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Mass Communication: A Critical Approach

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**COVERAGE OF THE
2008 PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION** included NBC's
projecting a map of the
United States on the ice
rink at Rockefeller Plaza,
which was then colored
in as results from the
electoral college came in.

On Tuesday, November 4, 2008, shortly after 11 P.M., CNN, Fox News, and the major broadcast networks projected that Barack Obama would become the forty-fourth president of the United States. Son of a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother, Obama not only became the first African American president but the first Democrat since 1964 to win more than 50 percent of the popular vote. As the news media pointed out, President-elect Obama had some things working in his favor: the ongoing and unpopular war in Iraq, an outgoing president with a low favorability rating, and the financial crisis that hit in mid-September. President Obama also owed much of his victory to young voters, record-breaking fundraising, and a successful media strategy targeting both traditional media (i.e., TV commercials) and the Internet community. He was able to buy more than \$250 million in TV advertising, and, perhaps most telling of his influence with young voters, had 2.3 million "friends" on Facebook, compared to just 610,000 for Senator John McCain.¹

During the 2008 elections, the news media played a major role in helping us get to know the candidates and understand their platforms. How well, then, did the news media help Americans understand the complex issues raised during the national election? The media — as they did in 2000 and 2004 — continued to overemphasize polls, which often reduced the story of the election to a two-dimensional “who’s winning/who’s losing” racehorse narrative, obscuring complex policy issues like economic recovery, the war in Iraq, and environmental threats. This narrative was encouraged by the proliferation of presidential polls and Internet sites that tracked polls (e.g., *realclearpolitics.com*) and critiqued polling data (e.g., *pollster.com*, *fivethirtyeight.com*). At the time, the public editor of the *New York Times*, Clark Hoyt, reported that of the 270 political articles published in the *Times* during the last few months of the election, just “a little over 10 percent were primarily about policy substance.” These figures were similar to election coverage for much of mainstream media. Hoyt noted that other studies reported that in fall 2008 the vast majority of election stories were about “the horse race, political tactics, polls, and the like.”²

Sometimes overlooked amid the poll stories was the record \$3 billion the candidates, the major parties, and their supporters spent on political advertising through the primaries and presidential election season. However, most of the money went to TV stations in ten or so “battleground” states — like Indiana, North Carolina, Colorado, Nevada, Ohio, and Missouri — where either presidential candidate had a chance to win. In Missouri alone, TV stations took in more than \$50 million in 2008 and aired nearly 115,000 political ads from party

primaries through the final election.³ More significantly, the narratives offered in most of these ads also functioned at a two-dimensional level, pitting the “good” ideas or character of one candidate against the “bad” ideas or character of the other. However, these kinds of ads may no longer be as effective; the proliferation of independent online “fact checkers” (such as *factcheck.org*) and the Web sites of most mainstream media instantly responded to misrepresentations in the ads and circulated this information throughout the news media to help keep voters informed.

In a democracy, we depend on news media to provide us with information that helps us make decisions about our political leaders. As citizens, therefore, we should expect that the TV and cable stations — who earn so much money through political advertising — use a portion of that revenue to investigate the main issues of the day and serve as a counterpoint to the often one-sided political TV ads. However, as critics rightly point out, little of that money was used to hire more journalists to analyze major issues. Instead, in 2008 mainstream journalism continued to slash jobs in the face of their own economic crisis. Despite the limitations of our news media, their job of presenting the world to us is enormously important. But we also have a job to do that is equally important. We must point a critical lens back at the media and describe, analyze, and interpret the stories that we hear, watch, and read daily to arrive at our own judgments about the media’s performance. This textbook offers a map to help us all become more media literate, critiquing the media not as detached cynics but as informed audiences with a stake in the outcome.

▲ SO WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MEDIA

in the wake of the 2008 election, the economic crisis, and the war in Iraq? In such times, how do we demand the highest standards from our media? In this book, we take up such questions, examine the history and business of mass media, and discuss the media as a central force in shaping culture within our democracy. After all, the media have an impact beyond the reporting of news stories. At their best, in all their various forms, from mainstream newspapers to radio talk shows to blogs, the media try to bring understanding to events that affect all of us.

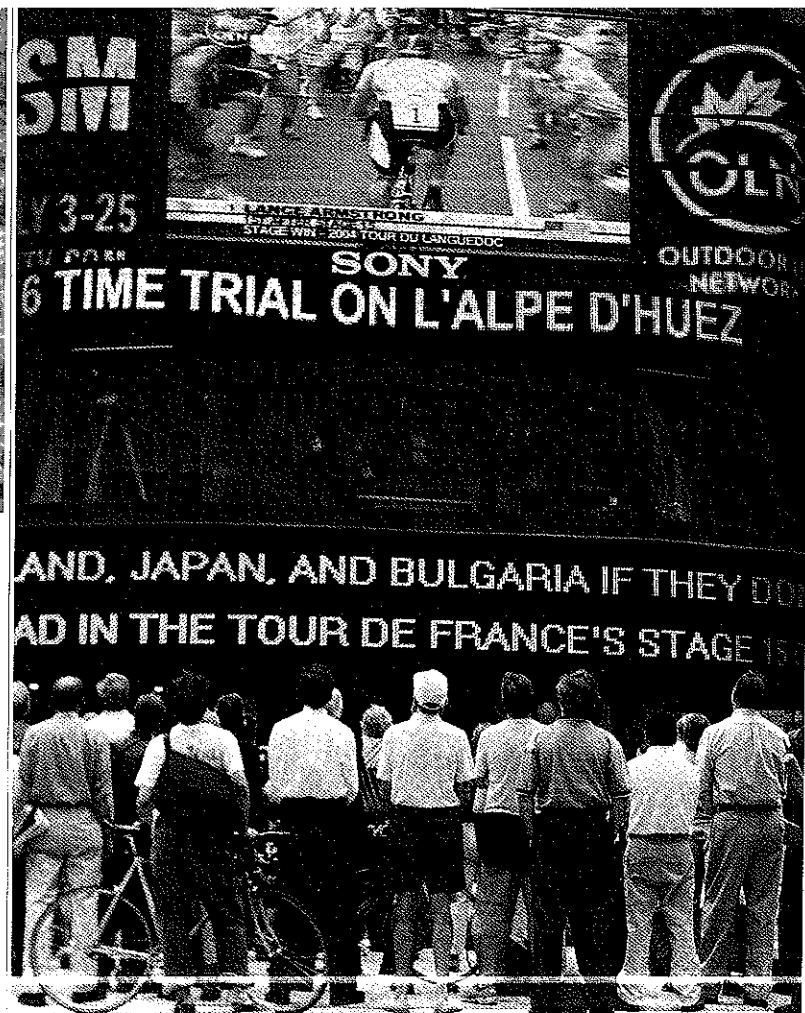
But, at their worst, the media’s appetite for telling and selling stories leads them not only to document tragedy but also to misrepresent or exploit it. Many viewers and social critics disapprove of how media, particularly TV and cable, seem to hurtle from one event to another, often dwelling on trivial, celebrity-driven content. They also fault media for failing to remain detached from reported events—for example, by uncritically using government-created language such as “shock and awe” (the military’s term for the early bombing strikes on Baghdad in the Iraq war). In addition, the growth of media industries, commercial culture, and new converging technologies—fiber-optic cable, handheld computers, digital television—offers a challenge to all of us. If we can learn to examine and critique the powerful dynamics of the media, we will be better able to monitor the rapid changes going on around us.

In this chapter, we examine key concepts and introduce critical processes for investigating media industries and issues. In later chapters, we probe the history and structure of media’s major institutions. In the process, we develop an informed and critical view of the influence these institutions have had on community and global life. The goal is to become *media literate*—more critical as consumers of mass media institutions and more engaged as participants who accept part of the responsibility for the shape and direction of media culture.

Culture and the Evolution of Mass Communication

One way to understand the impact of the media on our lives is to explore the cultural context in which the media operate. Often, culture is narrowly associated with art, the unique forms of creative expression that give pleasure and set standards about what is true, good, and beautiful. Culture, however, can be viewed more broadly as the ways in which people live and represent themselves at particular historical times. This idea of culture encompasses fashion, sports, architecture, education, religion, and science, as well as mass media. Although we can study some cultural products, such as novels or songs from various historical periods, culture itself is always changing. It includes a society’s art, beliefs, customs, games, technologies, traditions, and institutions. It also encompasses a society’s modes of **communication**: the creation and use of symbol systems that convey information and meaning (for example, languages, Morse code, motion pictures, and one-zero binary computer codes).

Culture is made up of both the products that a society fashions and, perhaps more importantly, the processes that forge those products and reflect a culture’s diverse values. Thus, **culture** may be defined as the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values. According to this definition, when we listen to music, read a book, watch television, or scan the Internet, we are not asking, “Is this art?” but are instead trying to identify or connect with something or someone. In other words, we are assigning meaning to the song, book, TV program, or Web site. Culture, therefore,



THE MEDIA, in all their varied forms from television news to online advertising, function as part of our larger shared culture.

is a process that delivers the values of a society through products or other meaning-making forms. For instance, the American ideal of “rugged individualism” has been depicted for decades through a tradition of westerns and detective stories on television, in movies and books, and even in political ads.

Culture links individuals to their society, providing both shared and contested values, and the mass media help circulate those values. The **mass media** are the cultural industries—the channels of communication—that produce and distribute songs, novels, newspapers, movies, Internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people. The historical development of media and communication can be traced through several overlapping eras in which newer forms of technology disrupted and modified older forms.

These eras, which all still operate to greater or lesser degrees, are oral, written, print, electronic, and digital. The first two eras refer to the communication of tribal or feudal communities and agricultural economies. The last three phases feature the development of **mass communication**: the process of designing cultural messages and stories and delivering them to large and diverse audiences through media channels as old as the printed book and as new as the Internet. Hastened by the growth of industry and modern technology, mass communication accompanied the shift of rural populations to urban settings and the rise of a consumer culture.

