



# strange days

**POPULAR CULTURE AND  
MASS MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

What is the role of digital technology in our everyday lives? Did Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO and co-founder, transform how we relate to each other when he created the site?

**E**VERY FEW WEEKS OR SO I RECEIVE AN EMAIL FROM A BANKER, government official, businessperson, or heir asking for help diverting temporarily inaccessible funds from Nigeria to the United States, of which I am promised a generous portion. All I am asked for in return is to send ahead the necessary transaction and transfer costs, attorney fees and taxes, along with all of my personal banking information. My correspondent assures me that I will be doing his family and perhaps justice itself a great service by assisting him. He flatters me, yes he does. But this deal is too good to be true.

Of course, the Nigerian email scam is notorious by now; most readers have received several such entreaties in the past few months, if not days. Two things about the scam are less well known, however. The first is that although it sounds impossibly ludicrous, in fact it is based on a confidence game dating back to the sixteenth century, the Spanish Prisoner. The setup is different in its particulars every time, but it essentially remains the same con as its centuries-old predecessor in which the mark, typically a member of the English gentry, is told a fantastic story about a prince unfairly imprisoned somewhere in Spain. The mark is asked to cover the costs of bribing the guards and financing his escape, after which the prince himself will reward him handsomely with his newly accessible riches. (Often there is a beautiful sister involved as well, with dropped hints and suggestions that if all goes according to plan, the mark will win her love as well.) Of course, once the mark has taken the bait and volunteered to front a small stake for the enterprise, numerous problems ensue: the guards demand additional bribes for their accomplices, a wayward conspirator steals the money in reserve, the prisoner is moved to a more impenetrable site—all of which requires more and more of the mark's money until he has been sapped bone dry. The brilliance of the Spanish Prisoner is that when it has been performed correctly, the mark need not ever know that he has, in fact, been scammed, that such a prisoner never existed in the first place. He is left empty-handed, cursing his bad luck that the prince's escape has been foiled, yet again.

The second thing most people do not know about the Nigerian email scam is that very shrewd, college-educated professionals fall for it all the time. In 2006 Mitchell Zuckoff reported in *The New Yorker* on one such victim, a Massachusetts psychotherapist named John W. Worley, whom online con artists swindled for at least \$40,000. (Even after Worley was sentenced to federal prison for passing their bad checks, he maintained his confidence in the legitimacy of the scammers and their money-transfer scheme.) In 2005 the U.S. Federal Trade Commission received 55,000 complaints about such email scams, also known as "419" schemes, named after the anti-fraud section of the criminal code in Nigeria. Occasionally American victims actually travel to Nigeria to conduct the transactions in person. A recent FTC consumer alert warns, "According to

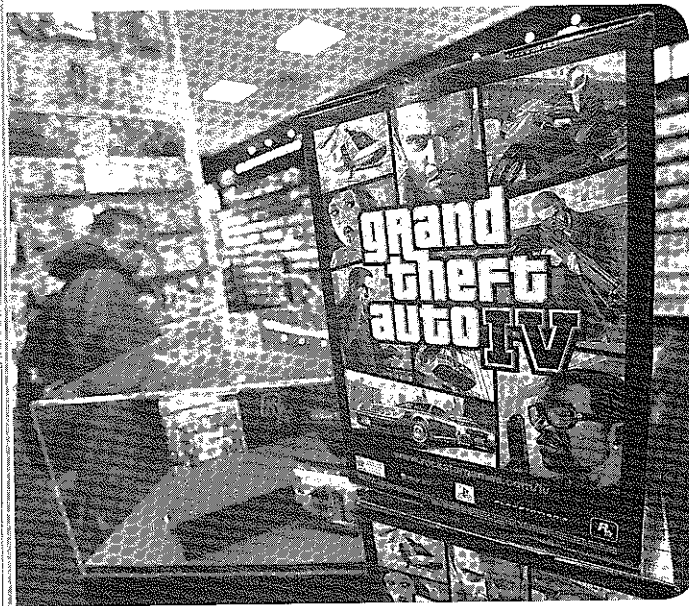
State Department reports, people who have responded to these 'advance-fee' solicitations have been beaten, subjected to threats and extortion, and in some cases, murdered."

While 419 schemes have proliferated since Nigeria's economic upheaval in the mid-1980s, clearly the Internet has made such crimes infinitely easier to pull off. Email is a practically costless method of communication on a truly mass scale, which is what makes it so easy to fish among millions for an eventual victim. (This is also why the proliferation of spam is so intractable: if service providers were to charge even a ridiculously low fee for sending emails, say one-twentieth of one cent per message, we would put a serious dent in email fraud as well as all other spam.) Email communication is also faceless and nearly untraceable, unlike phone calls or handwritten letters, which is why so few Internet swindlers are ever apprehended (Zuckoff 2006). But the Nigerian email scam also works because we have grown so reliant on today's digital technology to communicate with friends and family, express intimate opinions, and even romantic desire. We open our hearts and minds to perfect strangers online all the time, and so it should hardly surprise us that even the shadiest of deals can seem so tantalizing when processed through the familiar interface of our laptops and iPhones, machines equipped with our cherished photos and favorite songs.

This chapter is about the role that digital technology plays in our everyday lives, as a mediator of interpersonal communication and social interaction. Like the Nigerian email scam, not all of the news is upbeat, or even all that new—just think about how long con men have kept the Spanish Prisoner in operation. Much of it is still open to debate and conjecture; all of it is subject to revision. Unlike the American popular culture of the nineteenth century, the story of the digital age is still being written, by all of us. Going forward, how should we think about the impact of the Internet on our cognitive capacity to concentrate for extended periods of time? How will the future of American journalism and the news media be impacted by the digital revolution? How much can we trust MySpace or online dating sites? How does the rise of YouTube and easy-to-use recording and editing hardware and software complicate the distinction between the pop cultural creator and consumer in the digital age? Turn down your iPods, and let us begin the conversation.

