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Mass Communication

A Critical Approach

On November 6, 2012, shortly after 11 P.M., Fox News projected that Barack Obama had won Ohio, as he did in 2008, and would be reelected president of the United States. But Karl Rove, a Fox News analyst and the chief campaign fund-raiser for the Republican Party, began questioning the news anchors, arguing it was too early to call the election for President Obama. Rove persuaded one anchor to walk down the hall, on live television, and confront the statisticians in the "decision room" about their projection. What followed was an uncomfortable yet dramatic period, with Fox News managers sticking by their projection while Rove and Republican candidate Mitt Romney's campaign protested. It turned out that the statisticians were right.

This news drama during the 2012 election highlighted a number of media issues that swirled around the campaign. Rove's prominence and influence at Fox News showcased the outsized role campaign contributors seemed to play in the election. While the campaigns raised more than $1 billion each, the parties themselves and outside partisan groups raised an additional

$4 billion, making it the most expensive federal election ever.[1] With unlimited funds raised by corporations, rich individuals, and unknown groups (thanks to the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* ruling by the Supreme Court—see Chapter 16), partisan pundits and concerned citizens alike fretted about rich donors dictating election outcomes.

Much of this money was spent, of course, on political TV ads. By mid-October 2012, the Las Vegas TV market had already aired 73,000 political ads—10,000 per week—a new record with three weeks still to go.[2] The Richmond (VA) TV market stood to rake in as much as $18 million.[3] Many local retailers in swing states could not afford TV advertising during the political blitz—or got bumped off the air by political advertisers, as TV stations jacked up prices and even cut local news time to squeeze in more ads.[4] One often suggested solution: "Require . . . television to provide free air time to qualified candidates."[5]

But while Republicans outspent Democrats in nine of ten swing states where most of the TV ad money was concentrated, North Carolina was the only swing state that went to Romney.[6] Exit-poll data provides some reasons for President Obama's win: He won 55 percent of women voters, 93 percent of African American voters, 71 percent of Hispanic voters, 73 percent of Asian voters, and, perhaps most telling, 60 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year olds—the social media generation.[7] In 2012 the president "had 32 million likes compared with 12 million for Romney" on Facebook; and on Twitter, he had 23 million followers "and out-tweeted Mitt Romney by a margin of eight to one."[8]

Given the rise of social media and the new clout of young voters, it's worth asking whether TV will continue to play such an outsized role in future federal elections—especially since much ad spending did not produce the desired results. With the ability to mute ads or bypass them with DVRs, and with young people less interested in television, will such outrageous spending continue?

In the end, how well did TV media—where most people get their political information—help us understand the complex issues of our time? In a democracy, we depend on news media to provide information about these issues. As citizens, therefore, we should expect that TV stations use a portion of their massive political advertising revenue to investigate the main issues of the day and serve as a counterpoint to the one-sided and mostly negative ads—and not lay off reporters or cut their newsblock time to run more ads. Despite the limitations of our news media, their job of presenting the world to us and documenting what's going on is enormously important. But we also must point a critical lens back at the media and describe, analyze, and interpret the stories and ads to arrive at informed judgments. This textbook offers a map to help us become more *media literate*, critiquing the media—not as detached cynics, but as informed audiences with a stake in the outcome.

"The two main principles of marketing—not spending more than the sale is worth; focusing the most resources on the most susceptible buyers—are thrown out in presidential elections."

MICHAEL WOLFF, *USA TODAY*, 2012

◢ SO WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MEDIA?

In the wake of the 2012 presidential election, the economic and unemployment crises, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the ongoing war in Afghanistan, and the political uprisings in several Arab nations, how do we demand the highest standards from our media to describe and analyze such complex events and issues? At their best, in all their various forms, from mainstream newspapers and radio talk shows to blogs, the media try to help us understand the events that affect us. But, at their worst, the media's appetite for telling and selling stories leads them not only to document tragedy but also to misrepresent or exploit it. Many viewers and social critics disapprove of how media, particularly TV and cable, seem to hurtle from one event to another, often dwelling on trivial, celebrity-driven content.