Oral and Written Eras in Communication

In most early societies, information and knowledge first circulated slowly through oral traditions passed on by poets, teachers, and tribal storytellers. As alphabets and the written word emerged, however, a manuscript, or written, culture began to develop and eventually overshadow oral communication. Documented and transcribed by philosophers, monks, and stenographers, the manuscript culture served the ruling classes. Working people were generally illiterate, and the economic and educational gap between rulers and the ruled was vast. These eras of oral and written communication developed slowly over many centuries. Although exact time frames are disputed, historians generally consider these eras as part of Western civilization’s premodern period, spanning the epoch from roughly 1000 B.C.E. to the mid-fifteenth century.

Early tensions between oral and written communication played out among ancient Greek philosophers and writers. Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.), for instance, made his arguments through public conversations and debates. Known as the Socratic method, this dialogue style of communication and inquiry is still used in college classrooms and university law schools. Many philosophers who supported the superiority of the oral tradition feared that the written word would threaten public discussion by offering fewer opportunities for the give-and-take of conversation. In fact, Socrates’ most famous student, Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), sought to banish poets, whom he saw as purveyors of ideas less rigorous than those generated in oral, face-to-face, question-and-answer discussions. These debates prefigured similar discussions in the twentieth century regarding the dangers of television and the Internet. Do aspects of contemporary culture, such as TV talk shows and anonymous online chat rooms, cheapen public discussion and discourage face-to-face communication?

The Print Revolution

While paper and block printing developed in China around 100 C.E. and 1045, respectively, what we recognize as modern printing did not become practical in Europe until the middle of the fifteenth century. At this time, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of movable metallic type and the printing press in Germany ushered in the modern print era. Printing presses and publications spread rapidly across Europe in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Early on, many books were large, elaborate, and expensive. It took months to illustrate and publish these volumes, and they were usually purchased by wealthy aristocrats, royal families, church leaders, prominent merchants, and powerful politicians. Gradually, however, printers reduced the size and cost of books, making them available and affordable to more people. Books thus became the first mass-marketed products in history.

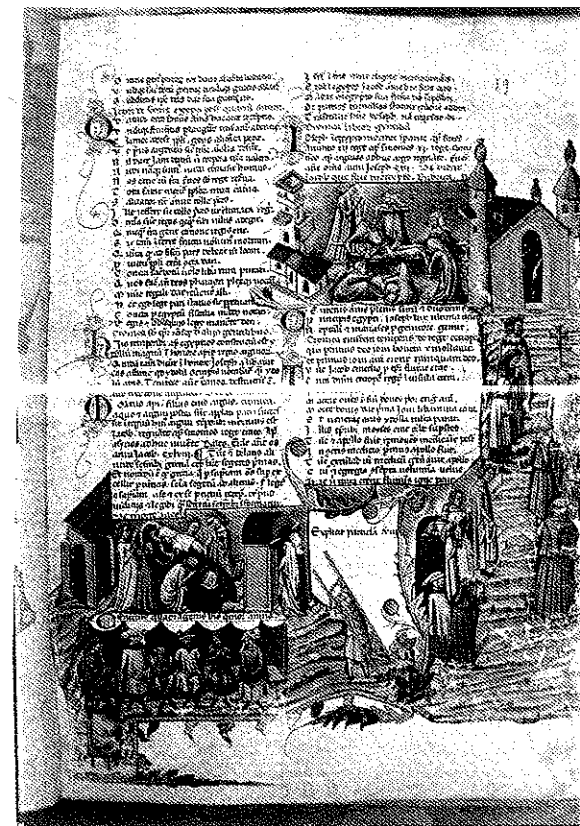
The printing press combined three elements necessary for this mass-market innovation. First, machine duplication replaced the tedious system in which scribes hand-copied texts. Second, duplication could be done rapidly, so large quantities of the same book could be produced. Third, the faster production of multiple copies brought down the cost of each unit, which made books more affordable to less affluent people.

Since mass-produced printed materials could spread information and ideas faster and farther than ever before, writers could use print to disseminate views counter to traditional civic doctrine and religious authority—views that paved the way for major social and cultural changes, such as the Protestant Reformation and the rise of modern nationalism. People started to resist traditional clerical authority and also to think of themselves not merely as members of families, isolated communities, or tribes, but as part of a country whose interests were broader than local or regional concerns. While oral and written societies had favored decentralized local governments, the print era marked the ascent of more centralized nation-states.

Eventually, the machine production of mass quantities that had resulted in a lowered cost per unit for books was also an essential factor in the mass production of other goods, which led to the Industrial Revolution, modern capitalism, and the rise of consumer culture in the twentieth century. With the revolution in industry came the rise of the middle class and an elite business class of owners and managers who acquired the kind of influence once held only by the nobility or the clergy. Print media became key tools used by commercial and political leaders to distribute information and maintain social order.

As with the Internet today, however, it was difficult for a single business or political leader, certainly in a democratic society, to gain total control over printing technology (although the king or queen did control printing press licenses in England until the early nineteenth century, and even today governments in many countries worldwide control presses, access to paper, and advertising and distribution channels). Instead, the mass publication of pamphlets, magazines, and books helped democratize knowledge, and literacy rates rose among the working and middle classes. Industrialization required a more educated workforce, but printed literature and textbooks also encouraged compulsory education, thus promoting literacy and extending learning beyond the world of wealthy upper-class citizens.

Just as the printing press fostered nationalism, it also nourished the ideal of individualism. People came to rely less on their local community and their commercial, religious, and political leaders for guidance. By challenging tribal life, the printing press “fostered the modern idea of individuality,” disrupting “the medieval sense of community and integration.”⁴ In urban and industrial environments, many individuals became cut off from the traditions of rural and small-town life, which had encouraged community cooperation in premodern times. By the



EARLY BOOKS Before the invention of the printing press, books were copied by hand in a labor-intensive process. This beautifully illuminated page is from an Italian Bible from the early 1300s.

"We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. . . . We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Aegle has the whooping cough."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN, 1854

mid-nineteenth century, the ideal of individualism affirmed the rise of commerce and increased resistance to government interference in the affairs of self-reliant entrepreneurs. The democratic impulse of individualism became a fundamental value in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Electronic and Digital Eras

In Europe and America, the impact of industry's rise was enormous: Factories replaced farms as the main centers of work and production. During the 1880s, roughly 80 percent of Americans lived on farms and in small towns; by the 1920s and 1930s, most had moved to urban areas, where new industries and economic opportunities beckoned. The city had overtaken the country as the focus of national life.

The Electronic Age

In America, the gradual transformation from an industrial, print-based society to one grounded in the Information Age began with the development of the telegraph in the 1840s. Featuring dot-dash electronic signals, the telegraph made four key contributions to communication. First, it separated communication from transportation, making media messages instantaneous—unencumbered by stagecoaches, ships, or the pony express.⁵ Second, the telegraph, in combination with the rise of mass-marketed newspapers, transformed "information into a commodity, a 'thing' that could be bought or sold irrespective of its uses or meaning."⁶ By the time of the Civil War, news had become a valuable product. Third, the telegraph made it easier for military, business, and political leaders to coordinate commercial and military operations, especially after the installation of the transatlantic cable in the late 1860s. Fourth, the telegraph led to future technological developments, such as wireless telegraphy, the fax machine, and the cell phone, which ironically resulted in the telegraph's demise: In 2006, the Western Union telegraph offices sent their final messages.

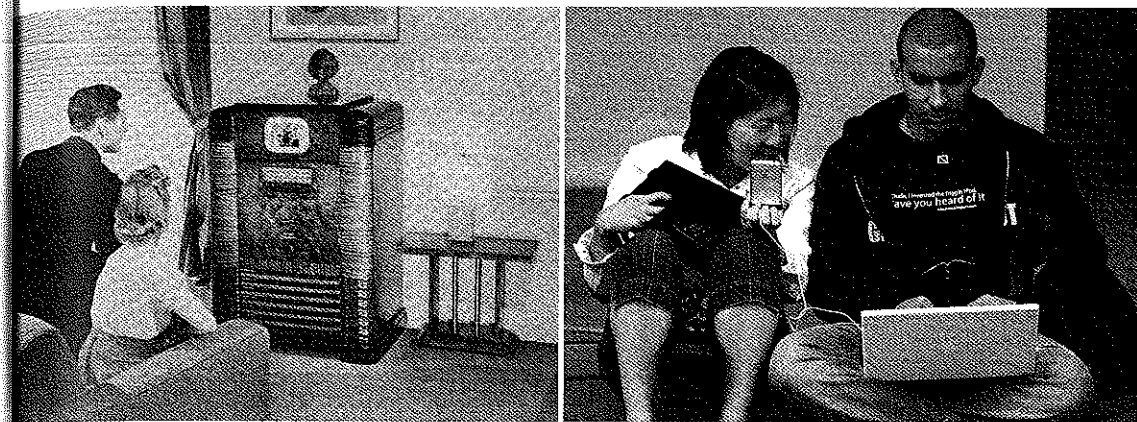
The rise of film at the turn of the twentieth century and the development of radio in the 1920s were early signposts, but the electronic phase of the Information Age really began in the 1950s and 1960s with the arrival of television and its dramatic impact on daily life. Then, with the coming of the latest communication gadgetry—ever smaller personal computers, cable TV, DVDs, DVRs, direct broadcast satellites, cell phones, PDAs, and e-mail—the Information Age passed into its digital phase.

The Digital Age

In **digital communication**, images, texts, and sounds are converted (encoded) into electronic signals (represented as varied combinations of binary numbers—ones and zeros) that are then reassembled (decoded) as a precise reproduction of, say, a TV picture, a magazine article, a song, or a telephone voice. On the Internet, various images, texts, and sounds are all digitally reproduced and transmitted globally.

New technologies, particularly cable television and the Internet, have developed so quickly that traditional leaders in communication have lost some of their control over information. For example, starting with the 1992 presidential campaign, the network news shows (ABC, CBS, and NBC) began to lose their audiences to MTV, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Comedy Central, and radio talk shows; by the 2004 national elections, Internet **bloggers**—people who post commentary on personal-opinion Web sites—had become a key element in news.

Moreover, e-mail—a digital version of oral culture—has assumed some of the functions of the postal service and is outpacing attempts to control communications beyond national borders. A professor sitting at her desk in Cedar Falls, Iowa, sends messages routinely to research scientists in Moscow. Yet as recently as 1990, letters between the United States and former communist states might have been censored or might have taken months to reach their destinations.



