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LIVING IN A MEDIA WORLD

An Introduction to Mass Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to

- 1.1 Identify and describe the four levels of communication
- 1.2 Define the term *media literacy* and identify the four dimensions of media literacy
- 1.3 Define the term *mass media* and identify the four models of mass communication
- 1.4 Explain the historical evolution of the media world
- 1.5 Describe the “Seven Secrets” about the mass media

Back in the 1990s, radio shock jock Howard Stern crowned himself as “the King of All Media.” Over the decade he would be known for pushing limits to the breaking point on his popular talk show, having a bestselling memoir called *Private Parts*, and having the book turned into a hit movie starring himself.

At the time, it was just about impossible to overestimate Stern’s presence in the media world and his potential to offend. He made jokes about rapes and even about his wife’s miscarriage. His offensive content and constant flirtation with near profanity kept him in constant trouble with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). One biography of Stern notes that his biggest controversy occurred when he was on the air in Washington, D.C., and an Air Florida plane crashed into the 14th Street Bridge during a snowstorm: “To express his outrage over the incident, [Stern] pretended to call the airline to inquire what a one-way ticket from National Airport to the 14th Street Bride would cost and whether it would become ‘a regular stop.’”^{1,2}

These days, Stern still has a national audience estimated to be in the vicinity of 1 to 2 million people per day with his two channels on Sirius/XM satellite radio, a nonbroadcast alternative to standard radio that is not regulated by the FCC. But he does not have the outsized influence he once did.³

Television talk show host and media mogul Oprah Winfrey took over as the Queen of All Media in the 2000s with her long-running daily television talk show, her satellite/cable network, a self-titled magazine, and her Harpo television and movie production company. When Oprah (who really only needs her first name in the media world) listed a title for her television book club, it would become an instant bestseller and a cultural touchstone. But since she closed down her daily talk show back in 2011, she too has moved a bit to the background.⁴

In the 2020s, the title of Queen of All Media clearly belongs to pop star Taylor Swift. She is the first female artist to have 100 million monthly Spotify listeners.⁵ Her Eras concert tour presale brought Ticketmaster to its knees when millions of fans attempted simultaneously to buy approximately 2 million tickets in a matter of a few hours. Eras would go on to be the world’s first billion-dollar concert tour. In addition, her Swiftie fans are estimated to be spending between \$2 and \$3 million for merchandise each night.⁶



In the 1990s, shock jock Howard Stern called himself the “King of All Media.” That crown has been passed on at least twice in the decades since then.

Kevin Mazur/Getty Images for SiriusXM

The Eras Tour concert film brought in more than \$250 million in box office on a budget of approximately \$15 million. Of course, having IMAX tickets selling for close to \$20 a seat didn't hurt. Nor did the fact that there was virtually nothing new in theaters due to ongoing writers and actors strikes. Those \$20 tickets were a bargain, though, compared with the \$235 average ticket price for the actual concerts.⁷

In addition to having intensely popular music across a wide range of demographics, Swift has also become something of a feminist icon by reclaiming her place in the recording industry by re-recording all of her early albums owned by the Big Machine label. By releasing "Taylor's Version" of these albums, she took ownership of her master tapes and gave her fans the chance to buy them straight from her instead of rewarding her estranged former manager, Scooter Braun.⁸

Gannett, the largest U.S. newspaper chain, even has a full-time Taylor Swift reporter. Brian West was hired for the Swift beat in November 2023. West admits to being a huge Swiftie but doesn't see that as an obstacle to him covering the Taylor media industry:

"I would say this position's no different than being a sports journalist who's a fan of the home team," says West. "I just came from Phoenix, and all of the anchors there were wearing Diamondbacks gear; they want the Diamondbacks to win. I'm just a fan of Taylor and I have followed her her whole career, but I also have that journalistic background: going to Northwestern, winning awards, working in newsrooms across the nation. I think that's the fun of this job is that, yeah, you can talk Easter eggs, but it really is more of the seriousness, like the impact that she has on society and business and music."⁹

Swift has even been credited with raising the television viewership of Kansas City Chiefs NFL games because she is dating one of the team's star players, Travis Kelce, and attends the team's games. There are also at least 10 college courses offered about her, including one at Harvard.

All of this led *Time* magazine to name Swift as its 2023 Person of the Year. In the cover story, journalist Sam Lansky writes:

It's hard to see history when you're in the middle of it, harder still to distinguish Swift's impact on the culture from her celebrity, which emits so much light it can be blinding. But something unusual is happening with Swift, without a contemporary precedent. She deploys the most efficient medium of the day—the pop song—to tell her story. Yet over time, she has harnessed the power of the media, both traditional and new, to create something wholly unique—a narrative world, in which her music is just one piece in an interactive, shape-shifting story. Swift is that story's architect and hero, protagonist and narrator.¹⁰

The media world has changed massively since Howard Stern dominated it in the pre-#metoo era of joking about sexual assault and other horrific issues that would not be tolerated now. It has also changed from an era in which Oprah, star of a daily broadcast television show, could dominate our discussion of books, culture, and race.

The first couple years of the 2020s were a time of intense turmoil, with the entire world shutting down in reaction to a global pandemic that would leave more than 1 million people dead in the United States alone. So perhaps people flooding to Taylor Swift's concerts and film, constantly streaming her music, and obsessing over her dating life are attempts to return to a world of normalcy where sporting events are held with fans in attendance, music can be celebrated with friends, and we can be creating the media memories that are such an important part of our shared life.

THE FOUR LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION

As director of eSports and head coach at Doane University, in Crete, Nebraska, Aaron Blackman communicates a lot, for both work and hobbies. His communication often flows through social media platforms, such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, Discord, and occasionally Facebook. Aaron

has this to say about using these outlets to stay in touch with friends and family, attend meetings, and form new connections with gamers around the world:

Communicating with others through social media weaves in and out of my daily routine. I check numerous forms of social media throughout the day for a variety of reasons. Primarily I use Discord, as that's how I keep in touch with my players, the conference, and other coaches. Discord is really useful for announcements, video, and voice calls. Discord, if you sign up or add friends, you have to sign up to a server, and it is curated for what you need to do. One of the things I did on day one with this job was create a Discord server for Doane eSports since this was a brand-new program. On this server, there's just me and our students here. At some point I will work on it and partition it off a little bit so there is a section for high school students who might be interested in connecting with coaches or players.

I use X to keep up on video game news. Politics is a little harder now on X. In the past I was also a freelance eSports journalist, so I used what was then Twitter as a first point of contact when it came to interviewing pro players and gauging fan reactions to pro games.

I also occasionally livestream video games I'm playing on Twitch. For the last 9 or 10 years, I've been doing an annual 24-hour Twitch livestream of me playing video games to raise money for the Nebraska Children's Hospital through the Extra Life charity. Among the games I've been playing are Hearthstone, Super Mario Wonder, the ghost-hunting game Phasmophobia, and Enter the Gungeon.

I also use Instagram, but mostly for sharing hobby photos of board games and painted gaming miniatures. Finally, as a Facebook member since 2005, I don't update it very often anymore, but I find myself scrolling through from time to time to catch up on life updates from family members, friends, and former co-workers.¹¹

When Aaron is on social media, he is engaging in almost every possible level of communication, but before we try to analyze these, we need to define what communication is. Media scholar George Gerbner provides a simple definition: **Communication** is “social interaction through messages.”¹² More plainly put, communication is how we interact with our entire world, whether through spoken words, written words, gestures, music, paintings, photographs, or dance. In the classical theory of communication there are four distinct levels of communication:

1. Intrapersonal—one to self
2. Interpersonal—one to one
3. Public speaking—one to a group
4. Mass communication—one to many

The important point is that communication is a process, not a static thing. Communication is an interaction that allows individuals, groups, and institutions to share ideas. Several of us engage hourly every day in a range of general levels of communication, often switching between them from moment to moment. Because of this, it is worth understanding what the four distinct levels of communication are and how we interact with them.

Intrapersonal Communication

Communication at its most basic level is **intrapersonal communication**, which is really communication within the self. This is how we think and how we assign meaning to all the messages and events that surround our lives. It ranges from the simple act of smiling in response to the smell of a favorite food coming from the kitchen to thinking about whether we really want to share that photo on

Snapchat. Feedback, or the response from the receiver of the message, is constant because we are always (or should be always) reflecting on what we have done and how we will react. When Aaron Blackman is thinking over in his own mind whether to share a photo on Instagram of a Marvel figure Spider-Man he's just painted, he is engaging in intrapersonal communication. Our own thoughts on what we want to communicate directly or indirectly with others are parts of important decisions that we may not pay enough attention to. People who have been drinking alcohol or using recreational drugs may suffer impaired intrapersonal communication, which may lead them to engage in more public communication they will later regret.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication, or one-on-one communication, is “the intentional or accidental transmission of information through verbal or nonverbal message systems to another human being.”¹³ Interpersonal communication can be a conversation with a friend or a hug that tells your mother you love her. Like communication with the self, interpersonal communication is continual when others are around because we constantly send out messages, even if those messages consist of nothing more than body language indicating that we want to be left alone.

Interpersonal communication provides many opportunities for feedback. Your friend nods, raises an eyebrow, touches you on the arm, or simply answers your question. Not all interpersonal communication is done face to face, however. A telephone conversation, an SMS text message, an email, or even a greeting card can be interpersonal communication, though at a somewhat greater emotional distance than a face-to-face conversation. When Aaron carries out a personal conversation over Discord, sends a text message to a friend about a video game, or talks to his wife over dinner, he's engaging in interpersonal communication.

Group Communication

Group communication is when a network of people are communicating with each other. There might be a leader who is dominating the communication in the group, such as with a teacher in the classroom. Students in the class will also have many opportunities to communicate—asking questions, demonstrating their boredom by playing games on their phone, or even falling asleep and snoring in the back of the room. But sometimes the group communication is more evenly interactive, such as when a group of friends are arguing about the merits of the latest movie they just watched.

Other situations test the boundaries of group communication, such as a Kendrick Lamar concert at an amphitheater or concert hall. With the amplifiers and multiple video screens, there is a high level of communication technology but limited possibilities for audience members to provide direct feedback to the performers. However, there is still interaction between the rapper and his audience through cheers, applause, and answering back. A key characteristic here is that our roles as senders and receivers are constantly changing. At one moment we are sending out messages and in the next instant we are receiving them. Aaron engages in group communication when he meets with his eSports team, cheers while attending an eSports event in person, or shares a photo on Instagram.¹⁴

Mass Communication

Mass communication is a society-wide communication process in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large, mixed audience, most of whose members are not known



Aaron Blackman occasionally streams video games like Brotato on the live streaming platform Twitch under his gamer name Flagg05.

Courtesy of Aaron Blackman

to the sender. Nationally broadcast speeches by politicians, stories about crime in the newspapers, and popular new novels are all forms of mass communication. These communications are fundamentally different from the forms described previously because the sender is separated in space, and possibly in time, from the receiver. Also, the audience is not really known to the communicator. When a communicator appears on television or writes an article for a newspaper, they don't know who will be listening or reading. What is more, the audience consists of many types of people. It might contain a young man in prison, an old woman in a nursing home, a child eating Cheerios for breakfast, or Aaron as he's getting ready to go to the office to meet with his eSports team. The message is communicated to all these people and to thousands or millions of others.¹⁵

Traditionally, mass communication has allowed only limited opportunities for feedback because the channels of communication were largely one-way, but with the rise of interactive communication networks, the opportunities for feedback are growing rapidly. Aaron consumes a wide range of mass communication types during his day, including binge-watching shows on Netflix, Hulu, and Disney+; watching movies in a home theater he's built; watching video game streamers and *Overwatch* tournaments on Twitch; playing video games on Blizzard, Steam, and the various game console networks; playing games through a new VR headset; and listening to music through YouTube or Spotify. "My wife and I haven't paid for cable or satellite for years, but we pay for a million streaming services. NFL is now spread out over multiple services, with some games being exclusive to some place like Peacock," Aaron says. "Aside from *The Last of Us*, *Ted Lasso*, or *The Mandalorian*, we are perfectly content to catch up on TV shows months or years after their initial run. Entertainment fits into our busy schedules, not the other way around."¹⁶



Dan Middleton, better known as YouTube video game streamer DanTDM, has managed to become enough of a media star to be invited to attend the BAFTA Children's Awards in London.

Mike Marsland/WireImage/Getty Images

Always a Mix of Levels

The distinctions among the various levels of communication are useful, but don't assume that every instance of communication can automatically be placed in one category or another. There are frequent crossovers in the levels of communication. Consider online communication. You can share a message with a friend via Snapchat. Through Instagram, you can share your favorite images or short video. With an intranet, an employer can communicate with employees throughout the world. And through websites and podcasts, messages can go out to the entire world. The same is true of a newspaper, in which a classified ad can carry a proposal of marriage, a notice of a group meeting, or a political manifesto. When Aaron goes out to dinner with friends, they cheer when a Nebraska Huskers football game being shown on the Big Ten Network gets exciting and talk about the competitors with each other, thus engaging in mass and group communication at the same time. When Aaron thinks about what he is going to say to his friends he is with or who are on social media, he's engaging in intrapersonal communication.

The purpose of this book is to help you better understand mass communication and the mass media. In the 15 chapters of this book, we look at a variety of topics:

- the institutions that make up the media and how they function in and affect our society
- the owners and controllers of media businesses
- the media themselves, including books, newspapers, audio, movies, television, online media, and social media
- the roles the media play in countries and cultures around the world
- the industries that support the media, including advertising and public relations
- the laws and ethics that regulate and control the media

By the time you are finished, you will better understand what the media are, how we interact with them, and what roles they play in our lives.

UNDERSTANDING OUR MEDIA WORLD

Most people have ambivalent feelings about their high levels of media use. Dr. James Potter, in his book *Media Literacy*, writes that our society is overwhelmed with media content spraying out through a virtual firehose. These messages include the following:

- more than 700 hours of feature films per year (Just think of how many hours of Marvel Cinematic Universe movies get released per year.)
- more than 300 hours of video added to YouTube per minute
- more than 48 million hours of video every year globally from commercial television
- more than 1,500 book titles published globally per day

With the pervasiveness of our mobile devices that seem to be physically attached to our bodies, we are rarely out of range of this content and our ability to share it with others. It is liberating to be connected to the entire industrialized world online, but the risk of invasion of privacy is troubling.

Research shows that this mix of growing amounts of content and easier access has resulted in us spending more and more time with our media. In 2019, a survey by eMarketer found that Americans spent an average of 12 hours and 30 minutes a day with media, literally more than half our day. That number was predicted to climb to 13 hours and 35 minutes per day in 2020, during the peak of the pandemic lockdown.^{17,18} The provocative question Potter raises is how do we deal with this high-pressure flow of content? How do we select what to consume? How do we process it? How do we integrate it or dismiss it from our lives? And, perhaps most importantly, what do we know about the choices we make? This section discusses the concept of media literacy and examines some common misconceptions about the mass media.

The term **media literacy** refers to people's understanding of what the media are, how they operate, what messages they are delivering, what roles they play in society, and how audience members respond to media messages. Potter defines media literacy this way: "a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter."

Potter argues that media literacy is not something that we either have or lack; instead, it is something we each have in varying levels. He writes that people with high levels of media literacy have a great deal of control over the vision of the world they see through the media and can decide for themselves what the messages mean. In contrast, those with low levels of media literacy can develop exaggerated impressions of problems in society, even when those impressions conflict with their own experience. For example, media consumers who spend large amounts of time watching television often perceive society as far more dangerous and crime-ridden than it is because that's the image they see on television.¹⁹ Potter says that too often consumers with low levels of media literacy assume that the media have large, obvious, and mostly negative effects on other people but little or no effect on themselves. Finally, those with low levels of media literacy are often unwilling to use the media literacy skills they have and thus those skills remain underdeveloped.

Potter has identified four basic perspectives or dimensions of media literacy:

1. Cognitive
2. Emotional
3. Aesthetic
4. Moral²⁰

The Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension of media literacy deals with the ability to intellectually process the information being communicated by the media. This can involve interpreting the meaning of words on a printed page, appreciating the implications of ominous music in a movie, or understanding that a well-dressed character in a television show is wealthy. For example, *Barbie* director and co-screenwriter Greta Gerwig included a combination of rich cultural images her hit movie, ranging from referencing the science fiction epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the opening of her movie to recreating the look of Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" from the Sistine Chapel when Barbie's creator Ruth Handler reaches out to her creation.²¹



One of the many reasons we go to the movies is to experience strong emotions, such as fear, horror, surprise, or romance, in a safe environment.

iStockphoto.com/Paolo Cipriani

The cognitive dimension also includes the skills necessary to access the media: using a tablet, accessing 4K ultra high-definition (UHD) programming on your UHD television, or finding a book in the library. All of these are learned skills. We learn to read in school, learn the meaning of musical cues from movies we have seen, and learn how to navigate online through repeated practice.

