

MEDIA CONTENT

PRIMER QUESTIONS

1. How would you define *media content*?
2. What newspaper content is typical of where you are living? What newspaper content do you think is unique to where you are living?
3. What radio content is typical of where you are living? What radio content do you think is unique to where you are living?
4. What television content is typical of where you are living? What television content do you think is unique to where you are living?
5. What web site content is typical of where you are living? What web site content do you think is unique to where you are living?

Think about what you notice the most about a tree when you pass it by—probably the leaves. Earlier in this book, media content was likened to the leaves of a tree. Just as leaves serve as a focal point for people who pass by a tree, so too does content serve as a focal point for potential audiences in the vicinity of media outlets. So great is the presence of content during the audience's experience of a media system, that the audience can be largely unaware of the previously discussed elements that are combining to form a media system.

This is the first of three chapters that deal with media content. In this chapter, media content is discussed in a broad sense of the term. In the next two chapters, more specialized areas of media content—news reporting and imports/exports—are discussed as separate elements of a media system in their own right. In previous chapters, content was positioned as the element that would best exhibit the impact of all the elements on each other and on the media system.

DEFINING MEDIA CONTENT

The Traditional Definition

Media content traditionally has been defined as quantifiable data contained within a medium, and identifiable through a research methodology called content analysis. Unfortunately, this definition treats media content versus media form as separate, discrete, and mutually exclusive

concepts. Two important books that address the traditional definition of media content are Klaus Krippendorff's *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (1980) and Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick's *Mass Media Research: An Introduction* (2003).

To illustrate how the traditional definition of media content splits content from form in a messy and somewhat artificial way, consider a hypothetical study of the form of a newspaper, wherein the order of the news sections is analyzed. Perhaps such a study would identify the first section as current events, the second section as feature news, the third section as sports, and the fourth section as business-classifieds. Though this is a study of the form of the newspaper, it is also possible to infer that certain content is given greater importance than other content. For example, placing sports third indicates that sports news is perceived to be the third-most-important category of news after current events and features. This simple example shows how form and content are so inextricably linked that conceptualizing them as two mutually exclusive categories of information can be difficult.

Another problem with the traditional approach to defining media content is that it has promoted the idea that content is primarily what drives an audience to access selected media, while treating form merely as a secondary motivator. Yet, as Marshall McLuhan declared long ago in *Understanding Media* (1964), "the medium is the message." This famous statement suggests that audiences sometimes seek out media forms—as in "getting on the internet"—more enthusiastically than the specific information carried by a given medium. Media form is especially relevant to an audience that is being exposed to foreign-language media content because the tone of the conversations between characters can play a more pivotal role in helping the audience to make any sense of the foreign dialogue than the dialogue itself, which may not be understandable. Therefore, in essence, the traditional definition of media content has failed to properly acknowledge the importance of form in certain contexts of media use.

Defining Media Content as Form and Substance

To address the problems with the traditional definition, **media content** is defined here as a combination of **form** (the way in which the substance of a medium is presented) and **substance** (the information contained within a medium), neither of which can be perfectly separated from each other. *Substance* is a better term for our purposes than *data*, which usually is understood to mean just numbers. In essence, defining media content as a combination of substance and form provides for a broader, more descriptive analysis of similarities and differences across the content of media systems in various countries.

DISTINCTIVE THEMES IN MEDIA CONTENT

This chapter focuses on **distinctive themes** in the content of newspapers, radio, television, and the internet in the eight countries. Distinctive themes reveal interesting facets of one particular media system compared to facets of another media system. The following variables will be used to analyze distinctive themes in the form and substance of media content in the eight countries:

Themes of Form in Newspaper Content

- Format (Tabloid versus Broadsheet)
- Proportions of Text, Advertising, Graphics, Photographs, Cartoons

Themes of Substance in Newspaper Content

- Sections/Typical Coverage
- Violence
- Nudity, Profanity, Sexuality

Themes of Form in Radio and Television Content

- Published Radio Program and Television Program Listings
- Private versus Public Broadcasters
- Start and End Times of Programs
- Advertising Minutage
- Actual Time Length of Program Content