MEDIA CONVERGENCE

In the 1930s and 1940s, television or radio sets—encased in decorative wood and sold as stylish furniture—occupied a central place in some American homes. Today, using our computers, we can listen to a radio talk show, watch an adventure movie, or download a favorite song, as old media forms now converge online.

The Age of Convergence

The electronic and digital eras have fully ushered in the age of **media convergence**. And *media convergence* today has two very different meanings. First, it refers to the technological merging of content in different mass media—for example, magazine articles and radio programs are also accessible on the Internet, and songs, TV shows, and movies are now available on iPods and cell phones.

Such technical and media content convergence is not entirely new. For example, in the late 1920s, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) purchased the Victor Talking Machine Company and introduced machines that could play both radio and recorded music. Then in the 1950s, the recording and radio industries (as deejays played records) united again during the emergence of television. However, contemporary media convergence is much broader than the simple merging of older and newer forms. In fact, the various eras of communication are themselves reinvented in this "age of convergence." Oral communication, for example, finds itself reconfigured, in part, as e-mail and instant messaging. And print communication is re-formed in the thousands of newspapers now available online. Also, keep in mind the wonderful ironies of media convergence: The first major digital retailer, Amazon.com, made its name by selling the world's oldest mass medium—the book—on the world's newest mass medium—the Internet.

A second definition of media convergence—sometimes called **cross platform** by media marketers—describes a business model that involves consolidating various media holdings, such as cable connections, phone services, television transmissions, and Internet access, under one corporate umbrella. The goal is not necessarily to offer consumers more choice in their media options, but to better manage resources and maximize profits. For example, a company that owns TV stations, radio outlets, and newspapers in multiple markets—as well as in the same cities—can deploy a reporter or producer to create three or four versions of the same story for various media outlets. So rather than having each radio station, TV station, newspaper, and online news site generate diverse and independent stories about an issue vital to a community, a media corporation employing the convergence model can use fewer employees to generate multiple versions of the same story. Such a company needs fewer reporters, producers, and editors—not more. Ultimately, fewer stories are generated from fewer perspectives, which means that consumers have less choice in news coverage.

The convergence business model offers more profits to those companies that downsize—or converge—their workforce while increasing their media holdings in many markets. But while it's easy to see the benefits for media owners, this model offers serious disadvantages for society. In addition to limiting the range of perspectives from which stories are told, another consequence is that the owners' biases and interests—for example, in culture, politics, and economics—are

possibly more influential. Also, the apparent need for fewer journalists means the employment of fewer journalists, possibly from a narrower array of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Contributions from a range of journalistic voices are often diminished. (See Chapter 2 for more about media convergence.)

Mass Media and the Process of Communication

The mass media constitute a wide variety of industries and merchandise, from documentary news programs about famines in Africa to infomercials about vegetable slicers or mind readers. The word *media* is, after all, a Latin plural form of the singular noun *medium*, meaning an intervening material or substance through which something else is conveyed or transmitted. Television, newspapers, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, radio, broadcast satellites, and the Internet are all part of the media; and they each are quite capable of either producing worthy products or pandering to society's worst desires, prejudices, and stereotypes. Let's begin by looking at how mass media develop, and then at how they work and are interpreted in our society.

The Evolution of a New Mass Medium

The development of most mass media is initiated not only by the diligence of inventors, such as Thomas Edison, but also by social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. For instance, both telegraph and radio evolved as newly industrialized nations sought to expand their military and economic control and to transmit information more rapidly. The phonograph emerged because of the social and economic conditions of a growing middle class with more money and leisure time. Today, the Internet is a contemporary response to new concerns: transporting messages and sharing information more rapidly for an increasingly mobile and interconnected global population.

Typically, media innovations emerge in three stages. First is the *novelty, or development, stage*, in which inventors and technicians try to solve a particular problem, such as making pictures move, transmitting messages aboard ships, or sending mail electronically. Second is the *entrepreneurial stage*, in which inventors and investors determine a practical and marketable use for the new device. For example, early radio relayed messages to and from places where telegraph wires could not go, such as military ships at sea. Part of the Internet also had its roots in the ideas of military leaders, who wanted a communication system that was decentralized enough to survive nuclear war or natural disasters.

The third phase in a medium's development involves a breakthrough to the *mass medium stage*. At this point, businesses figure out how to market the new device as a consumer product. Although the government and the navy played a central role in radio's early years, it was commercial entrepreneurs who pioneered radio broadcasting and quickly reached millions of people. In the same way, Pentagon and government researchers developed the prototype for the Internet, but commercial interests extended the Internet's global reach and business potential.

The Linear Model of Mass Communication

Now that we know how the mass media evolve, let's look at two particularly influential models for how a mass medium actually communicates messages and meanings. In one of the older and more enduring explanations about the way media communicate, mass communication is conceptualized as a *linear process* of producing and delivering messages to large audiences. **Senders** (authors, producers, and organizations) transmit **messages** (programs, texts, images, sounds,



CIVIL RIGHTS

In the 1950s, television images of early civil rights struggles visually documented the inequalities faced by black citizens. In 1957, the governor of Arkansas refused to allow black students like Elizabeth Eckford to enter Little Rock's Central High School, even though racial segregation had been outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1954. In response, President Dwight Eisenhower sent in the army to integrate the school and control angry white mobs. Think about the ways in which TV images can make events "real" to us.

and ads) through a **mass media channel** (newspapers, books, magazines, radio, television, or the Internet) to large groups of **receivers** (readers, viewers, and consumers). In the process, **gatekeepers** (news editors, executive producers, and other media managers) function as message filters. Media gatekeepers make decisions about what messages actually get produced for particular audiences. The process also allows for **feedback**, in which citizens and consumers, if they choose, return messages to senders or gatekeepers through letters-to-the-editor, phone calls, e-mail, Web postings, or talk shows.

The problem with the linear model is that in reality media messages do not usually move smoothly from a sender at point A to a receiver at point Z. Words and images are more likely to spill into each other, crisscrossing in the flow of everyday life. Media messages and stories are encoded and sent in written and visual forms, but senders often have very little control over how their intended messages are decoded or whether the messages are ignored or misread by readers and viewers.

A Cultural Approach to Mass Communication

A second model for understanding media takes a *cultural approach* to mass communication. This concept recognizes that individuals bring diverse meanings to messages, given factors such as gender, age, educational level, ethnicity, and occupation. In this model of mass communication, audiences actively affirm, interpret, refashion, or reject the messages and stories that flow through various media channels. For example, when controversial filmmaker Michael Moore released the 2007 documentary *Sicko*, which calls for a universal nonprofit health-care system, regular filmgoers and health insurance company executives often had very different interpretations of the story that the movie told. Some executives saw the documentary's support for universal health

care as an indictment of capitalism and the “American way,” while many ordinary people read the film as advocating a commonsense solution for providing health care to uninsured individuals and lowering soaring health-care costs.

People also reacted with a range of complex views when they learned through the media about Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s invitation and subsequent visit to Columbia University in September 2007. Many thought inviting Ahmadinejad to speak at a major U.S. university helped legitimize an “evil” regime. Others felt the invitation reflected the university’s commitment to encouraging free speech and to promoting dialogue about important issues. Still others objected to the invitation, but then also objected to a perceived incivility on the part of Columbia University’s president, who called the Iranian leader “a petty and cruel dictator” in his introduction.

While the linear model may demonstrate how a message gets from a sender to a receiver, the cultural model suggests the complexity of this process and the lack of control “senders” (i.e., media executives, creative writers, news editors, ad agencies, etc.) often have over how audiences receive messages and the meanings the senders may have intended. Sometimes producers of media messages seem to be the active creators of communication while audiences are merely passive receptacles. But as the *Sicko* and Ahmadinejad examples illustrate, consumers also shape media messages to fit or support their own values and viewpoints. This phenomenon is known as **selective exposure**: People typically seek messages and produce meanings that correspond to their own cultural beliefs, values, and interests. For example, studies have shown that the people with political leanings toward the left or the right tend to seek out blog sites that reinforce preexisting views.

Stories: The Foundation of Mass Communication

Despite selective exposure, the stories of mass communication can shape a society’s perception of events and attitudes. Throughout the twentieth century and during the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, courageous journalists covered armed conflicts, telling stories that helped the public comprehend the magnitude and tragedy of such events. In the 1950s and 1960s, television news stories on the Civil Rights movement led to crucial legislation that transformed the way many white people viewed the grievances and aspirations of African Americans. In the late 1960s to early 1970s, the persistent media coverage of the Vietnam War ultimately led to a loss of public support for the war. In the late 1990s, stories about the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair sparked heated debates over private codes of behavior and public abuses of authority.

More recently, in 2005, news media stories about the federal government’s inadequate response to the devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina prompted the resignation of Michael Brown as head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. From 2005 into 2008, news reports about the Bush administration’s secret domestic spying operation and the CIA’s destruction of videotapes of prisoner interrogations sparked debates about terrorism, privacy rights, torture, and the ongoing war in Iraq. By the 2008 election, overall support for the war had eroded substantially in public opinion polls. In each of these instances, the stories mass media told played a key role in changing individual awareness, cultural attitudes, and even public policy.

To take a cultural approach to mass communication is to understand that our media institutions are basically in the **narrative**—or storytelling—business. Media stories put events in context for us, helping us to better understand both our daily lives and the larger world. As psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, we are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us. In his book *Making Stories*, he says, “Stories, finally, provide models of the world.” *The common denominator, in fact, between our entertainment and information cultures is the narrative.* It is the media’s main cultural currency—whether it’s Oliver Stone’s quasi-fictionalized *JFK*, a Dixie Chicks ballad, a Fox News “exclusive,” a *New York Times* article, or a television commercial. The point is that the popular narratives of our culture are complex and varied. Roger Rosenblatt, writing in *Time* magazine during the polarizing 2000 presidential election, made this

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

JOAN DIDION, *THE WHITE ALBUM*

“Stories matter, and matter deeply, because they are the best way to save our lives.”