The Emotional Dimension

The emotional dimension of media literacy covers the feelings created by media messages. Sometimes the emotions can be overwhelming; examples include the fear of a young child watching a scary movie or the joy of a parent watching a news story about a child in danger being rescued. People often spend time with songs, movies, books, and other media specifically to feel the emotions they generate.²² *Barbie* became a box office champion in part because groups of women went together to see the movie, sometimes dressing up all in Barbiecore fashion pink, to experience a sense of empowerment from a story that focused on an iconic female toy.²³

The Aesthetic Dimension

The aesthetic dimension of media literacy involves interpreting media content from an artistic or critical point of view. How well is the media artifact produced? What skills were used in producing it? How does it compare in quality to other similar works? Understanding more than the surface dimensions of media content can require extensive learning. *Barbie* was the biggest movie of 2023, bringing in well over \$600 million in the United States and \$1.4 billion globally, and it was largely a critical success as well, with an 88% positive rating on Rotten Tomatoes. The movie received eight Academy Award nominations and was praised for excellent performances by lead actress Margot Robbie along with supporting actors Ryan Gosling and America Ferrera. This didn't stop right-wing critics from complaining that the movie was "too woke" and supporters of the movie from pointing out that Gerwig and Robbie were snubbed by not being nominated for best director and best actress.^{24,25,26,27}

The Moral Dimension

The moral dimension of media literacy consists of examining the values of the medium or the message. In a television sitcom, for example, an underlying message might be that a quick wit is an important tool for dealing with problems or that a problem can be solved in a short time. In an action movie, the moral lessons may be that violence and authority are needed if one is to succeed and that the world is a mean and dangerous place. In *Barbie*, the story is a morally complex stew made up of elements of feminism, critical theory, corporate capitalism, and the fun girls have playing with Barbie dolls.²⁸

Developing Our Media Literacy

Like any skill, developing media literacy demands hard work and practice. It is also not something we develop all at once, Potter writes.²⁹ Instead we have a wide range of skills that are developed slowly across our lifetime. At the most basic level are the skills we learn as a baby or a toddler—acquiring the fundamentals of communication. As babies, we learn there are people other than ourselves and that they can communicate with us through sounds and actions. This is the discovery that communication with other people exists.

The second step is acquiring language. Young children learn that sounds and expressions not only convey feelings through smiles, frowns, loving sounds, and angry shouts but also can have specific meanings. They learn they can communicate with others using those sounds. Beyond the language of words, young children can also start developing the vocabulary of music and other sounds; they start to understand happy and sad music along with the meanings of other nonverbal sounds.

The third step in developing media literacy is developing an understanding of narrative. Once we learn to use language, we can start to understand the meaning of stories, including the differences between fiction and nonfiction as well as how stories are told in terms of the basics of plot and time sequence. Understanding the difference between stories that are true versus those that are made up is a basic level. At a higher level comes the ability to understand that stories that are made up can still tell us things that are real about our lives. At a different level is learning how to make sense out of flashbacks and varying points of view in a story that are not immediately obvious to the novice media consumer. A first-time moviegoer would likely have difficulty with complex narrative timelines used by director Christopher Nolan in his films, such as *Dunkirk*, *Tenet*, and *Oppenheimer*.

The fourth step is developing skepticism. As we learn to examine who is sending us messages, we use that knowledge to analyze how people sending out messages are trying to persuade us. As we learn the differences between advertisements and programming, we learn to discount the claims made in ads. As we learn more about the media outlets we are consuming information from, we get a better idea of what kind of skepticism we need to be applying. Is this someone who is presenting us with unbiased information or is it someone who is making an active effort to persuade us?

The fifth step is intensive development. We start to have specific interests that we want to learn about in more depth. We develop complex thought structures about the topics we are most interested in. These allow us to think about these topics in more intricate ways. For example, if you are interested in politics, you will likely seek out stories about the issues you are passionate about. You will also be much better at decoding the news about politics than people who don't care. The more you learn about current politics, the more you will be able to remember and the better you will be at analyzing the information you consume. The more you learn about your favored topic, the better you will be at learning more.

The sixth step is experiential exploring. We consume different types of media and content because we are looking for different types of experiences. You might watch a new horror movie because you are seeking the excitement and adrenaline rush that being frightened in a safe environment provides. Our reactions and sensations are not a negative part of media consumption; they are often the point of it.

The seventh step is critical appreciation. This is when we start being able to analyze media content apart from our own feelings about it. For example, you might not be a big fan of hip-hop, but you can still analyze and appreciate the complex rhymes and sampling that goes into producing the commentary and sonic mix. You don't have to like something to be able to appreciate it. Similarly, you realize that the fact that you like a particular book doesn't necessarily make it a brilliant bit of writing.

The eighth and final step is social responsibility. As we grow in media literacy, we learn to take a moral stand about the value of certain content over that of other content. We realize that some media content and our use of it can have moral and ethical consequences for society as a whole and that through our media decisions we have the ability to make the world a better place. As an example, you might decide to always check the accuracy of provocative social media posts that might be from a bot account or an online troll before passing it on. Even if a meme says something you absolutely agree with, you still try to figure out where it came from before you share it.

MODELS OF MASS COMMUNICATION

Although people often use the terms *mass communication* and *mass media* interchangeably, they are significantly different concepts. Mass communication is a process, whereas the **mass media** are simply the technological tools used to transmit the messages of mass communication.³⁰ Earlier in this chapter, we defined mass communication as a society-wide communication process in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to a large mixed audience, most of whose members are not known to the sender. There are many ways to approach looking at mass communication. Media scholar Denis McQuail lays out four models that help us answer different questions about the nature of mass communication (Table 1.1):

1. Transmission Model
2. Ritual Model
3. Publicity Model
4. Reception Model³¹

Model	Orientation of sender	Orientation of receiver
Transmission	Transfer of meaning	Cognitive processing
Ritual	Performance	Shared experience
Publicity	Competitive display	Attention-giving spectatorship
Reception	Preferential encoding	Differential decoding/construction of meaning

Source: Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010). Reproduced by permission of Sage. Copyright © Denis McQuail, 2005.

Transmission Model

There is an old way of describing mass communication known as the **Sender Message Channel Receiver (SMCR) or transmission model**. The transmission model does not do justice to the complexity of the mass communication process because it tends to portray mass communication as a largely one-directional flow of messages from the sender to the receiver, rather than as a complex interaction where senders and receivers are constantly changing places. What it does is lay out the key elements in mass communication.

The **sender** is the source of messages that go out through mass communication. When critics talk about “the media” as a potent force, they are often talking about the few large corporations that control the flow of messages from our major commercial channels. But as you have already figured out, there are many other senders than just the major media corporations. For example, when the *New York Times* started reporting on the COVID-19 virus in January 2020, it was the sender.

The **message** is the content being transmitted by the sender and reacted to by the receiver. Before the message can be transmitted, it must be encoded. **Encoding** requires at least two steps. First, the sender’s ideas must be turned into a message—a script for the video is drafted, a graphic is created, or a tweet is written. Second, the message must be prepared for transmission—the script is recorded, the graphic is placed on an online page, or the tweet is sent out. When the various professional and collegiate sports leagues started cancelling their seasons and the broadcasts of their games in March 2020, that started sending out a message of how serious the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to be.

The **channel** is the medium used to transmit the message. Recall that a mass medium is a technological tool. Think about a newspaper. It consists of black and colored ink printed on relatively low-quality paper. It is portable, readily available, and cheap. Channels can include books, newspapers,

social media, streaming audio and video, or movies in a theater. What about faxes, text messages, letters, and email? Do they fit in as channels for mass communication? It depends. If you receive sports scores sent out as mass SMS text messages by your favorite sports news service, then it certainly is a mass communication channel. When you send a text to your sweetie, it is much more like interpersonal communication. When the Broadway Cares charity created the crowdsourced version of the song “Non-Stop” from the musical *Hamilton* during the height of the pandemic lockdown, its channels were the YouTube video service and a variety of social media outlets.

The **receiver** is the audience for the mass communication message—that is, the people who are receiving and decoding the message. **Decoding** is the process of translating a signal from a mass medium into a form the receiver can understand. Receivers do not always get a clear message from the sender, however. Several types of **noise** can interfere with the delivery of the message. For example, there is semantic noise, which occurs when the receiver does not understand the meaning of the message, such as when you can’t understand the lyrics on a Latin music channel because you don’t speak Spanish; mechanical noise, which occurs when the channel has trouble transmitting the message, such as when you are a long way from a cell tower so you can’t get a web page to load on your mobile device; and environmental noise, which occurs when the action and sounds surrounding the receiver interfere with the reception of the message, such as when your roommate’s loud video game keeps you from concentrating on your *Media Literacy* textbook. It is also the receiver who ultimately assigns the meaning to the message they are receiving. The sender may have intended a message as a sarcastic joke while the receiver might interpret the joke as an offensive serious statement. Which meaning matters? The one assigned to it by the receiver.

Though the transmission model (SMCR) is useful for laying out the various elements of the mass communication process, it does not explain how mass communication works in our lives. It focuses primarily on the process of transmitting messages largely from the point of view of a sender trying to influence the receiver. However, in the real world we are constantly switching between being a sender and a receiver, translating messages from one channel to another. And as the messages bounce back and forth, their meanings transform depending on who is receiving them and who is sending them out.

Ritual Model

Whereas the transmission model looks at how a message is sent, the **ritual model** puts audience members at the center of the equation. The ritual model looks at how and why audience members (receivers) consume media messages. This model suggests that we watch a program such as *The Voice* not so much to learn about aspiring singers or to receive advertising messages, but rather to interact with family and friends. Lots of people who are not football fans will attend Super Bowl watch parties to participate in the mid-winter celebration of sports, commercials, and chicken wings. Media consumption thus goes beyond simply delivering messages and becomes a shared experience that brings us together as a people.

Carter Wilkerson, a then 16-year-old from Reno, Nevada, earned the record for Twitter (now X) engagement with 3.6 million retweets and 1 million likes for his tweet trying to get a year’s worth of free chicken nuggets from Wendy’s. The fast-food chain told him he would need to get 18 million shares to get his free chicken, but in the end, they gave him his nuggets anyway. For what it’s worth, Wilkerson told the *New York Times* that he might use his experience as a launching ground for a career in marketing. “It’d be pretty cool to put on my college applications that I’m the No. 1 retweeted tweet of all time,” he said. As of 2024, Wilkerson had moved away from marketing and enrolled in dental school at University of Nevada Las Vegas.^{32,33}

Publicity Model

Sometimes media messages are not trying to convey specific information as much as they are trying to draw attention to a particular person, group, or concept. According to the **publicity model**, the mere fact that a topic is covered by the media can make the topic important, regardless of what is said about it. For example, when Justin Timberlake exposed Janet Jackson’s right nipple for nine-sixteenths of a second during the 2004 Super Bowl, there were all sorts of charges that broadcast network CBS was lowering the moral standards of America’s young people. The major effect of this stunt was that the

Federal Communications Commission adopted increasingly strict rules on broadcast decency. As a result, at least 20 Sinclair-owned ABC affiliates refused to air the World War II movie *Saving Private Ryan* the following November for fear that they would be fined for all the bad language contained in the movie. Concerns about changing television standards had existed for several years prior to Jackson flashing Super Bowl viewers, but the attention she brought to the issue put broadcast decency in the limelight.³⁴ By 2018, however, Timberlake's role in the affair seemed to have been forgotten, with the singer giving the Super Bowl halftime show. Miss Jackson, on the other hand, was not invited back.

Reception Model

The **reception model** moves us out of the realm of social science analysis and into the world of critical theory (something we will spend time on in Chapter 2). Instead of looking at how messages affect audiences or are used by the senders or receivers, the reception model looks at how audience members derive and create meaning out of media content. Rather than seeing content as having an intended, fixed meaning, the reception model says that each receiver decodes the message based on their own unique experiences, feelings, and beliefs. You can take a single news story and show it to liberal and conservative observers, and both will claim that it is biased against their point of view. In fact, a 1982 study showed that the more journalists tried to present multiple sides of an issue, the more partisans on either side of the issue viewed the story as biased.³⁵

EVOLUTION OF THE MEDIA WORLD

Where did our media world come from? Is it just a product of the late 20th century with its constant flow of print and electronic messages? Not really. The world of interconnected and overlapping communication networks that surrounds us has been evolving for hundreds of years. Before the advent of

the mass media, people interacted primarily face to face. Most of the time, they interacted only with people like themselves and had little contact with the outside world. But people gradually created communication networks that used first interpersonal channels, then print media, electronic media, and, most recently, interactive media. This section examines how various communication networks have grown over the centuries to form the media world in which we now live.

The first major communication network in the Western world predates the mass media and was developed by the Roman Catholic Church in the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. During that period, messages flowed from the Vatican in Italy through the cardinals and bishops to priests in cathedrals and villages throughout Europe and finally to congregations through sermons from the pulpit.³⁶

The first major expansion in communication beyond the Church was the development of the printing press—in particular, the development of practical movable type in the 1450s—and the subsequent mass production of printed materials. Mass printing made it possible for major social changes, such as the Protestant Reformation, to spread from their country of origin to the rest of Europe and the world beyond.

Although the printing press allowed for the mass production of information, printing was still relatively slow, and publications remained expensive. The addition of steam power to the printing press in 1814 dramatically increased the rate at which printed material could be reproduced.

The advent of electronic communication made the media world much more complex. This type of communication began in 1844 with the opening of the first telegraph line from Baltimore, Maryland, to Washington, DC. In 1866, telegraph cables spanned the Atlantic



By the 1880s, telegraph wires crisscrossed the New York City skyline, sending messages rapidly through the city, across the country, and around the world.

AP Images/Associated Press

Ocean, overcoming a seemingly insurmountable barrier that had long hindered transoceanic communication. Instead of sending a message on a 2-week journey by boat across the ocean and waiting for a reply to come back the same way, two people on opposite sides of the ocean could carry on a dialogue via telegraph.

In the 1880s, Emile Berliner invented the gramophone, or phonograph, which played mass-produced discs containing about 3 minutes of music. Just as printed books made possible the storage and spread of ideas, the gramophone allowed musical performances to be captured and reproduced.

The invention of radio in the late 19th century freed electronic communication from the limits imposed on it by telegraph wires. Messages could come into the home at any time and at almost no cost to the receiver. All that was needed was a radio set to receive an endless variety of cultural content, news, and other programming.

Movies were first shown at nickelodeon theaters in the late 1890s and early 1900s and were produced by an entertainment industry that distributed films worldwide. Young couples on a date in London, Ohio, and in London, England, could see the same movie, copy the same styles of dress, and perhaps even practice the same kisses they saw in the movie. Due to radio and the movies, the media world became a shared entertainment culture produced for profit by major media corporations.

In 1939, patrons in New York's neighborhood taverns no longer had to settle for radio broadcasts of Yankees games being played at the Polo Grounds. Instead, a small black-and-white television set located on a pedestal behind the bar showed a faint, flickering image of the game. After a series of delays caused by World War II, television surpassed radio in popularity. It also became a lightning rod for controversy as people stayed home to watch whatever images it would deliver.

TEST YOUR MEDIA LITERACY

CAN TELEVISION TAKE ANYTHING SERIOUSLY?

Back in 1985, New York University communication professor Neil Postman published his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In it, Postman argues that the primary effect of television is that it changes how people see the world; that is, with television, people start viewing everything as entertainment. Young people get their news in a comedy format, watching *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* the same way they watch the newsmagazine *60 Minutes* on CBS. They learn about politics on the same channel that shows a professional football game.³⁷

In an interview with Robert Nelson for the *Civic Arts Review*, Postman described the major point of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

Television always recreates the world to some extent in its own image by selecting parts of that world and editing those parts. So, a television news show is a kind of symbolic creation and construction made by news directors and camera crews. . . .

Americans turn to television not only for their light entertainment but for their news, their weather, their politics, their religion, their history, all of which may be said to be their furious entertainment. What I am talking about is television's preemption of our culture's most serious business. It is one thing to say that TV presents us with entertaining subject matter. It is quite another to say that on TV all subject matter is presented as entertaining and it is in that sense that TV can bring ruin to any intelligent understanding of public affairs. . . .