Themes of Substance in Radio Formats and Television Genres

- Typical Radio Formats/Television Genres
- Unique Radio Formats/Television Genres
- Violence
- Nudity, Profanity, Sexuality

Themes of Content on the Internet

As discussed previously, the internet follows patterns in the distribution of content that are radically different from the other three media. One pattern that is different is that search engines automatically use **geolocation** technology to bring up content that is local to where the internet is being accessed. For example, geolocation technology is at work when a search engine automatically comes up in the first language of the country in which the computer is being accessed. In other words, if someone accesses the web site google.com in Lebanon, the web pages will automatically come up in Arabic language, as depicted in Figure 9.1.

A second pattern involves localized pop-up ads that automatically appear according to where the computer being used to access the internet is located. Even if a person logs on to a computer in one country, and then accesses an email service based in another country, pop-up ads that come up will often be about local products and services in the country in which the computer is being accessed.

Because internet content is not automatically confined by the country in which it is distributed (as other media are), the analysis of internet content in this book focuses on content that audiences access. Accordingly, the bulk of the analysis of internet content takes place in Chapter 12 on Media Audiences. In the meantime, however, internet content is analyzed briefly in terms of the two variables that, taken together, represent basic themes of form and substance: (1) start-up web page content and (2) restricted web site content.

MEDIA CONTENT IN FRANCE**Newspaper Form in France**

In France, the five national newspapers all have a different size. *Libération* and *L'Humanité* (*The Humanity*) both have a tabloid shape but are slightly different sizes. *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde* (*The World*), and *Le Canard Enchaîné* (*The Enchained Duck*) are all broadsheets,

night. Typically, scenes with nudity are brief, and naked body parts are sometimes partially obscured by other objects within the scene. Female nudity is much more prevalent than male nudity on television in the UK. It is fairly common to hear profanity on television in the UK in the evening. Almost all words—including *fuck*—can be heard on broadcast television in the UK, on both live and taped comedy shows, talk shows, dramas, films, and on certain newscasts reporting on events at which profanity is used. Though profanity is not routine, it generally is not edited out if it is considered to be relevant to the program.

Internet Content in the UK

Start-up web pages are designed especially for internet cafés. These pages usually contain preferred browsers and search engines, as well as advertisements for products and services sold both inside and outside the café. In chain internet cafés, access to adult web sites is often blocked by a filter installed by the café. British Telecomm also blocks access for its dial-up and broadband users to web sites containing pornographic images with potential minors.

MEDIA CONTENT IN THE USA

Newspaper Form in the USA

Most USA newspapers are broadsheets in both form and substance, though some big cities have daily tabloids. *USA Today* is narrower than the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, as well as most big-city broadsheets. Ink often rubs off USA newspapers onto the reader's hands. There is great variation in the proportion of text, advertising, photos, and graphics. Generally speaking, the largest proportion of a newspaper is text. Typically, most newspaper text will be in a single font, with emphasis provided by bolding the font or by increasing its pitch in a story headline.

In the USA, the national *USA Today* is considered to be a highly visual newspaper that mimics the form of television in two main respects. One is through the television-like design of the street dispenser used to sell *USA Today* (as depicted in Figure 8.10 in Chapter 8 on Accessibility of Media). The other is through a layout design that presents a lot of color photos and graphics, while keeping text to a minimum in terms of length and level of vocabulary compared to other newspapers. The success of *USA Today* has led other newspapers to become somewhat more visually appealing through greater use of color and graphics.

In the USA, advertising occupies a substantial portion of most newspapers. In the *New York Times*, for example, the proportion of advertising—including classifieds—is about 45 percent of the total space. Advertising typically appears on all pages of newspapers in the USA except the front page; an exception to this convention is *USA Today*, which typically runs one or two smaller ads on the front page. On Sundays, most newspapers become thick and weighty because of extra sections and multiple advertising inserts for retail stores, which fall out from the newspaper as it is handled.

In the USA, photographs and graphics are somewhat common in newspaper stories. In general, photographs accompanying news stories on the front page are in color, and on succeeding pages are in black and white. Photographs in newspapers in the USA—particularly local newspapers—often have a grainy quality, or show double images.

