of long-time journalists and editors who were not well-versed in multimedia journalism. Later, however, it was discovered that Facebook dramatically overstated the success of videos posted on its platform. The company soon tweaked the algorithms once more to prioritize other signals instead (e.g., the number of reactions to a post). The journalistic outlets who pivoted toward video were forced to pivot back, firing many of the multimedia producers they had recently hired.

As this example illustrates, the fates of news content, journalists, and journalistic outlets can depend on just a few large, commercial social media platforms. With one tweak of their algorithms, an organization's content may become largely invisible to the platform's user base. This becomes especially problematic as more people congregate on fewer, larger platforms (resulting in a *network effect*, where the value of the platform increases as more people participate on it). The consolidation of massive audiences on those few platforms results in news organizations depending on referrals from those networks.

Platformization, or the rise of platforms as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the contemporary online environment, also presents a brand problem for journalistic outlets. Researchers have found that users tend to associate the news content they come across with the platform, and not the journalistic outlet. Thus, not only are journalistic out-

lets losing distributional control, they are also losing recognition.

Spreadable News

The sharing of news content is not a new social phenomenon. People have long described the news they heard on the radio or saw on TV to a work colleague over lunch, or even cut out and shared newspaper stories of note with friends and loved ones. However, in the online environment, it is much easier to share news content — often by simply clicking a button, whether on a platform (e.g., “retweet”) or on the story itself (e.g., “share”).

The term *spreadable media* has been coined to describe how participatory culture accelerates the distribution of media content. Today’s news consumption is often *incidental*, meaning that people frequently encounter news as part of their constant connection with social media, and not because they were actively looking for news. Put another way, even if their primary intention for accessing social media was to connect with friends, they may encounter a number of news products from different sources along the way. The consequence of this is that news consumption today is increasingly about exercising sociability — and part of that is by sharing content that people find to be interesting or relevant.

Moreover, the proliferation of social media has resulted in a user-centered distribution model. Only a relatively small share

of the stories published by *The New York Times* that users encounter on Facebook originate from the *Times*' Facebook page. Instead, the vast majority of those stories — and a large portion of external traffic driven to the *Times*' website — comes from users who voluntarily shared the story (often with some commentary). Thus, journalistic outlets are not only becoming increasingly dependent on platforms, they are also becoming more dependent on users who are willing to share the outlet's work.

There are many reasons why users choose to share. These range from having genuine interest in a story to promoting an identity marker, such as their intellect (e.g., high-brow think pieces) or political ideology (e.g., a story about partisan corruption). In order to get users to serve as willing sharers, journalistic outlets must find ways to appeal to those users. This might include, for example, writing a more provocative headline, including an emotional cover image, or even producing more opinionated content.

Thus, as some scholars have argued, while speed and quality used to be considered the twin pillars of good journalism, *sociability* has become a third pillar. It is no longer sufficient to be first and comprehensive; now, journalists must also produce journalism in a form that is capable of spreading effectively. Put another way, today's journalism must be both findable and shareable to succeed in a user-centered distribution model. This means both tweaking news products to optimize shareability (e.g., using salient keywords in the headline)

and seeking out key nodes of content distribution (e.g., influencers) to help promote a story after it has been published.

Key Takeaways

- Nearly half of all Americans now consume news on social media, with much of it occurring on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.
- People who consume news primarily through social media tend to have lower levels of knowledge about some issues. There is also growing appetite among Americans for greater moderation of false information on social media.
- Journalistic outlets have become increasingly dependent on social media in recent years due to changes in digital infrastructures and news consumption habits.
- Audiences now lie at the heart of news distribution, and journalists must be even more attentive than before to the shareability of their products.

COMPUTATIONAL JOURNALISM

Introduction

According to media scholar Nicholas Diakopoulos, “computational journalism” refers to *the application of computing and computational thinking to the activities of journalism (e.g., newsgathering), all while upholding core values of journalism (e.g., accuracy)*. As such, computational journalism isn’t just about the technology; it is also a way of approaching the practice of journalism.