And stranger still is the fact that commercials may appear anywhere in a news story, before, after, or in the middle, so that all events are rendered essentially trivial, that is to say, all events are treated as a source of public entertainment. How serious can an earthquake in Mexico be or a hijacking in Beirut, if it is shown to us prefaced by a happy United Airlines commercial and summarized by a Calvin Klein jeans commercial? Indeed, TV newscasters have added to our grammar a new part of speech altogether. What may be called the "now this" conjunction. "Now this" is a conjunction that does not connect two things but does the opposite. It disconnects. When newscasters say, "Now this," they mean to indicate that what you have just heard or seen has no relevance to what you are about to hear or see. There is no murder so brutal, no political blunder so costly, no bombing so devastating that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, "Now this." The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the matter, let's say 45 seconds, that you must not be morbidly

preoccupied with it, let us say for 90 seconds, and that you must now give your attention to a commercial. Such a situation in my view is not news. And in my opinion it accounts for the fact that Americans are among the most ill informed people in the Western world.³⁸

WHO is the source?

Neil Postman (1931–2003), a prominent American educator, media theorist, and cultural critic, founded the media ecology program at New York University (NYU) and chaired the NYU Department of Culture and Communication. Postman wrote 18 books and more than 200 magazine and newspaper articles for such periodicals as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and the *Washington Post*. He also edited the journal *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* and was on the editorial board of the *Nation*.

WHAT is he saying?

Postman argues that the primary effect of television is that it changes how people see the world; that is, with television, people start viewing everything as entertainment. In comparison, think about your own viewing habits. Do you watch the news the same way you watch *Big Bang Theory*? Or learn about politics on the same channel that shows *Big Brother*? Or see news about the war in Syria, followed by a commercial for Domino's?

WHAT kind of evidence does the book provide?

What kind of data does Postman provide to support his arguments? What kind of evidence is needed to bolster these claims? Is there evidence that disputes his claims? How do you think Postman's background is likely to have shaped his view of television?

HOW do you or your classmates react to Postman's arguments?

What does the title *Amusing Ourselves to Death* mean to you? Do you feel that television trivializes important issues or makes them more palatable? Have you noticed similar effects in yourself as described by Postman? Do you notice differences in how news anchors make the transition from news to commercials and back again? Are the stories before and after the break any different from stories during the rest of the newscast?

DOES it all add up?

Do you believe that Postman's arguments are true today? In October 2017, CBS News was so eager to break the news about the death of rock legend/entertainer Tom Petty that its anchors started reporting it in the early afternoon, nearly half a day before he actually died. The news then rapidly spread to other major news outlets that did not want to miss out on the breaking story, including *Entertainment Weekly*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Rolling Stone* magazine. This led to music stars such as John Mayer, Shania Twain, and Jon Bon Jovi expressing their sympathy. But within an hour of having set off this flurry of interest, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), supposedly the source of the story, said it could not confirm the report. Finally, at 11:30 p.m. on October 2, the LAPD confirmed that Petty had died.³⁹

Do you think that this fascination with celebrity deaths supports Postman's claims? Why or why not? Do you think that Petty's death was newsworthy enough to merit the coverage it received? Or were CBS and its fellow news channels just trying to entertain their viewers?

After several decades of television, people had gotten used to the idea that news, information, and entertainment could be delivered almost magically into their homes, although they could do little to control the content of this medium other than change channels. Then a new medium emerged, one that made senders and receivers readily interchangeable. The internet became a full-fledged mass communication network in the 1990s (though many people were unaware that the first nodes of this new medium were being linked together as far back as 1969). Rather than simply making it easier for individuals and organizations to send messages to a mass audience, the new computer networks were designed for two-way communication. Audience members were becoming message providers themselves.

Online and Mobile Media: Interactive Communication

Online media's interactivity was the culmination of a trend toward giving audience members new control over their communication world. The growth of cable and satellite television, along with the VCR, had already given viewers more choices and more control, and the remote control allowed them to choose among dozens of channels without leaving their chairs.

In 2000, when the Pew Research Center first started tracking Americans' use of the internet, slightly more than 50% of us were online. That number has increased steadily during the ensuing decades; in 2018, approximately 95% of American adults were online.⁴⁰ The implications of interactivity are significant. Whereas the commercial media have come to be controlled by a smaller and smaller number of large corporations (see Chapter 3), an important channel of mass communication is open to ordinary people in ways that were never before possible. With a trivial investment in a mobile device or computer, individuals can grab the spotlight with news and entertainment through social media and the World Wide Web.

Consider the example of artist Danielle Corsetto, creator of the popular web comic *Girls With Slingshots*. Her comic started under the name *Hazelnuts* when she was in high school, but she took it online in October 2004 when fans of her sketches asked her when she was going to start publishing her comic. Corsetto explained to the *Frederick News-Post* that *Girls With Slingshots* (or *GWS*) is a slice-of-life comic that tells the story of “sour, grumpy girl” Hazel and her best friend, Jamie, a “bubbly girl who is very comfortable with herself.”⁴¹ One of the fascinating things about the comic is the level of diversity within its cast. There is Melody, who is deaf; Soo Lin, who is blind; Darren, who is gay; Erin, who is asexual; and McPedro, a cactus who talks when Hazel's been drinking. Anna Pearce, writing for *Bitch Media*, says that her favorite thing about the comic is that it looks at disability from the point of view of a disabled person. “What I like about the jokes in this strip are that they are all over the place. Some are about how clueless people can be about blindness. Some are disability-related humour as told by people with disabilities.”⁴²

Although her comic is online, she still does her drawing by hand. Corsetto explains, “It's more realistic and less stereotypical. All the characters have these unusual relations, both romantic and platonic . . . that are not what you would find in, say, a sitcom, but it's written like a sitcom. I'm kind of trying to normalize these things that are taboo.”

Since 2007, she has made her living exclusively through drawing and writing comics. In addition to *Girls With Slingshots*, Corsetto works on a variety of side projects, including writing three volumes of the *Adventure Time* graphic novel series. Although *GWS* started out small, Corsetto's website drew about 100,000 readers a day at its peak. In March 2015, Corsetto brought *GWS* to a close, with her heroine Hazel coming to terms with her long-absent father. Given the subject matter, alcohol use, and language in *GWS*, Corsetto would not have been able to publish her work in a legacy newspaper or magazine.⁴³

Following the completion of the comic, Corsetto took what she called a sabbatical, working on advancing her art skills, teaching art classes, editing a two-volume hardcover book edition of *GWS*, writing the text for a sex education comic for high school– and college-age students, and developing a graphic novel she started publishing pages for on her Patreon page.⁴⁴ Corsetto says she



After Hurricane Maria, power lines came down all over Puerto Rico. Facebook pledged to send a “connectivity team” to help restore communications to the island, in a move by one of several tech companies—among them Tesla, Google, Cisco, Microsoft, and a range of startups—that came with disaster response proposals, most aimed at getting phone and internet service up and running.

AP Photo/Carlos Giusti



Self portrait of Danielle Corsetto with her cat.

Courtesy of Danielle Corsetto

has been depending on donations from the crowdfunding platform Patreon for most of her current income.

While Corsetto is “making a living” from her artwork, she wrote in a post to her Patreon supporters that this can mean different things to different people:

I net more than the average schoolteacher, but less than the average accountant. My income fluctuates year to year. I live comfortably and I feel wealthy. . . . But I guarantee if I showed my bookkeeping to an old-school cartoonist who hit it big in newspaper syndication in the 90s, they’d think I was insane to say that I “feel wealthy.”⁴⁵

Some critics would argue that the growth of cable television stations, websites, and magazines creates only an illusion of choice because a majority of the channels are still controlled by the same five or six companies.⁴⁶ Even so, it is a new media world, one in which audience members are choosing what media content they will consume and when they will consume it. It’s a world that even media giants are being forced to adjust to.

THE SEVEN SECRETS ABOUT THE MEDIA “THEY” DON’T WANT YOU TO KNOW 2.0

Media literacy is a tricky subject to talk about because few people admit that they really don’t understand how the media operate and how messages, audiences, channels, and senders interact. After all, since we spend so much time with the media, we must know all about them, right? As an example, most students in an Introduction to Mass Communication class will claim that the media and media messages tend to affect other people far more than themselves. The question of media literacy can also become a political question, for which the answer depends on whether you are liberal or conservative, rich or poor, young or old. But the biggest problem in the public discussion of media literacy is that certain routine issues get discussed repeatedly, while many big questions are left unasked.

- Secret 1—The media are essential components of our lives.
- Secret 2—There are no mainstream media.
- Secret 3—Everything from the margin moves to the center.
- Secret 4—Nothing is new: Everything that happened in the past will happen again.
- Secret 5—All media are social.
- Secret 6—Online media are mobile media.
- Secret 7—There is no “they.”

Seven editions of this book ago, I first came out with the Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know. These were things we do not typically hear about in the media. Secret things. Perhaps it is because there is no one out there who can attract an audience by saying these things. Or maybe it is because the ideas are complicated and we do not like complexity from our media. Or maybe it is because “they” (whoever “they” may be) do not want us to know them.

But the media world has changed considerably since the secrets were first developed in 2006:

- Netflix had no streaming service—it was only a DVD-by-mail service.
- There was no iPhone—the BlackBerry with its little Chiclet keyboard was the height of smartphone technology.
- There were no tablet computers.

- Cell phone service was typically sold by the minute, and most mobile plans had a limit to the number of text messages that were included in the basic plan.
- Google was in the process of buying a cell phone video sharing service called YouTube created by three former PayPal employees.
- Facebook was only 2 years old, and use of it was limited to college students.
- Instagram had not yet gone online—that wouldn't happen until 2010. By 2018, it had 800 million active users.⁴⁷

Today, my students tell me they watch most of their video using Netflix streaming, virtually all of them have a smartphone and several social media accounts, and their most frequent way of going online is with a mobile device. So in the sixth edition of this book, it became clear that it was time to update the Seven Secrets to better match the current media world—we were releasing the Seven Secrets About the Media “They” Don’t Want You to Know 2.0. These key issues of media literacy—which do not get the discussion they deserve—provide a foundation for the rest of the chapters in this book. (And just who are “they”? Wait for Secret 7.)



The meaning of yellow ribbons tied into a bow has transformed many times over the past several decades.

iStockphoto.com/HildeAnna

SECRET 1: The Media Are Essential Components of Our Lives

Critics often talk about the effects the media have on us as though the media were something separate and distinct from our everyday lives. But conversations with my students have convinced me otherwise. Every semester I poll my students as to what media they have used so far that day, with the day starting at midnight. I run through the list: checking X/Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram; listening to the radio; checking the weather on a mobile device; binge-watching on Netflix; reading the latest Margaret Atwood novel; listening to Spotify on an iPhone; and so it goes. In fact, media use is likely to be the most universal experience my students will share. Surveys of my students find that more of my morning class students have consumed media content than have eaten breakfast or showered since the day began at midnight. Are the media an important force in our lives? Absolutely! But the media are more than an outside influence on us. They are a part of our everyday lives.

Think about how we assign meanings to objects that otherwise would have no meaning at all. Take a simple yellow ribbon twisted in a stylized bow. You’ve seen thousands of these, and most likely you know exactly what they stand for—“Support Our Troops.” But that hasn’t always been the meaning of the symbol.

The yellow ribbon has a long history in American popular culture. It played a role in the rather rude World War II-era marching song “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.” The ribbon was a symbol of a young woman’s love for a soldier “far, far away,” and the lyrics mention that her father kept a shotgun handy to keep the soldier “far, far away.” The yellow ribbon was also a symbol of love and faithfulness in the John Ford film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. In the 1970s, the ribbon became a symbol of remembering the U.S. staff in the Iranian embassy who had been taken hostage. This meaning came from the song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon ’Round the Old Oak Tree,” made popular by the group Tony Orlando and Dawn. The song tells about a prisoner coming home from jail hoping that his girlfriend will remember him. She can prove her love by displaying the yellow ribbon. The prisoner arrives home to find not one but 100 yellow ribbons tied to the tree. The display of yellow ribbons tied to trees became commonplace in newspaper articles and television news stories about the ongoing hostage crisis after the wife of a hostage started displaying one in her yard.

Later, during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, Americans were eager to show their support for the troops fighting overseas, even if they did not necessarily support the war itself, and the stylized ribbon

started to become institutionalized as a symbol of support. The yellow “Support Our Troops” ribbon was followed by the red ribbon of AIDS awareness, the pink ribbon of breast cancer awareness, and ribbons of virtually every color for other issues. And how do we know the meanings of these ribbons? We hear or see them being discussed through our media. The meaning is assigned by the creators of a ribbon, but the success of the ribbon depends on its meaning being shared through the media. So, do the media create the meanings? Not really. But could the meanings be shared nationwide without the media? Absolutely not. The media may not define our lives, but they do help transmit and disseminate shared meanings from one side of the country to the other.⁴⁸

SECRET 2: There Are No Mainstream Media

We often hear charges related to perceived sins of the so-called mainstream media. But who exactly are these mainstream media? For some, the mainstream media (MSM) are the heavyweights of journalism, especially the television broadcast networks and the major newspapers, such as the *New York Times*. For others, the MSM are the giant corporations that run many of our media outlets. New York University journalism professor and blogger Jay Rosen says that the term MSM is often used to refer to media we just don't like—a “them.”⁴⁹ It isn't always clear who constitutes the MSM, but in general we can consider them to be the old-line **legacy media**—the big-business newspapers, magazines, and television.

But are these old media more in the mainstream than our alternative media? Look at talk radio. Afternoon talk radio is dominated by conservative political talk show hosts like Sean Hannity and the late Rush Limbaugh's replacements Clay Travis and Buck Sexton. They are fond of complaining about how the MSM don't “get it.” But how mainstream are the MSM? For 2023, Fox News averaged 1.89 million viewers in prime time (down from 2.49 million viewers in 2019), making it the number 1 basic cable network; MSNBC averaged 1.21 million viewers in prime time and was the third most watched basic cable network (after Fox News and ESPN), and CNN averaged 582,000 viewers, representing the smallest average primetime audience in the network's history.⁵⁰

With all the talk of cable news, it's easy to forget that the legacy broadcast networks have significant audiences as well: ABC with 7.86 million viewers, NBC with 6.87 million, and CBS with 4.82 million, as of the final 3 months of 2023. (The Fox broadcast network does not have a network evening news broadcast.)⁵¹ *The Sean Hannity Show*, on the other hand, averages 16.2 million radio listeners a week, followed by financial advice guru Dave Ramsey.⁵² (Note that television audiences and radio audiences are measured differently.) So, which is more mainstream? A popular afternoon radio show with a large daily audience or a television news program with a somewhat smaller audience?

And then there is video game streamer Daniel Middleton, a.k.a. DanTDM, who has more than 28 million followers on YouTube streaming *Minecraft* and other video games. The British game streaming star is now in his 30s and has two children with his wife of more than a decade and has branched out to producing graphic novels and a live show. What could possibly be more mainstream?⁵³ Again, these numbers are not directly comparable with television ratings—they are much, much bigger. Overall, YouTube claims to have more than two billion monthly users. Most videos do not get a particularly large viewership, but the combined total is massive.⁵⁴

So, it is largely meaningless to describe one medium as mainstream and another as nonmainstream. They are all significant presences in our world. Can we distinguish between old and new media? Perhaps. Can we argue that our alternative sources of news and entertainment are any less significant than the traditional ones? Absolutely not.

SECRET 3: Everything From the Margin Moves to the Center

The mass media, both news and entertainment, are frequently accused of trying to put forward an extremist agenda of violence, permissiveness, homosexuality, drug use, edgy fashion, and nonmainstream values.

People in the media business, be they entertainers or journalists, respond with the argument that they are just “keeping it real,” portraying the world as it is by showing aspects of society that some people want to pretend don't exist. They have no agenda, the argument goes; they just want to portray reality.

Now, it is true that much of what the media portray that upsets people is real. On the other hand, it is a bit disingenuous to argue that movie directors and musicians are not trying for shock value when they use offensive language or portray stylized violence combined with graphic sexuality. Think back to any of a few recent horror movies. We all know that teenagers routinely get slashed to ribbons by a psycho killer just after having sex, right? Clearly, movie producers are trying to attract an audience by providing content that is outside of the mainstream.