In this book, we examine the history and business of mass media, and discuss the media as a central force in shaping our culture and our democracy. We start by examining key concepts and introducing the critical process for investigating media industries and issues. In later chapters, we probe the history and structure of media's major institutions. In the process, we will develop an informed and critical view of the influence these institutions have had on national and global life. The goal is to become media literate—to become critical consumers of mass media institutions and engaged participants who accept part of the responsibility for the shape and direction of media culture. In this chapter, we will:

- Address key ideas including communication, culture, mass media, and mass communication
- Investigate important periods in communication history: the oral, written, print, electronic, and digital eras
- Examine the development of a mass medium from emergence to convergence
- Learn about how convergence has changed our relationship to media
- Look at the central role of storytelling in media and culture
- Discuss two models for organizing and categorizing culture: a skyscraper and a map
- Trace important cultural values in both the modern and postmodern societies
- Study media literacy and the five stages of the critical process: description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement

As you read through this chapter, think about your early experiences with the media. Identify a favorite media product from your childhood—a song, book, TV show, or movie. Why was it so important to you? How much of an impact did your early taste in media have on your identity? How has your taste shifted over time to today? What does this change indicate about your identity now? For more questions to help you think about the role of media in your life, see "Questioning the Media" in the Chapter Review.

Past-Present-Future: The "Mass" Media Audience

In the sixties, seventies, and eighties—the height of the TV Network Era—people watched many of the same programs, like the *Beverly Hillbillies*, *All in the Family*, the *Cosby Show*, or the evening network news. But today, things have changed—especially for younger people. While almost all U.S. college students use Facebook every day, they are rarely posting or reading about the same experiences.

In a world where we can so easily customize our media use, the notion of truly "mass" media may no longer exist. Today's media marketplace is a fragmented world with more options than ever. Prime-time network TV has lost half its viewers in the last decade to the Internet and to hundreds of alternative channels. Traditional newspaper readership, too, continues to decline as young readers embrace social media, blogs, and their smartphones.

The former mass audience is morphing into individual users who engage with ever-narrowing politics, hobbies, and entertainment. As a result, media outlets that hope to survive must appeal not to mass audiences but to niche groups—whether these are conservatives, progressives, sports fans, history buffs, or reality TV addicts. But what does it mean for us as individuals with civic obligations to a larger society if we are tailoring media use and consumption so that we only engage with Facebook friends who share similar lifestyles, only visit media sites that affirm our personal interests, or only follow political blogs that echo our own views?

Culture and the Evolution of Mass Communication

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

Culture is made up of both the products that a society fashions and, perhaps more important, the processes that forge those products and reflect a culture's diverse values. Thus **culture** may be defined as the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values. According to this definition, when we listen to music, read a book, watch television, or scan the Internet, we usually are not asking "Is this art?" but are instead trying to identify or connect with something or someone. In other words, we are assigning meaning to the song, book, TV program, or Web site. Culture, therefore, is a process that delivers the values of a society through products or other meaning-making forms. The American ideal of "rugged individualism," for instance, has been depicted for decades through a tradition of westerns and detective stories on television, in movies and books, and even in political ads.

CULTURAL VALUES AND IDEALS are transmitted through the media. Many cosmetics advertisements show beautiful people using a company's products; this implies that anyone who buys the products can obtain such ideal beauty. What other societal ideas are portrayed through the media?

Culture links individuals to their society by providing both shared and contested values, and the mass media help circulate those values. The **mass media** are the cultural industries—the channels of communication—that produce and distribute songs, novels, TV shows, newspapers, movies, video games, Internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people. The historical development of media and communication can be traced through several overlapping phases or eras in which newer forms of technology disrupted and modified older forms—a process that many academics, critics, and media professionals began calling *convergence* with the arrival of the Internet.

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

Oral and Written Eras in Communication

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

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

The Print Revolution

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

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

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

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

and written societies had favored decentralized local governments, the print era supported the ascent of more centralized nation-states.