Computer-generated graphics are often used to illustrate stories containing information about finances and technology.

The local newspaper pictured in Figure 9.10 shows a typical broadsheet, as well as the proportions of photographs, graphics, and a common font that is used in the USA.

Cartoon strips are a regular feature in newspapers, especially in big-city and small-town newspapers. Cartoon strips are typically found in sections toward the back of the newspaper. In addition to cartoons, newspapers in the USA typically print one or two political cartoons, usually on an editorial page.

Newspaper Substance in the USA

Most broadsheet newspapers—national and regional/local newspapers—typically feature sections in the following order: Current Events, Feature, Sports, Business, and Classified. The Classified sections of newspapers in the USA usually occupy a substantial portion of the newspaper. Big-city newspapers often have a Metro section, and a special-insert section that runs one day a week—for example, the *New York Times*'s "House&Home" section. In addition, big-city and regional newspapers often contain local sections that typically vary according to the county in which the newspaper is distributed.

In the USA, there is a group of three newspapers known as the "prestige press" because of their impact on stories that are run in smaller newspapers and their impact on the subjects discussed on television talk shows. The *New York Times* is known for publishing editorials that are quoted in local newspapers and discussed on radio and television on



FIGURE 9.10 Front Page of Local Newspaper Pocono Record from the USA
Source: Robert McKenzie; reprinted with permission by Pocono Record, February 3, 2004.

politically oriented talk shows. The *Wall Street Journal* is known for extensively covering business news, including economic policy, investments, money management, and banking. The *Washington Post* is known for investigative stories related to government.

Much of the content in the prestige press involves coverage of (1) events related to national politics based in Washington, DC (wherein the content often breaks down issues into strategies employed by Republicans and Democrats to gain competitive advantages against each other); (2) violent crime that is relevant to the city in which the newspaper is based, but has wider national interest because of circumstances surrounding the crime; and (3) investigations that uncover potential corruption or wrongdoing by public officials or companies.

Big-city tabloids in the USA tend to focus on news stories exhibiting high drama. For example, a New York City tabloid's two main front-page stories were: A fire "hero" who was "hurt" by falling debris; and "outrage" over Janet Jackson's breast being exposed during the Super Bowl (*Daily News*, February 2, 2004).

Regional/local newspapers in the USA typically cover local crime stories and upcoming events. For example, front-page stories for a local Pennsylvania newspaper (*Pocono Record*, February 7, 2004) included: a state teacher's union and the state government reaching agreement on a contract; the updated expense of a highway welcome center; houses being added onto by building a lower level; and a local musical group that is gaining attention.

There are three newspaper sections that are commonly found in most broadsheets in the USA: Current Events; Business, which covers news ranging from stock-market reports to consumer spending data to corporate activity; and Sports. Sports sections tend to focus on the four major seasonal sports in the USA: baseball, "American" football, basketball, and hockey. College and high-school sports also are covered in big-city and regional/local newspapers.

Newspapers routinely include stories about violent crimes. Such crimes are described with detail in regard to whether the violence resulted in injury or death. The sentence here, taken from a story in the *Washington Times*, typifies how violent crimes are described in terms of the end results: "A police standoff ended after nine hours yesterday with a gunman and two other persons dead and four officers wounded" (November 13, 2003, p. A9). However, photos in newspapers in the USA generally do not show close-ups of victims, or vivid bodily harm such as bruising and blood; nor are graphic details about the specifics of the injuries to human body parts described.

The approach to nudity and profanity in newspapers in the USA follows a similar pattern to broadcasting content, which is to say that it is rare to see a photograph of a nude person. However, if a nude person does appear in a photograph in a newspaper, the genitals usually are blurred or blackened. Very rarely, a newspaper story covering an art exhibition might show a woman's breasts. Similarly, profane words typically will be presented by blocking parts of the words using symbols like _ _ _ _ or *%\$*#.

Radio Form in the USA

In the USA, radio program listings are not normally published in newspapers. Sometimes newspapers publish the radio station call letters and frequencies that are available in the immediate area. In the USA, radio segments on both commercial and public stations almost always begin and end exactly at either the top of the hour or the bottom of the hour. Except

for news, program segments usually last three to four hours. Per half hour, regular programming varies from eighteen to twenty-two minutes because of advertising.