FRANK MCCONNELL, *STORYTELLING AND MYTHMAKING*, 1979

observation about the importance of stories: “We are a narrative species. We exist by storytelling—by relating our situations—and the test of our evolution may lie in getting the story right.”⁷

The Power of Media in Everyday Life

The earliest debates, at least in Western society, about the impact of cultural narratives on daily life date back to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, himself accused of corrupting young minds, worried that children exposed to popular art forms and stories “without distinction” would “take into their souls teachings that are wholly opposite to those we wish them to be possessed of when they are grown up.”⁸ He believed art should uplift us from the ordinary routines of our lives. The playwright Euripides, however, believed that art should imitate life, that characters should be real, and that artistic works should reflect the actual world—even when that reality is sordid.

In *The Republic*, Plato developed the classical view of art: It should aim to instruct and uplift. He worried that some staged performances glorified evil and that common folk watching might not be able to distinguish between art and reality. Aristotle, Plato’s student, occupied a middle ground in these debates, arguing that art and stories should provide insight into the human condition but should entertain as well.

The cultural concerns of classical philosophers are still with us. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, newly arrived immigrants to the United States who spoke little English gravitated toward cultural events (such as boxing, vaudeville, and the emerging medium of silent film) whose enjoyment did not depend solely on understanding English. Consequently, these popular events occasionally became a flash point for some groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, local politicians, religious leaders, and police vice squads, who not only resented the commercial success of immigrant culture but also feared that these “low” cultural forms would undermine what they saw as traditional American values and interests.

In the United States in the 1950s, the emergence of television and rock and roll generated several points of contention. For instance, the phenomenal popularity of Elvis Presley set the stage for many of today’s debates over hip-hop lyrics and television’s negative influence, especially on young people. In 1956 and 1957, Presley made three appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. The public outcry against Presley’s “lascivious” hip movements was so great that by the third show the camera operators were instructed to shoot the singer only from the waist up. In some communities, objections to Presley were motivated by class bias and racism. Many white adults believed that this “poor white trash” singer from Mississippi was spreading rhythm and blues, a “dangerous” form of black popular culture.

Today, with the reach of print, electronic, and digital communications and the amount of time people spend consuming them (see Table 1.1), mass media play an even more controversial role in society. Many of us have become increasingly critical of the quality of much contemporary culture and are concerned about the overwhelming amount of information now available.

TABLE 1.1
HOURS PER PERSON PER YEAR USING CONSUMER MEDIA

Source: Veronis Suhler Stevenson Communications Industry Forecast.

*Total hours includes time spent with recorded music, consumer magazines, consumer books, home video/DVD, box office, interactive TV, and wireless content, and time spent media multitasking—using media simultaneously.

**Estimates.

Year	Total TV	Broadcast & Satellite Radio	Newspaper	Consumer Internet	Video Games	Total*
1999	1,427	939	205	65	58	3,280
2002	1,519	991	194	147	70	3,430
2004	1,546	986	188	176	77	3,480
2006	1,555	975	179	190	82	3,499
2009	1,562	984	165	203	96	3,555**
Five-Year Change						
1999-2004	+119	+47	-17	+111	+19	+200
2004-2009	+16	-2	-23	+27	+19	+75

EXAMINING ETHICS

Covering the War

Back in 2006—with the war in Iraq about to begin its fourth year—then-President George W. Bush criticized the national news media for not showing enough “good news” about U.S. efforts to bring democracy to Iraq. Bush’s remarks raised ethical questions about the complex relationship between the government and the news media during times of war: How much freedom should the news media have to cover the war? What topics should they report on? How much control should the military have over the media’s reports on the war? Are there topics that should not be covered?

These kinds of questions have also created ethical quagmires for local TV stations that cover war and its effects on communities where soldiers have

been called to duty and then injured or killed. Some station managers—out of fear of alienating viewers—encourage their news division not to seem too critical of war efforts, wanting the station to appear “patriotic.” In one extreme 2004 case, the nation’s largest TV station owner—Sinclair Broadcast Group—would not air the ABC News program *Nightline* because it devoted an episode to reading the names of all U.S. soldiers killed in the Iraq war up to that time. Here is an excerpt from a *New York Times* account of that event:

Sinclair Broadcast Group, one of the largest owners of local television stations, will preempt tonight’s edition of the ABC News program “Nightline,” saying the program’s plan to have Ted Koppel [who then anchored the program] read aloud

the names of every member of the armed forces killed in action in Iraq was motivated by an antiwar agenda and threatened to undermine American efforts there.

The decision means viewers in eight cities, including St. Louis and Columbus, Ohio, will not see “Nightline.” ABC News disputed that the program carried a political message, calling it in a statement “an expression of respect which simply seeks to honor those who have laid down their lives for their country.”

But Mark Hyman, the vice president of corporate relations for Sinclair, who is also a conservative commentator on the company’s newscasts, said tonight’s edition of “Nightline” is biased journalism. “Mr. Koppel’s reading of the fallen will have

How much freedom should the news media have to cover the war?

no proportionality,” he said in a telephone interview, pointing out that the program will ignore other aspects of the war effort.

The company’s reaction to “Nightline” is consistent with criticism from some conservatives, who are charging ABC with trying to influence opinion against the war.

Mr. Koppel and the producers of “Nightline” said earlier this week that they had no political motivation behind the decision to devote an entire show, expanded to 40 minutes, to reading the names and displaying the photos of those killed. They said they only intended to honor the dead and document what Mr. Koppel called “the human cost” of the war.¹

Given such a case, how might a local TV news director today—under pressure from the station’s manager or owner—formulate guidelines to help negotiate such treacherous ethical territory? While most TV news divisions have ethical codes to guide journalists’ behavior in certain situations, could ordinary citizens help shape ethical discussions and decisions? Following is a general plan for dealing with an array of ethical dilemmas that face media practitioners and for finding ways in which nonjournalists might

insert themselves into this decision-making process.

Arriving at ethical decisions is a particular kind of criticism involving several steps. These include (1) laying out the case; (2) pinpointing the key issues; (3) identifying the parties involved, their intent, and their competing values; (4) studying ethical models and theories; (5) presenting strategies and options; and (6) formulating a decision or policy.² As a test case, let’s look at how local TV news directors might establish ethical guidelines for war-related events. Following the six steps above, our goal is to make some ethical decisions and to lay the groundwork for policies that address TV images or photographs used for war coverage (for example, protesters, supporters, or memorial/funeral images). (See Chapter 14, page 435, for details on confronting ethical problems.)

Examining Ethics Activity

As a class or in smaller groups, design policies that address at least one of the issues raised above. Start by researching the topic; find as much information as possible. For example, you can research guidelines that local stations already use by contacting local news directors and TV journalists.



“Skyscrapers were citadels of the new power of finance capitalism. . . . Far above the thronging sidewalks, they elevated the men who controlled much of the capital that lubricated the workings of organized cultural enterprises—publishing companies, film studios, theatrical syndicates, symphony orchestras. Culture . . . was becoming increasingly organized during the twentieth century. And the model for that organization was the hierarchical, bureaucratic corporation.”

JACKSON LEARS,
HISTORIAN

Many see popular media culture as unacceptably commercial and sensationalistic. Too many talk shows exploit personal problems for commercial gain, reality shows often glamorize outlandish behavior and sometimes dangerous stunts, and television research has once again documented a connection between aggression in children and violent entertainment programs. Children, who watch nearly forty thousand TV commercials each year, are particularly vulnerable to marketers selling junk food, toys, and “cool” clothing. Even the computer, once heralded as an educational salvation, has created confusion. Today, when kids announce that they are “on the computer,” parents wonder whether they are writing a term paper, playing a video game, chatting with “friends” on Facebook, or peeking at pornography.

Yet how much the media shape society—and how much they simply respond to existing cultural issues—is still unknown. Although media depictions may worsen social problems, research has seldom demonstrated that the media directly cause our society’s major afflictions. For instance, when a middle-school student shoots a fellow student over a designer jacket, should society blame the ad that glamorized the clothing and the network that carried the ad? Or are parents, teachers, and religious leaders failing to instill strong moral values? Or are economic and social issues involving gun legislation, consumerism, and income disparity at work as well? Even if the clothing manufacturer bears responsibility as a corporate citizen, did the ad alone bring about the tragedy, or is the ad symptomatic of a larger problem?

With American mass media industries earning more than \$200 billion annually, the economic and societal stakes are high. Large portions of media resources now go toward studying audiences, capturing their attention through stories, and taking their consumer dollars. To increase their revenues, media outlets try to influence everything from how people shop to how they vote. Like the air we breathe, the commercially based culture that mass media help create surrounds us. Its impact, like the air, is often taken for granted. But to monitor that culture’s “air quality”—to become media literate—we must attend more thoughtfully to diverse media stories that are too often taken for granted. (For further discussion, see “Examining Ethics: Covering the War” on pages 14–15.)

Surveying the Cultural Landscape

Some cultural phenomena gain wide popular appeal, and others do not. Some appeal to certain age groups or social classes. Some, such as rock and roll, jazz, and classical music, are popular worldwide; other cultural forms, such as Tejano, salsa, and Cajun music, are popular primarily in certain regions or communities. Certain aspects of culture are considered elite in one place (opera in the United States) and popular in another (opera in Italy). Though categories may change over time and from one society to another, two metaphors offer contrasting views about the way culture operates in our daily lives: culture as a hierarchy, represented by a skyscraper metaphor, and culture as a process, represented by a map metaphor.