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

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

Just as the printing press fostered nationalism, it also nourished the ideal of individualism. People came to rely less on their local community and their commercial, religious, and political leaders for guidance. By challenging tribal life, the printing press "fostered the modern idea of individuality," disrupting "the medieval sense of community and integration."[9] In urban and industrial environments, many individuals became cut off from the traditions of rural and small-town life, which had encouraged community cooperation in premodern times. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideal of individualism affirmed the rise of commerce and increased resistance to government interference in the affairs of self-reliant entrepreneurs. The democratic impulse of individualism became a fundamental value in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *WALDEN*, 1854

The Electronic Era

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

The gradual transformation from an industrial, print-based society to one grounded in the Information Age began with the development of the telegraph in the 1840s. Featuring dot-dash electronic signals, the telegraph made four key contributions to communication. First, it separated communication from transportation, making media messages instantaneous—unencumbered by stagecoaches, ships, or the pony express.[10] Second, the telegraph, in combination with the rise of mass-marketed newspapers, transformed "information into a commodity, a 'thing' that could be bought or sold irrespective of its uses or meaning."[11] By the time of the Civil War, news had become a valuable product. Third, the telegraph made it easier for military, business, and political leaders to coordinate commercial and military operations, especially after the installation of the transatlantic cable in the late 1860s. Fourth, the telegraph led to future technological developments, such as wireless telegraphy (later named radio), the fax machine, and the cell phone, which ironically resulted in the telegraph's demise: In 2006, Western Union telegraph offices sent their final messages.

The rise of film at the turn of the twentieth century and the development of radio in the 1920s were early signals, but the electronic phase of the Information Age really boomed in the 1950s and 1960s with the arrival of television and its dramatic impact on daily life. Then, with the coming of ever more communication gadgetry—personal computers, cable TV, DVDs, DVRs,

direct broadcast satellites, cell phones, smartphones, PDAs, and e-mail—the Information Age passed into its digital phase where old and new media began to converge, thus dramatically changing our relationship to media and culture.

The Digital Era

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

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

Moreover, e-mail—a digital reinvention of oral culture—has assumed some of the functions of the postal service and is outpacing attempts to control communications beyond national borders. A professor sitting at her desk in Cedar Falls, Iowa, sends e-mail or Skype messages routinely to research scientists in Budapest. Yet as recently as 1990, letters—or "snail mail"—between the United States and former communist states might have been censored or taken months to reach their destinations. Moreover, many repressive and totalitarian regimes have had trouble controlling messages sent out over the borderless Internet.

Further reinventing oral culture has been the emergence of *social media*, such as Twitter and in particular Facebook, which now has nearly one billion users worldwide. Social media allow people from all over the world to have ongoing online conversations, share stories and interests, and generate their own media content. This turn to digital media forms has fundamentally overturned traditional media business models, the ways we engage with and consume media products, and the ways we organize our daily lives around various media choices.

The Linear Model of Mass Communication

The digital era also brought about a shift in the models that media researchers have used over the years to explain how media messages and meanings are constructed and communicated in everyday life. In one of the older and more enduring explanations about how media operate, mass communication has been conceptualized as a linear process of producing and delivering messages to large audiences. **Senders** (authors, producers, and organizations) transmit **messages** (programs, texts, images, sounds, and ads) through a **mass media channel** (newspapers, books, magazines, radio, television, or the Internet) to large groups of **receivers** (readers, viewers, and consumers). In the process, **gatekeepers** (news editors, executive producers, and other media managers) function as message filters. Media gatekeepers make decisions about what messages actually get produced for particular receivers. The process also allows for **feedback**, in which citizens and consumers, if they choose, return messages to senders or gatekeepers through letters-to-the-editor, phone calls, e-mail, Web postings, or talk shows.

But the problem with the linear model is that in reality media messages, especially in the digital era, do not usually move smoothly from a sender at point A to a receiver at point Z. Words and images are more likely to spill into one another, crisscrossing in the daily media deluge of ads, TV shows, news reports, social media, smartphone apps, and—of course—everyday

conversation. Media messages and stories are encoded and sent in written and visual forms, but senders often have very little control over how their intended messages are decoded or whether the messages are ignored or misread by readers and viewers.