### **The Medium is the Message**

Over forty years ago communications theorist Marshall McLuhan (1967) developed a pathbreaking idea—media not only pass along messages from sender to receiver but actively reshape how we process information, knowledge, and text. While much has changed since McLuhan's time, the relationship between our media environment and its impact on how we perceive the world around us has rarely been more thoroughly debated than in our current digital age. In his recent book provocatively titled *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson (2006) argues that unlike past iterations of arcade fun, new generations of video games like the *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto* series are uniquely capable of teaching young people to develop intellectual thinking abilities and problem-solving



According to Steven Johnson, why might playing *Grand Theft Auto* actually be good for you?

skills. While reading textbooks may provide a kind of *explicit learning* by facilitating the absorption of crystallized knowledge like dates, facts, and figures, playing video games contributes to what the great American philosopher John Dewey called *collateral learning* by facilitating the development of cognitive skills and competencies among energized participants. According to Johnson, this skill set includes pattern recognition, task prioritization, decision making, and most of all, how to find order and meaning in chaos.

make decisions on the basis of available evidence and reasoned analysis. But perhaps more important, this decision making is made under an unusual set of circumstances for a friendly game, because unlike poker, chess, or baseball, the actual rules of play are intentionally withheld from the players. Therefore, part of the challenge lies in figuring out the game's multiple and hierarchically nested objectives, its density of rules and regulations, and how to maneuver within its confusing universe—all of which can be learned only by playing the game in frustrating fits and starts, relying on analytic logic and creative hunches, hypothesis development and theory testing, trial-and-error and discovery. Unlike fast-paced distractions with quick rewards (like CGI-laden blockbuster thrillers), modern video games can be tedious and difficult. They require patient experimentation and teach players to delay gratification as they probe what Johnson calls the *physics* of the game's complex virtual world—how far across a canyon a character can jump while wearing armor; the relative amounts of blood one loses if wounded in the legs or the chest; from which direction the robot is most likely to invade (Johnson 2006, p. 44). Along the way, these intellectual demands exercise and sharpen the mind, augmenting how the brain functions not only during jarring rounds of play but in more common place settings as well.

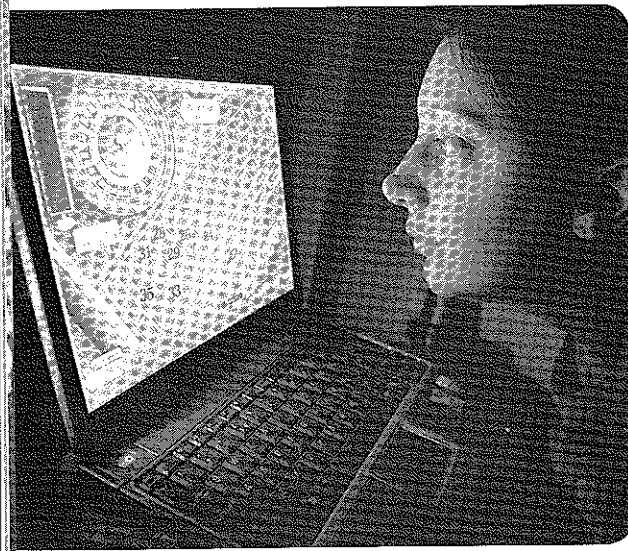
Others suggest that sophisticated digital games help participants develop crucial organizational and decision-making skills ideal for the professional world. For instance, *massively multiplayer online role-playing games* (or MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest* allow players to adopt virtual identities or *avatars* to communicate and interact with one another through the game's visual and audio interface. Through their avatars, participants form guilds,

clans, and other social alliances and collectively solve problems and achieve complex goals (Castronova 2005). Management gurus like Stanford communication professor Byron Reeves argue that familiarity and experience navigating MMORPGs provide superior training for positions of leadership in business. In *Virtual Worlds, Real Leaders* (2007), a "Global Innovation Outlook 2.0 Report" prepared for IBM employees, Reeves proclaims, "if you want to see what business leadership may look like in three to five years, look at what's happening in online games." According to the IBM report:

Online games, and specifically massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), offer a glimpse at how leaders develop and operate in environments that are highly distributed, global, hyper-competitive, and virtual. Hundreds of thousands of players—sometimes millions—interact daily in highly complex virtual environments. These players self-organize, develop skills, and settle into various roles. Leaders emerge that are capable of recruiting, organizing, motivating, and directing large groups of players toward a common goal. And decisions are made quickly, with ample, but imperfect, information. Sound familiar?

"MMORPGs mirror the business context more than you would assume," says Reeves. "They presage one possible future for business—one that is open, virtual, knowledge-driven, and comprised of a largely volunteer or at least transient workforce." Of course, online games do not provide a perfect analog for the business world of the future. The stakes in the real world are obviously much higher. But it's easy to see how some of the qualities of gifted gaming leaders could translate into a corporate setting. The collaborative influence that online leaders exhibit is extraordinary in some cases. Gaming leaders are more comfortable with risk, accepting failure, and the resulting iterative improvement, as part of their reality. Many of these leaders are able to make sense of disparate and constantly changing data, translating it all into a compelling vision. And the relationship skills of the best gaming leaders would put many Fortune 500 managers to shame. (pp. 4–5)

Of course, we experience digital media in a variety of platforms that may impact our social and cognitive capacities in contradictory ways. In an essay for the *Atlantic*, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Nicholas Carr (2008) argues that if video games like *Call of Duty* make us smarter, then how we surf online—"reading and writing emails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link"—may have a more deleterious effect on our mental faculties (p. 57). Carr and others wonder if latter-day Internet habits have impaired our ability to read deeply and contemplatively, to absorb texts critically with a sufficient degree of concentration. Already, other media are adapting to the Internet's frenetic visual norms. Magazines and newspapers feature shorter articles and capsule summaries, and the *New York Times* now includes article abstracts in every edition (p. 60). Television networks clutter



A college student plays roulette online. How do gaming sites put consumers in "the zone"?

the screen with distracting banners, news crawls, promotional icons and ads, mini-trailers, quick weather updates, and stock quotes (Lee 2007). As TV soundtracks and commercials become the primary medium for introducing pop songs to mass audiences, even our attention span for music listening diminishes as our exposure to new recordings is increasingly confined to 10-, 15-, and 30-second snippets of sound.