Radio listings are normally printed only in local newspapers. The typical newspaper listing includes radio stations, radio frequencies, and formats, but not radio programs or shows. On radio in the USA, there is a predominance of commercial programming over noncommercial programming, and privately funded programming over government-funded programming. Public broadcasting channels are available in a channel selection but ordinarily are outnumbered by commercial channels by a ratio of around ten to one.

Radio programming in the USA normally includes multiple breaks for advertising—usually prior to the start of, several times during, and again after the program concludes. Advertising breaks typically run for three to four minutes but can run much longer. Prior to the start of a radio program, advertising typically runs five to seven minutes. Advertising minutage usually ranges from eight minutes per half hour to twelve minutes per half hour.

Almost all radio hosts in the USA keep a very brisk pace to their talk. Interchanges on the air with callers are often hurried, with the on-air personality guiding the caller to “get to the point.” However, as Kate Bachman points out in an article in *Mediaweek*, the “live deejay” on many music stations is no longer a mainstay because of “voice tracking,” a practice in which the on-air host prerecords talk segments on computer that are then inserted between songs during “real-time” programming at one or more radio stations.

Radio Formats in the USA

Radio content in the USA is mostly determined by a radio station’s niche format. Typical formats include Contemporary Hit Radio, Hot Country, and News/Talk. Radio formats tend to be narrowly defined. For example, a station with a Hot Country format will normally broadcast songs from contemporary artists such as Faith Hill or Alan Jackson, but not usually songs of artists from twenty or thirty years ago such as Johnny Cash or Conway Twitty. In most regions of the USA, the selection of radio formats available will include “top 40,” adult contemporary, classic rock, country, talk, and classical or jazz (usually aired by a public broadcasting station).

Much of the programming on radio is locally originated, but some programming originates from networks, syndicates, and from other radio stations that are part of the same ownership group. Usually, the only programming that originates from a network and is aired on a local station is national news. The programming that originates from a sister station or a syndicate is typically a music show or a talk show with a well-known and popular on-air personality. However, when local stations broadcast syndicated or sister-station radio programs, there is usually an attempt to mix that content with some local content (for example, weather, commercials, and news) to give the impression that the programming is coming from the local station.

There are at least three distinctive themes in USA radio formats: (1) the “Contemporary Hit Radio” (CHR) formula, which is structured according to what music is selling the best (“hit” songs are played multiple times at set intervals throughout the day); (2) Country, which ranges from older, “twangy” country music to newer country music with somewhat of a rock-and-roll sound; and (3) Talk, which is accessible mostly on the AM band, and is typified by a right-wing political orientation. On talk radio programs, the host and callers

typically advocate policies and positions using a bombastic delivery style. Callers are often told before they speak that they have “30 seconds” to respond, or that they must be brief in their response. Often, the host interrupts a caller’s sentences.

Profanity is generally not spoken on broadcast radio. Some words that are considered to be less profane—for example, *ass* and *shit*—can be heard in music played on radio in the USA, but usually only if the words are buried by music. Otherwise, one of three methods is employed to prevent profanities from being aired. One method involves airing songs that have alternate “clean” lyrics designed just for radio play. Another method is when, if a conversation takes place live on the air, the radio station runs a “delay,” which gives the host or another staff member a few seconds to press a button that can delete profane words uttered by guests before the words are broadcast. Another method is when both songs and on-air conversations with potential profanities are muted or replaced with a bleep or another sound effect. For example, on December 21, 2004, radio station KKLZ in Las Vegas, Nevada, ran a contest in which listeners were asked to call in and identify the year of a song that was played. One caller correctly guessed that the year for the song was 1976. The conversation between the host and the caller was recorded off the air while the song was being aired, and then played back on the air, after the song had ended. The conversation consisted of the host telling the caller that he was correct, and that he had therefore won free tickets to a concert. The caller then exclaimed “holy sh . . . (bleep) . . . t.” Thus, the beginning of the word, “sh,” could clearly be heard, as well as the ending of the word, “t.” But the middle of the word, “i,” was only partially muted by the bleep. Immediately afterwards, the caller remarked, “I mean, holy cow”—while the on-air host laughed. On-air hosts at stations—particularly those with edgier formats—often/avoid directly saying a profanity by using code word or words that sound similar to a specific profane word. An example is using the word *friggin* instead of *fuckin*. This technique is a way for the on-air personality to follow the letter of the law, but at the same time to violate the spirit of the law. As I (2002) argue in “Contradictions in U.S. Law on Obscenity and Indecency in Broadcasting: A Bleeping Critique,” such methods of partially disguising profanity only serve to invite radio listeners to solve a puzzle presented by a code word or a piece of a missing word or phrase. In such a rhetorical exercise, listeners ironically become more mentally involved in the programming—and therefore are more vividly exposed to meanings of the pseudo-masked profanities.