Culture as a Skyscraper

Throughout twentieth-century America, critics and audiences took for granted a hierarchy of culture placing supposedly superior products at the top and inferior ones at the bottom. This can be imagined, in some respects, as a modern skyscraper. In this metaphor, the top floors of the building house **high culture**, such as ballet, the symphony, art museums, and classic literature. The bottom floors—and even the basement—house popular or **low culture**, including such icons as soap operas, rock music, radio shock jocks, and video games (see Figure 1.1). High

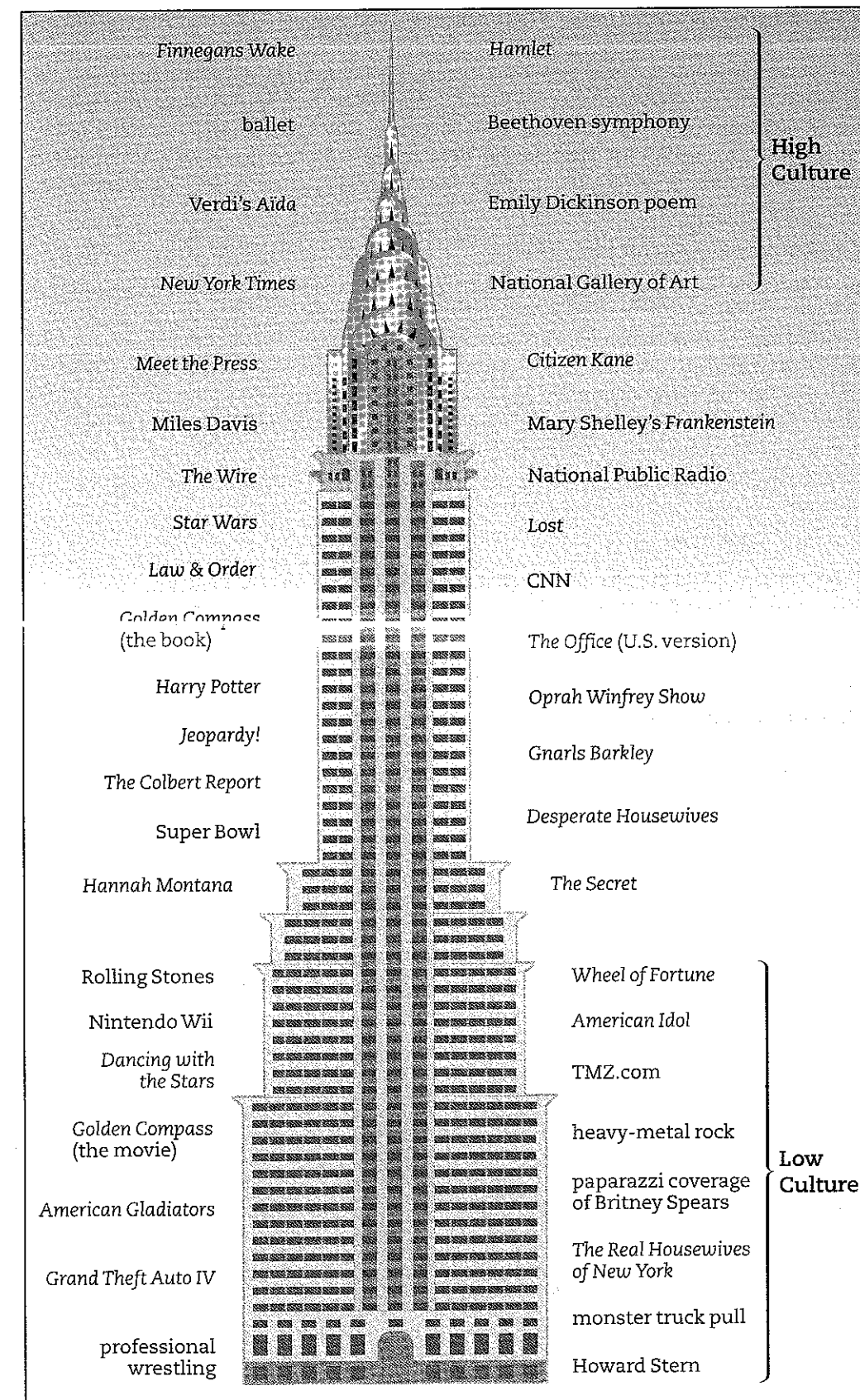


FIGURE 1.1
CULTURE AS A
SKYSCRAPER

Culture is diverse and difficult to categorize. Yet throughout the twentieth century, we tended to think of culture not as a social process but as a set of products sorted into high, low, or middle positions on a cultural skyscraper. Look at this highly arbitrary arrangement and see if you agree or disagree. Write in some of your own examples.

Why do we categorize or classify culture in this way? Who controls this process? Is control of making cultural categories important—why or why not?

culture, identified with “good taste,” higher education, and support by wealthy patrons and corporate donors, is associated with “fine art,” which is available primarily in libraries, theaters, and museums. In contrast, low or popular culture is aligned with the “questionable” tastes of the “masses,” who enjoy the commercial “junk” circulated by the mass media, such as reality TV, celebrity gossip Web sites, and action films. Whether or not we agree with this cultural skyscraper metaphor, the high-low hierarchy has become so entrenched that it often determines or limits the ways in which we view and discuss culture today.⁹ Using this model, critics over time have developed five areas of concern about low culture.

An Inability to Appreciate Fine Art

Some critics note that popular culture, in the form of contemporary movies, television, and rock music, distracts students from serious literature and philosophy, thus stunting their imagination and undermining their ability to recognize great art.¹⁰ This critical view pits popular culture against high art, discounting a person’s ability to value Bach and the Beatles or Shakespeare and *The Simpsons* concurrently. The assumption is that because popular forms of culture are made for profit, they cannot be experienced as valuable artistic experiences in the same way as more elite art forms such as classical ballet, Italian opera, modern sculpture, or Renaissance painting (even though many of what we regard as elite art forms today were once supported and commissioned by wealthy patrons).

Exploiting High Culture

Another concern is that popular culture exploits classic works of literature and art. A good example may be Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s dark Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, written in 1818 and ultimately transformed into multiple popular forms. Today, the tale is best remembered by virtue of two movies: a 1931 film version starring Boris Karloff as the towering and tragic monster, and the 1974 Mel Brooks comedy *Young Frankenstein* (which in 2007 had another incarnation as a Broadway musical). In addition to the movies, television turned the tale into *The Munsters*, a mid-1960s situation comedy. The monster was even resurrected as sugar-coated Frankenberry cereal. In the recycled forms of the original story, Shelley’s powerful themes about abusing science and judging people on appearances are often lost or trivialized in favor of a simplistic horror story or a comedy spoof.

A Throw-Away Ethic

Unlike an Italian opera or a Shakespearean tragedy, many elements of popular culture have a short life span. The average newspaper circulates for about twelve hours, then lands in a recycle bin or at the bottom of a birdcage; the average magazine circulates for five to seven days; a new Top 40 song on the radio lasts about one month; a typical new TV series survives for less than ten weeks; and most new Web sites are rarely visited and doomed to oblivion.

EXPLOITING HIGH CULTURE

Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, might not recognize our popular culture’s mutations of her Gothic classic. First published in 1818, the novel has inspired numerous interpretations, everything from the scary—Boris Karloff in the classic 1931 movie—to the silly—the Munster family in the 1960s TV sitcom and the lovable creature in the 1974 movie *Young Frankenstein*. Can you think of another example of a story that has developed and changed over time and through various media transformations?



Although endurance does not necessarily denote quality, in the view of many critics, so-called better or “higher” forms of culture have more staying power. In this argument, lower or popular forms of culture are unstable and fleeting; they follow rather than lead public taste. Known in the television industry in the 1960s and 1970s as the “least objectionable programming,” this tactic meant that network executives pandered to mediocrity by airing bland, disposable programming that a “normal” viewer would not find objectionable or disturbing.

A Diminished Audience for High Culture

Some observers also warn that popular culture has inundated the cultural environment, driving out higher forms of culture and cheapening public life.¹¹ This concern is supported by data showing that TV sets are in use in the average American home for more than seven hours a day, exposing adults and children each year to thousands of hours of trivial TV commercials, violent crime dramas, and superficial “reality” programs. According to one story critics tell, the prevalence of so many popular media products prevents the public from experiencing genuine art. Forty or more radio stations are available in large cities; cable systems with hundreds of channels are in place in 60 percent of all U.S. households; and Internet services and DVD players are in more than 90 percent of U.S. homes. In this scenario, the chances of audiences finding more refined forms of culture supposedly become very small, although critics fail to note the choices that are also available on such a variety of radio stations, cable channels, and Internet sites. (For an alternate view, see “Case Study: The Sleeper Curve” on pages 20–21.)

Inhibiting Political Discourse and Social Change

Another cautionary story, frequently recounted by academics, politicians, and TV pundits, tells how popular culture, especially its more visual forms (such as TV advertising and daytime talk shows), undermines democratic ideals and reasoned argument. According to this view, popular media may inhibit not only rational thought but also social progress by transforming audiences into cultural dupes lured by the promise of products. A few multinational conglomerates that make large profits from media products may be distracting citizens from examining economic disparity and implementing change. Seductive advertising images, for example, showcasing the buffed and airbrushed bodies of professional models frequently contradict the actual lives of

FAMILY GUY

Building on the longevity and success of Fox’s *The Simpsons*, the animated comedy *Family Guy* was canceled twice by Fox in 2000 and 2002. But Fox revived the show in 2005 because of strong DVD sales and a loyal audience that tuned in to early syndicated episodes of the series on cable’s Cartoon Network. Like *The Simpsons*, this irreverent program satirizes other forms of culture, including its own network.

CASE STUDY

The Sleeper Curve

In the 1973 science fiction comedy movie *Sleeper*, the film's director, Woody Allen, plays a character who reawakens two hundred years after being cryogenically frozen (after a routine ulcer operation had gone bad). The scientists who "unfreeze" Allen discuss how back in the 1970s people actually believed that "deep fat," "steaks," "cream pies," and "hot fudge" were unhealthy. But apparently in 2173, those food items will be good for us.

In his 2005 book, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson makes a controversial argument about TV and culture based on the movie. He calls his idea the "Sleeper Curve" and claims that "today's popular culture is actually making us smarter."¹ Johnson's ideas run counter to those of many critics who worry about popular culture and its potentially disastrous effects, particularly on young people. An influential argument in this strain of thinking appeared twenty years ago in Neil Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman argued that we were

moving from the "Age of Typology" to the "Age of Television," from the "Age of Exposition" to the "Age of Show Business."² Postman worried that an image-centered culture had overtaken words and a print-oriented culture, resulting in "all public discourse increasingly tak[ing] the form of entertainment." He pointed to the impact of advertising and how "American businessmen discovered, long before the rest of us, that the quality and usefulness of their goods are subordinate to the artifice of their display."³ For Postman, image making has become central to choosing our government leaders, including the way politicians are branded and packaged as commodity goods in political ads. Postman argued that the TV ad has become the "chief instrument" for presenting political ideas, with these results: "that short simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems."⁴

Now that we are somewhere between the Age of Television and the Age of the Internet, Johnson's argument offers an

opportunity to assess where our visual culture has taken us. According to Johnson, "For decades, we've worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a path declining steadily toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the 'masses' want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies try to give the masses what they want. But, the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more cognitively demanding, not less."⁵ While Johnson shares many of Postman's 1985 concerns, he disagrees with the point from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that image-saturated media is only about "simple" messages and "trivial" culture. Instead, Johnson discusses the complexity of video and computer games and many of TV's dramatic prime-time series, especially when compared with less demanding TV programming from the 1970s and early 1980s.