If Internet surfing makes us prone to distraction, then for some the debilitating effects of digital media can be quite costly indeed. For instance, about \$60 billion is illegally gambled in Internet poker games each year, a pursuit that draws in an estimated 1.6 million U.S. college students. As Mattathias Schwartz (2006) reported in the *New York Times Magazine*, in 2005

Lehigh University sophomore class president Greg Hogan, Jr., lost \$7,500 playing online poker, and out of desperation, in December of that year he held up a Wachovia bank for \$2,871 in cash. With no casino dealers, card shuffling, or friendly table partners to distract him, Hogan found the seamless, fast-paced action of digital poker "paralyzing" and "narcotic," a familiar sensation among addicts, men and women alike. According to Schwartz, "Many, like Lauren Patrizi, a 21-year-old senior at Loyola University in Chicago, have had weeks when they're playing poker during most of their waking hours. Rarely leaving their rooms, they take their laptops with them to bed, fall asleep each night in the middle of a hand and think, talk and dream nothing but poker."

According to cultural anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull (2005, p. 73), digital technologies succeed in creating what consumers call *the zone*, a dissociated subjective state marked by a suspension of normative parameters—monetary, bodily, temporal, and spatial. Gambling sites rely on cashless transactions (performed with credit and debit card numbers) in which financial stakes are transformed into pixilated "chips" that no longer seem like real money. Unlike dorm-lounge poker games in which classmates eventually get tired, punch-drunk, or else lose their shirts, online casinos never close, but consistently and relentlessly maintain a steady rhythm of play that keeps addicts glued to their screens alone for hours, nights, and weeks on end. With only computer keys to depress, players never drop their cards; moreover, gambling software allows gamers to bet multiple hands simultaneously, further increasing the hypnotic speed and tempo with which one gains and (more often) loses.

Eventually, one relinquishes all proper sense of time until, as one of Schull's informants admits, "it's not about *winning*: it's about *continuing to play*" without interrupting the "illusion of control," the experience of total flow (pp. 74–75).

The departure from conventions of temporal reality experienced by Internet gamblers is not sufficiently different from the heightened states known to other video game players. In a piece for *Harper's* magazine fittingly titled "The Perfect Game," Joshua Bearman (2008) reports that according to Walter Day, founder and proprietor of Twin Galaxies, an online organization for video game fanatics, "'Top gamers have yogic concentration,' he says, 'combining utter focus with extreme relaxation, like what I've studied with the Maharishi.' Walter says the players, like all great athletes, can enter flow states when navigating Pac-Man or marathoning on games like Nibbler. And many players do in fact report moments, deep into the hours, when everything but the game recedes" (p. 69).

While admittedly extreme, this dissociation from reality is merely illustrative of the increased levels of loneliness and alienation experienced by many young people, and their condition is perhaps only exacerbated by digital technologies. Writing in the British journal *Biologist*, Aric Sigman (2009, p. 15) argues, "The rapid proliferation of electronic media is now making private space available in almost every sphere of the individual's life. Yet this is now the most significant contributing factor to society's growing physical estrangement. Whether in or out of the home, more people of *all* ages in the UK are physically and socially disengaged from the people around them because they are wearing earphones, talking or texting on a mobile telephone, or using a laptop or Blackberry." This loss of face-to-face interpersonal contact has been associated with a variety of physiologically debilitating conditions and an increased incidence of a number of illnesses, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and rheumatoid arthritis (p. 17).

### What Happens Online Doesn't Always Stay Online

The Hogan bank robbery illustrates that while the online universe may be virtual, it is nevertheless severely consequential for what happens here in the real world. In *Synthetic Worlds*, telecommunications professor Edward Castronova (2005) explores the porous quality of the barrier (or what he calls the *membrane*) separating the imaginary realm of cyberspace from the material world of everyday life. As he argues, "we find human society on either side of the membrane, and since society is the ultimate locus of validation for all our important shared notions—value, fact, emotion, meaning—we will find shared notions on either side as well" (pp. 147–48).

Nowhere is this blurred boundary more apparent than in the online economies of MMORGs such as *World of Warcraft* (WOW) and 3D virtual worlds like *Second Life* (SL). In warehouses packed with computer terminals throughout China, thousands of young "digital sweatshop" workers play WOW seven days a week in 12-hour shifts, developing high-status avatars and collecting virtual gold coins, magic wands, and weapons that American gamers buy on eBay and Yahoo! for actual U.S. dollars (Barboza 2005). (According to the *New York Times*, in 2005 game players could expect to pay \$9.99 on eBay for 100 grams of WOW gold, and \$269 to be transported to Level 60, the game's highest level at that time.) In *Second Life*, the 10 million-plus registered users of the Web site can



Chinese workers playing *World of Warcraft* in a "digital sweatshop."

trade real U.S. dollars for Linden dollars (*SL*'s fluctuating online currency) and purchase conceptual "real estate" for their online home or business; lingerie, formalwear, puppies, and sports cars for their avatars; and even animated oral sex from virtual prostitutes and escorts. (According to sources, cyber-brothels in *SL* charge customers anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 Linden dollars—or about \$9 to \$13—for an online "avatar-on-avatar" sexual encounter.)