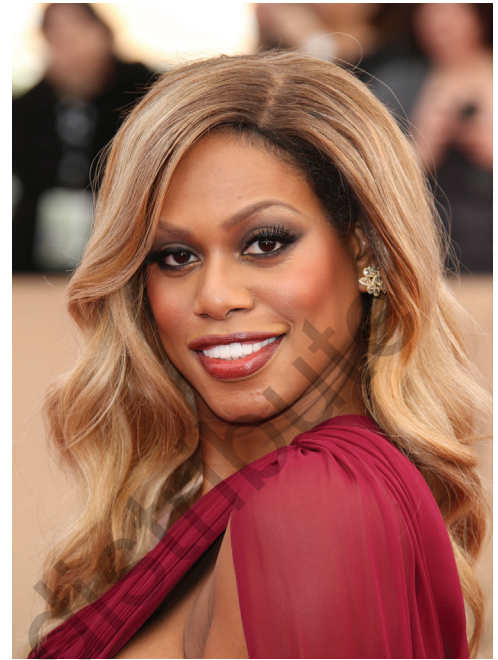
The problem with the argument between “keeping it real” and “extremist agenda” is that it misses what is happening. There can be no question that audiences go after media content that is outside of the mainstream. Similarly, the more nonmainstream content is presented, the more ordinary it seems to become. This is what is meant by Secret 3—one of the mass media’s biggest effects on everyday life is to take culture from the margins of society and make it into part of the mainstream, or center. This process can move people, ideas, and even individual words from small communities into mass society.

We can see this happening in several ways. Take the 1975 cult movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which tells the story of a gay male cross-dresser (Dr. Frank-N-Furter) who is building a muscle-bound boyfriend (Rocky) for himself when a newly engaged straight couple show up at his castle’s doorstep seeking shelter from a storm. While the movie found success as a midnight movie in the counterculture community, it took years to move from being considered a flop to a cult classic.

But in recent years *Rocky Horror* has moved from simply a midnight movie to a core element of popular culture. The Fox Broadcasting show *Glee* did a Halloween episode in 2010 where the kids in the show’s glee club produced *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a high school musical. But the *Glee* version had actress Amber Riley playing the part of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, while the part of Rocky was still played by a male actor, Chord Overstreet. Thus, the central plotline went from gay to straight. The *Glee* version also had Frank-N-Furter singing about being from “Sensational, Transylvania” instead of “Transsexual, Transylvania.” With these changes, *The Rocky Horror Glee Show* became a perfect example of Secret 3. *Rocky Horror* started out as a camp musical in the 1970s that found enormous success in the counterculture community. But *Glee* sanitized it from a celebration of cross-dressing gay culture into a mass-market story of straight people playing with gay themes. In 2016, Fox Broadcasting showed a full remake of *Rocky Horror* that aired in October featuring trans actress Laverne Cox (of *Orange Is the New Black* fame) as Dr. Frank-N-Furter. *Hollywood Reporter* reviewer Daniel Finberg noted in 2016 that the show is no longer shocking in that “one of the most unorthodox characters in the history of musicals has become oddly conventional.”⁵⁵

An alternative approach is to look at how the media accelerate the adoption of activist language into the mainstream. Take the medical term *intact dilation and extraction*, which describes a controversial type of late-term abortion. A search of the LexisNexis news database shows that newspapers used the medical term only five times over a 6-month period. On the other hand, *partial-birth abortion*, the term for the procedure used by abortion opponents, was used in more than 125 stories during the same time. Opponents even got the term used in the title of a bill passed by Congress that outlawed the procedure, thus moving the phrase into the mainstream through repeated publication of the bill’s name.

This process is not a product of a liberal or conservative bias by the news media. It’s simply a consequence of the repeated use of the term in the press.



Laverne Cox starred in Fox’s TV remake of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as the mad scientist/alien/cross-dresser Dr. Frank-N-Furter, replacing Tim Curry. The film is easily the most beloved camp cult movie of all time.

Dan MacMedan/Getty Images



Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter.

Rocky Horror Picture Show

SECRET 4: Nothing Is New: Everything That Happened in the Past Will Happen Again

Secret 4 is a little different from the oft-repeated slogan “Those who ignore the past are doomed to repeat it.” Instead, it says that media face the same issues repeatedly as technologies change and new people come into the business.



Congressional hearings in the 1950s about horror comics, such as those pictured here, show how adults are always concerned about the possible effects of new media on children.

©Bettmann/Getty Images

The fight between today’s recording companies and file sharers has its roots in the battle between music publishers and the distributors of player piano rolls in the early 1900s. The player piano was one of the first technologies for reproducing musical performances. Piano roll publishers would buy a single copy of a piece of sheet music and hire a skilled pianist to have their performance recorded as a series of holes punched in a paper roll. That roll (and the performance) could then be reproduced and sold to anyone who owned a player piano without further payment to the music’s original publisher.⁵⁶

Then, in 1984, Sony successfully defended itself against a lawsuit from Universal Studios by arguing that it had a right to sell VCRs to the public because there were legitimate, legal uses for the technology. Universal had protested the sales because the video recorders could be used to duplicate its movies. Before long, the studios quit trying to ban the VCR and started selling videocassettes of movies directly to consumers at reasonable prices. Suddenly, the studios had a major new source of revenue.⁵⁷

This can also be seen with the repeated fears of new media technologies emerging over the years. In the 1930s, there was fear that watching movies, especially gangster pictures, would lead to precocious sexual behavior, delinquency, lower standards and ideals, and poor physical and emotional health. The 1940s brought concern about how people would react to radio programs, particularly soap operas.⁵⁸ Comic books came under attack in the 1950s. The notion that comic books were dangerous was popularized by a book titled *Seduction of the Innocent* by Dr. Fredric Wertham. Wertham also testified before Congress that violent and explicit comic books were a cause of teenage delinquency and sexual behavior. The industry responded to the criticism by forming the Comics Code Authority and ceasing publication of popular crime and horror comics, such as *Tales From the Crypt* and *Weird Science*.

The 1980s and 1990s saw controversies over offensive rap and rock lyrics.⁵⁹ These controversies reflected widespread concern about bad language and hidden messages in songs. In 2009, pop star Britney Spears had a not-so-hidden allusion to the “F word” in her song “If U Seek Amy.” If you speak the title aloud, it sounds like you are spelling out *F, U, . . . well, you get the picture*. Critics were, of course, shocked and dismayed at this example of a pop star lowering public taste. Of course, Spears did not really create her naughty little lyric on her own. Aside from a host of rock and blues singers who have used similar lines, *Slate* writer Jesse Sheidlower notes that James Joyce used the same basic line in *Ulysses*, when he has a group of women sing:

*If you see kay
Tell him he may
See you in tea
Tell him from me.*

A careful reading of the third line will let you find a second hidden obscenity as well.⁶⁰

Numerous media critics and scholars have argued that television and movies present a distorted view of the world, making it look like a much more violent and dangerous place than it is. More recently, mobile devices have been blamed for a range of social ills, from car accidents caused by distracted drivers to promiscuity caused by sexually explicit mobile phone text and photo messages.

Why has there been such long-running, repeated concern about the possible effects of the media? Media sociologist Charles R. Wright says that people want to be able to solve social ills, and it is easier

to believe that poverty, crime, and drug abuse are caused by media coverage than to acknowledge that their causes are complex and not fully understood.⁶¹

Writing in 1948, sociologists Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld identified four major aspects of public concern about the media:

- Concern that because the media are everywhere, they might be able to control and manipulate people. This is a large part of the legacy of fear.
- Fear that those in power will use the media to reinforce the existing social structure and discourage social criticism. When critics express concern about who owns and runs the media, this is what they are worried about.
- Fear that mass entertainment will lower the tastes and standards for popular culture by trying to attract the largest possible audience. Criticism of action movies, soap operas, and wrestling as replacements for healthier entertainment, such as Shakespeare's plays, is at the heart of this concern.
- The belief that mass entertainment is a waste of time that detracts from more useful activities. When your mother told you to turn off the television set and go outside, this was her concern!⁶²

SECRET 5: All Media Are Social

No matter what media you are using—whether it be a legacy newspaper or television station or a social media channel like Facebook—you are always interacting with it at a social level—whether it be face to face, with friends on Facebook, or with the entire world via Twitter.

Take, as an example, when your author went to hear President Barack Obama speak at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) campus. I got the expected reactions from friends to the selfie of my wife and me standing in line to enter the arena. I also shared news on Twitter about the president's visit from social media guru Dr. Jeremy Lipschultz. And while I was on Lipschultz's Twitter page, *Omaha World-Herald* weather reporter Nancy Gaarder tweeted out a photo of me at work. Now, in this case, Gaarder and I were interacting because she was sitting behind me and we got to talking face to face. But this was only the first of many social interactions for the day based on news being shared socially.

As everyone in the arena waited for the president to appear, I tweeted out a photo of the press corps area on the floor of the arena, along with the hashtag #POTUSatUNO, one of several in use at the event. Before long I picked up a response from Marjorie Sturgeon, a multimedia journalist for Omaha's Action 3 News, who noted she could see herself in my photo. Meanwhile, I was sharing news from the *Omaha World-Herald*, UNO student journalists, and other observers. Media recall research tells us that one of the best predictors of the news we will remember is the news we talk about. Thus, the news we share socially will become the news that matters most to us.

When important news breaks, it is likely we'll hear about it first through social media. When a mass shooter killed at least 58 people and left more than 500 people injured in Las Vegas in October 2017, there were a lot of contradictory stories circulating on Twitter and other social media. But with all the reports circulating, it could be hard to tell which stories should be believed. New Hampshire Public Radio reporter Casey McDermott noted that NPR included the following statement at the bottom of its web stories about the shooting:

This is a developing story. Some things that get reported by the media will later turn out to be wrong. We will focus on reports from police officials and other authorities, credible news outlets and reporters who are at the scene. We will update as the situation develops.⁶³



Casey McDermott
@caseymcdermott

A small thing right now, but I really appreciate this disclaimer at the bottom of @NPR's report from Las Vegas. n.pr/2yiNzZY

This is a developing story. Some things that get reported by the media will later turn out to be wrong. We will focus on reports from police officials and other authorities, credible news outlets and reporters who are at the scene. We will update as the situation develops.

New Hampshire Public Radio reporter Casey McDermott noted that NPR included the following statement at the bottom of its web stories about the Las Vegas shooting.

Twitter/@caseymcdermott

SECRET 6: Online Media Are Mobile Media

When the internet first started to gain a following, going online used to mean a person would need to physically go to a location where there was a computer that was plugged into an Ethernet cable. At the turn of the millennium, going online typically involved a slow, loud dial-up line. However, as of 2023, approximately 80% of adults had access to high-speed broadband Internet at home, most likely using either a cable modem or a landline-based DSL service.⁶⁴ Increasingly, going online now means a person needs only to access a smartphone; in many parts of the world, the mobile internet is the only internet.

In January 2007, Apple announced the first version of its iconic iPhone, and the world of mobile internet would never be the same. It is not that the iPhone was the first phone to access the internet. The BlackBerry had been around for 8 years at that point with its little chiclet keyboard. But the BlackBerry was always primarily an email and messaging device.⁶⁵ If the BlackBerry looked like a glorified pager, Apple's iPhone looked like something out of Steven Spielberg's futuristic movie *Minority Report* with its touch screen interface and full internet access.⁶⁶ Android phones featuring Google's mobile operating system were launched in the United States in October 2008, bridging the gap between the iPhone and the BlackBerry with both a touch screen and a slide-out keyboard.⁶⁷

In 2013, the *Washington Post* reported that mobile internet use was expected to grow at a rate of 66% a year globally as an increasing number of people connect more devices online. In fact, the number of online devices in the world was expected to exceed the number of people on earth. (You wondering when the computers are going to take over? They already outnumber us.)⁶⁸ In addition to outnumbering people, mobile devices have outnumbered traditional personal computers since 2012.⁶⁹

With the prevalence of mobile media, going online is not something we do; it's something we are. In the days of AOL and dial-up internet, going online involved planning for internet use at a specific time and space. With the coming of broadband access, you could go online as much as you wanted, but you were still tethered to a space. But with mobile internet, the online world is where we live. It goes with us everywhere. We have moved to a world where, instead of deliberately going online, we need to deliberately go offline.

Another way to get a feel for the growing impact of mobile media is to look at the size of the audience for various channels. Those that allow people to express themselves publicly through their mobile devices have much bigger audiences than those that call for passive consumption. So, as of 2023 Facebook had just over 3 billion active monthly users, YouTube had 2.5 billion, and the 2023 Super Bowl (on television) had an audience of 115 million. Think about it—the Super Bowl had less than 4% of the audience size of Facebook.^{70,71}

If you look outside the United States, the use of mobile media becomes even more significant. Among refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East, mobile media are the only media people have access to. During the Arab Spring movement in Egypt in 2011, much of the news coming out of the country was by way of mobile phones.⁷²

Computers and laptops are still important tools for going online, but with the growing power, size, and availability of mobile devices, we can now think of online being everywhere/all the time.

SECRET 7: There Is No “They”

If you listen to media criticism for long, you will hear a pair of words used over and over again: *they* and *them*. It is easy to take potshots at some anonymous bogeymen—they—who embody all evil. I even engaged in it at the beginning of this section with the title “The Seven Secrets About the Media ‘They’ Don’t Want You to Know 2.0.”

So, who are they? No one. Everyone. A nonspecific other we want to blame. Anytime I used *they* in a news story, my high school journalism teacher would ask who “they” were. And that's what you need to ask whenever you hear criticism of the media. It is not that the criticism is not accurate. It very well may be. But it probably applies to a specific media outlet, a specific journalist, a certain song, or a particular movie. But *we* can make few generalizations about an industry so diverse that it includes everything from a giant corporation spending a reported \$1 billion to produce *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* to young people posting photos and messages on Snapchat.⁷³ There are a lot of media out there, but no unified *them*.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Chapter Summary

Communication takes place at several levels, including intrapersonal (within the self), interpersonal (between individuals), group (between three or more individuals), and mass (between a single sender and a large audience). Mass communication is a process that covers an entire society, in which an individual or institution uses technology to send messages to large, mixed audiences, most of whose members are not known to the sender. Communication is an interactive process and rarely takes place at just a single level.

The rapid growth of the mass media has led the public and critics to raise questions about the effects various media might have on both society and individuals. Researchers have suggested that the best way to control the impact of the media in our lives is to develop high levels of media literacy—an understanding of what the media are, how they operate, what messages they are delivering, what roles they play in society, and how audience members respond to these messages. Media literacy includes cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral dimensions. Developing media literacy requires active work on a range of skills over a person’s lifetime. These include acquiring the fundamentals of communication, acquiring language, acquiring an understanding of narrative, developing skepticism, intensive development, experiential exploring, critical appreciation, and social responsibility.

Mass communication can be examined in terms of the process of transmission; the rituals surrounding its consumption; the attention its messages draw to persons, groups, or concepts; or how audience members create meaning out of media content.

The first communication network was developed by the Roman Catholic Church, which could send messages reliably throughout Europe as early as the 12th century. In the mid-15th century, the development of printing made it possible for books and other publications to be mass produced for the first time, leading to numerous cultural changes. Books, magazines, newspapers, and other printed media forms became readily available, although they were expensive to produce before steam-driven printing presses became common in the 19th century.

The electronic media emerged in the mid-19th century with the invention of the telegraph, followed by recorded music, radio, movies, and television. These media allowed popular culture to be produced commercially and to be delivered easily and inexpensively into people’s homes. The first interactive digital communication network, the internet, was developed starting in the late 1960s but wasn’t available to the general public until the 1990s. Online media added a return channel to the mass communication process, initiating a much higher level of audience feedback. Online media also allowed individuals to disseminate their own ideas and information without the costs of a traditional mass medium.

Your text suggests that the following seven principles can guide your understanding of how the media operate: (1) The media are essential components of our lives, (2) there are no mainstream media, (3) everything from the margin moves to the center, (4) nothing is new—everything that happened in the past will happen again, (5) all media are social, (6) online media are mobile media, and (7) there is no “they.”

KEY TERMS

channel	legacy media
communication	mass communication
decoding	mass media
encoding	media literacy
group communication	message
intrapersonal communication	noise
interpersonal communication	publicity model

receiver
reception model
ritual model

sender
Sender Message Channel Receiver (SMCR) or
transmission model

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic affect how and where we consume mass media?
2. What are the four different levels of communication? Explain how many of our interactions with mass communication involve several levels of communication.
3. What are the elements that make mass communication mass? Would you consider social media like Facebook to be mass communication? Why or why not?
4. Some people compare the development of the internet to the invention of moveable type and the printing press. Do you think they are of comparable importance? Why or why not?
5. List two of the Seven Secrets and provide a current example of each from the news.