As a way of thinking, *computational journalism is rooted in the idea of translating the messy world into organized (structured) information schemas*. For example, the many attributes (aspects) of a murder incident can be indexed based on taxonomies and categories of people, entities, concepts, events, and locations (e.g., who the perpetrator was, what kind of weapon they used, and what sort of location the murder took place in). In a way, journalists have always done this in an informal way in order to produce things like the summary lead (5Ws and H). However, computational journalism requires jour-

nalists to do it in a formal way, such as by storing each part of that information as a distinct item in a database.

A Brief History

Although computational journalism may seem like a novel thing, we can trace some of its informal origins to the 1800s. For example, the very first edition of *The Manchester Guardian* (May 5, 1821) offered a table listing the amount of patients at a local hospital who were inoculated against the cowpox, the amount who were released after surviving the disease, and the amount who died from it. It similarly offered other figures about the patients who were being treated for an accident as well as those being held in its ‘lunatic asylum.’ While no computers were used to compile that table — computers had not yet been invented — the *Guardian* journalists were already engaging in the form of thinking that powers computational journalism today.

The machine-aided form of journalism that is more typically associated with today’s computational journalism arguably began in 1952, when CBS News used a digital computer to predict the outcome of a presidential election by using partial results. By the 1960s, journalists like Phil Meyer of the *Detroit Free Press* and Clarence Jones of the *Miami Herald* were using computers to analyze things from survey data (e.g., to determine the underlying causes of the 1967 Detroit

riot) to court records (to uncover bias in the criminal justice system in Dade County). By the 1980s, an array of different computational practices for gathering and analyzing news began to emerge, many of which were categorized into what was termed “computer-assisted reporting.” Put another way, the logic used in computational journalism was being increasingly paired with the technology that is now associated with it.

As the Internet proliferated in the 1990s, journalistic practices became even more computationally oriented. In particular, journalistic outlets started investing more money in “digital” positions, resulting in new jobs and departments. This included the hiring of multi-person software development teams who could work with non-technically savvy journalists to produce computational journalism stories and develop computational journalism workflows. While such teams, processes, and products remained relatively small and had limited influence on the broader practice of journalism, they were important for seeding the changes to journalistic norms and logics that would accelerate in the coming years.

Computational Journalism in the 21st Century

By the late 2000s, new areas of specialization were emerging. These include *automated journalism* (having machines produce news content from data with limited human supervi-

sion), *conversational journalism* (communicating news via automated, dialogic interfaces like chat bots), *data journalism* (using data to report, analyze, write, and visualize stories), *sensor journalism* (using electronic sensors to collect and analyze new data for journalistic purposes), and *structured journalism* (publishing news as data).

While some of those specializations emerged relatively independently from one another, they are still centered on interpreting the world through data, and generally rely on computational processes to translate knowledge into data and data into knowledge. As such, they are fundamentally computational forms of journalism, regardless of the amount of technological wherewithal that is actually required.

Computational journalism also aims to blend logics and processes spanning multiple disciplines, such as journalism, computer science, information retrieval, and visual design. With regard to journalism, it involves a significant shift away from the traditional focus on nuance (in reporting), individualism (in subject or focus), and creativity (in writing). Instead, it orients itself toward standardization (in reporting), scale (in subject or focus), and efficiency (in writing). These differences in logics and approaches often make it difficult for editorial and technical actors to work together on computational journalism projects. In fact, researchers have found that when computational journalism projects fizzle or fail, it is often due to the philosophical and procedural differences among members of the team.

Nevertheless, computational forms of journalism have been used to produce highly impactful work in recent years, both in terms of journalistic content and new tools for producing journalism. Several computational journalists (who don't always self-identify as such) have won prestigious awards for their computational journalism. For example, Jay Hancock and Elizabeth Lucas of *Kaiser Health News* won a Pulitzer Prize in 2020 for exposing predatory bill collection by the University of Virginia Health System, which had forced many low-income patients into bankruptcy. Hancock and Lucas worked together with an open data advocate to collect and analyze information about millions of civil court records in Virginia — far more than a human journalist could inspect manually. Their reporting resulted in the non-profit, state-run hospital changing its behavior.