How much does the economy and social life circulating within online games and synthetic environments impact the material world? As Castrovona (2005, p. 148) points out, for all intents and purposes the distinction between "real" and "virtual" in this context is practically nonexistent. Online gamers spend over \$1 billion a year on flashy virtual assets made up of little more than digital ones and zeroes. In June 2007, \$6.8 million changed hands on *SL*'s Lindex in a single month: the exchange rate was about 270 Linden dollars to one U.S. dollar (Dell 2007). Through her avatar "Anshe Chung," in 2006 virtual real estate developer and broker Ailin Graef became the first person to earn \$1 million in *SL*.

Meanwhile, the social lives perpetuated in synthetic worlds reverberate offline as well. Flesh-and-blood lovers frequently meet in *SL*, just as adulterous extramarital affairs that occur online often lead to real-life divorces. In recent years *SL* has provided a virtual environment where elite universities offer interactive classes, businesses run professional conferences, and corporations hold shareholders meetings. Virtual worlds like *SL* even offer simulated contexts lifelike enough to prepare emergency workers to erect medical facilities in the event of a dangerous crisis. And lest we forget, according to the authorized

edition of the *9/11 Commission Report* (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004), the al-Qaeda terrorists responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 relied on digital entertainment software—in their case, flight-simulator computer games—for their training as well (pp. 157–58).

How else do goings-on within the virtual world impact our everyday lives offline? Certainly, the ease with which information flows online among otherwise discrete interpersonal networks has obvious consequences for how we maintain control over our reputations and identities. As George Washington University law professor Daniel Solove (2007) observes in *The Future of Reputation*, since anyone with an Internet connection can post intimate photographs, juicy gossip, or vicious rumors on the Web for a potential worldwide audience of billions, personal reputations can easily be maligned within hours. In 2003 Kelley D. Parker, a partner at the elite New York law firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison, allegedly ordered a paralegal to conduct research on nearby sushi restaurants after eating some bad takeout. The underling wrote up a three-page memo replete with interview quotes, footnotes, and exhibitions, and the scanned document later appeared on the Web site Gawker for her colleagues to mock (Glater 2003). (The memo memorably ends, "I would hope you find the attached helpful in choosing the restaurant from which your dinner will be ordered on a going-forward basis.") While it was never determined whether the infamous "sushi memo" was a hoax or a prank, it presumably hardly matters to Ms. Parker, whose reputation has been forever marred by the online posting.

Of course, rumors of bad behavior among celebrities likely travel faster online than any other kind of hearsay. Web sites like Gawker, The Smoking Gun, TMZ, and YouTube are veritable clearinghouses for such gossip, as actor Christian Bale learned after he cursed out the director of photography on the movie set of *Terminator: Salvation* in 2008 for nearly four minutes, and a full-length audio recording of his tantrum resurfaced on YouTube the following year. (Bale has since apologized for the outburst, but notably did so only after its public airing.) The Web site Bitter Waitress provides an ongoing list of celebrity (as well as civilian) diners who have stingily tipped less than 15 percent of their check: famous cheapskates shamed by the site include actresses Lindsay Lohan and Helena Bonham Carter, former Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino, rock singer David Lee Roth, and reality TV figure Dog the Bounty Hunter. In March 2009, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (or PETA) published an online list of celebrities who unabashedly wear fur, including Madonna, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Kanye West, Elizabeth Hurley, Kate Moss, Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher, Mary J. Blige, and Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

A very different kind of online clearinghouse for the airing of grievances, Rate My Professors (RMP) sells itself as an unscientific *Consumer Reports* for undergraduates and an Internet forum for shaming university instructors of ill repute. A Web site that empowers college students by allowing them to anonymously post ratings (on the basis of easiness, clarity, overall quality, helpfulness, and "hotness") as well as descriptive evaluations of their professors for the world to

read, RMP reverses the power dynamic otherwise inherent in teacher-student relationships by establishing a semipermanent public record of ridicule and complaint often built entirely out of vengeance, deserved or not (Solove 2007, p. 98). "Andy," a writing instructor from the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, reveals on his blog some of the more colorful online postings written about him by former students:

- Andy is impossible to please and he can be a wicked jackass. He writes really mean comments on students' papers. I do not recommend him. Find someone else!!!
- He does not know how to teach nor does he like his job. He grades really hard and expects way too much. . . . Nothing is ever good enough for this man.
- Impossible. . . . I would be surprised if you get above a 75 on any of the 4 essays. He discusses your grade with other students in your absence. . . . Complains about his other class to us; I'm sure he complains about us to them. Kills any self esteem you may have had in your writing; not helpful at all. Do anything to avoid this class!!
- He's not a good writing teacher at all!! He's not even a real teacher, he grades essays by putting them in a pile from best to worst (he said this to my class). Very hard grader, the highest grade I got was a 78. He's not helpful: when he tries to help, he makes things worst. He came to class dressed like he just got out of bed, every class!!
- The guy is a teacher only to inflate his ego, which is why he checks this Web site to see what people think of him.