Do not copy, post, or distribute



Drew Angerer/Getty Images

2

MASS COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

How Society and Media Interact

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to

- 2.1 Discuss the history and development of our understanding of media effects
- 2.2 Describe four types of effects the mass media can have on people
- 2.3 List Lasswell's three major social functions that the media perform
- 2.4 Explain the three steps Bandura created to engage in social learning
- 2.5 Describe how the critical/cultural approach takes a more qualitative examination of who controls media systems

Frances Haugen was a Facebook product manager whose job was to protect against election interference on the social media site. She worked at the company for nearly 2 years, departing in May 2021. During her time at the social media company now known as Meta, she became disillusioned with her work, believing that Facebook was more concerned about “growth and user engagement” than about making sure the website was a healthy place for people to visit for information.¹

Before working for Facebook, she had put in time working for Google and social media channel Pinterest. During this time she also had a close friend who radically changed his personality and beliefs after spending large amounts of time online reading material on forums about white nationalism and the occult. This experience made her start questioning how social media might affect young people: “It’s one thing to study misinformation, it’s another to lose someone to it,” she said. “A lot of people who work on these products only see the positive side of things.”²

During her last several months at Facebook, she dug through a large archive of company research and reports that were posted openly to the company’s intranet Facebook Workplace. Haugen eventually leaked six documents about internal research on the effects of Meta’s social media sites that were written about in a series of stories by the *Wall Street Journal* known as “The Facebook Files.” These stories argue that

- Facebook’s rules favor powerful elites, with the usual rules being ignored when it comes to powerful politicians and celebs;
- the channel’s algorithms promote conflict by promoting engagement instead of reliable information;
- its services are used openly by bad actors such as drug cartels and human traffickers;
- Instagram can have negative effects on vulnerable girls’ mental health.

One of the biggest offenders, according to the Facebook Files, was photo-sharing service Instagram. The company’s own work showed that spending time on Instagram made body image worse for at least one third of teen girl users. Closely connected were reports that Instagram posts focused heavily on “body image and lifestyle” and that they fostered excessive social comparison.³

The *Journal* found that these negative social media effects tended to be connected specifically to Instagram:

That is especially true concerning so-called social comparison, which is when people assess their own value in relation to the attractiveness, wealth, and success of others. The tendency to share only the best moments, a pressure to look perfect, and an addictive product can send teens spiraling toward eating disorders, an unhealthy sense of their own bodies, and depression, March 2020 internal [Meta] research states.⁴

In response to criticism of how Instagram has engaged with teens and preteens, Meta has urged young people to have private accounts visible only to their friends and is working at controlling which ads will be shown to them. The company has also said it is working on developing a new

product for users under age 13, though as of this writing in winter 2024 Meta had announced new controls only on existing products.⁵

The publication of the Facebook Files stories led to congressional hearings, multiple states suing social media companies, and New York City declaring social media to be a public health hazard because of its effects on young people's mental health.^{6,7}

According to a study by the Pew Research Center, parents have a wide range of concerns about potential negative effects of social media on teens that may or may not be supported by actual research:

- Being exposed to explicit content
- Wasting too much time on the sites
- Being distracted from completing homework
- Sharing too much about their personal life
- Feeling pressured to act in a certain way
- Being harassed or bullied
- Experiencing problems with anxiety, depression, or lower self-esteem

Parents of girls expressed more concern about problems with anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem than did parents of boys.⁸

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General's office published the advisory report "Social Media and Youth Mental Health" based on a review of a wide range of research. This report looks at both the negative and positive outcomes that might come from young people's use of social media.

Overall, the report found that social media is a near universal experience for teens, with almost 95% of those 13–17 years old reporting using a social media platform. And while children under 13 are supposedly not allowed on social media, research shows that nearly 40% of those ages 8–12 use social media.

One clear finding was that "different children and adolescents are affected by social media in different ways, based on their individual strengths and vulnerabilities, and based on cultural, historical, and socio-economic factors." In fact, this statement could be applied to virtually all mass communication research ever conducted.^{9,10}

The Surgeon General's report also found that there are potential benefits to youth from using social media, including providing connections with people who share similar interests and creating a place for self-expression. Social media can also give young people a chance to interact with a more diverse peer group than they would have access to otherwise. As an example, a 20-year-old Stanford University student said that she liked being able to follow on Instagram other young women who use wheelchairs, which was a positive influence for her.¹¹

On the negative side, the report found that adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media had double the risk of experiencing symptoms such as depression and anxiety. One study reviewed in the report found that limiting social media exposure to 30 minutes a day led to "significant improvements in depression severity." The report also found support for concerns that social media content could help promote "body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms."¹²

In this chapter, we look at various explanations of how the mass media interact with and affect audience members. We will return to the possible effects of social media on teens' mental health to look for explanations. It will not so much be a question of which of these explanations is correct as it will be one of what kind of understanding the theories and types of effects give us. In this chapter, we look at how our understanding of media and their effects has evolved over the past century and consider several approaches to studying these effects.

THE EVOLUTION OF MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

As we discussed in Chapter 1 in the section on media literacy, media consumers often assume that the media have large, obvious, and generally negative effects on people, and they look to blame the media for complex social problems.¹³ In this section, we look at media effects research and how this research has evolved over the past 200 years.

Stay up to date on the latest in media by visiting the author's blog at ralpheyhanson.com.

Prior to the 1800s, most people in Europe and North America lived in rural communities where their neighbors were likely to be similar in ethnic, racial, and religious background. People knew their neighbors, and their neighbors knew them. There were only limited opportunities for people to change their station in life or to learn much about the outside world. But with the rise of the Industrial

Revolution in the 19th century, we started to see massive migration from the rural areas into the cities and from various countries to the United States. As people moved into the cities, they started working for wages in factories with people who were quite different from them. With industrialization, people went from small, close-knit communities where they knew everyone to a mass society where they learned about the world from mass media sources, such as the new inexpensive newspapers, magazines, and paperback novels.¹⁴

At the end of the 19th century, people came to believe that the traditional ties of church, community, and family were breaking down and losing their power to influence people. The comfortable local community was being replaced by something impersonal, complex, and removed from the traditions that had previously held people together; people felt that their community was being replaced by a mysterious “they” or “them.” Concerned observers noted that people seemed to be alienated, isolated, and interchangeable members of a faceless mass audience, separated by the decline of the family and the growth of technology. So, what held this new mass society together?¹⁵ The increasingly frequent answer was that the mass media were replacing the church, family, and community in shaping public opinion.¹⁶ This is an example of Secret 7—There is no “they.” (For additional discussion of the growth of the mass media from its origins in the 1400s to the present day, see Chapter 1.)

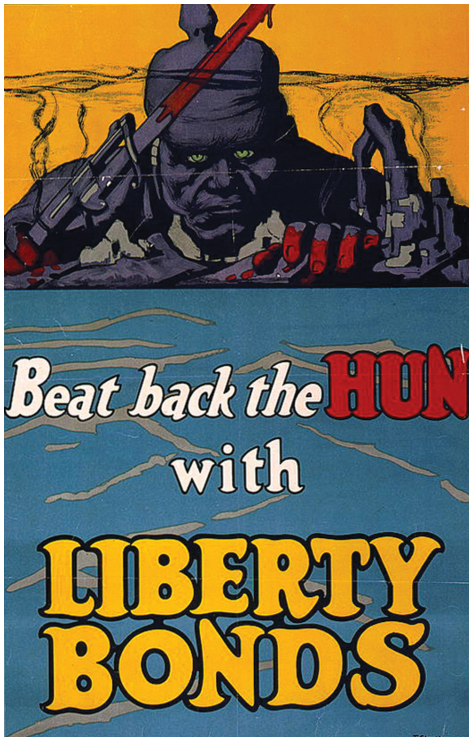
Fears that media messages would have strong, direct effects on audience members grew out of propaganda efforts by all combatants during World War I and by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in the 1930s. Critics worried that mass media messages would overwhelm people in the absence of the influences of family and community. With traditional social forces in decline, it was inevitable, critics feared, that the media would become the most powerful force within society.

This argument viewed audience members as passive targets who would be hit or injected with the message, which, like a vaccine, would affect most people in similar ways. But research looking for powerful, direct effects leading to opinion and behavioral changes generally came up short. In fact, in the 1940s and 1950s, researchers sometimes doubted whether media messages had any effect on individuals at all.¹⁷ Although most scholars now focus on the media's indirect effects on society rather than their direct effects on individuals, they remain concerned about how the media influence individuals.

The big problem is that the direct effects approach viewed media messages as a stimulus that would lead to a predictable attitudinal or behavioral response with nothing intervening between sender and audience. But although people have a shared biological heritage, they have different backgrounds, needs, attitudes, and values. In short, everyone has been socialized differently.

The Limited Effects Model

The research conducted on the effects of media, up to and during World War II, showed that there were not dramatic, predictable, or consistent effects of media messages on the public, and research began to focus on more limited and indirect effects of these messages. The indirect effects approach reviews the effects that messages have on individuals, but it accounts for how audience members perceive and interpret these messages selectively according to personal differences. Because people's perceptions are selective, their responses to the messages vary as well. For example, a person who is preparing to buy a car, a person who just bought a car, and a person who does not drive will each react differently to an automobile commercial.



Allied propaganda posters designed to build support for World War I weren't afraid to make use of strong negative stereotypes of the Germans.

Library of Congress

The Payne Fund Studies

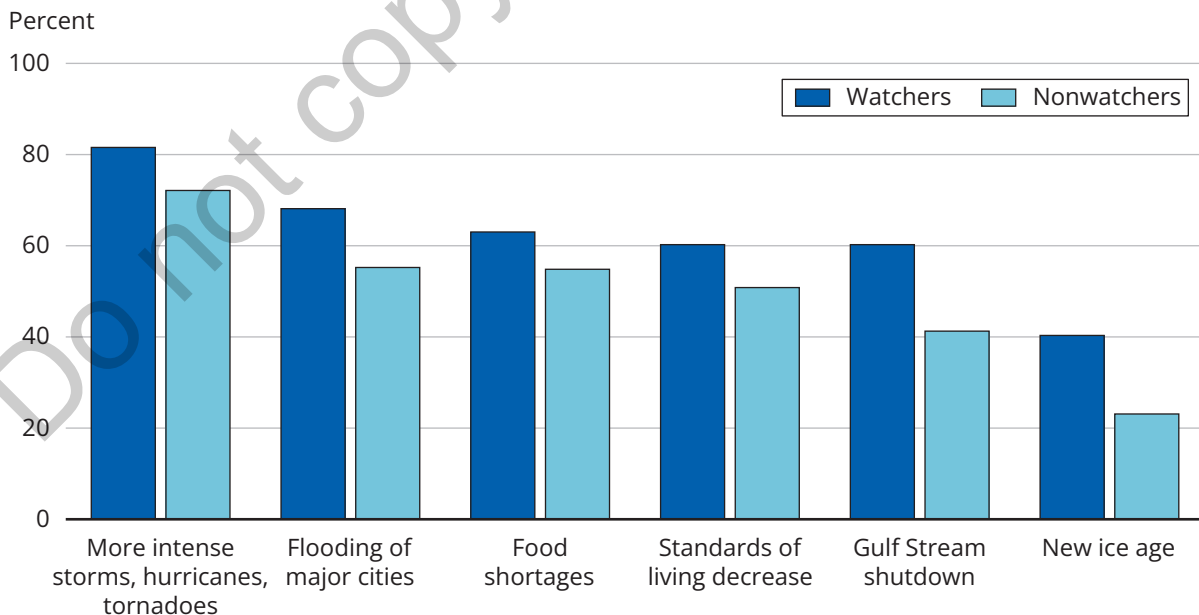
Researchers soon found an excellent source for studying the effects of media on the population in the form of a major new cultural institution—the movies. As movies grew in popularity in the 1920s, people became concerned about their effects on viewers, especially young people. The film industry claimed that movies do not shape society; they just reflect it. But that argument ignored the fact that movies were a central part of society; even mirrors have effects. Movie historian Gerald Mast notes that “movies have . . . been an immensely powerful social and cultural force. . . . They have produced social changes—in ways of dress, patterns of speech, methods of courting. And they have mirrored social changes—in fashion, sexual mores, political principles.”¹⁸

Researchers often use examples from the movies to demonstrate the purported effects that movies have on society. An example of how a movie can have a significant effect on society is the 2004 science fiction disaster feature *The Day After Tomorrow*. The movie’s plot centers around two climate scientists who discover that earth is experiencing accelerating climate change and are trying to warn the public about the potential devastating effects of global warming. As the movie progresses, several (scientifically implausible) storms arise around the globe causing catastrophic floods, hail, and snowstorms proving the scientists’ warnings. After several adventure and disaster sequences, the movie ends with a view from space showing the earth covered in icecaps.

Even though the movie exaggerates the size of the storms and their devastation, the message it portrays is familiar to many of us: that increased awareness of climate change is essential to saving life as we know it on the planet. And those who watched it were apparently moved to act on that message. For example, researchers at Yale showed that after participants saw the movie, they appeared to be more thoughtful about the environment and began to consider how their own actions could help prevent a catastrophe, such as the one depicted. The researchers consistently found that the movie had a strong influence on all the participants they studied and that after watching the movie these participants better understood the risks of global warming (Figure 2.1).¹⁹

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Percent of Watchers and Nonwatchers Who Found Each Item *Somewhat or Very Likely*

“In the United States, how likely do you think it is that each of the following will occur during the next 50 years due to global warming?”



Source: Anthony A. Leiserowitz, “Day After Tomorrow: Study of Climate Change Risk Perception,” *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 46, no. 9 (2004): 22–39.

Note: Nonwatchers weighted (n = 390), watchers weighted (n = 139).

The Payne Fund, a private foundation studying the effects of media on the public, sponsored a series of 13 studies between 1929 and 1933, several of which analyzed the content of movies, who was going to the movies, and what, if any, effects the movies were having on audiences. The researchers found that a small number of basic themes continuously appeared in movies: crime, sex, love, mystery, war, children, history, travel, comedy, and social propaganda. Of these themes, more than three fourths of all movies dealt with crime, sex, or love.

A second major finding by the Payne Fund was that people could remember a surprising amount of what they had seen in movies, even 6 months after seeing them. Why such a high level of recall? Perhaps it was because movies were novel at the time, but another explanation was that movies gave people something to talk about, thus stimulating recall.

Some critics had suggested that movies might be responsible for moral decay, and one of the studies looked at whether the morals portrayed in movies were at odds with those of the viewing public. Not surprisingly, the moral standards of characters in movies tended to be lower than those of viewers. After all, people who behave differently from us are the most interesting to watch.

Herbert Blumer, a noted social psychologist, conducted a major study that examined the diaries of young people who recorded how they thought they had been influenced by movies. He found that participants reported imitating the behaviors they saw in movies and copying the actions of their favorite stars in their games and play. Young people reported that they saw movies as a source of ideas about action, romance, and standards of beauty. They were using the movies to learn how to behave as an adult.²⁰ In short, Blumer was looking at how social interaction shaped young people's reaction to the movies, thus demonstrating Secret 5—All media are social.

The People's Choice

In addition to worrying about how movies were affecting young people, critics also feared that political media campaigns would “inject” people with ideas that would lead to the message creator's desired actions, such as supporting a particular candidate, ideology, or point of view. This model of powerful direct campaign effects was largely discredited by voter studies in the 1940s and 1950s, but it remains important because many people still believe that it is accurate.²¹

One of the first large-scale social-scientific studies of campaign influences was *The People's Choice*, a study of the 1940 U.S. presidential election contest between Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt and Republican Wendell Willkie. A team of researchers led by Paul Lazarsfeld looked at how voters in Erie County, Ohio, decided which candidate to vote for. Lazarsfeld's team found that people who were highly interested in the campaign and paid the most attention to media coverage of it were the least likely to be influenced by the campaign. Why? Because they had decided whom they supported before the campaign had even begun.²²

In contrast, voters who decided at the last minute usually turned to friends or neighbors, rather than the media, for information about the campaign. In general, they turned to people who followed the campaign closely, the ones whom Lazarsfeld called opinion leaders. **Opinion leaders** are influential community members—friends, family members, and coworkers—who spend significant time with the media. Lazarsfeld suggested that information flows from the media to opinion leaders and then from opinion leaders to the rest of the public. Keep in mind that the opinion leaders are ordinary people who are simply interested and involved in a topic. Although this finding was not expected, it should not be surprising that interpersonal influence is more important than the media. The idea here is simple: People in groups tend to share opinions with one another, and when they want reliable information, they go to the people they know. This illustrates Secret 5—All media are social. Even decades before so-called social media (like Facebook, Threads, and X/Twitter) existed, people were still drawn to talk about the news at length.