On the software side, journalists have worked alongside software development teams to create technologies like DocumentCloud, an all-in-one platform designed to help journalists (and teams of journalists working across multiple journalistic outlets) to upload, organize, analyze, annotate, search, and embed documents. The project brings together existing tools from disciplines like computational linguistics into an interface that is accessible to many journalists. Similarly, MuckRock has made it easier for journalists to make several Freedom of Information Act requests at the same time, write news stories from them, and share the data with other journalists.

Computational journalism demands the same high ethical

standards as traditional journalism to ensure that the process of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information to the public is truthful, independent, and inclusive. However, computational forms of journalism do not always have a distinct code of ethics. This can be challenging as computational journalists tend to place a greater premium on transparency and openness than traditional journalists, which can introduce ethical tensions. For example, some computational journalists have been critiqued as being naive for posting unredacted datasets (that placed unwitting individuals at risk) or not reviewing automated stories (that included misinformation).

It is expected that computational journalism will only continue to grow in the coming years. For example, *The New York Times* launched a short program to teach its journalists data skills, and the outlet made that course open-source when publishing it online. And, journalistic outlets like *BuzzFeed News*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *The Marshall Project*, and *The Washington Post* sometimes post the code powering their computational journalism on the code-sharing platform GitHub in order to promote their craft. Moreover, as computers become more powerful and intelligent, automation is likely to become more commonplace — as will the tasks related to translating the natural world into structured data.

Key Takeaways

- Computational journalism covers both the application of computing *and* computational thinking to various journalistic activities, including information gathering, sensemaking, and information dissemination.
- Computational journalism is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it has developed intensely in recent years as new forms of journalism emerged.
- Computational journalism has been used to produce both award-winning journalistic work as well as impactful journalism-oriented technologies.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND AUTOMATION

Introduction

According to researchers Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, “artificial intelligence” (AI) refers to *a system’s ability to correctly interpret external data, learn from those data, and apply those learnings to achieve specific goals through flexible adaptation.*

As their definition suggests, the intelligence in AI is based on some form of “learning” that usually comes from data covering events or instances that occurred in the past. AI will then use that past learning and adapt to some related phenomenon in the present. And, it will then conduct itself in the present in a way that we would consider to be “intelligent” if that same task had been performed by a human being. Finally, AI generally continues to learn as the present becomes the past, and continues to adapt as the future becomes the present.

Artificial intelligence plays a hidden but significant role in our daily lives. When you type half a phrase into the Google search bar and Google suggests several ways you might finish

it, a predictive algorithm is at play. When you look for flights online, an intelligent (well, not always) algorithm may try to guess your budget based on your browsing history and suggest a nearby hotel within that price range. When Facebook recommends tagging yourself in a photo because it recognizes your face, it's because an intelligent algorithm has already analyzed your face many times. Moreover, we are increasingly seeing applications of AI in many different facets of journalism.

AI in Journalism

As with other segments of everyday life, artificial intelligence is no longer just some niche idea within the news industry. AI is already being used, in varying ways and to different extents, within every major stage of news production, from helping journalists find ‘the story’ to automating personalized distribution of news content.

Generating Story Ideas

Coming up with a unique and compelling story idea is one of the most creative parts of journalism. The world is filled with newsworthy events — each of which can be approached through a large array of story angles — but journalists only have the capacity to tackle a relatively small amount of them. Moreover, audiences have limited time and attention, and can

only consume a sliver of the content that is already out there. To stand out, journalists must identify the most interesting and informative angles for the most interesting and important events. While AI still struggles to come up with unique and compelling ideas of its own (and is generally limited to phenomena that have been digitized and structured), it is nevertheless being used by journalists to manage information overload and to help them find ‘the story’ in large troves of documents.