In retaliation for this public pillorying, "Andy" attacks his students on his blog:

- I don't know what this person is talking about with regards to discussing grades with other students. I'm pretty sure I never did that. But I do talk about the other classes to each other, in a general sense. And while I'll concede that maybe I shouldn't, I don't feel that bad about it. I never say anything about another class that I haven't already said to their faces. The greater point here is that I kill their fragile self-esteem. These kids have never been told they're anything less than wonderful. They were all the best writers in their high-school class. They are all brilliant. Yet most of them wouldn't know a comma if it spliced them between the eyes. I have no idea what's going on in high school English classrooms, but the system is broken if you can get a diploma without the most basic of basic skills. Teaching two 8 AM sections my first semester probably didn't help matters. These kids love to sleep, but not when they should be sleeping. During those hours, they are binge drinking or playing Guitar Hero. That may be unfair, as many of them are also paying their way through school and working part-time jobs. But regardless, the majority is sleep-deprived, and in no condition to learn at 8 AM.

- It's pretty reflective of the sense of entitlement felt by some of these kids. They deserve an A simply because (a) they're God's special creatures and (b) writing is no more important than gym class.
- I'm always amazed by how hard these students think they're trying. Sometimes they'll ask me questions about their papers, but generally when you strip away the bullshit, their questions all amount to: "How can I get an A on my paper without doing any actual work?" I've had about 100 students, and despite their complaints about grades, maybe five or six have actually come to my office hours to discuss how to improve their writing. I've probably put more time and effort into this blog post than some of them put into their papers.

The difference between "Andy's" blog posts and RMP is that the latter is an extraordinarily well-known and heavily networked Web site, and its impact sometimes goes far beyond the university quad. For instance, Miriam Gershow is a writing instructor in the English Department at the University of Oregon, and although she has received many positive evaluations on Rate My Professors from satisfied students over the years, an equal number of posted comments have been mean and nasty: "Do not take her class!!" "I NEVER GIVE ADVICE, BUT THIS ONE IS THE WORST TEACHER IN THE UNIVERSE. IF YOU REALLY VALUE YOUR LIFE, THEN DO NOT THINK ABOUT TAKING HER CLASSES. A SUICIDE DECISION. HORRIBLE, HORRIBLE, HORRIBLE!" "I got a good grade in the class, but simply put this teacher is garbage." "Worst . . . teacher . . . ever." But while RMP is presumably designed to help university students choose courses and instructors, anyone can access the site, including potential employers, divorce lawyers, and book reviewers from the *New York Times*. When Janet Maslin of the *Times* reviewed Gershow's 2009 novel *The Local News*, which features an anxious yet smug teenager named Lydia Pasternak as its lead character, she drew on the author's online student evaluations to explain Lydia's social status:

Ms. Gershow has been a teacher at the University of Oregon, where some students' online ratings of her sound like a continuation of Lydia's high school nightmare. Being regarded as neither popular nor hot seems to be territory that Ms. Gershow knows well, maybe in the classroom and certainly on the pages of her unusually credible and precise novel. (Maslin 2009, p. C7)

Does Maslin's use of Rate My Professors (and its "hotness" ratings scale) represent a violation or ethical breach? What if a job interviewer relies on an applicant's Facebook profile (replete with their odd musical tastes and suggestive photographs) when rendering judgment about their professional qualifications? Given the far-ranging uses of Internet networking and dating sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Match, it is no wonder that subscribers strategically design their online profiles and behaviors in self-interested ways. Among Facebook users, young people augment their social standing by linking to high-status or especially attractive friends; bald men refer to their heads as "shaved"; restaurant servers

and retail workers list their aspirational careers (e.g., fashion modeling, acting, screenwriting, guitar playing) as their actual occupations; college professors avoid posting photos of themselves playing beer pong (Rosenbloom 2008). According to an unpublished paper by economists at MIT and the University of Chicago on Internet courtship (Hitsch, Hortacsu, and Ariely 2004), less than 1 percent of both men and women who use dating sites like Match describe themselves as having “less than average looks.” As noted in Chapter 9, men report heights that are one inch taller than the national average, while women underreport their weight (again, compared to the national average) by a difference of 20 pounds for women in the 30–39 and 40–49 age ranges. As Jennifer Egan (2003) reports in the *New York Times Magazine*, “most online daters have at least one cranky tale of meeting a date who was shorter or fatter or balding or generally less comely than advertised. Small lies may even be advisable; by dropping a year or two off her age, a 40-year-old woman will appear in many more men’s searches, and the same is true for a man shorter than 5-foot-11 who inflates his height even slightly.”

Of course, lying about one’s online identity can be more consequential than simply suffering through a disappointing date. In 2006 Megan Meier, a 13-year-old girl from Dardenne Prairie, Missouri, began emailing with Josh Evans, an adorable boy who befriended her on MySpace. Josh was 16 years-old, six-foot-three, and had blue eyes and wavy brown hair. He owned a pet snake, liked pizza, and preferred Coke to Pepsi (Collins 2008). To any 13-year-old girl, he would have been a perfect boyfriend if not for his one flaw—he wasn’t actually real but an online cipher invented and animated by Lori Drew, a 47-year-old mother; her 13-year-old teenage daughter Sarah, a former friend of Megan’s; and Ashley Grills, an 18-year-old family friend (Steinhauer 2008). They created a MySpace profile for “Josh Evans” to spy on Megan and eventually bully her as a form of emotional torture, knowing she had a history of depression for which she was taking prescribed medication. On October 15 of that year, after their online courtship had lasted several weeks, Megan received a strangely hostile message from the imaginary boy: “I don’t like the way you treat your friends, and I don’t know if I want to be friends with you” (Maag 2007). After school the next day, she continued fighting online with “Josh,” who called her names



Tina Meier shows pictures of her daughter Megan, who committed suicide after receiving cruel messages on MySpace.

before sending her a final message—“The world would be a better place without you”—and she responded, “You’re the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over” (Steinhauer 2008). Later that afternoon, Megan was found dead in her bedroom closet, where she had hanged herself with a belt.