As evidence, Johnson compares the plot complications of Fox's CIA/secret agent thriller *24* with *Dallas*, the prime-time soap opera that was America's most popular TV show in the early 1980s. "To make sense of an episode of *24*," Johnson maintains, "you have to integrate far more information than you would have a few decades ago watching a comparable show. Beneath the violence and the ethnic stereotypes, another trend appears: to keep up with entertainment like *24*, you have to pay attention, make inferences, track shifting social relationships." Johnson argues that today's audience would be "bored" watching a show like *Dallas*, in part "because the show contains far less information in each scene, despite

the fact that its soap-opera structure made it one of the most complicated narratives on television in its prime. With *Dallas*, the modern viewer doesn't have to think to make sense of what's going on, and not having to think is boring."

In addition to *24*, a number of contemporary programs offer complex narratives, including *Desperate Housewives*, *Lost*, *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *CSI*, which air on the traditional broadcast networks; and *The Sopranos*, *Big Love*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on cable's HBO. Another example, *Dexter*—about an L.A. police department blood spatter expert who moonlights as a serial killer (of bad guys)—premiered on cable's Showtime in 2005 and was edited for broadcast on CBS beginning in 2008. Johnson says that in contrast to older popular programs like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, contemporary TV storytelling layers "each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you're exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information, that connect multiple narrative threads." Johnson argues that younger audiences today—brought up in the Age of the Internet and in an era of complicated interactive visual games—bring high expectations to other kinds of popular culture as well, including television. "The mind," Johnson writes, "likes to be challenged; there's real pleasure to be found in



Dallas (1978-1991)

solving puzzles, detecting patterns or unpacking a complex narrative system."

In countering the cultural fears expressed by critics like Postman and by many parents trying to make sense of the intricate media world that their children encounter each day, Johnson sees a hopeful sign: "I believe that the Sleeper Curve is the single most important new force altering the mental development of young people today, and I believe it is largely a force for good: enhancing our cognitive faculties, not dumbing them down. And yet you almost never hear this story in popular accounts of today's media."

Steven Johnson's theory is one of many about media impact on the way we live and learn. Do you accept Johnson's Sleeper Curve argument that certain TV programs—along with challenging interactive video and computer games—are intellectually demanding and are actually making us smarter? Why or why not? Are you more persuaded by Postman's 1985 account—

that the word has been displaced by an image-centered culture and, consequently, that popular culture has been dumbed down by its oversimplified and visual triviality? As you consider Postman, think about the Internet: Is it word based or image based? What kinds of opportunities for learning does it offer?

In thinking about both the 1985 and 2005 arguments by Postman and Johnson, consider as well generational differences. Do you enjoy TV shows and video games that your parents or grandparents don't understand? What types of stories and games do they enjoy? What did earlier generations value in storytelling, and what is similar and dissimilar about storytelling today? Interview someone who is close to you but from an earlier generation about media and story preferences. Then discuss or write about both the common ground and the cultural differences that you discovered.

Lost (2004-)



"The Web has created a forum for annotation and commentary that allows more complicated shows to prosper, thanks to the fan sites where each episode of shows like *Lost* or *Alias* is dissected with an intensity usually reserved for Talmud scholars."

- Steven Johnson, 2005

"TV is a genre of reruns, a formulaic return to what we already know. Everything is familiar. Ads and old programs are constantly recycled. It's like mythology, like the Homeric epics, the oral tradition, in which the listener hears passages, formulae, and epithets repeated over and over again. There is a joy in repetition, as children know when they say, 'Mommy, tell me that story again.'"

CAMILLE PAGLIA,
SOCIAL CRITIC,
HARPER'S, 1991

people who cannot hope to achieve a particular "look" or may not have the money to obtain high-end cosmetic products offered on the market. In this environment, art and commerce have become blurred, restricting the audience's ability to make cultural and economic distinctions. Sometimes called the "Big Mac" theory, this view suggests that people are so addicted to mass-produced media menus that they lose their discriminating taste for finer fare, and, much worse, their ability to see and challenge social inequities.

Culture as a Map

The second way to view culture is as a map. Here, culture is an ongoing process—rather than a vertically organized hierarchy—and allows us to better account for our diverse and individual tastes. Maps represent large, unwieldy spaces that extend in all directions. Maps highlight main highways and familiar urban centers, but they also include side roads and small towns, directing our focus to unexplored areas. This metaphor depicts culture in a more complex way—spreading out in more directions—than the skyscraper model does. An individual guided by the cultural map can pursue many connections from one cultural point to another and can appreciate a range of cultural experiences without necessarily ranking them.

Cultural phenomena—such as the stories we read in books or watch at the movies—offer plenty of places to go that are conventional, recognizable, stable, and comforting. Yet at the same time, our culture's narrative storehouse contains other stories that tend toward the innovative, unfamiliar, unstable, and challenging. Most forms of culture, however, demonstrate both tendencies. For example, we may buy the CD of a favorite artist or watch our favorite TV programs for both their innovation *and* their familiarity. We may listen to an old song or see a new film to complement a mood, to distance ourselves from problems, or to reflect critically on the song's lyrics or the movie's meanings.

The Comfort of Familiar Stories

The appeal of culture is often its familiar stories, pulling audiences toward the security of repetition and common landmarks on the cultural map. Consider, for instance, early television's *Lassie* series, about the adventures of a collie named Lassie and her owner, young Timmy. Of the more than five hundred episodes, many have a familiar and repetitive plot line: Timmy, who arguably possessed the poorest sense of direction and suffered more concussions than any TV character in history, gets lost or knocked unconscious. After finding Timmy and licking his face, Lassie goes for help and saves the day. Adult critics might mock this melodramatic formula, but many children find comfort in the predictability of the story. This quality is also illustrated when night after night children ask their parents to read the same book, such as Margaret Wise Brown's *Good Night, Moon* or Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, or watch the same DVD, such as *Snow White* or *The Princess Bride*.

Innovation as Direction for Personal Growth

Like children, adults also seek comfort, often returning to an old Beatles or Motown song, a William Butler Yeats or Emily Dickinson poem, or a TV rerun of *Seinfeld* or *Andy Griffith*. But we also like cultural adventure. We may stray from a familiar film on cable's American Movie Classics to discover a new movie from Iran or India on the Independent Film Channel. We seek new stories and new places to go—those aspects of culture that demonstrate originality and complexity. For instance, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) created language anew and challenged readers, as the novel's poetic first sentence illustrates: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." A revolutionary work, crammed with historical names and topical references to events, myths, songs, jokes, and daily conversation, Joyce's novel remains a challenge to understand and decode. His work demonstrated that part of what culture provides is that impulse to explore new places, to strike out in new directions, searching for something different that may contribute to our own growth.

A Range of Maps and Messages

We know that people have complex cultural tastes, needs, and interests based on different backgrounds and dispositions. It is not surprising, then, that our cultural treasures—from blues music and opera to comic books and classical literature—contain a variety of messages. Just as Shakespeare's plays—popular entertainments in his day—were packed with both obscure and popular references, TV episodes of *The Simpsons* have included allusions to the Beatles, Kafka, *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, Tennessee Williams, talk shows, Aerosmith, *The X-Files*, Freud, and *Citizen Kane*. In other words, as part of an ongoing process, cultural products and their meanings are "all over the map," spreading out in diverse directions.

Challenging the Nostalgia for a Better Past

Some critics of popular culture assert—often without presenting supportive evidence—that society was better off before the latest developments in mass media and resist the idea of re-imagining an established cultural hierarchy as a map. The nostalgia for some imagined "better past" has often operated as a device for condemning new cultural phenomena. In the nineteenth century, in fact, a number of intellectuals and politicians worried that rising literacy rates among the working class might create havoc: How would the aristocracy and intellectuals maintain their authority and status if everyone could read?

Throughout history, a call to return to familiar terrain, to "the good old days," has been a frequent response to new, "threatening" forms of popular culture. Yet over the years many of these forms, including the waltz, silent movies, ragtime, and jazz, have themselves become cultural "classics." How can we tell now what the future holds in store for such cultural expressions as comic books, rock and roll, soap operas, fashion photography, heavy metal, hip hop, tabloid newspapers, "reality" television programs, and Internet blogs?

Cultural Values of the Modern Period

To understand how the mass media have come to occupy their current cultural position, we need to trace significant changes in cultural values from the modern period until today. In general, scholars think of the **modern** period in the United States as having its roots in the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century and extending until about the mid-twentieth century. Although there are certainly many ways to conceptualize what it means to be "modern," we will focus on four major features or values that resonate best with changes across media and culture: efficiency, individualism, rationalism, and progress.

Working Efficiently

In the business world, modernization involved captains of industry using new technology to create efficient manufacturing centers, produce inexpensive products to make everyday life better, and make commerce more profitable. Printing presses and assembly lines made major contributions in this transformation, and then modern advertising spread the word about new gadgets to American consumers. In terms of culture, the modern mantra has been "form follows function." For example, modern skyscrapers made of glass, steel, and concrete replaced the supposedly wasteful decorative and ornate styles of premodern Gothic cathedrals. This new value was replicated or echoed in journalism, where a front-page style rejected decorative and ornate adjectives and adverbs for "just the facts," requiring reporters to ask and answer the questions: who, what, when, where, and why. To be lean and efficient, modern news de-emphasized description, commentary, and historical context.