A Cultural Model for Understanding Mass Communication

A more contemporary approach to understanding media is through a cultural model. This concept recognizes that individuals bring diverse meanings to messages, given factors and differences such as gender, age, educational level, ethnicity, and occupation. In this model of mass communication, audiences actively affirm, interpret, refashion, or reject the messages and stories that flow through various media channels. For example, when controversial singer Lady Gaga released her nine-minute music video for the song "Telephone" in 2010, fans and critics had very different interpretations of the video. Some saw Lady Gaga as a cutting-edge artist pushing boundaries and celebrating alternative lifestyles–and the rightful heir to Madonna. Others, however, saw the video as tasteless and cruel, making fun of transsexuals and exploiting women–not to mention celebrating the poisoning of an old boyfriend.

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

The rise of the Internet and social media has also complicated the traditional roles in both the linear and cultural models of communication. While there are still senders and receivers, the borderless, decentralized, and democratic nature of the Internet means that anyone can become a sender of media messages–whether it's by uploading a video mash-up to YouTube or by writing a blog post. The Internet has also largely eliminated the gatekeeper role. Although some governments try to control Internet servers and some Web sites have restrictions on what can and cannot be posted, for the most part, the Internet allows senders to transmit content without first needing approval from, or editing by, a gatekeeper. For example, some authors who are unable to find a traditional book publisher for their work turn to self-publishing on the Internet. And musicians who don't have deals with major record labels can promote, circulate, and sell their music online.

The Development of Media and Their Role in Our Society

The mass media constitute a wide variety of industries and merchandise, from moving documentary news programs about famines in Africa to shady infomercials about how to retrieve millions of dollars in unclaimed money online. The word *media* is, after all, a Latin plural form of the singular noun *medium*, meaning an intervening substance through which something is conveyed or transmitted. Television, newspapers, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, radio, broadcast satellites, and the Internet are all part of the media; and they are all quite

capable of either producing worthy products or pandering to society's worst desires, prejudices, and stereotypes. Let's begin by looking at how mass media develop, and then at how they work and are interpreted in our society.

The Evolution of Media: From Emergence to Convergence

The development of most mass media is initiated not only by the diligence of inventors, such as Thomas Edison (see Chapters 4 and 7), but also by social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. For instance, both telegraph and radio evolved as newly industrialized nations sought to expand their military and economic control and to transmit information more rapidly. The Internet is a contemporary response to new concerns: transporting messages and sharing information more rapidly for an increasingly mobile and interconnected global population.

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

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

Finally, the fourth and newest phase in a medium's evolution is the *convergence stage*. This is the stage in which older media are reconfigured in various forms on newer media. However, this does not mean that these older forms cease to exist. For example, you can still get the *New York Times* in print, but it's also now accessible on laptops and smartphones via the Internet. During this stage, we see the merging of many different media forms onto online platforms, but we also see the fragmenting of large audiences into smaller niche markets. With new technologies allowing access to more media options than ever, mass audiences are morphing into audience subsets that chase particular lifestyles, politics, hobbies, and forms of entertainment.

Media Convergence

Developments in the electronic and digital eras enabled and ushered in this latest stage in the development of media—**convergence**—a term that media critics and analysts use when describing all the changes that have occurred over the past decade, and are still occurring, in media content and within media companies. However, the term actually has two different meanings—one referring to technology and one to business—and has a great impact on how media companies are charting a course for the future.

The Dual Roles of Media Convergence

The first definition of media convergence involves the technological merging of content across different media channels—the magazine articles, radio programs, songs, TV shows, video games, and movies now available on the Internet through laptops, tablets, and smartphones.

MEDIA CONVERGENCE
In the 1950s, television sets—like radios in the 1930s and 1940s—were often encased in decorative wood and sold as stylish furniture that occupied a central place in many American homes. Today, using our computers, we can listen to a radio talk show, watch a movie, or download a favorite song—usually on the go—as older media forms now converge online.

Such technical convergence is not entirely new. For example, in the late 1920s, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) purchased the Victor Talking Machine Company and introduced machines that could play both radio and recorded music. In the 1950s, this collaboration helped radio survive the emergence of television. Radio lost much of its content to TV and could not afford to hire live bands, so it became more dependent on deejays to play records produced by the music industry. However, contemporary media convergence is much broader than the simple merging of older and newer forms. In fact, the eras of communication are themselves reinvented in this "age of convergence." Oral communication, for example, finds itself reconfigured, in part, in e-mail and social media. And print communication is re-formed in the thousands of newspapers now available online. Also, keep in mind the wonderful ironies of media convergence: The first major digital retailer, Amazon.com, made its name by selling the world's oldest mass medium—the book—on the world's newest mass medium—the Internet.