### Digital Technology and the Media Industries

One notable element of the MySpace Suicide Hoax (as the Meier case would come to be known) is that MySpace is a free Web site, as are most popular media sites, including YouTube, Comcast, CNN, Hulu, and ESPN. Although all forms of online mass media cost money and require expert talent to produce and maintain, in the last decade the overriding economic model for the Internet has emphasized payments upfront to an online service provider (like Comcast or Verizon) in return for unlimited access to largely free content from a seemingly infinite variety of sources. With Web advertising revenue shrinking, many wonder what will come of the media industries that rely on capital investments to produce the kinds of popular culture that we have grown used to consuming online for free. With the help of Apple’s iTunes, the music industry has succeeded in convincing consumers to pay for downloaded music at 99 cents per song, rather than simply share pirated recordings on peer-to-peer networks like LimeWire. In 2008 consumers downloaded just over a billion songs from iTunes, a 27 percent increase from 2007, while compact disc sales were down nearly 20 percent from the year before (Sisario 2005).

The online market for newspaper content has not been as lucrative, and many papers around the country are expected to go under in the next few years, even to the point that some big cities may be left without a major newspaper (Pérez-Peña 2009). This is ironic, since newspapers have more readers today than ever before, especially among young people—yet only a small portion of those readers pay for the privilege, given the availability of free newspaper content online (Isaacson 2009). In truth, past efforts to persuade Internet readers to pay for newspaper content (like the *New York Times*) have largely failed, in part because of extreme competition from an abundance of free online news sites. As Michael Kinsley (2009), founding editor of the online magazine *Slate*, wisely observes, whereas in the past readers were beholden to their local newspaper (if for no other reason than it was prohibitively expensive to have papers, like *Le Monde* or the *Jerusalem Post*, delivered from another country every day), today “every English-language newspaper is in direct competition with every other. Millions of Americans get their news online from the *Guardian*, which is published in London. This competition, and not some kind of petulance or laziness or addled philosophy, is what keeps readers from shelling out for news.” Meanwhile, other sources of newspaper revenue like classified ads have shrunk dramatically due to the greater efficiency of online sites like eBay and Craigslist.

The solution is far from obvious; in fact, many hardly recognize that there is much of a problem, given the seemingly excessive sources of news available online. But although many of us rely on myriad bloggers and news-digest Web sites for the day’s headlines—the *Huffington Post*, *Politico*, *Salon*—few of their

writers actually go out into the world to honestly report on the news, and instead rely on the hard-nosed journalists who work for the newspapers most jeopardized by the digital revolution. Meanwhile, few bloggers or online pundits have the professional journalistic experience, interviewing and fact-checking skills, financial resources, or institutional power to conduct long-term investigations that reveal government corruption or corporate malfeasance. As Andrew Keen (2007) observes in *The Cult of the Amateur*, the democratization of the Internet, “despite its lofty idealization, is undermining truth, souring civic discourse, and belittling expertise, experience, and talent” (p. 15).

It is threatening the very future of our cultural institutions. I call it the great seduction. The Web 2.0 revolution has peddled the promise of bringing more truth to more people—more depth of information, more global perspective, more unbiased opinion from dispassionate observers. But this is all a smokescreen. What the Web 2.0 revolution is really delivering is superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment. The information business is being transformed by the Internet into the sheer noise of a hundred million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves.

Moreover, the free, user-generated content spawned and extolled by the Web 2.0 revolution is decimating the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers, as professional critics, journalists, editors . . . and other purveyors of expert information are being replaced . . . by amateur bloggers [and] hack reviewers. . . . For the real consequence of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information. One chilling reality in this brave new digital epoch is the blurring, obfuscation, and even disappearance of truth. (pp. 15–16)

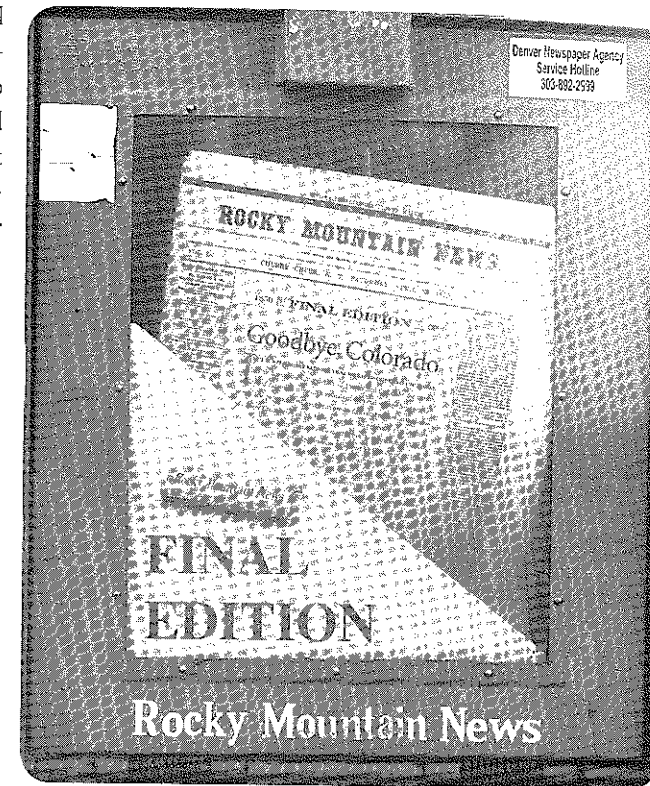
Again, the solution needed to fix the current implosion of the newspaper industry is far from obvious. Kinsley thinks that once the herd is thinned down to a half dozen national papers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, these elite news-gathering organizations will emerge stronger and more competitive than ever, able to keep growing ranks of war journalists in Baghdad and Kabul, and hard-hitting investigative reporters in Beijing and at the Pentagon. Of course, this will not do very much for smaller cities across the country from Sacramento to Cleveland to Tulsa, where citizens rely on their local papers and news bureaus to serve as watchdogs that ensure the integrity of local and state legislatures, government agencies, school boards, and judicial bodies.