Cultural responses to and critiques of modern efficiency often manifested themselves in the mass media. For example, Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World* (1932), created a fictional world in which he cautioned readers that the efficiencies of modern science and technology posed a threat to individual dignity. Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), set in a futuristic manufacturing plant, also told the story of the dehumanizing impact of modernization and machinery. Writers and artists, in their criticisms of the modern world, have often pointed to technology's ability to

alienate people from one another, capitalism's tendency to foster greed, and government's inclination to create bureaucracies whose inefficiency oppressed rather than helped people.

Celebrating the Individual

The values of the *premodern period* (before the Industrial Revolution) were guided by strong belief in a natural or divine order, placing God or Nature at the center of the universe. But becoming modern meant elevating individual self-expression to a more central position. Scientific discoveries of the period allowed modern print media to offer a place for ordinary readers to engage with new ideas beyond what their religious leaders and local politicians communicated to them. Along with democratic breakthroughs, however, modern individualism and the Industrial Revolution triggered new forms of hierarchy in which certain individuals and groups achieved higher standing in the social order. For example, those who managed commercial enterprises gained more control over the economic ladder, while an intellectual class of modern experts—masters of specialized realms of knowledge on everything from commerce to psychology to literature—gained increasing power over the nation's economic, political, and cultural agendas.

Believing in a Rational Order

To be modern also meant to value the capacity of logical, scientific minds to solve problems by working in organized groups, both in business and in academic disciplines. Progressive thinkers maintained that the printing press, the telegraph, and the railroad, in combination with a scientific attitude, would foster a new type of informed society. At the core of this society, the printed mass media, particularly newspapers, would educate the citizenry, helping to build and maintain an organized social framework.¹²

A leading champion for an informed rational society was Walter Lippmann, who wrote the influential book *Public Opinion* in 1922. Later a major newspaper columnist, Lippmann believed that the world was “altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” He distrusted both the media and the public's ability to navigate such a world and to reach the rational decisions needed in a democracy. Instead, he called for “an independent, expert organization” for making experience “intelligible to those who have to make decisions.” Driven by a strong belief in science and rationality, Lippmann advocated a “machinery of knowledge” that might be established through “intelligence bureaus” and staffed by experts. While such a concept might look like the modern “think tank,” Lippmann saw these as independent of politics, unlike think tanks today, such as the Brookings Institute or Heritage Foundation, which have strong partisan ties.¹³

Rejecting Tradition/Embracing Progress

Although the independent bureaus never materialized, Walter Lippmann's ideas were influential throughout the twentieth century and were a product of the **Progressive Era**—a period of political and social reform that lasted roughly from the 1890s to the 1920s. Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were prominent national figures associated with this era. On both local and national levels, Progressive Era reformers championed social movements that led to constitutional amendments for both women's suffrage and Prohibition, political reforms that led to the secret ballot during elections, and economic reforms that ushered in the federal income tax to try to foster a more equitable society. In journalism, the muckraking period (see Chapter 9) represented media's significant contribution to this era. Working mostly for reform-oriented magazines, *muckrakers* were journalists who exposed corruption, waste, and scandal in business and politics. Like other Progressives, muckraking journalists shared a belief in the transforming power of science and technology. And they (along with Lippmann) sought out experts to identify problems and develop solutions.

Influenced by the Progressive movement, the notion of being modern in the twentieth century meant throwing off the chains of the past, breaking with tradition, and embracing progress. Many Progressives were skeptical of religious dogma and sought answers in science. For example, in architecture the differences between a premodern Gothic cathedral and a modern

skyscraper are startling, not only because of their different “looks,” but also because of the cultural values these building types represent: the former symbolizing the past and tradition, the latter standing for efficiency and progress. Similarly, twentieth-century journalists, in their quest for modern efficiency, became captive to the reporting of timely and immediate events. Newly standardized forms of front-page journalism that championed “just the facts” and current events that “just happened yesterday” did help reporters efficiently meet tight deadlines. But, realizing one of Walter Lippmann's fears, modern newspapers often failed to take a historical perspective or to analyze sufficiently the ideas and interests underlying these events.

Shifting Values in Postmodern Culture

For many people, the changes occurring in the contemporary, or **postmodern**, period—from roughly the mid-twentieth century to today—are identified by a confusing array of examples: music videos, remote controls, Nike ads, shopping malls, fax machines, e-mail, video games, blogs, *USA Today*, YouTube, *TRL*, hip-hop, and reality TV. Some critics argue that postmodern culture represents a way of seeing—a new condition, or even a malady, of the human spirit. Chiefly a response to the modern world, controversial postmodern values are playing increasingly pivotal roles in our daily lives. Although there are many ways to define the postmodern, this textbook focuses on four major features or values that resonate best with changes across media and culture: populism, diversity, nostalgia, and paradox (see Table 1.2).

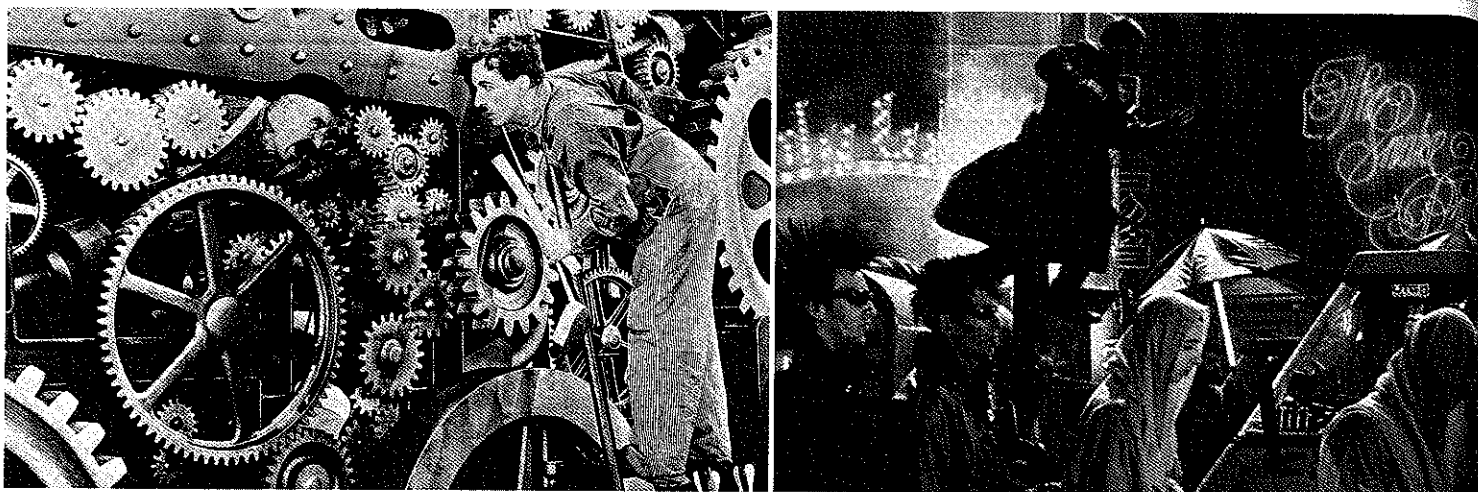
Celebrating Populism

During the 2008 presidential race, Democratic and Republican candidates as well as political pundits associated certain campaigns with populism. As a political idea, **populism** tries to appeal to ordinary people by highlighting or setting up a conflict between “the people” and “the elite.” For example, populist politicians often tell stories and run ads that criticize big corporations and political favoritism. Meant to resonate with working- and middle-class values and regional ties, such narratives generally pit Southern or Midwestern small-town “family values” against the supposedly coarser urban lifestyles associated with big cities and the privilege of East or West Coast “high society.”

In postmodern culture, populism manifests itself in many ways. For example, artists and performers, like Chuck Berry in his 1950s rock and roll anthem “Roll Over Beethoven,” blur the border between high and low culture. In the visual arts, following Andy Warhol's popular 1960s style, advertisers borrow from both fine art and street art, while artists borrow from commerce

TABLE 1.2
TRENDS ACROSS
HISTORICAL PERIODS

	Premodern (pre-1800s)	Modern Industrial Revolution (1800s–1950s)	Postmodern (1950s–present)
Work hierarchies	peasants/merchants/ rulers	factory workers/managers/ national CEOs	temp workers/global CEOs
Major work sites	field/farm	factory/office	office/home/“virtual” or mobile office
Communication reach	local	national	global
Communication transmission	oral/manuscript	print/electronic	electronic/digital
Communication channels	storytellers/elders/ town criers	books/newspapers/ magazines/radio	television/cable/Internet/multimedia
Communication at home	quill pen	typewriter/office computer	personal computer/laptop/cell phone
Key social values	belief in natural or divine order	individualism/rationalism efficiency/anti-tradition	anti-hierarchy/skepticism (about science)/ diversity/multiculturalism/irony & paradox
Journalism	oral & print-based/partisan/ decorative/controlled by political parties	print-based/objective/ efficient/timely/controlled by publishing families	TV-Internet based/opinionated/ conversational/controlled by entertainment conglomerates



FILMS OFTEN REFLECT THE KEY SOCIAL VALUES

of an era—as represented by the modern and postmodern movies pictured. Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936, above) satirized modern industry and the dehumanizing impact of a futuristic factory on its overwhelmed workers. Similarly, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982, above, right), set in futuristic Los Angeles in 2019, questions the impact on humanity when technology overwhelms the natural world. As author William Romanowski said of *Blade Runner* in *Pop Culture Wars*, "It managed to quite vividly capture some postmodern themes that were not recognized at the time. . . . We are constantly trying to balance the promise of technology with the threats of technology."

and popular art. In magazines, arresting clothing or cigarette ads combine stark social commentary with low-key sales pitches. At the movies, populist themes in films like *Fargo* (1996), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and *Juno* (2008) fuse the comic and the serious, the ordinary and the odd. Even film stars, like Angelina Jolie and Richard Gere, often champion oppressed groups while releasing movies that make the actors wealthy global icons of consumer culture.

Other forms of postmodern style blur modern distinctions not only between art and commerce, but also between fact and fiction. For example, television vocabulary now includes *infotainment* (*Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*) and *infomercials* (fading celebrities selling anti-wrinkle cream). On cable, MTV's reality programs—such as *Real World* and *The Hills*—blur boundaries between the staged and the real, mixing serious themes with comedic interludes and romantic spats; Comedy Central's fake news programs, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, combine real, insightful news stories with biting satire of traditional broadcast and cable news programs.