With the lengthy campaigns today, people find it easier to turn to interpersonal sources than the wealth of media information. Yet this trend is nothing new. Although many people believe that our election campaigns are starting earlier and earlier every election cycle, presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan started his campaign for the 1900 election 1 month after the election of 1896!²³

Even as early as the 1830s, when the penny press was just getting started, presidential campaigns could run as long as 2 years.

The People's Choice, as well as other early voter studies, found that campaigns typically reinforced existing political predispositions and that few people changed their minds about whom they were going to support. There are several reasons for this:

- The voters who start off with strong opinions are unlikely to change them.
- The voters who pay the most attention to a campaign are those with the strongest political views; thus, they are the least likely to change their opinions.
- The most persuadable voters (those who are least informed) are not likely to pay attention to political communication and therefore are not strongly influenced by media coverage of the campaign.²⁴

The Two-Step Flow Today

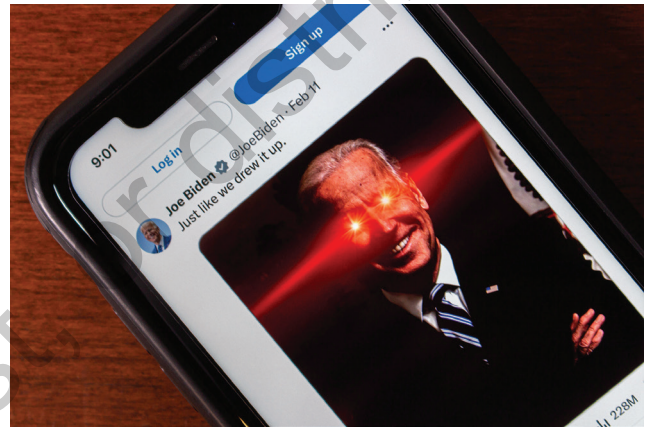
The two-step flow of information process described by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues back in the 1940s continues to be relevant in the age of 21st-century social media influencers. In the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden's campaign worked with "Facebook moms," women who share "cute and uplifting content," to share videos like the one of Biden giving his American flag lapel pin to a boy at a campaign stop. The fact that it was being shared by people Facebook subscribers already liked and trusted made messages like the flag pin video more effective than those coming directly from the campaign.²⁵

The Importance of Meaning

The approaches to studying mass communication that we have looked at fall under the transmission model discussed in Chapter 1. As media scholar James Carey wrote, the transmission model "is defined by terms such as 'imparting,' 'sending,' 'transmitting,' or 'giving information to others.'"²⁶ These explanations view mass communication as an extension of transportation; and indeed, before electronic media, the fastest form of transportation was also the fastest form of communication.

The transmission model focuses on the sending of messages with fixed meanings rather than on how we interact with them. Explanations that focus on the importance of meaning, on the other hand, look at who gets to decide what the messages will be, how we interact with these messages, and how we negotiate meanings for these messages. When we look at the ritual model of communication (again, looking back to Chapter 1), we think about how we use messages to interact with those around us, where the interaction is the key concept rather than the message itself.

The reception model, for example, looks at how meaning is derived and created from the message rather than treating the message within a fixed content that everyone accepts as being correct.²⁷



President Joe Biden's 2024 campaign used the "Dark Biden" glowing eye image to create viral content for social media.

Koshiro K/Alamy Stock Photo

EFFECTS OF MEDIA IN OUR LIVES

Media scholars throughout the 20th century who studied the effects of the mass media on individuals and society questioned several aspects of the media, including the messages being sent, the media sending them, the owners of the media, and the audience members themselves.²⁸ The following are some of the major effects that were studied:

- Message effects—how media messages might change behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs
- Attitudinal effects—changes in feelings about a product, an individual, or an idea based on media content

- Behavioral effects—media content can influence buying a product, making a phone call, and voting for a candidate
- Psychological effects—media content can inspire fear, joy, revulsion, happiness, or amusement, among other feelings
- Medium effects—the particular medium being used to transmit messages
- Ownership effects—the influence of those who own and control the media
- Active audience effects—unique members who respond as individuals, not as undifferentiated members of a mass

Message Effects

Not surprisingly, the earliest concerns about the effects of mass communication focused on how messages might change people's behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs. These message effects can take a variety of forms. The types of these effects have been broken down into categories such as cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, and psychological.

The most common and observable message effect is on the short-term learning of information. This can be as significant as learning about a new medical treatment or as trivial as remembering the lyrics to a popular song. The amount of learning that takes place from media content depends largely on the motivation level of the person consuming the media.

Political scientist Doris Graber found that people who want to be able to talk intelligently with others about media content (whether it be the news, a sporting event, or an entertainment program) learn much more from the media than people who are simply seeking entertainment. This is one more example of Secret 5—All media are social. Remember, you do not need to be using Facebook or Twitter to make media social. Research also shows that people learn more from people they identify with and pay more attention to political commentators they agree with than ones they dislike.²⁹ Hence the most popular political radio talk shows, such as those hosted by conservative Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh's replacements Clay Travis and Buck Sexton, argue a single and consistent point of view rather than providing a range of views.³⁰

Attitudinal Effects

People can develop attitudinal effects—feelings about a product, an individual, or an idea—based on media content. Viewers might decide that they like a new product, political candidate, or hairstyle because of what they have seen in a television commercial, a news broadcast, or a sitcom.

Typically, it is much easier to get people to form new opinions than to get them to change existing ones.³¹ For example, political advertising generally tries to change the opinions of uncommitted voters rather than those of voters who already have strong political loyalties. In the 2016 presidential election cycle, the Bernie Sanders campaign found substantial success by targeting young, uncommitted voters who value being asked directly for their support.³²

Behavioral Effects

Behavioral effects include actions such as clipping a coupon from a newspaper, buying a product, making a phone call, and voting for a candidate. They might also include imitating attractive behaviors (for example, dressing a certain way). Behavioral effects are in many ways the most difficult to achieve because people are reluctant to change their behavior. Sometimes, however, people go to



The youth vote's biggest beneficiary has been Bernie Sanders, who won 80% of the youth vote in Iowa and Nevada. The candidate was the internet's darling, dominating the competition on Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter.

AP Images/Associated Press

the media deliberately looking for behavior to copy, as when a child watches an episode of *Batman* and then imitates it in play or when a teenager watches a movie to learn how to behave on a date.³³

Psychological Effects

Media content can inspire fear, joy, revulsion, happiness, or amusement, among other feelings.³⁴ A major psychological effect of media content, especially violent or erotic material, is arousal. Symptoms of arousal can include a rise in heart rate, adrenaline levels, or sexual response. Seeking a psychological response is a common reason for spending time with the media, whether the response sought is relaxation, excitement, or emotional release. Arousal can come from content (action, violence, sexuality, loud music or sound) and from style (motion, use of color, the rate and speed at which new images appear). Notice that music videos, which often offer little in terms of learning, provide many of these elements.³⁵

Legendary film composer John Williams is known for his sweeping, emotionally memorable scores for movies like the Indiana Jones series, the Jurassic Park series, and even Kobe Bryant's Academy Award-winning animated short *Dear Basketball*. But he is undoubtedly best known for his scores for the nine core Star Wars films. From the opening fanfare played over the crawling text, to the menacing "The Imperial March (Darth Vader's Theme)," to the love theme for Han Solo and Princess Leia, these melodies are instantly recognized cultural icons. They also are a key part of how the Star Wars movies are capable of so blatantly manipulating our feelings.

Alex Ross, music critic for the *New Yorker*, writes that Williams manipulated the audience in *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* by composing vaguely menacing music for Luke Skywalker to make the audience question whether the Jedi hero has gone over to the dark side. "The new film tells us otherwise," Ross says, "but shadowy chords surround the exiled hero for much of the film, leaving us in suspense as to his intentions."³⁶

Medium Effects

As mass media consumption grew in the 1950s, scholars also started paying more attention to the particular medium being used to transmit messages. Until the 1950s, most media effects research focused on the interactions among the sender, the message, and the receiver, ignoring the influence of the medium itself. But the medium used to communicate is crucial. Canadian communication researcher Marshall McLuhan argued that the medium used for transmission can be as important as the message itself, if not more so. McLuhan is best known for his statement "The medium is the message," by which he meant that the method of message transmittal is a central part of the message. For example, television does an excellent job of transmitting emotional messages because it includes both visual (explosions, luxury interiors) and audio (laugh tracks, scary music) cues along with words. Media analyst and commentator Ezra Klein writes that for all their political differences, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC all present news in a similar way: "Cable news in all its forms carries a sameness: the look of the anchors, the gloss of the graphics, the aesthetics of urgency and threat, the speed, the immediacy, the conflict, the conflict, the conflict."³⁷ Then consider technology that enhances the sound of movies: Surround sound systems are designed to create an immersive experience by surrounding viewers with seven or more distinct sound channels as well as shaking them with a deep bass channel. The goal is not to transmit the message better, but to create a more overwhelming experience. (Think of how the impact of a summer blockbuster film would be diminished if the sound were turned down.) The same is true of large-screen high-definition television sets. Books and newspapers, in contrast, are much better at transmitting complex rational information because these media allow us to review the information and



Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan, right, is best remembered for his statement "The medium is the message." He became such a pop culture figure in the 1970s that he had a cameo playing himself in the film *Annie Hall*.

United Artists/Photofest

consider its meaning at our own pace.³⁸ The web excels at providing obscure materials that appeal to a limited, widely dispersed audience, and it makes it easy for receivers to respond to what they've seen or heard. Media scholars now recognize that communication technology is a fundamental element of society and that new technologies can lead to social change.³⁹ As Secret 1 points out, the media are essential components of our lives.

Media sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz, for example, argues that the existence and development of various media can lead to radical changes in society. He writes that the development of publishing and books in the 16th century made it easy for new ideas to spread beyond the person who originated them and that this tended to undermine the control of ideas by both the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁰

The existence of digital documents, encrypted email, and high-capacity thumb drives now allows a small group of technically skilled individuals to spread news and documents around the world, with governments powerless to stop them. Meyrowitz also identifies some social effects of particular media. In *No Sense of Place*, he argues that the major effect of print as a medium is to segregate audiences according to education, age, class, and gender. For example, a teenager needs to be able to read at a certain level to understand the content of a magazine targeted at young women or young men—content that a young child would be unable to comprehend. In contrast, electronic media such as television tend to cross the demographic boundaries. A child too young to read a magazine or book can still understand at least some of the information in a television program targeted at adults.⁴¹ This is why parent groups and childhood educators push to restrict certain sites and apps on a child's smartphone or tablet.

Ownership Effects

Instead of looking at the effects of media and their messages, some scholars examine the influence of those who own and control the media.⁴² These critical scholars are concerned because owners of media determine which ideas will be produced and distributed by those media.

In the United States, media outlets are owned mostly by a few multinational conglomerates and newly formed media companies, such as Disney, News Corporation/Fox Corporation, Warner Bros. Discovery, Paramount, Bertelsmann, Comcast/NBCUniversal, Google, and Apple. Some observers, such as German academic and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, fear that these corporations are becoming a sort of ruling class, controlling which books are published, which programs are aired, which movies are produced, and which news stories are written.⁴³ As we discuss in Chapters 3 and 11, Disney, News Corporation, Google, and Apple have all had to compromise at times with the Chinese government in order to keep doing business in China. For example, Google had to agree to censor its search results about sensitive topics in China for the company to be allowed to operate there.⁴⁴

Media critic and former newspaper editor Ben Bagdikian suggests that the influence of media owners can be seen in how the news media select stories to be covered. He argues that large media organizations will kill news stories and entertainment programs that don't reflect well on the corporation. The roots of this tendency go back to when captains of industry such as J. P. Morgan and the Rockefellers bought out magazines that criticized them to silence that criticism. What we end up with, Bagdikian says, is not the feared bogeyman of government censorship, but rather "a new Private Ministry of Information and Culture" that gives corporations control over what we will see, hear, or read.⁴⁵ Increasingly, however, the new alternative media are providing channels that allow consumers to bypass Big Media controls.⁴⁶ (See the section on long-tail media in Chapter 3 for more on how these new channels are enabling anyone who wants to distribute content to do so on a large scale.) Websites such as Breitbart or Daily Kos give voice to issues from a partisan point of view with no controls at all other than those the authors choose to employ.

Active Audience Effects

Some of the early fears about the effects of the media on audience members arose from the belief that the audience truly was a faceless, undifferentiated mass—that the characteristics of the audience en masse also applied to the audience's individual members. Early critics viewed modern people as alienated

and isolated individuals who, separated by the decline of the family and the growth of a technological society, did not communicate with one another. After World War II, the concept of the mass audience began to change as scholars came to realize that the audience was made up of unique members who responded as individuals, not as undifferentiated members of a mass.⁴⁷

Today, communicators, marketers, and scholars realize that individuals seek and respond to different messages at different times and for different reasons. Therefore, they divide audiences on the basis of **geographics**, or where people live; **demographics**, or their gender, race, ethnic background, income, education, age, educational attainment, and the like; or **psychographics**, a combination of demographics, lifestyle characteristics, and product usage. Hence, a young woman buying a small SUV to take her mountain bike out into the mountains will respond to a very different kind of advertising message than a mother seeking a small SUV so that she can safely drive her child to school during rush hour in the winter.

Audiences can also be classified by the amount of time they spend using media or by the purposes for which they use media. Each segment of the media audience will behave differently. Take television viewing as an example. Some people tune in daily to watch their favorite soap opera or talk show and will not change the channel for the entire hour. This is known as appointment viewing. Others surf through several channels using the remote control, looking for something that will capture their interest. Still others switch back and forth between two channels.

With regard to television, the concept of a mass audience consuming the same content at the same time existed to some extent from the 1950s to the 1970s, when the vast majority of viewers had access to only three broadcast networks, but that concept broke down completely with the advent of streaming, cable, satellite, multiple broadcast networks, TiVo, DVDs, and VCRs. This is an example of Secret 7—There is no “they.”

In addition to recognizing that different people use the media in different ways, scholars have realized that mass communication messages are generally mediated through other levels of communication. One reason this book discusses intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group communication in addition to mass communication is that these levels all come into play in how mass communication operates. People discuss political news with one another, cheer together for their favorite teams while watching a hockey game on television, and think about how stock market information is going to affect their investment plans. A young man’s reaction to a love scene in a movie will differ depending on if he watches it with a group of friends, with his sweetie, or with his parents.⁴⁸

TEST YOUR MEDIA LITERACY

WHAT KIND OF EFFECTS ARE PEOPLE LOOKING FOR?

As we can see, our media can have many effects on their audiences, and audiences can have effects back on the media. At the beginning of this chapter, we took an extended look at the types of effects we think may be involved between social media and young people. As we have seen, some of these effects are discussed by serious researchers, some by concerned parents, and some by critics wanting to score easy points against “the media.”

Think about the types of media effects we have read about so far in this chapter. Which of them can you see in the concerns about social media? And who are sharing these concerns? Remember, these effects can include the following:

- Message effects
- Attitudinal effects
- Behavioral effects
- Psychological effects
- Medium effects
- Ownership effects
- Active audience effects

WHO are the sources?

Who are the sources for the claims about social media effects? How credible are their claims of effects? Where did they get their information come from?

WHAT are they saying?

Read the opening vignette. What reasons do the sources give for the effects they see? Whom do they say was responsible for this happening?

WHAT evidence exists?

What evidence is there for potentially negative social media effects? What evidence is there for potentially positive social media effects?

WHAT do you think explains what happened?

How would you explain how social media affect young people today? What kinds of effects discussed earlier do you think do the best job of explaining how people interact with social media? Why?

MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Much like most scientific research, mass communication research depends, in large part, on theory and the questions posed by these theories. It is helpful to understand these theoretical approaches and how the effects of the media are not limited to those on individuals or groups.

Researchers know that some of the media's most significant messages can have an effect on our major social functions. According to media scholar Harold Lasswell, the mass media are simply "an extension of basic functions that society has always needed. Earlier societies had priests, town criers, storytellers, bards who sang ballads, and travelers who brought news from distant lands."⁴⁹

Researchers also know that communication can be functional or dysfunctional but, in either case, it operates within the social system.⁵⁰ For example, some people respond inappropriately to the news of approaching danger. Instead of going to the basement during a tornado warning, a functional response, they go outside with their video cameras to get footage of the storm, a dysfunctional response. In both cases, they are responding to the news of the storm.