For example, in 2016, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published a series of stories that examined sexual abuse of patients by their doctors. While a human journalist decided that this was an important story to explore — it would go on to be a Pulitzer Prize finalist — intelligent algorithms still played a major role in helping the journalist find what was most interesting and significant about the story. The algorithms reviewed a set of disciplinary documents that were manually identified (by a human) as involving sexual misconduct and learned about the sorts of words and phrases that were commonly used in such documents to describe sexual misconduct. (After all, there usually wasn’t a clear sentence in the disciplinary documents that read, “this person sexually abused someone.”) That algorithm then applied that learning to more than 100,000 documents, which had not been reviewed by a human, and gave each document a probability that it involved a case of physician sexual misconduct. This helped point the journalists at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* toward doctors, clinics,

and areas where that abuse was most prevalent or disproportionate.

As another example, in 2019, a whistleblower secretly leaked documents from a law firm in Mauritius to a group of investigative journalists. The documents provided a rare look at how multinational companies avoided paying taxes when they did business in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. There were more than 200,000 documents in that leak, with some of those documents being hundreds of pages long. To help journalists make sense of that information, the digital news outlet *Quartz* built a machine learning algorithm that helped journalists locate the most relevant portions of the most relevant documents. Specifically, when the journalist found a document of interest, the algorithm would analyze it and link the journalist to other documents in the leaked trove that had similar kinds of information or involved the same individuals and organizations.

Sourcing and Verifying Information

As journalists flesh out their story ideas, they frequently turn to different sources of information, from expert human sources to databases. When sourcing information, journalists typically look for the most authoritative source. That authority may come by virtue of someone's position (like the CEO of a company), their area of expertise (like an academic who

studies a very specific thing), or from someone's proximity to a phenomenon (like a person who saw the car crash). However, there are often multiple sources who can speak with authority about some topic. For example, there are several academics who study police funding — and even though they're all experts, each may bring a different perspective to the table.

News organizations are already using AI to help them not only identify potential sources but to correct systematic sourcing biases that may arise in the course of reporting. For example, in 2018, the *Financial Times* began using AI to review stories and warn journalists if they were relying too heavily on male sources. The *Financial Times*' technology was not particularly sophisticated; it mostly guessed the gender based on a person's name and the use of pronouns. But it was enough to make a journalist reflect because several biases operate at a subconscious level — and having something prompt the journalist to reflect is sometimes enough to mitigate the worst effects. A more sophisticated technology produced by the Ryerson School of Journalism, JeRI, similarly aims to score the institutional power of sources by weighing factors including their placement in a story and frequency of attribution. This helps journalists see if some people, organizations, and locations are receiving too much attention.

The use of AI isn't just limited to sourcing. It is also being used to help journalists both interview and make use of interviews. For example, United Robots, a Swedish tech company, offers technology that can automate the process of conducting

(simple) interviews. In the case of a soccer match, the technology is able to analyze a game recap, identify potential questions for the winning and losing coaches, send those coaches text messages with the questions, and integrate the coaches' responses into the game recap. All of this can occur with limited human supervision. AI has also been used by journalists to parse interview transcripts (some of which are computer-generated) and identify the most interesting aspects of the interview, or to link a source's present remarks with things they've said elsewhere in the past.

News organizations are also using AI to fact-check information, either by intelligently linking new stories and claims to existing, human-led fact-checks or by attempting to intelligently rate a claim by independently looking up information in knowledge bases. For example, Storyful, a company that specializes in fact-checking information on social media, partnered with Google in 2020 to create Source, a tool that automatically looks up an image's public history (to ascertain its origin), checks it for artifacts suggestive of digital manipulation, and extracts and translates any text (e.g., from a meme). This helps journalists more quickly ascertain if an image is likely to be a hoax or part of a disinformation campaign.

Producing Stories

A great deal of newswriting is formulaic. The inverted pyramid remains the dominant narrative structure for breaking news,

and journalists often adhere to, and repeat, certain sets of words, phrases, and syntax (e.g., “said” and “according to”). Unsurprisingly, AI is therefore already used by some leading news organizations (e.g., *Bloomberg News* in the United States, *The Canadian Press* in Canada, and *Helsingin Sanomat* in Finland) to produce tens of thousands of seemingly human-produced news stories each year with limited supervision.