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

Media Businesses in a Converged World

The ramifications of media convergence are best revealed in the business strategies of digital age companies like Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and especially Google—the most successful company of the digital era so far (see Chapter 2). Google is the Internet's main organizer and aggregator because it finds both "new" and "old" media content—like blogs and newspapers—and delivers that content to vast numbers of online consumers. Google does not produce any of the content, and most consumers who find a news story or magazine article through a Google search pay nothing to the original media content provider nor to Google. Instead, as the "middleman" or distributor, Google makes most of its money by selling ads that accompany search results. But not all ads are created equal; as writer and journalism critic James Fallows points out, Google does not necessarily sell ads on the news sites it aggregates:

Virtually all of Google's (enormous) revenue comes from a tiny handful of its activities: mainly the searches people conduct when they're looking for something to buy. That money subsidizes all the other services the company offers—the classic "let me Google that" informational query (as opposed to the shopping query), Google Earth, driving directions, online storage for Gmail and Google Docs, the . . . YouTube video-hosting service. Structurally this is very much like the old newspaper bargain, in which the ad-crammed classified section, the weekly grocery-store pullout, and other commercial features underwrote state-house coverage and the bureau in Kabul.[12]

In fact, Fallows writes that Google, which has certainly done its part in contributing to the decline of newspapers, still has a large stake in seeing newspapers succeed online. Over the last few years, Google has undertaken a number of experiments to help older news media make the transition into the converged world. Google executives believe that since they aren't in the content business, they are dependent on news organizations to produce the quality information and journalism that healthy democracies need—and that Google can deliver.

Today's converged media world has broken down the old definitions of distinct media forms like newspapers and television—both now available online and across multiple platforms. And it favors players like Google, whose business model works in a world where customers expect to get their media in multiple places—and often for free. But the next challenge ahead in the new, converged world is to resolve who will pay for quality content and how that system will emerge. In the upcoming industry chapters, we take a closer look at how media convergence is affecting each industry in terms of both content production and business strategies.

Media Convergence and Cultural Change

The Internet and social media have led to significant changes in the ways we consume and engage with media culture. In pre-Internet days (say, back in the late 1980s), most people would watch popular TV shows like the *Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Cheers*, or *Roseanne* at the time they originally aired. Such scheduling provided common media experiences at specific times within our culture. While we still watch TV shows, we are increasingly likely to do so at our own convenience through Web sites like Hulu and Netflix or DVR/On-Demand options. We are also increasingly making our media choices on the basis of Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter recommendations from friends. Or we upload our own media—from photos of last night's party to homemade videos of our lives, pets, and hobbies—to share with friends instead of watching "mainstream" programming. While these options allow us to connect with friends or family and give us more choices, they also break down shared media experiences in favor of our individual interests and pursuits.

The ability to access many different forms of media in one place is also changing the ways we engage with and consume media. In the past, we read newspapers in print, watched TV on our televisions, and played video games on a console. Today, we are able to do all of those things on a computer, tablet, or smartphone, making it easy—and very tempting—to multitask. Media multitasking has led to growing media consumption, particularly for younger people. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that today's youth—now doing two or more things at once—packed ten hours and forty-five minutes worth of media content into the seven and a half hours they spent daily consuming media.[13] But while we might be consuming more media, are we really engaging with it? And are we really engaging with our friends when we communicate with them by texting or posting on Facebook? Some critics and educators feel that media multitasking means that we are more distracted, that we engage less with each type of media we consume, and that we often pay closer attention to the media we are using than to people immediately in our presence.

