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ELEMENTS OF A MEDIA SYSTEM

PRIMER QUESTIONS

1. What does the term *system* mean to you?
2. What qualifies something as a system?
3. What is a particular system that affects your life? What are the basic elements of that system?
4. How do the elements of the system relate to each other? How do the elements help the system to function?
5. What do you think are some basic elements that make up a media system?

When you set out to explore a new town or city that you are visiting for the first time and that you want to explore, you probably come up with an approach that will help guide where you go. For example, maybe you decide to take a drive around and through the city first to get an idea of how it is laid out. Then maybe you go to a famous historical or cultural site, then to the district where there are a lot of restaurants for lunch, followed by a visit to a good shopping district. Later, maybe you go to the part of the city where the movie theaters or nightclubs are. Having an approach to exploring somewhere new that is based on visiting categories of sites according to your interests at different points in the day allows you to explore the city with a plan—rather than exploring the city randomly, in which case you might miss something for which the city is famous, or waste time going from one end of the city to the other and then all the way back again.

Similarly, before the media systems of the eight countries can be explored, it is important to develop the methodological approach that will guide the comparisons. A **methodological approach** is a way of studying a phenomenon systematically and is composed of a conceptual framework breaking down into the variables that make up this framework. A **conceptual framework** is a set of connecting assumptions that guide the approach and the variables that are used to generate information. **Variables** are categories of information that vary according to different conditions and circumstances. The methodological approach that is used in this book is designed to ensure that the four media are being studied fairly and accurately; that the findings and interpretations are interesting, reasonable, and meaningful; and that the study does not render a snap analysis by examining just one variable related to a phenomenon of media. Particularly in a study comparing media from around the world, the observations will be somewhat sterile unless they go beyond just what is seen, heard, or read in the media—otherwise known

as content. In other words, the methodological approach that is designed to compare media from around the world in this book attempts to describe not only the high-profile variable of content but also the less obvious variables that lie underneath the content.

THE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF A SYSTEM

This book uses the methodological approach of "a system" to guide how we explore media from different countries. Though an explanation of what a system is can come across as somewhat abstract and vague, it is necessary to provide one here in order to gain a theoretical understanding of what is discussed in this book and why. This knowledge will in turn enhance the interpretations of the findings. While it is being presented, keep in mind that the theory of a system will be fleshed out with details in the subsequent chapters.

A **system** is a collection of interrelated parts in motion that make up a whole. These parts interact with each other to produce a whole system. There is an organic quality to a system, in that the whole is constantly growing or maturing. At various periods in the evolution of a system's efficiency some parts will flourish, whereas others will flounder or even expire.

Several characteristics help describe how the parts and the whole relate to each other. First, a system is an entity that consists of multiple parts that are mutually influenced by each other. Second, a system draws on a wide range of resources to exist and to function properly. Third, a system is always undergoing change because of external forces but retains a basic stability because of an established internal structure. These resources can include institutions, people, technology, and raw materials. Together, these three characteristics depict a media system as essentially a dynamic, self-perpetuating entity made up of multiple interrelated parts.

Media exhibit characteristics of a system. First, media consist of multiple variables that are mutually influenced by external forces such as technological innovation, intercountry relations, and globalization. Second, media make use of a wide range of resources to produce and deliver content. These resources include equipment, people, and information. Third, media undergo constant change in a variety of areas including content development, industry restructuring, regulatory activity, and market exploration, while retaining a fundamental internal structure. Because media exhibit these characteristics, the concept of a system can be used to describe media.

The conceptual framework that is used in this book to compare media from around the world is that of a media system, the variables of which are called elements. At the end of this chapter, the conceptual framework of a media system and its variables are depicted using a tree as a visual metaphor to make it easier to understand. Before we get to the media system as a tree, however, it is important to identify the connecting assumptions that comprise the conceptual framework of a media system and the variables that make up this framework, as described here:

1. Elements are the fundamental components of a media system. Without the elements, the media system does not function.

2. Each element is directly related to each of the other elements. In addition, a change in one element may lead to changes in some or all of the other elements.

3. Some elements will have a greater influence on the media system in different conditions than other elements. Each element impacts the media system in different ways, under different conditions, and with different effects. Sometimes, one element may have a greater impact on the media system than another element, due to a set of circumstances that exist during a particular time period.

4. One or more elements may illuminate some or all of the other elements. In other words, focusing on one or more element may make it possible to see other elements more clearly than if the focus was initially on the other elements.

5. Sometimes there is a special relationship between a subset of two or three elements that drives changes in all the other elements. By studying this subset, it may be possible to more clearly understand how two or three elements interacting with each other can exert a greater force on other variables than if they were interacting individually with other variables.

6. All of the elements taken together make up a whole media system. Thus, all of the elements must be studied to provide a full understanding of a whole media system.