Television Form in the USA

Television program listings are published in most newspapers and in the weekly magazine *TV Guide*. Television programs on both commercial and public stations almost always begin and end exactly at either the top of the hour or the bottom of the hour. Programs segments usually last half an hour or one hour. However, in 2004, networks were experimenting with running some prime-time shows one minute past the hour to keep the audience from changing channels to another television show. Normally, the actual time length of a television program varies from eighteen to twenty-two minutes per half hour because of inserted advertising. As Table 9.3 shows, the typical listing of television channels and programs available shows a predominance of commercial programming over noncommercial programming, and privately funded programming over government-funded programming. Public broadcasting channels are available in the average channel selection but ordinarily are outnumbered by commercial channels by a ratio of around ten to one.

TABLE 9.3 Sample Television Program Listings from the USA, October 28, 2004

TIME	ABC	NBC	CBS	FOX	PAX	PBS
	TIME	TIME	TIME	TIME	TIME	TIME
6:00pm	Action News	News at Six	News 22 at Six	King of Queens	Pyramid Shop 'til 6:30	News Hour with Jim Lehrer
6:30	ABC World News	NBC Nightly News	CBS Evening News	Everybody Loves Raymond	You Drop Newswatch	Lehrer Nightly Business
7:00	Jeopardy!	Wheel of Fortune	Seinfeld	King of Queens	Family Feud	Tempo
7:30	Wheel of Fortune	Jeopardy!	Entertainment Tonight	Everybody Loves Raymond	On the Cover	The New This
8:00	Extreme Makeover	Joey Will & Grace	Survivor: Vanuatu	Everybody Loves Raymond	Balderdash	Old House
9:00	Life As We Know It	Apprentice: Part 2	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation	Loves Raymond	Cold Turkey	Pennsylvania's Historic Firehouses
10:00	Prime-Time Live	ER	Without a Trace	Tru Calling	Diagnosis Murder	Shroud for a Night Tingle
11:05	Jimmy Kimmel Live!	The Tonight Show with Jay Leno		Special: TV's Funniest Game-Show Moments		
		Late Night with Conan O'Brien				
		12:35				

Source: Robert McKenzie.

Television programming normally includes multiple breaks for advertising. Usually there is an advertising break prior to the start of a program, then about ten minutes and again about twenty minutes into the program, and again after the program concludes. Advertising breaks are typically three to four minutes per break. Advertising minutage per half hour usually ranges from eight to twelve minutes per half hour, though infomercials consist entirely of advertising. The multiple advertising breaks as well as the length of the breaks on both television and radio put a squeeze on the regular programming. In other words, regular programming often sounds and looks shortened and rushed because it must make way for advertising. Similarly, during the advertising segments, typically there are quick cuts from one sound to another and/or from one camera shot to another, while viewers are urged to hurry "before it's too late" or "while the offer is still valid," in regard to making a purchase.