However, media multitasking could have other effects. In the past, we would wait until the end of a TV program, if not until the next day, to discuss it with our friends. Now, with the proliferation of social media, and in particular Twitter, we can discuss that program with our

friends—and with strangers—as we watch the show. Many TV shows now gauge their popularity with audiences by how many people are "live-tweeting" it, and by how many related trending topics they have on Twitter. In fact, commenting on a TV show on social media grew by 194 percent between April 2011 and April 2012.[14] This type of participation could indicate that audiences are in fact engaging more with the media they consume, even though they are multitasking. Some media critics even posit that having more choice actually makes us more engaged media consumers, because we have to actively choose the media we want to consume from the growing list of options.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

JOAN DIDION, *THE WHITE ALBUM*

Stories: The Foundation of Media

The stories that circulate in the media can shape a society's perceptions and attitudes. Throughout the twentieth century and during the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, courageous professional journalists covered armed conflicts, telling stories that helped the public comprehend the magnitude and tragedy of such events. In the 1950s and 1960s, network television news stories on the Civil Rights movement led to crucial legislation that transformed the way many white people viewed the grievances and aspirations of African Americans. In the late 1960s to early 1970s, the persistent media coverage of the Vietnam War ultimately led to a loss of public support for the war. In the late 1990s, news and tabloid magazine stories about the President Clinton-Monica Lewinsky affair sparked heated debates over private codes of behavior and public abuses of authority. In each of these instances, the stories told through a variety of media outlets played a key role in changing individual awareness, cultural attitudes, and public perception.

While we continue to look to the media for narratives today, the kinds of stories we seek and tell are changing in the digital era. During Hollywood's Golden Age in the 1930s and 1940s, as many as ninety million people each week went to the movies on Saturday to take in a professionally produced double feature and a newsreel about the week's main events. In the 1980s, during TV's Network Era, most of us sat down at night to watch the polished evening news or the scripted sitcoms and dramas written by paid writers and performed by seasoned actors. But in the digital age, where reality TV and social media now seem to dominate storytelling, many of the performances are enacted by "ordinary" people. Audiences are fascinated by the stories of finding love, relationships gone bad, and backstabbing friends on such shows as *Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and the *Real Housewives* series. Other reality shows like *Pawn Stars*, *The Deadliest Catch*, and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* give us glimpses into the lives and careers of everyday people, while amateurs entertain us in singing, dancing, and cooking shows like *The Voice*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Top Chef*. While these shows are all professionally produced, the performers are almost all ordinary people (or celebrities and professionals performing alongside amateurs), which is part of the appeal of reality TV—we are better able to relate to the characters, or compare our lives against theirs, because they seem just like us.

Online, many of us are entertaining each other with videos of our pets, Facebook posts about our achievements or relationship issues, photos of a good meal, or tweets about a funny thing that happened at work. This cultural blending of old and new ways of telling stories—told both by professionals and amateurs—is just another form of convergence that has disrupted and altered the media landscape in the digital era. More than ever, ordinary citizens are able to participate in, and have an effect on, the stories being told in the media. For example, in 2011 and 2012, professional news reports and amateur tweets and blog posts about the Occupy Wall Street protests across the United States and the world led to important debates over income disparity, capitalism and power, government, and modern democracy. In fact, without the videos, tweets, and blog posts from ordinary people, the Occupy Wall Street movement might not have gotten the news media coverage that it did.

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

FRANK MCCONNELL, *STORYTELLING AND MYTHMAKING*, 1979

Our varied media institutions and outlets are basically in the ***narrative***–or storytelling–business. Media stories put events in context, helping us to better understand both our daily lives and the larger world. As psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, we are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us. In his book *Making Stories*, he says, "Stories, finally, provide models of the world."[15] The common denominator, in fact, between our entertainment and information cultures is the narrative. It is the media's main cultural currency–whether it's Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video, a post on a gossip blog, a Fox News "exclusive," a *New York Times* article, a tweet about a bad breakfast, or a funny TV commercial. The point is that the popular narratives of our culture are complex and varied. Roger Rosenblatt, writing in *Time* magazine during the 2000 presidential election, made this observation about the importance of stories: "We are a narrative species. We exist by storytelling–by relating our situations–and the test of our evolution may lie in getting the story right."[16]

The Power of Media Stories in Everyday Life

The earliest debates, at least in Western society, about the impact of cultural narratives on daily life date back to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, himself accused of corrupting young minds, worried that children exposed to popular art forms and stories "without distinction" would "take into their souls teachings that are wholly opposite to those we wish them to be possessed of when they are grown up."[17] He believed art should uplift us from the ordinary routines of our lives. The playwright Euripides, however, believed that art should imitate life, that characters should be "real," and that artistic works should reflect the actual world–even when that reality is sordid.