Lasswell wrote that the media perform three major social functions:

1. Surveillance of the environment, looking for both threats and opportunities
2. Correlation of different elements of society, allowing segments of society to work together
3. Transmission of culture from one generation to the next⁵¹

Media sociologist Charles Wright adds a fourth—the function of entertainment—to the above list.⁵²

Surveillance of the Environment

Much of what we know about the world we learn from the media through the process of **surveillance**. The media show us what is happening not only in our own culture, but in other societies as well. Our only other sources of knowledge about the world are our own direct experiences and the direct experiences that others share with us. For example, people who live in the Middle East learn much of what they know about the outside world through their use of social media and direct messaging software like WhatsApp, which allow them to bypass much of the local censorship that limits legacy media.⁵³

The constant flow of information from the media allows us to survey our surroundings. It can give us warnings of approaching danger—everything from changes in the weather to earthquakes to violence in the streets. This flow of information is essential for the everyday operation of society. The stock markets depend on the business news, travelers depend on weather forecasts, and grocery shoppers depend on knowing what is on special this week.

Surveillance can also undermine society. For example, when people in poor nations see media images of what life is like in the United States and other industrialized nations, they may become dissatisfied with the conditions of their own lives, and this may lead to social unrest and violence. News about violence may also make people more fearful for their own safety.

Surveillance is not just for the masses. Government and industry leaders worldwide watch CNN or C-SPAN or read the *New York Times* or *Financial Times* to know what other government leaders are saying and thinking.

News can also give status to individuals. Because media coverage exposes them to large audiences, they seem important. This process is known as **status conferral**. In a rather extreme example, Kim Kardashian initially became famous after being a friend of socialite Paris Hilton and producing a famous sex tape back in 2007.⁵⁴ The notoriety from her friendship and sex tape led to the long-running reality TV series *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* that ran on the E! cable/satellite network from 2007 to 2021. Kardashian told *Vogue Arabia* she longed for both money and fame, and found them both through media attention. “Money was always the goal but I was obsessed with fame, like embarrassingly obsessed.”⁵⁵ Even now Kardashian keeps showing up in media coverage simply for showing up at celebrity events.



Reality TV star Kim Kardashian shows up regularly at events like the Kering's Caring for Women Dinner both to support causes she cares about and to keep her visibility up.

James Devaney/GC Images/Getty Images

Correlation of Different Elements of Society

Correlation is the selection, evaluation, and interpretation of events to impose structure on the news. Correlation is accomplished by persuasive communication through editorials, commentary, advertising, and propaganda. Through media-supplied correlation, we make sense out of what we learn through surveillance. It puts news into categories and provides cues that indicate the importance of each news item. Does it appear on the front page of the newspaper? Is it the first item on the broadcast? Is there a teaser on the magazine cover promoting the story?

Although many people say that they would prefer just the facts, virtually the only news outlet that provides no interpretation of events is the public affairs network C-SPAN, which has rigid rules governing how every event is covered. Far more viewers choose to go to the broadcast networks or cable news channels, which provide some interpretation, rather than watch the relatively dry “just the facts” C-SPAN.⁵⁶

It is often difficult to distinguish between communication that is informative and communication that is persuasive. Editorial judgments are always being made as to which stories should be covered and which should be omitted, which picture of a politician should be published, or what kind of headline should be written. Thus, it is useful to view surveillance and correlation as two functions that can be shared by a message.

Socialization and Transmission of Culture

Socialization is the process of integrating people within society through the transmission of values, social norms, and knowledge to new members of the group.

It is through the media, as well as through our friends, family, school, and church, that we learn the values of our society. Socialization is important not only to young people as they are growing up but also to immigrants learning about and assimilating into their new country, high school students

heading off to college, and new graduates going to work.⁵⁷ Here is another example of Secret 1—The media are essential components of our lives.

The media provide socialization in a variety of ways:

- Through role models in entertainment programming
- Through goals and desires as presented in media content
- Through the citizenship values portrayed in the news
- Through advertisements for products that may be useful to us in different stages of our lives

Entertainment

Entertainment is communication designed primarily to amuse, even if it serves other functions as well, which it almost always does. A television medical drama would be considered entertainment, even though it might educate a person about life in a hospital or the symptoms of a major illness. In fact, a major characteristic of all television programming, including entertainment programming, is to let people know what life outside their own world is like.⁵⁸



Extensive coverage by the tabloids put Catherine, Princess of Wales, at the top of Brits' news agenda in spring 2024 when she announced she had been diagnosed with cancer.

Mark Case/Getty Images

Agenda Setting

Although explanations of powerful direct effects did not hold up under research scrutiny, people still had a hard time accepting that the news media and political campaigns had little or no effect on the public. **Agenda-setting theory** provides an alternative explanation that does not minimize the influence of the media on society.⁵⁹ This theory holds that issues that are portrayed as important in the news media become important to the public—that is, the media set the agenda for public debate. If the media are not able to tell people what to think, as the direct effects model proposed, perhaps they can tell people what to think about. Agenda-setting theorists seek to determine whether the issues that are important to the media are also important to the public.⁶⁰

The initial study of agenda setting was conducted in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs. The researchers found, among uncommitted voters in the 1968 presidential election, a strong relationship between the issues the press considered important and the issues the voters considered important. Since these voters had not already made up their minds about the upcoming election, their most likely source of cues, the researchers concluded, was the mass media. The study compared the content of the press and the attitudes of voters and found a strong correlation. Even though the researchers did not find evidence that the press persuaded people to change their opinions, they did find that the issues featured in the campaign and in the press were also the issues that voters felt were important.⁶¹

There are, however, some limits on the usefulness of the agenda-setting concept. If a story does not resonate with the public, neither the media nor the candidates will be able to make people care. For example, reports that Ronald and Nancy Reagan had conceived a child before they were married did not seem to do any damage to Reagan's image; nor was the Rev. Pat Robertson's campaign damaged by reports that the candidate and his wife had lied about the date of their wedding anniversary to hide the fact that their first child was conceived premaritally.

OUR INTERACTIONS WITH MEDIA

The media, by widening the information about the world that we are exposed to, play an important role in social learning. Students and young professionals have all been warned on numerous occasions to be careful what they post on social media. But media coverage of a public relations practitioner named

Justine's social media self-destruction has likely helped a lot of folks avoid her mistake. Just before her 12-hour flight took off from London for Cape Town, South Africa, Justine sent out a tweet that read, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!"

Her tweet spawned an extended online firestorm under the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet. Tweets ranged from mocking her insensitivity, to parody accounts, to expressions of offense and hurt. Once Justine did land, she learned she had been fired while she was in the air. Despite having only about 500 followers at the time she took off, her tweet rapidly spread around the world. With a case like #HasJustineLandedYet, social media users can learn from the example of one woman without having to suffer all the consequences she did.⁶²

At some point in your life, you have likely been told that experience is the best teacher. While experience may be a good teacher, it is also a harsh one, forcing us to suffer from our mistakes. Fortunately, we do not have to make all these mistakes ourselves, according to social psychologist Albert Bandura's **social learning theory**. Bandura is best known for conducting an experiment that had children observing an adult beating an inflatable (life-size) "Bobo" doll. In the experiment, only some of the children saw the adult being reprimanded for behaving so aggressively, while others saw the adult suffer no consequences for their behavior.

Bandura found that children who saw the adult "get away with" the aggressive behavior were more likely to behave aggressively when they were left in a room alone with the Bobo doll than were those who saw the adult get reprimanded. In short, what Bandura found was that children based their behavior on what they had learned from observing adult behavior. Bandura writes, "If knowledge and skills could be acquired only by direct experience, the process of human development would be greatly retarded, not to mention exceedingly tedious and hazardous."⁶³ Instead, he says that we are able to learn by observing what others do and the consequences they face.

Bandura says humans go through three steps to engage in social learning:

1. We extract key information from situations we observe.
2. We integrate these observations to create rules about how the world operates.
3. We put these rules into practice to regulate our own behavior and predict the behaviors of others.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory turns the traditional way of looking at media effects on its head. Instead of looking at the audience as a sheep-like mass of receivers of messages, uses and gratifications theory views audience members as active receivers of information of their own choosing. This theory is based on the following assumptions:

- Audience members are active receivers who have wants and needs. They then make decisions about media use based on those wants and needs. For example, in this approach, video games do not do things to children; children make use of video games.
- Media compete with many sources of gratification. I might watch television in the evening to relax. Television would be competing with reading a magazine, going for a walk, and playing with my son as alternative ways of relaxing.
- Audience members are aware of these choices and make them consciously.
- Our judgments about the value of various media uses must come from the audience's perspective.⁶⁴



In Albert Bandura's famous "Bobo" doll experiment, the social psychologist found that children who saw adults "get away" with aggressive behavior were more likely to behave aggressively toward an inflatable life-size doll.

WATFORD/Mirrorpix/Mirrorpix via Getty Images

The idea behind uses and gratifications theory is that individuals are constantly seeking gratifications, and the media compete to provide them. Media scholar Arthur Asa Berger says that among the gratifications that audience members might seek are to be amused, to experience the beautiful, to have shared experiences with others, to find models to imitate, and to believe in romantic love.⁶⁵ So someone who doesn't care about football might still watch a game on television and enjoy it because he wants to spend time with friends. Although he is consuming media, that is not the real point of his interaction with the television set.

Symbolic Interactionism

George Herbert Mead wrote back in 1934 that what holds us together as a culture is our common creation of society through our interactions based on language, or **symbolic interactionism**. We engage in symbolic interactions in which we continually attempt to arouse in others the feeling we have in ourselves by telling others how we feel.

If our language is understood, we are able to communicate; if, on the other hand, we do not share common meanings, we will not be understood.⁶⁶ The mass media are by far the biggest source of shared meanings in our world. This is an example of Secret 1—The media are essential components of our lives.

If you think back to our discussion of the meaning of the yellow ribbon in Chapter 1, you can see how this works. We start with an arbitrary symbol: the yellow ribbon. We assign it meaning and then propagate that meaning through portrayal in the media. Eventually, nearly everyone comes to have the same shared meaning of the looped ribbon, and the ribbon becomes a universal symbol of support—support for the troops, for disease sufferers, and for all kinds of social causes.

Sociologist W. I. Thomas provides us with one of the most quoted and understandable statements of symbolic interactionism: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”⁶⁷ If we ignore the outdated gender bias of the quote, there's a lot to analyze there. What Thomas is saying is that if people view a problem as being real, and behave as though a problem is real, it will have real consequences, even if the problem does not truly exist. Back in 1938, Orson Welles narrated a famous radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. The radio play was misinterpreted by some to be an actual news story, and there were many accounts at the time of people panicking and even committing suicide out of fear of the Martians invading New Jersey. Ever since then, broadcasters have been very careful to run extensive disclaimers on the air every time they run a *War of the Worlds*-style story, to make sure they don't panic their audience. There is also a widespread fear of powerful effects that the mass media can have on susceptible audience members. The only problem is that the research conducted at the time on the *War of the Worlds* panic was seriously flawed, and criticism of the research, which dates back to the 1940s, has largely been ignored, in part because the belief in the *War of the Worlds* effect is so strong. The truth is that there was far more perception of panic than actual panic at the time. In summary, it doesn't matter much now whether the panic took place. What matters is that people believe that it did.⁶⁸

Spiral of Silence

German media scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, with her **spiral of silence**, raises the question of why people become unwilling to express what they perceive to be a minority opinion. Noelle-Neumann became interested in this question in part from trying to find out why the Germans supported political positions that led to national defeat, humiliation, and ruin in the 1930s and 1940s, or why the French under German occupation were seemingly complacent as Jewish friends and neighbors were sent to concentration camps. Noelle-Neumann says that societies function on the basis of perceived consensus. We want to view ourselves as part of a majority and as holding the consensus opinion. Thus people



The panic many people think was inspired by Orson Welles made *War of the Worlds* perhaps the most notorious event in American broadcast history.

Ullstein Bild/Getty Images

will refrain from expressing opinions that they think will be at odds with those of their friends and neighbors, even though their neighbors might actually agree with them.⁶⁹

So how do people receive the cues that indicate what popular public opinion is so that they might agree with it? The media are important public institutions because they are often our best source of public opinion. Central to Noelle-Neumann's argument is that when people believe they are in the minority with their opinion, they will tend to stay quiet on the topic, thus feeding the sense that a particular opinion is held by a minority. Thus it becomes a death spiral of diversity of ideas, as more and more people come to believe that they hold a minority opinion.⁷⁰

While the spiral of silence is a fascinating explanation of how public opinion functions, it is difficult to independently verify and prove whether it, in fact, works that way. Radicals will oftentimes speak up with unpopular opinions precisely because they are unpopular. And people who care deeply about an issue will speak out simply because they feel they are correct.

A 2023 study conducted by campus research company College Pulse and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression found that more than half of students surveyed at the University of Nebraska worried about hurting their reputation because someone might misunderstand or misinterpret comments they made, and approximately a quarter of students reported feeling they couldn't freely discuss controversial topics in their classes. Among the issues they felt uncomfortable discussing were abortion, gun control, racial inequality, and transgender rights.⁷¹

Cultivation Analysis

George Gerbner (1919–2005), the best-known researcher of television violence, did not believe televised violence has direct effects on people's behavior, but he was deeply concerned about its effect on society as a whole.⁷² Gerbner developed an alternative to traditional message effects research called **cultivation analysis**. His argument was that watching large amounts of television cultivates a distinct view of the world that is sharply at odds with reality.⁷³

Over the years, Gerbner and his colleagues analyzed thousands of network television programs for the themes they presented and the level of violence they included. In a series of studies beginning in 1967, Gerbner's team found high levels of violence on television. They defined violence as "the overt expression of force intended to hurt or kill."⁷⁴

Network officials have been openly critical of Gerbner, saying that his studies weren't representative of television as a whole and that his definition of violence is not useful because it does not discriminate between the fantasy violence of a *Road Runner* cartoon and the more graphic gore of a *Saw* or *Hostel* movie.

Gerbner compared the rate of violence on television to the rate of it occurring in the real world. He concluded that television cultivates a view of the world that is much more violent than the world we live in. The nature of the violence is different as well, with most television violence occurring between strangers rather than between family members, as does real-life violence. Gerbner said that, because of this, people who watch a great deal of television perceive the world differently than do light viewers. Heavy television viewing cultivates a response that Gerbner calls the **mean world syndrome**.

Gerbner's basic argument has been supported by more recent research. A 2012 study of Californians found that people who regularly consumed local television news perceived themselves as being more afraid of and having higher risk of being a victim of crime. Similar effects were found from people who watched crime-based reality programs.⁷⁵

Gerbner explained what he considered to be major misconceptions about the effects of televised violence and what his research suggested the real effects were. He argued that watching large amounts of television cultivates a distinct view of the world that is at odds with reality.

Gerbner argued that, because of televised violence, heavy television viewers are more likely to

- overestimate their chances of experiencing violence,
- believe that their neighborhoods are unsafe,
- state that fear of crime is a very serious personal problem,
- assume that the crime rate is rising, regardless of the actual crime rate.⁷⁶

In an appearance before Congress, Gerbner testified,

The most general and prevalent association with television viewing is a heightened sense of living in a “mean world” of violence and danger. Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures. . . . They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television.⁷⁷

The effect of violent television, Gerbner argued, is not that it will program children to be violent; instead, the real harm is more complex. Violent programming

- pushes aside other ways of portraying conflict,
- deprives viewers of other choices,
- facilitates the victim mentality,
- discourages production of alternative programming.⁷⁸

Gerbner’s point was that the most obvious-to-imagine effects might not be the most important actual effects.

THE CRITICAL/CULTURAL APPROACH

In the decades between World War I and World War II came the rise of a revolution in social science thinking known as **critical theory**. Originated by a group of German scholars known as the Frankfurt School, these cultural critics were trying to make sense of a changing world that was leaving people alienated, exploited, and repressed with no good way of making sense of what was happening. Many of these scholars were Marxist in their political and social views and deeply concerned by the upheavals brought about by the end of World War I. These upheavals led to the rise of fascism in some parts of Europe and communism divorced from Karl Marx’s ideas in others. There are several key principles to this approach:

- There are serious problems that people suffer that come from exploitation and the division of labor.
- People are treated as “things” to be used rather than individuals who have value.
- You can’t make sense out of ideas and events if you take them out of their historical context.
- Society is coming to be dominated by a culture industry (what we might call the mass media) that takes cultural ideas, turns them into commodities, and sells them in a way to make the maximum amount of money. This separates ideas from the people who produce them.
- You cannot separate facts from the values attached to them and the circumstances from which these facts emerged.