Television Genres in the USA

The vast majority of television programming is commercial and entertainment oriented, starting with lower-number cable and satellite channels that tend to be accessed first as viewers begin to surf through programs. Cultural-oriented and information-oriented programs tend to be found on one channel between ten and twenty carrying a PBS-member station, and then not again until upper channels in the thirties and higher. Almost all television channels broadcast programming twenty-four hours a day. Certain genres typically are scheduled during portions of the broadcast day. From 1900 (7:00 PM) to 2100 (9:00 AM), network affiliates usually carry network programming, which typically involves a two-hour news program presented by multiple anchors. These news programs are presented in a less formal manner than more serious news programs in the evening. Hosts typically converse with each other and make light jokes in between presentation of the news. From late morning up until noon and again in the afternoon, typical television genres include soap operas, game shows, and talk shows. Local and network news typically air in the early evening. During the mid- to late evening, typical program genres include comedies, dramas, reality programs, and news magazines. Standard late-night programs are comedy-based talk/variety shows. During overnight hours, typical program genres include infomercials and reruns of sitcoms and dramas.

One distinctive television genre in the USA commonly broadcast in the evenings is the formulaic sitcom. Usually taking place in an upper-middle-class household, the set is designed in such a way as to represent a spotless household with nothing out of place. Often the plot involves a central problem presented at the beginning of the show, which leads the cast to having humorous moments up to the end of the show when the problem is solved in a tidy way.

A second distinctive television genre is the televangelist sermon, broadcast mostly in the evenings and on Sundays. Programs usually involve a male or female preacher reading scripture and telling stories with a moral ending to an auditorium packed with worshipers. Often the studio and television audience is asked to pray during the program and to donate money to the religious organization.

A third distinctive genre is the infomercial, usually seen from 0200 (2:00 AM) to 1200 (noon) any day. Infomercials are especially common on weekend mornings. An infomercial is usually a half-hour program during which a product or service is sold by one or two hosts demonstrating the product in front of a studio audience. Various types of products are

sold during infomercials, including household cleaners, food-related appliances and gadgets, exercise equipment, weight-loss treatments, and get-rich-quick schemes. Infomercials typically incorporate multiple opportunities during the program for the product or service to be purchased outright, or in installments, or with financing.

Violence on television in the USA is a common theme. Violent programming can be seen at most hours of the day. Dramas, cartoons, and movies often have various levels of violence ranging from gun shoot-outs to fistfights. News programs also regularly cover violence. Promotional trailers for prime-time dramas regularly show someone pointing a gun in a moment of suspense. However, across all genres in which violence is part of the content, rarely does the program show blood or injured body parts in graphic, close-up camera shots.

In the USA, nudity is a regular theme usually on premium cable and satellite television channels only. On terrestrial broadcast channels, nudity is rarely seen. Occasionally, a medical or scientific documentary will provide a quick glimpse of a woman's breast or buttocks, or a man's buttocks. More typically, when a program's plot involves a scene with nudity, camera angles show the character in such a way that foreground objects in the scene (for example, a chair) obscure the character's genitals from being fully seen by the viewer.

Nudity on a television program outside of a medical or scientific context generally causes widespread uproar in the USA. Such was the case when Justin Timberlake pulled down part of Janet Jackson's top, exposing one of her breasts during a half-time show of the national football championship game (the Super Bowl) broadcast by the CBS network, a division of the Viacom global media conglomerate. The next day, the chairman of the FCC announced that he was ordering an immediate investigation into the incident. A few days later, the FCC reported that it had received over 200,000 complaints about the incident from television viewers (AP story, *Pocono Record*, February 7, 2004). About six months later, CBS affiliate stations that broadcast the segment were fined \$27,500 each (totaling \$550,000) by the FCC. Similarly, profanity is not regularly seen or heard on terrestrial television in the USA. If a character utters a profanity during the taping of a show, usually the sound of the profanity gets muted or bleeped out in the postproduction process before the show is broadcast.

Internet Content in the USA

Internet content in the USA is rarely restricted because most people access the internet where they reside. If internet content is restricted in the USA, it is mainly that of adult web sites. Parents, businesses, and some internet cafés employ filters to restrict access to such sites. Because the internet is frequently accessed in the home, most start-up web pages are selected by the main person using the computer, and typically consist of portal home pages, email sites, or personal home pages.

MEDIA CONTENT IN MÉXICO

Newspaper Form in México

In México, newspapers are a fairly even mix of broadsheets and tabloids in terms of size. Though there are some sensational national newspapers, most newspapers are serious in substance. A distinctive feature of newspapers in México is that there are so many of