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

VideoCentral
Mass Communication
bedfordstmartins.com/mediaculture

Agenda Setting and Gatekeeping
Experts discuss how the media exert influence over public discourse.
Discussion: How might the rise of the Internet cancel out or reduce the agenda-setting effect in media?

VIETNAM WAR PROTESTS
On October 21, 1967, a crowd of 100,000 protesters marched on the Pentagon demanding the end of the Vietnam War. Sadly, violence erupted when some protesters clashed with the U.S. Marshals protecting the Pentagon. However, this iconic image from the same protest appeared in the *Washington Post* the next day and went on to become a symbol for the peaceful ideals behind the protests. When has an image in the media made an event "real" to you?

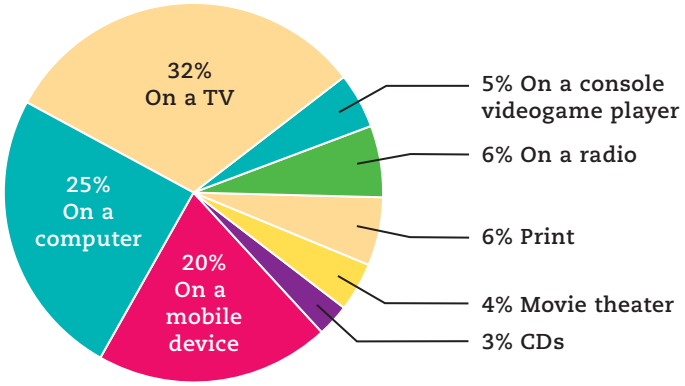


FIGURE 1.1

DAILY MEDIA CONSUMPTION BY PLATFORM, 2010 (8- TO 18-YEAR-OLDS)

Source: "Generation M²: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-year-olds," a Kaiser Family Foundation Study, p. 10, accessed May 24, 2010, http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf.

The cultural concerns of classical philosophers are still with us. In the early 1900s, for example, newly arrived immigrants to the United States who spoke little English gravitated toward cultural events (such as boxing, vaudeville, and the emerging medium of silent film) whose enjoyment did not depend solely on understanding English. Consequently, these popular events occasionally became a flash point for some groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, local politicians, religious leaders, and police vice squads, who not only resented the commercial success of immigrant culture but also feared that these "low" cultural forms would undermine what they saw as traditional American values and interests.

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

Today, with the reach of print, electronic, and digital communications and the amount of time people spend consuming them (see Figure 1.1), mass media play an even more controversial role in society. Many people are critical of the quality of much contemporary culture and are concerned about the overwhelming amount of information now available. Many see popular media culture as unacceptably commercial and sensationalistic. Too many talk shows exploit personal problems for commercial gain, reality shows often glamorize outlandish behavior and sometimes dangerous stunts, and television research continues to document a connection between aggression in children and violent entertainment programs or video games. Children, who watch nearly forty thousand TV commercials each year, are particularly vulnerable to marketers selling junk food, toys, and "cool" clothing. Even the computer, once heralded as an educational salvation, has created confusion. Today, when kids announce that they are "on the computer," many parents wonder whether they are writing a term paper, playing a video game, chatting on Facebook, or peering at pornography.

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

With American mass media industries earning more than $200 billion annually, the economic and societal stakes are high. Large portions of media resources now go toward studying audiences, capturing their attention through stories, and taking their consumer dollars. To increase their revenues, media outlets try to influence everything from how people shop to how they vote. Like the air we breathe, the commercially based culture that mass media help create surrounds us. Its impact, like the air, is often taken for granted. But to monitor that culture's

"air quality"—to become media literate—we must attend more thoughtfully to diverse media stories that are too often taken for granted. (For further discussion, see "Examining Ethics: Covering War" on pages 18-19.)