Others suggest alternate funding arrangements for online news and other media. Walter Isaacson (2009), a former managing editor of *Time*, recommends instituting an easy-to-use automatic system for collecting micropayments (similar to the iTunes Store) for inexpensive but immediate access to online media content (TV newscasts, short videos and films, blogs, newspaper articles, magazine profiles), sort of like an E-Z Pass for the information superhighway. This

could provide the necessary financial incentives and support for citizen-journalists and creative artists to produce media deemed worthy and valuable by the public—all without relying solely on the unpredictability of advertising revenue. Another workable strategy is for journalists to develop media partnerships with private universities and other nonprofit organizations. A successful example of this model in action includes the Medill Innocence Project established by David Protess, a Northwestern journalism professor who directed a team of students whose collective investigative reporting contributed to the exoneration of 11 innocent and falsely imprisoned men and women, including five death row inmates. Similarly, in his book *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America's Media*, New York University sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2007) reports on the work of the Citizens Union Foundation, a nonprofit research, education, and advocacy group in New York that launched the *Gotham Gazette*, an online publication, in September 1999. Funded by grants and pledge drives, the *Gazette* provides “original reporting on a broad range of civic, cultural, and political issues” germane to local city residents: an example includes its award-winning coverage following the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 (pp. 182–84).

### The Future of Online Media and the Digital Age

As this last discussion illustrates, the future of online media is unknown. According to Henry Jenkins (2006), the founder and director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, the digital age is marked by the rise of three interrelated phenomena: the *convergence* of content across multiple mass media platforms and industries; the active *participation* of audiences that coproduce their own media experiences, often by digitally manipulating the raw materials of popular culture; and the harnessing of *collective intelligence* as an emergent form of media power in which consumers draw on the networking faculties of the Internet to pool their resources and skills with the goal of either challenging traditional media forms or else producing something altogether new. Each presents a unique set of opportunities as well as reasons for tempering expectations. Let us take each in turn.



The final edition of Colorado's oldest newspaper, the Rocky Mountain News, which was nearly 150 years old when it shut down in 2009.



First, the *convergence* of media content across platforms promises the development of exciting and dynamic new forms of cultural production. Jenkins (2006) points to *The Matrix* juggernaut as a prime example. After the runaway success of the 1999 feature film (which grossed over \$170 million at the U.S. box office), its creators, Andy and Larry Wachowski, leveraged the film's concept, characters, and rich aesthetic across numerous media and art-making enterprises, including two sequels (*The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*); three DVDs packed with documentaries, interviews, and other special features; two video games (*Enter the Matrix* and the MMORG *The Matrix Online*); a collection of short animated films (*The Animatrix*); and a series of comics (*Déjà Vu, I Kant*) by cult artists and illustrators such as Dave Gibbons (*Watchmen*) and Bill Sienkiewicz (*Elektra: Assassin*). Unlike most tent-pole franchises in which movie stars, characters, and logos are licensed for endless McDonald's Happy Meals, cheap toys, and soda cups devoid of truly creative content, the strategy of convergence employed for *The Matrix* combines cross-promotion with "synergistic storytelling," with each additional multimedia platform providing new narrative experiences and insights for its audiences (Jenkins 2006, pp. 104–5).

If convergence represents a top-down model of digital pop cultural production created by profit-seeking industries, other examples suggest how consumers themselves *participate more actively* in the coproduction of their own new media experiences. As we have discussed in earlier chapters, popular culture fans create their own spoofs through the emergent medium of the mash-up, in which two or more media are sampled, manipulated, and juxtaposed together to ironic effect. Armed with Photoshop, political junkies create an array of sight gags to be distributed via the Internet: Barack Obama as a Vulcan, George W. Bush as Elvis Presley (in his 1970s Las Vegas period), Dick Cheney as Shrek. A three-and-a-half-minute mock movie trailer, *Tom Hanks Is James Bond* intercuts shots of recent Bond films with scenes from Hanks's many box-office hits, including *Splash*, *Bachelor Party*, *The Money Pit*, *The Man with One Red Shoe*, and *The Da Vinci Code*. A shorter mash-up features Miss Piggy, Scooter, and the felt-headed gang from *The Muppets Take Manhattan* lip-synching the dialogue from the opening diner scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*. (The lovable Kermit the Frog and Fozzie Bear argue over the merits of restaurant tipping, in the tough voices of actors Steve Buscemi and Harvey Keitel.) Other enthusiastic fans simply film *themselves* lip-synching to pop songs and post their homemade videos online, as 19-year-old Gary Brolsma from Saddle Brook, New Jersey, did in 2004 when he recorded himself dancing to "Dragostea din tei," a techno track by the Moldovan pop group O-Zone. (Relatively unknown in the United States, the song was a No. 1 hit single in at least 12 European countries that year, including Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Portugal, and Romania.) Gary submitted the finished product to a Web site, and he became an overnight sensation: his video, which he dubbed the "Numa Numa Dance," has been downloaded from the Internet at least seven million times, and he has appeared on *Good Morning America*, NBC's *Tonight Show*, and CNN (Solove 2007, p. 42).



The creators of the popular YouTube mash-up *Reservoir Dogs Take Manhattan* layered the famous diner scene from Tarantino's crime drama over footage from *The Muppets Take Manhattan*.