For example, *The Associated Press* uses AI to review hundreds of thousands of public filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission and turn them into news stories. The process is largely automated. It begins by accessing the SEC’s system and downloading all new filings, such as a quarterly earnings report. It then translates a filing into a structured dataset, looking for expected markers like the company’s reported revenue for that quarter and trying to make sense of unstructured information (e.g., the company’s forecast for the next quarter or its expected threats). It then analyzes that filing, sometimes comparing it to previous data (e.g., the previous quarter’s revenue and forecast) to identify the most interesting data points. It then inserts those data points into one of many potential story templates previously written by human journalists. (You can think of these templates as a Mad Libs of sorts.) Finally, it publishes the story on *The Associated Press*’ newswire. The entire process is largely unsupervised — after setting up the algorithm and writing the templates, the *AP* journalists can take their hands off the wheel.

AI is also used to personalize segments of human-produced stories, such as by localizing or rewriting portions of a human-crafted narrative to appeal to each individual user. For example, *The New York Times* has used AI to identify a reader's location and personalize a human-produced story about air quality around the world by adding a computer-generated paragraph about the air quality in the reader's location.

Additionally, journalistic outlets like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) have used AI to summarize stories written by humans and machines alike, producing either bullet-point rundowns or shortened versions of those stories. Those summaries can serve as the basis for companion products, such as an auto-generated news roundup for a voice assistant like Amazon's Alexa. The BBC has even experimented with automating the transformation of a text story into a multi-panel visual story that can be instantly shared on visually oriented platforms like Instagram.

AI is not just being used in text-oriented journalism, though. News organizations have experimented with using "deep fake" technology to automate broadcasts featuring both semi-human and entirely synthetic anchors. For example, Reuters has prototyped a fully automated sports news summary system that pairs automated game summaries with photographs of the key moments being described, all of which is presented by synthetic footage of a real news presenter (i.e., a "deep fake" based on pre-recorded footage of the presenter). Put another way, Reuters' technology is able to combine the

words describing the event with relevant pictures, and present the package through a realistic-looking anchor. China's Xinhua News Agency has prototyped similar technology that is able to operate outside the realm of sports and that uses an entirely computer-generated anchor.

These technologies represent advances on existing uses of AI in multimedia journalism. For example, AI is already frequently used to help editors 'tag' audiovisual content (e.g., label the people, objects, and locations in a picture) in order to help them more easily find relevant photos later on.

Distributing Stories

News consumers regularly engage with news distributed via intelligent algorithms. For example, when a person visits a news outlet's website, they often encounter several widgets on the sides of the article that direct the person to other articles they might want to read next. Those recommendations may be tailored specifically to that person, based on the stories they have previously read on that outlet's site, or even elsewhere on the Web. For example, if that person usually reads political news stories or watches videos about the Boston Celtics, the journalistic outlet's algorithms may point the person toward more stories about politics or the Celtics.

Such recommendation algorithms are used by digitally native and legacy outlets alike. For example, even *The New York Times*, an organization that takes great pride in its jour-

nalistic expertise and editorial stewardship, has relinquished some of its agenda-setting power by adopting personalized distribution via the “For You” section of its app. Some organizations, including publications owned by Sweden’s Bonnier News Local, allow intelligent algorithms to take the lead in organizing the news content appearing on those publications’ home pages, leaving human editors to play more of a supervisory role (i.e., to occasionally overrule the algorithm’s editorial decision-making).

More broadly, in an information ecosystem that is arguably oversupplied with content, there is an economic imperative for some news organizations to employ AI to intelligently distribute their products in tailored ways across platforms and to multiple market segments. This includes adapting their existing content to fit the expectations of different platforms, such as by creating a shorter automated news summary for TikTok than what might appear on YouTube. It also involves adapting promotional messages to take advantage of different platforms’ technical affordances, such as by identifying trending hashtags and automatically applying the relevant ones to the journalistic outlet’s work.

Ethical and Legal Dilemmas

AI is not some neutral thing. AI is not only shaped by its creators but it shapes individual and collective human behaviors

via the ways it is put to use. It is thus crucial to take stock of the fact that market-leading technologies at the intersection of AI and journalism are being developed by people and companies with backgrounds outside of journalism, and to wrestle with the positive and negative implications of that. For example, AI technologies are often benchmarked through notions of efficiency and scalability. This is a stark contrast to the ideals that shape understandings of ‘quality’ journalism.