Diversifying and Recycling Culture

Closely associated with populism, another value (or vice) of the postmodern period emphasizes diversity and fragmentation, including the wild juxtaposition of old and new cultural styles. In a suburban shopping mall, for instance, Waldenbooks and Gap stores border a Vietnamese, Italian, and Mexican food court, while techno-digitized instrumental versions of 1960s protest music play in the background to accompany shoppers.

Part of this stylistic diversity involves borrowing and transforming earlier ideas from the modern period. In music, hip-hop deejays and performers sample old R&B, soul, and rock classics to reinvent songs. Borrowing in hip-hop is often so pronounced that the original artists and record companies have frequently filed for copyright infringement.

Critics of postmodern style contend that such borrowing devalues originality, emphasizing surface over depth and recycled ideas over new ones. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, films were adapted from books and short stories. Now, films often derive from popular TV series: *The Brady Bunch*, *Mission Impossible*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *Transformers*, to name just a few. In 2007, *The Simpsons Movie* premiered—"18 years in the making," its promotional ads read, a reference to the long TV series run on Fox. Meanwhile, the public radio program *This American Life*, hosted by Ira Glass, became a television program on Showtime, starting in 2006.

Questioning Science and Revering Nostalgia

Another tendency of postmodern culture is to raise doubts about scientific reasoning. Rather than seeing science purely as enlightened thinking, some postmodern artists and analysts criticize it for

laying the groundwork for bureaucratic problems. They reject rational thought as "the answer" to every social problem, revealing instead nostalgia for premodern values of small communities, traditional religion, and mystical experience. For example, since the late 1980s, a whole host of popular TV programs—such as *Twin Peaks*, *Northern Exposure*, *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *Angel*, *Lost*, *Medium*—emerged to offer the mystical and supernatural as responses to the "evils" of our daily world and the limits of the purely rational. Both major political parties also spent time and energy establishing religious credentials for candidates in the 2008 election.

In other areas of contemporary culture, Internet users are reclaiming lost conversational skills and letter-writing habits in instant messaging and e-mail. Even the current popularity of radio and TV talk shows, according to a postmodern perspective, partly represents an attempt to recover lost aspects of oral traditions. Given the feelings of powerlessness and alienation that mark the contemporary age, one attraction of the talk-show format—with its populist themes—has been the way it encourages ordinary people to participate in discussions with celebrities, experts, and one another.

Acknowledging Paradox

A key aspect of our postmodern time is the willingness to accept paradox. While modern culture emphasized breaking with the past in the name of progress, postmodern culture stresses integrating retro styles with current beliefs: At the same time we seem nostalgic for the past, we embrace new technologies with a vengeance. Although some forms of contemporary culture raise questions about science, still other aspects of postmodern culture warmly accept technology. Blockbuster films such as *Jurassic Park*, *The Matrix*, and the Harry Potter series do both, presenting stories that challenge modern science but that depend on technology for their execution.

During the modern period, artists and writers criticized the dangers of machines, pointing out that new technologies often eliminate jobs and physically isolate us from one another. While postmodern style often embraces new technology, there is a fundamental paradox in this alliance. Although technology can isolate people, as modernists warned, new technologies can also draw people together to discuss politics on radio talk shows, in electronic town-hall meetings, on Facebook, or on iPhones, as postmodern society proves. Our lives today are full of such incongruities.

Critiquing Media and Culture

In contemporary life, cultural boundaries are being tested; the arbitrary lines between information and entertainment have become even more blurred. Consumers now read newspapers on their computer screens. Media corporations do business across vast geographic boundaries. We are witnessing media convergence, in which satellite dishes, TV screens, cable or computer modems, and cell phones easily access new and old forms of mass communication. For a fee, everything from magazines to movies is channeled into homes through the Internet and cable or satellite TV.

Considering the diversity of mass media, to paint them all with the same broad brush would be inaccurate and unfair. Yet that is often what we seem to do, which may in fact reflect the distrust many have of prominent social institutions, from local governments to daily newspapers. Of course, when one recent president lies about an extramarital affair with a young White House intern and another leads us into a long war based on faulty intelligence that mainstream news failed to uncover, our distrust of both government and media is understandable. It's ultimately more useful, however, to replace a cynical perception of the media with an

"A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin."

H. L. MENCKEN

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

1 DESCRIPTION. If we decide to focus on how well the news media serve democracy, we might critique the fairness of several programs or individual stories from *60 Minutes* or the *New York Times*. We start by describing the programs or articles, accounting for their reporting strategies, and noting what persons are featured as interview subjects. We might further identify central characters, conflicts, topics, and themes. From the notes taken at this stage, we can begin comparing what we have found to other stories on similar topics. We can also document what we think is missing from these news narratives—the questions, viewpoints, and persons that were not included—and other ways to tell the story.

2 ANALYSIS. In the second stage of the critical process, we isolate patterns that call for closer attention. At this point, we decide how to focus the critique. Because *60 Minutes* has produced thousands of hours of programs, our critique might spotlight just a few key patterns. For example, many of the program's reports are organized like detective stories, reporters are almost always visually represented at a medium distance, and interview subjects are generally shot in tight close-ups. In studying the *New York Times*, on the other hand, we might limit our analysis to social or

It is easy to form a cynical view of the stream of TV advertising, talk shows, rock stars, and news tabloids that floods the cultural landscape. But cynicism is no substitute for criticism. To become literate about media involves striking a balance between taking a critical position (developing knowledgeable interpretations and judgments) and becoming tolerant of diverse forms of expression (appreciating the distinctive variety of cultural products and processes).

A cynical view usually involves some form of intolerance and either too little or too much information. For example, after enduring the glut of news coverage and political advertising devoted to the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, we might easily have become cynical about our political system. However, information in the form of "factual" news and knowledge about a complex social process such as a national election are not the same thing. The critical process stresses the subtle distinctions between amassing information and becoming media literate.

political events in certain countries that get covered more often than events in other areas of the world. Or we could focus on recurring topics chosen for front-page treatment, or the number of quotes from male and female experts.

3 INTERPRETATION. In the interpretive stage, we try to determine the meanings of the patterns we have analyzed. The most difficult stage in criticism, interpretation demands an answer to the

"So what?" question. For instance, the greater visual space granted to *60 Minutes* reporters—compared with the close-up shots used for interview subjects—might mean that the reporters appear to be in control. They are given more visual space in which to operate, whereas interview subjects have little room to maneuver within the visual frame. As a result, the subjects often look guilty and the reporters look heroic—or, at least, in charge. Likewise, if we look again at the *New York*

Developing a media-literate critical perspective involves mastering five overlapping stages that build on each other:

- *Description*: paying close attention, taking notes, and researching the subject under study
- *Analysis*: discovering and focusing on significant patterns that emerge from the description stage
- *Interpretation*: asking and answering the "What does that mean?" and "So what?" questions about one's findings
- *Evaluation*: arriving at a judgment about whether something is good, bad, or mediocre, which involves subordinating one's personal taste to the critical assessment resulting from the first three stages
- *Engagement*: taking some action that connects our critical perspective with our role as citizens to question our media institutions, adding our own voice to the process of shaping the cultural environment

Let's look at each of these stages in greater detail.

Times, its attention to particular countries could mean that the paper tends to cover nations in which the United States has more vital political or economic interests, even though the *Times* might claim to be neutral and evenhanded in its reporting of news from around the world.

4 EVALUATION. The fourth stage of the critical process focuses on making an informed judgment. Building on description, analysis, and interpretation, we are better able to evaluate the

fairness of a group of *60 Minutes* or *New York Times* reports. At this stage, we can grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the news media under study and make critical judgments measured against our own frames of reference—what we like and dislike as well as what seems good or bad about the stories and coverage we analyzed.

This fourth stage differentiates the reviewer (or previewer) from the critic. Most newspaper reviews, for example, are limited by daily time or space

constraints. Although these reviews may give us important information about particular programs, they often begin and end with personal judgments—"This is a quality show" or "That was a piece of trash"—which should be the final stage in any substantial critical process. Regrettably, many reviews do not reflect such a process; they do not move much beyond the writer's own frame of reference.

5 ENGAGEMENT. To be fully media literate, we must actively work to create a media world that helps serve democracy—the fifth stage of the critical process. In our *60 Minutes* and *New York Times* examples, engagement might involve something as simple as writing a formal or e-mail letter to these media outlets to offer a critical take on the news narratives we are studying.

But engagement can also mean participating in Web discussions, contacting various media producers or governmental bodies like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with critiques and ideas, organizing or participating in public media literacy forums, or learning to construct different types of media narratives ourselves—whether print, audio, video, or online—to participate directly in the creation of mainstream or alternative media. The key to this stage is to challenge our civic imaginations, to refuse to sit back and cynically complain about the media without taking some action that lends our own voices and critiques to the process.

attitude of genuine criticism. To deal with these shifts in our experience of our culture and the impact that mass media have on our lives, we need to develop a profound understanding of the media—what they produce and how they work.

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

Developing **media literacy**—that is, attaining knowledge and understanding of mass media—requires following a **critical process** that takes us through the steps of description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement (see "Media Literacy and the Critical Process" above). We will be aided in our critical process by keeping an open mind, trying to understand the specific cultural forms we are critiquing, and acknowledging the complexity of contemporary culture.

Just as communication is not always reducible to the linear sender-message-receiver model, many forms of media and culture are not easily represented by the high-low metaphor. We should, perhaps, strip culture of such adjectives as *high*, *low*, *popular*, and *mass*. These modifiers may artificially force media forms and products into predetermined categories. Rather than focusing on these worn-out labels, we might instead look at a wide range of issues generated by culture, from the role of storytelling in the mass media to the global influences of media industries on the consumer marketplace. We should also be moving toward a critical perspective that takes into account the intricacies of the cultural landscape.

A fair critique of any cultural form, regardless of its social or artistic reputation, requires a working knowledge of the particular book, program, or music under scrutiny. For example, to understand W. E. B. Du Bois's essays, critics immerse themselves in his work and in the historical