If individuals can create their own mash-ups while working alone on their home desktops, other kinds of participatory culture employ the *collective intelligence* of networked contributors working collaboratively toward a common creative objective. For example, Linux is a computer operating system based on free open source software, and anyone is permitted to use, modify, and redistribute its source code. Originally developed by a Finnish hacker, Linus Torvalds, while he studied computer science at the University of Helsinki, Linux steadily improves year after year because of the aggregate knowledge and diverse expertise of its untold thousands of programmers. Moreover, each participant relies on his or her own particular brand of proficiency to contribute not only to the functionality, reliability, and robustness of the software but also to a larger and perhaps more ideologically satisfying goal—to challenge the market and institutional dominance of privately owned, profit-generating operating systems such as Unix, Mac OS, and Microsoft Windows. The collective intelligence of those thousands of Linux programmers, or what *New Yorker* business columnist James Surowiecki (2005) refers to as "the wisdom of crowds," best illustrates how the Internet can connect individuals whose shared ingenuity often proves more advantageous in the pursuit of cultural creativity and innovation than the solitary labors of even the greatest thinkers, isolated in their studio or laboratory. Of course, it should be noted that while the system is decentralized it is hardly anarchic since a small group of elite programmers (including Torvalds himself) vet all alterations to the source code (p. 74). (One senses that the Linux brain trust holds a tighter grip on its content than other Internet sites that rely on collective intelligence, such as the consistently fallible Wikipedia.)

Obviously, a pop cultural landscape marked by the convergence of content across media platforms, the active participation of audiences that coproduce their own entertainment experiences, and the harnessing of collective intelligence as a resource for creativity and innovation suggests an exciting future for online media and the digital age. Still, at least two general caveats are in order. First, cultural convergence across platforms can drive the production of media content in rather insidious ways. If serious journalists are expected to generate entertaining news stories that easily travel from print to television to the Internet, less flashy issues of critical substance may not get the coverage they deserve. Likewise, the increased duties among reporters who are increasingly required to find and incorporate digital photography, streaming video, and interactive graphics into their stories may find they have less time to do the actual newsgathering necessary for producing high-quality investigative journalism (Klinenberg 2005). As Hollywood studios seek out computer-animated film projects that can be seamlessly translated into online role-playing games and fully loaded DVD box sets, perhaps fewer art-house movies, costume dramas, or war documentaries will receive adequate financing.

Second, the rising participatory culture in which American consumers coproduce their own media experiences will require fundamental changes in our nation's outdated approach to intellectual property and copyright law. Currently, intellectual property law and the litigious impulses of a consolidated media industry with unlimited financial resources and political influence prevent cultural innovators from borrowing corporate-controlled images and reproductions, even for seemingly "fair use" purposes. Merely the *threat* of litigation restricts many contemporary artists who choose self-censorship over sinking into debt to fight off lawsuits from multinational giants like Sony, Time Warner, Viacom, and Disney, even winnable ones. In such cases, what is *technically* considered fair use by legal definition and thus protected by statute can hardly be acknowledged as permissible in any real or *practical* sense.

In his spirited manifesto *Free Culture*, Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig (2005) warns that the rise of new media technologies only exacerbates this problem by choking the options of consumers and creators. According to current copyright law, it is within one's rights as the purchaser of a compact disc, paperback novel, or newspaper to lend it to multiple friends, sell it to a secondhand shop, or give it a third and fourth listen or read oneself, as these activities constitute fair use. In a digitized format, however, doing any of these things with a cultural object under copyright protection can technically be considered illegal, since using even a fragment of a digitized text (such as a downloaded photograph or an excerpt from an electronically published book or journal article) almost always involves making a *new* electronic copy of the material in question. In fact, in certain cases each use can constitute an entirely separate alleged offense, as Jesse Jordan, a freshman at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, learned the hard way when he modified a preexisting search engine built for his school's network, allowing students to access one another's publicly available computer files, including those containing music. The following year the

Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) sued Jordan for "willfully" violating copyright law and demanded statutory damages of \$150,000 per infringement. RIAA alleged that each use of a music file constituted a separate infringement and cited more than 100 individual acts of illegality. According to RIAA, Jordan owed \$15 million in damages (Lessig 2005, pp. 48–51).

While the recording industry claims that it no longer targets individuals who use peer-to-peer software to download music illegally, cases such as Jordan's illustrate the profiteering behavior of the culture industries in the digital age. Although the rise of new media promises cultural creators the autonomy to produce innovative or critical artworks that sample or borrow from preexisting pop cultural films, television shows, recordings, or brands, in many instances it can be infuriatingly challenging to procure permission to use logos, cartoon characters, and other kinds of corporate-controlled intellectual property. While digital technologies may allow for an unprecedented abuse of preexisting copyright law—as the proliferation of mash-ups on YouTube clearly demonstrates—the tools provided by Web-based search engines like Google and Yahoo! allow major media companies to efficiently monitor the Internet landscape and identify violators for harassment and legal action, a practice seemingly driven by spite as much as by greed. As Naomi Klein (2002, p. 178) argues in *No Logo*, even in the wake of the digital age "the underlying message [from the media industries] is that culture is something that happens to you. You buy it at the Virgin Megastore or Toys 'R' Us and rent it at Blockbuster Video. It is not something in which you participate, or to which you have the right to respond."

But as Lessig reminds us, the health of any democratic society requires that its cultural products and ideas be available for unfettered distribution, commentary, and eventual innovation and appropriation to ensure their rejuvenation and evolution over time. After all, the availability of unprotected cultural objects contributed to the richness of twentieth-century American popular culture, from Walt Disney's appropriation of classic fairy tales to the modern rise of free open-source software like Linux. Just as we place limitations on the extension of patents in order to promote scientific progress, the fecundity of our cultural landscape requires similar guarantees. As students and scholars of media and popular culture as well as devoted fans, we should demand nothing less.



College students are not the only consumers being sued by the RIAA. Jammie Thomas, a mother of four from Minnesota, was taken to trial by the recording industry for sharing 1,702 songs online.