AI technologies can also become highly biased: depending on how (and by whom) the AI is developed and what it is trained upon, it can adopt and replicate (at scale) a number of human flaws. For example, Amazon created an AI-based hiring tool that ended up disproportionately rejecting female applicants. A 2021 investigation by *The Markup* found that an algorithm used by a large government agency was more likely to suggest denying home loans to people of color than to White people with similar characteristics. That was just one of many investigations by *The Markup*, a non-profit data-driven journalistic outlet, that have repeatedly shown that ‘color-blind’ algorithms are anything but.

Within the context of journalism, AI can unintentionally reproduce problematic depictions and promote inaccurate stereotypes. For example, an automated story about a decrease in the number of immigrants entering the United States may automatically embed a stock photo of immigrants being detained by immigration authorities. That, in turn, might promote and perpetuate the association between immigration and

criminality, simply because the algorithm has learned that previous stories about immigration tended to focus on elements of legality and crime. Journalists and their outlets must therefore remain mindful of how they are employing artificial intelligence, and how such applications may advance or detract from their mission to represent truth.

On the legal front, the United States legal landscape remains unclear about key considerations involving the applications of AI in public communication. For example, legal standards in the U.S. make it difficult to hold algorithms (and their creators) liable for libel, leaving unclear who can be held legally responsible for defamation when the communication is enacted by a machine. Moreover, even established case law is now being reexamined as AI proliferates. This includes safe-harbor provisions that have shielded operators of digital infrastructure (and portions of news websites) from certain liabilities.

AI and the Future of Journalism

The future of journalism will involve greater human-machine interaction. While humans will likely remain at the center of news production, the work they do and the ways they go about it will look different. This will invariably result in the downsizing of certain roles and aspects of the job, but it will also

create new roles and possibilities — from developing new technologies to managing knowledge systems to specializing in new beats and formats.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that although the aforementioned applications of AI in journalism show promise, the technology is still limited in important ways. For example, although algorithms already produce hundreds of thousands of business and sports news stories, their applications remain largely limited to news briefs and game recaps. An algorithm would have a much harder time writing a story that gets at *how* a CEO's sex scandal might affect their company, or produce a feature on *why* a player decided to sit out the season due to health concerns. Put another way, only a small amount of the news stories people regularly consume can be produced using the present AI technology, and those stories generally rely on either pre-existing data or phenomena that can be easily translated into structured data. And, products resulting from AI-led processes are usually relatively basic: they still use fairly simple expressions to convey information and can only offer surface-level analyses. They do not feature compelling leads or writerly panache, and they don't win Pulitzers on their own.

Nevertheless, there is good reason for journalistic outlets to invest in AI, and good reason to believe such investments will only increase. Journalists and journalistic outlets that fail to adapt to this changing environment will find themselves at risk of falling behind competitors who are able to leverage AI to increase efficiencies, scale upward, and even improve the

quality of their work. Algorithms can generate news stories far more quickly than human journalists, and they can be useful aides for creating the first documentation of an event. Put another way, they can free up human journalists to focus on the more meaningful follow-up stories and draw some attention to stories that might otherwise not receive any coverage (for lack of human resources).

However, it is not just news producers who must adapt. The future of journalism will also likely be filled with ‘junk,’ from misinformation and disinformation to more fundamental issues involving information overload resulting from an influx of automated communication. That, in turn, will require individuals to adapt their existing media literacies and seek out their own trusted, intelligent assistants to help separate signal from noise.

Key Takeaways

- Artificial intelligence refers to a system that is capable of learning from the past, adapting to the present, and acting in a way that would be considered “intelligent” if a human being did it.
- AI is today used in some fashion in every stage of news production, from coming up with story ideas to distributing news content.

- AI is not a neutral technology; it takes on values from its creators and the objects it is tasked to learn from. This introduces a number of ethical and legal dilemmas that journalistic actors must be mindful of.
- Humans will likely remain at the center of news production. However, the work they do and the ways they go about it will look different.

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.