Political science scholar Stephen Bronner writes that it is out of critical theory that people saw the rise of environmentalism, racial equality, sexual equality, and the examination of privilege. While critical theory cannot always help us understand ideas themselves, it can, Bronner writes, help us understand where they come from: “To put it crudely, critical theory can offer fruitful perspectives on the historical genesis and social uses of, say, the theory of relativity introduced by Albert Einstein. But it should not attempt to make philosophical judgments about its truth character.”⁷⁹

C. Wright Mills, who was heavily influenced by critical theorists, argued that media coverage of private problems helped turn them into major public issues. Bronner writes,

Women have already turned incest and spousal abuse from private into public concerns; gay and lesbian citizens have advocated the need for legislation against “hate crimes”; people of

color are challenging institutional racism; and countless other attempts have been made . . . to render the myriad institutions of the powerful accountable to the disempowered.⁸⁰

In other words, this is Secret 3—Everything from the margin moves to the center.

Up through the 1940s, most of the research on the mass media focused on direct and indirect effects of media messages on the behaviors of groups and individuals. But another school of thought looks at how people use media to construct their view of the world rather than looking at how media change people's behaviors. Instead of using the quantitative data analysis of the voter studies, the **critical/cultural approach** takes a more qualitative examination of the social structure in which communication takes place. It considers how meaning is created within society, who controls the media systems, and the roles the media play in our lives. Instead of looking at how messages affect people, it looks at how people use and construct messages.⁸¹

Media and Body Image

Eating disorders in girls and women are typically a result of many factors, one of which is a desire to be thin. It is no secret that in the United States, being thin is equal to being beautiful, leading a significant number of girls and women to suffer from eating disorders to achieve thinness. Unfortunately, this trend toward excessive thinness as a standard of beauty has become more prominent in recent decades. In 1972, 23% of U.S. women said that they were dissatisfied with their overall appearance. By 1996, that figure had grown to 48%. Critics frequently charge that the thin models in fashion magazines (both in ads and in editorial content) are at least partially responsible for promoting extreme thinness as attractive. In 1953, when Marilyn Monroe was featured in the debut issue of *Playboy*, she was a size 12 with measurements close to the then-ideal of 36-22-35, which by today's standard would make her a **plus-sized model**. Today, the much-photographed Jennifer Aniston is an impossible (for most women) size 0.⁸²

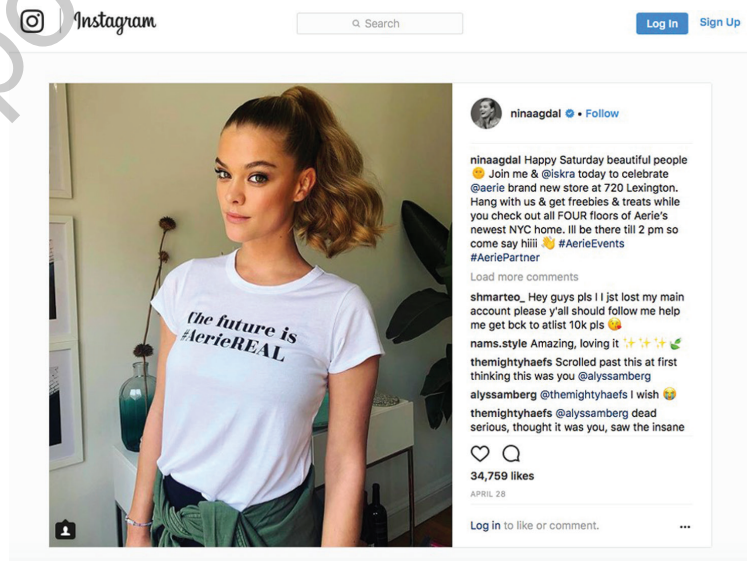
Diversity and Size

Danish model Nina Agdal is not a plus-sized model, but, as she points out, she does not have a conventional model's gaunt figure. After she was dropped from a magazine cover story because, as she tells it, she wasn't able to fit into the sample sizes during the photo shoot, resulting in the magazine telling her agent it "did not reflect well on my talent" and "did not fit their market," she decided to take her anger to social media. She posted an Instagram photo of herself from the shoot to show how she looked and wrote,

If anyone has any interest in me, they know I am not an average model body—I have an athletic build and healthy curves. . . . Some days I'm a sample size, some days I'm a size 4, some a 6. I am not built as a runway model and have never been stick thin. Now, more than ever, I embrace my curves and work diligently in the gym to stay strong and most of all, sane.⁸³

By using this negative event to promote body positivity through her photo shoots, she told *Glamour* magazine, "I feel a responsibility, since I'm one of the girls in the ads, in the magazines, in the commercial." In response to this, the former Victoria's Secret model signed to be part of the unretouched #AerieReal campaign for American Eagle's underwear and swimwear brand.⁸⁴

Several European countries have put regulations in place that control industry use of underweight models. France, for example, has weight minimums for fashion models, while the United Kingdom requires that fashion advertisements use "a sense of responsibility to consumers." While laws have been introduced at a



Nina Agdal took to social media to promote body positivity after having been rejected for modeling jobs due to her body size.

Instagram/@ninaagdal

variety of levels to regulate the weight and health of fashion models in the United States, it appears likely that the proposed regulations could violate both the Americans with Disabilities Act and the First Amendment.⁸⁵

Remember Secret 3—Everything from the margin moves to the center? It's possible that the willingness of women's magazines to use models of differing sizes is becoming more commonplace than it was several years ago.

It all started back in 2005 with the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and its so-called Lumpy Ladies. That ad campaign, featuring attractive women of a variety of sizes posing in their underwear for photographer Annie Leibovitz, helped open a dialogue about size, beauty, and magazine content. Were we going to see more images of realistic-looking women in magazine features and advertisements?⁸⁶ (That, of course, begs the question as to what constitutes “real women.” Are size-2 women not real? Or is it more that average-sized women are ignored by the media?)

The Dove campaign paved the way for models of various sizes. The contrast between plus-sized models and more conventionally sized magazine models was highlighted with a story in the online publication *PLUS Model Magazine* that had relatively tame naked photos of plus-sized model Katya Zharkova next to an unnamed “straight-sized” model. *PLUS Model* editor in chief Madeline Jones explained the magazine's photo spread thusly:

The answer to the question is this, there is nothing wrong with our bodies. We are bombarded with weight-loss ads every single day, multiple times a day because it's a multi-billion-dollar industry that preys on the fear of being fat. Not everyone is meant to be skinny, our bodies are beautiful, and we are not talking about health here because not every skinny person is healthy.

What we desire is equality to shop and have fashion options just like smaller women. Small women cannot be marketed to with pictures of plus-size women, why are we expected to respond to pictures of small size 6 and 8 women? We don't! When the plus size modeling industry began, the models ranged in size from 14 to 18/20, and as customers we long for those days when we identify with the models and feel happy about shopping.⁸⁷

The Importance of Representation

Standards of beauty are emphatically not a static thing. Journalist Nicole Spector writes that when she was a girl in the 1990s, *People* magazine's list of “The World's Most Beautiful People” was predominantly white (76%). An analysis using a medical scale of skin tones found that only 12% of the people on the list had moderate brown to dark brown skin. By 2017, that list had nearly 30% of the people ranked most beautiful in the darker categories. Gabriela Garcia, a Latina writer who founded the online publication *Modern Brown Girl*, told Spector that media attention to Hispanic women role models like Jennifer Lopez, who headlined the 2020 Super Bowl halftime show, has been vital for young Latina women:

For the first time, a brown girl with curves was popular and mainstream. She didn't shy away from her Latina-ness. I think she paved the way for other types of beauty. It wasn't until the media started to show women of different colors, sizes, and cultures that I began to realize that I was beautiful. And as silly as it sounds, women like J-Lo and Kim Kardashian have really helped promote body confidence for women who are not tall, blonde, and white.⁸⁸

But while Spector, whose mother is Latina, was impressed by the greater diversity in *People*'s list, she was bothered by the fact that in 2017 only 12% of the list were male, while back in 1990, nearly half the individuals on *People*'s list were male; hence, beauty and appearance are characteristics that we continue to use to judge women but not men. History and women's studies professor Dr. Catherine Kerrison told Spector that no matter what accomplishments women have, they will still be judged on how they look

As any woman in the public eye knows, it's crucial to her acceptance, her success that she present herself in ways that are acceptable to this standard. . . . Women will be evaluated by the standards of beauty and though those standards are expanding they are still critical to our success.⁸⁹



As a young person, Anok Yai did not see herself reflected in the lighter skinned models shown in most magazines, but since the image taken of her by photographer Steve Hall went viral in 2017, Yai has since worked steadily in the industry, becoming the first Black model in over 20 years to open for the famous fashion house Prada. She is seen here in 2023 attending the WSJ Magazine 2023 Innovator Awards in New York City.

Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for WSJ

Range of Beauty

As a young person, Anok Yai did not see herself reflected in the lighter skinned models shown in most magazines, but since the image taken of her by photographer Steve Hall went viral in 2017, Yai has since worked steadily in the industry, becoming the first Black model in over 20 years to open for the famous fashion house Prada.

As was mentioned earlier, diversity is not limited to race. Even among African Americans in media, light-skinned models are more likely to be featured in fashion than those with darker skin.

Anok Yai did not set out to be a model. She thought it might be an interesting thing to try, but that was about it. As a child, she and her sister would watch *America's Next Top Model*, hosted by Tyra Banks, but she did not think that kind of life was in her future. Yai is of Sudanese heritage, was born in Egypt, and moved to the United States with her family when she was 2 years old.

As she grew up, people told her she was beautiful, that she could be a model, that she could be on the cover of magazines. But the models Yai saw were always white or light-skinned Black women.⁹⁰

“When I was younger, I was insecure about my skin because I looked up to people in the media and, though I looked up to the black women, I never saw black women that were as dark as me,” Yai said.⁹¹

So Yai headed off to college at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire to study biochemistry with the goal of becoming a doctor. But then a friend suggested that they go to Howard University’s homecoming. It would be a chance for Yai to immerse herself in the ultimate African American student experience. Yai dressed sharp for the weekend—her friend told her she had to. “My friend was like ‘If I see you in a t-shirt and jeans, you’re not walking with me,’” Yai said.⁹²

But then Steve Hall, a Howard University graduate and a photographer for the fashion/Black culture website TheSUNK, took a picture of her. It is not the photo you would think would change a woman’s life. Yai is looking straight at the camera; she says she thinks the photo makes her look like a “deer in the headlights.”⁹³

The next morning, Hall posted the photo to Instagram, and Yai’s life was transformed. Hall’s photo quickly amassed more than 19,000 likes, and Yai soon went from having 300 Instagram followers to more than 50,000. Soon after that, the calls and emails from modeling agencies started coming in. Her childhood dream of being *America's Next Top Model* was starting to get real.

Yai eventually signed with Next Management, and in February 2018 she became the first Black model to open a runway show for the fashion house Prada since Naomi Campbell did so in 1997, more than 20 years before. “It was an honor and I’m proud that I was the one chosen to open, but this is bigger than me,” she told *Vogue* about modeling at Milan Fashion Week. “Me opening for one of the top fashion houses is a statement to the world—especially for black women—that their beauty is something that deserves to be celebrated.”⁹⁴ More recently Yai has been appearing on runways for Alexander McQueen, Valentino, and Hermès. She has also pushed back hard at claims she is a popular model because she meets “Eurocentric” beauty standards, writing on social media, “Eurocentric my ass” and “EASTERN F*****G AFRICAN.”⁹⁵

Photo Manipulation

The level of photo manipulation happening in both magazines and social media has been an ongoing controversy, with performers such as Adele, Kelly Clarkson, and Kate Winslet being made almost unrecognizable as photographers and photo editors try to make the curvy stars’ bodies comply with fashion magazine standards of beauty.

When Lena Dunham, the unconventional star of the HBO series *Girls*, posed for famed photographer Annie Leibovitz for the cover of *Vogue* magazine, questions were raised as to how authentic her images were. Dunham, in case you have missed the story, is famous for being naked in *Girls*—a lot—and her tattooed, untanned body is both celebrated and criticized for being an alternative to conventional standards of Hollywood beauty.

Dunham told *Slate* she had no problem with how Leibovitz had digitally altered her and that she understands and appreciates the difference between reality and what is published in a fashion magazine:

A fashion magazine is like a beautiful fantasy. *Vogue* isn’t the place that we go to look at realistic women, *Vogue* is the place that we go to look at beautiful clothes and fancy places and escapism

and so I feel like if the story reflects me and I happen to be wearing a beautiful Prada dress and surrounded by beautiful men and dogs, what's the problem? If they want to see what I really look like go watch the show that I make every single week.⁹⁶

Oscar-winning actress Kate Winslet specified in her contract with cosmetic company Lancôme that the company could not make digital changes to her appearance. Speaking at a Women in Hollywood event, Winslet said, “It does feel important to me, because I do think we have a responsibility to the younger generation of women. . . . I would always want to be telling the truth about who I am to that generation because they’ve got to have strong leaders.”⁹⁷

While people have long wanted to look like their favorite celebrity, more recently there has been controversy over how young people are wanting to make themselves look in real life the way they look in their filtered social media photos. There has even been a term coined to describe this—“Snapchat dysmorphia.”⁹⁸ Body dysmorphia is when a person becomes obsessed with a perceived flaw in their own appearance. Both cosmetic surgeons and psychologists are becoming concerned about people who have an obsessive interest in trying to look like either social media celebrities or their filtered self.

While Snapchat dysmorphia has gotten a fair amount of attention in popular media, the dissatisfaction people have at not looking like their filtered photos has even merited an article in the respected *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*.⁹⁹ Along with the built-in filters on social media apps, there is also an inexpensive app called Facetune that will let users give themselves whiter teeth or a smaller forehead, nose, or waist. Neelam Vashi, a dermatologist who is one of the authors of the *JAMA* article, told the *Washington Post*, “Sometimes I have patients who say, ‘I want every single spot gone, and I want it gone by this week or I want it gone tomorrow,’ because that’s what this filtered photograph gave them. . . . That’s not realistic. I can’t do that.”¹⁰⁰

CHAPTER REVIEW

Chapter Summary

With the rise of mass society and the rapid growth of the mass media starting in the 19th century, the public, media critics, and scholars have raised questions about the effects various media might have on society and individuals. These effects were viewed initially as being strong, direct, and relatively uniform on the population as a whole. After World War I, critics were concerned that media-oriented political campaigns could have powerful direct effects on voters. This view, though still widespread, was largely discredited by voter studies conducted in the 1940s and 1950s. These studies found that the voters with the strongest political opinions were those most likely to pay attention to a campaign and hence least likely to be affected by it. Other studies from the same period looked at what effects going to the movies had on young people. More recently, research has expanded to move beyond looking just at the effects that media and media content have on individuals and society to examinations of how living in a world with all-pervasive media changes the nature of our interactions and culture.

Understanding the effects of media on individuals and society requires that we examine the messages being sent, the medium transmitting these messages, the owners of the media, and the audience members themselves. The effects can be cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, or psychological.

Media effects can also be examined in terms of several theoretical approaches, including functional analysis, agenda setting, uses and gratifications, social learning, symbolic interactionism, and cultivation analysis.

In addition to looking at how media and their messages affect people and their interactions, there has been a rise of media scholarship in the area known as critical theory. This approach looks at how meaning is created within society, who controls the media systems, and the roles that media play in our lives. Critical theory has been used to consider topics such as how media can establish acceptable standards of beauty, size, and skin color.

KEY TERMS

agenda-setting theory	plus-sized model
correlation	psychographics
critical/cultural approach	social learning theory
critical theory	socialization
cultivation analysis	spiral of silence
demographics	status conferral
entertainment	surveillance
geographics	symbolic interactionism
mean world syndrome	uses and gratifications theory
opinion leaders	

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did the public find out about Meta's internal research on social media effects on young people? What were at least two of these findings?
2. What were the major problems with the direct effects model—the original theory of media effects?
3. What are the four major types of media effects? Give an example of each.
4. Compare and contrast how the direct effects model, versus the cultivation theory, would explain the effects of media violence.
5. What kind of questions can you best answer using critical theory? What kind of questions is it weakest at answering?

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