7. The whole of a media system is greater than the sum of its parts. Viewed individually, each element of a media system has a limited impact on the whole system. But viewed collectively, elements combined into a system comprise a force that has greater power and influence than can be assessed by simply adding up effects of individual elements.

The assumptions listed above provide a plan that will guide the comparison of media presented in this book. It is imperative to keep these qualities in mind when the media systems of the eight countries are being compared, because it will lead to a greater understanding of how the interplay between the selected elements actually results in the manifestation of a particular kind of media system in a given country—that is, a media system with a unique look, sound, and feel. This understanding will in turn lead to a fuller interpretation of the comparisons among media from around the world.

CENTRALITY OF MEDIA CONTENT

Earlier it was stated that **media content** is the most noticeable element that comes into play in a media system. This assertion is based on the reasoning that content is the main point at which audiences mentally come into contact with the media. Though content is a tangible entity, other more obscure but influential elements effectively lie beneath a study of content. Therefore, a study of content alone misses the opportunity to examine more hidden and derivative processes at work in a media system—processes that are revealed by uncovering fundamental elements fronted by content.

Think of a television newscast. It is easy to forget that when you watch and listen to a news story in a television newscast, the story is the product of activities taking place behind the scenes that ultimately give the newscast a particular look, sound, and feel. When you look past the content, however, you can find many factors that lead to the content—such as

the people who watch the content; the way the content is regulated, financed, and accessed; the way the society perceives of the role of television in providing content; and the way the culture of the country affects the values expressed in the content.

Therefore, a book that compares media from around the world must study structural elements that facilitate the production of content, as well as the content itself. Still, content should remain a focal point in the comparisons of media systems because it is central to a tangible understanding of media. In essence, to study content in relation to all the other elements of a media system is to illuminate the media system as a whole.

USING A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE TO GENERATE ELEMENTS OF A MEDIA SYSTEM

This now brings us to the question of what elements will be used to study media from around the world. This is one place where a rhetorical perspective comes into play. Again, as Sonja Foss, Karen Foss, and Robert Trapp discuss in *Contemporary Perspectives of Rhetoric* (1991), a rhetorical perspective attempts to provide reasonable interpretations of meaning for how the world is seen from a particular vantage point. Accordingly, a rhetorical perspective on the vantage point of a media system attempts to tie potential meanings to knowledge available through a media system. As the discussion of globalization in Chapter 2 suggested, the flow of information around the world is a major influence on what people who access media and people who make media content know. Therefore, a rhetorical perspective provides a way to analyze potential meanings about the look, sound, and feel of media systems in light of circumstances related to globalization.

The following criteria describe a rhetorical perspective for selecting elements that will elicit fair and meaningful comparisons of media systems from around the world:

1. The elements must exist in the media systems of all countries.
2. The elements must be flexible enough and diversified enough to yield interpretations that take context into account.
3. The elements must be basic enough that conclusions are not obscured by a focus on overly specific details.
4. There must be enough parity in the elements across the media systems of all countries.

ELEMENTS OF A MEDIA SYSTEM

In response to the criteria laid out in the previous section, nine elements have been selected to compare the media systems of eight countries in this book:

1. Cultural Characteristics of the Eight Countries
2. Philosophies for Media Systems
3. Regulation of Media
4. Financing of Media
5. Accessibility of Media

6. Media Content
7. News Reporting
8. Media Imports and Exports
9. Media Audiences

These elements were carefully selected according to the criteria promoted by a rhetorical perspective. In essence, the elements are designed to elicit a fair and objective comparison of media across all countries. But above and beyond that goal, the elements are designed to reveal a broad and deep picture of the media systems across the eight countries studied in this book. However, it is important that each element not be seen as a kind of cookie cutter placed on each country's media system to neatly catalogue its elements. Rather, the elements in this text should be seen as commonsense categories of information that generate discussions not only about the media systems of the countries in this book, but also about a media system in any given country.

ELEMENTS OF A MEDIA SYSTEM AS A TREE

To discuss a media system in a form we can easily visualize, it will be helpful from now on to use the metaphor of a tree. There are several reasons for using the image of a tree to depict a media system metaphorically: A tree is an organic system that is constantly changing its shape as new parts grow and older parts die off. A tree is surrounded by a local environment that presents unique conditions—such as air quality, wind speed, soil nutrients, and so on—all of which significantly affect its growth and overall shape. Finally, trees interact with other trees through root systems and pollination, just as media systems from some countries interact with media systems from other countries.

Like a tree, not all elements that comprise a media system are visible at first glance. Underground, there are two inconspicuous but important elements that impact the functioning of a media system as a tree. First, there are local soil conditions containing nutrients that significantly affect the growth and health of the tree. Drawing on this imagery, we can think of the element of **cultural characteristics** as representing local or domestic conditions that influence more subtle attributes of the tree. Similar to how the nutrients in soil affect the texture of a tree, certain cultural characteristics affect the texture of a media system. Also underground is the root network of a tree, which can be half the size of the entire tree. The root network absorbs nutrients from the soil. Drawing on this imagery, we can think of the element of **philosophies for media systems** as being analogous to the root network of a country's media system. Sometimes, the root system of a tree can comingle with the root system of another tree nearby. Similarly, the media system of one country can comingle with the media system of another country.

Above the ground, one portion of the tree that is easily visible is the trunk, which serves as the tree's base, and which supports and gives direction to the other parts of the tree above the ground. We can think of the element of **regulation** as being analogous to the trunk of a media system. Another portion of a tree above the ground is the main branches, which provide the basic parameters and the support for the smaller feeder branches of the tree. Continuing this analogy, we can think of the main tree branches as the element of
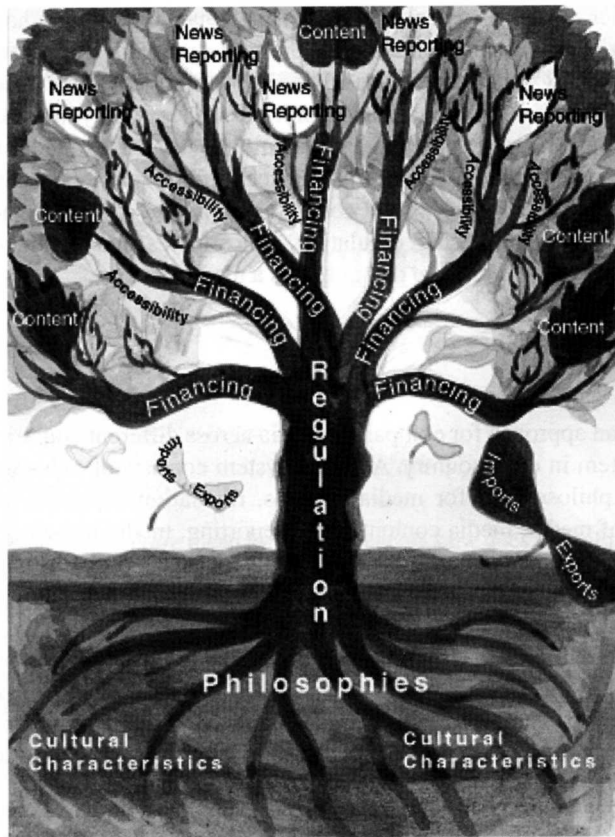
FIGURE 3.1 *Elements of a Media System Depicted As a Tree*
Source: Miharu Lane.

financing in a media system, and the feeder branches as the **accessibility** of a media system. The secondary branches exhibit leaves and seeds on a seasonal basis to passersby. Because leaves are the most observable and changeable part of a tree, we can think of leaves as analogous to **content** in a media system. Moreover, some leaves are more sensational than others and thereby stand out among all the leaves of the tree. Continuing this imagery, we can think of the standout leaves in a media system as being analogous to the element of **news reporting**. Just as standout leaves provide commentary on the general welfare of the tree, news reporting provides commentary on the general welfare of a media system and indeed a society. To continue with this imagery, the seeds of a tree are scattered by wind, rainfall, and living creatures to locations near and far away from the tree. Some seeds take root and sprout up as new trees, but others do not, or the seeds make it for a little while and then die off. Therefore, we can think of seeds as being analogous to the element of **imports/exports** in a media system. This brings us also to the final element of a media system. We can think of living creatures that observe a tree as being analogous to an **audience** for a media system. Drawing on this imagery, audiences interact with media content through the accessibility of the content. In other words, the feeder branches of a tree ultimately determine which leaves and seeds are reachable by passersby on the ground.

Figure 3.1 depicts a media system as a tree. This metaphor certainly has shortcomings, but it helps to visually describe and clarify the basic properties of a media system. Thus, when conceptualizing a media system as a tree, it becomes clear that a media system has visible parts as well as some parts that cannot be seen unless you look below the surface. It also becomes clear that audiences are initially drawn to media systems by seasonally produced content which, depending on accessibility, may be reachable by different audiences. Furthermore, it is clear that content is shaped by a host of other elements in the media system including financing, regulation, philosophies, and cultural characteristics, as well as the overall global climate that encloses a media system.

SUMMARY

This chapter laid out an approach for comparing media across different countries by focusing on the media system in each country. A media system consists of nine elements: cultural characteristics, philosophies for media systems, regulation of media, financing of media, accessibility of media, media content, news reporting, media imports/exports, and media audiences. These elements interact with and influence each other—some more than others. Thinking about a media system and its elements as a tree helps to clarity how a media system functions.

It is important to reinforce that the elements compared in this book are applicable not just to media systems in the specific countries discussed but also to media systems in all countries across the world. Therefore, as you read Chapters 4 through 12, you can replicate the kind of analysis in your own studies of other countries and regions representing your own particular interests.