Surveying the Cultural Landscape

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

Culture as a Skyscraper

Throughout twentieth-century America, critics and audiences perceived culture as a hierarchy with supposedly superior products at the top and inferior ones at the bottom. This can be imagined, in some respects, as a modern skyscraper. In this model, the top floors of the building house **high culture**, such as ballet, the symphony, art museums, and classic literature. The bottom floors—and even the basement—house popular or **low culture**, including such icons as soap operas, rock music, radio shock jocks, and video games (see Figure 1.2). High culture, identified with "good taste," higher education, and supported by wealthy patrons and corporate donors, is associated with "fine art," which is available primarily in libraries, theaters, and museums. In contrast, low or popular culture is aligned with the "questionable" tastes of the masses, who enjoy the commercial "junk" circulated by the mass media, such as reality TV, celebrity gossip Web sites, and violent action films. Whether or not we agree with this cultural skyscraper model, the high-low hierarchy often determines or limits the ways in which we view and discuss culture today.[18] Using this model, critics have developed at least five areas of concern about so-called low culture.

An Inability to Appreciate Fine Art

Some critics claim that popular culture, in the form of contemporary movies, television, and music, distracts students from serious literature and philosophy, thus stunting their imagination and undermining their ability to recognize great art.[19] This critical view pits popular culture against high art, discounting a person's ability to value Bach and the Beatles or Shakespeare and *The Simpsons* concurrently. The assumption is that because popular forms of culture are made for profit, they cannot be experienced as valuable artistic experiences in the same way as more elite art forms such as classical ballet, Italian opera, modern sculpture, or Renaissance painting—even though many of what we regard as elite art forms today were once supported and even commissioned by wealthy patrons.

A Tendency to Exploit High Culture

Another concern is that popular culture exploits classic works of literature and art. A good example may be Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's dark Gothic novel *Frankenstein*, written in 1818

EXAMINING ETHICS

Covering War

By early 2012, as the United States withdrew its military forces from Iraq and the Afghanistan war continued into its eleventh year, journalistic coverage of Middle East war efforts had declined dramatically. This was partly due to news organizations' losing interest in an event when it drags on for a long time and becomes "old news." The news media are often biased in favor of "current events." But war reporting also declined because of the financial crisis—twenty thousand reporters lost their jobs or took buyouts between 2009 and 2011 as papers cut staff to save money. In fact, many news organizations stopped sending reporters to cover the wars, depending instead on wire service reporters, foreign correspondents from other countries, or major news organizations like the *New York Times* or CNN for their coverage. Despite the decreasing coverage, the news media confront ethical challenges about the best way to cover the wars, including reporting on the deaths of soldiers, documenting drug abuse or the high suicide rate among Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, dealing with First Amendment issues, and knowing what is appropriate for their audiences to view, read, or hear.

When President Obama took office in 2009, he suspended the previous Bush administration ban on media coverage of soldiers' coffins returning to U.S. soil from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. First Amendment advocates praised Obama's decision, although after a flurry of news coverage of these arrivals in April 2009, media outlets quickly grew less interested as the wars dragged on. Later, though, the Obama administration upset some of the same First Amendment supporters when it withheld more prisoner and detainee abuse photos from earlier in the wars, citing concerns for the safety of current U.S. troops and fears of further inflaming anti-American opinion. Both issues—one opening up news access and one closing it down—suggest the difficult and often tense relationship between presidential administrations and the news media.

In May 2011, these issues surfaced again when U.S. Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden, long credited with perpetrating the 9/11 tragedy. As details of the SEAL operation began to emerge, the Obama administration weighed the appropriateness of releasing photos of bin Laden's body and video of his burial at sea. While some news organizations and First Amendment advocates demanded the release of the photos, the Obama administration ultimately decided against it, saying that they did not want to spur any further terrorist actions against the United States and its allies.

Back in 2006, then-President George W. Bush criticized the news media for not showing enough "good news" about U.S. efforts to bring democracy to Iraq. Bush's remarks raised ethical questions about the complex relationship between the government and the news media during times of war: How much freedom should the news media have to cover a war? How much control, if any, should the military have

IMAGES OF WAR

The photos and images that news outlets choose to show greatly influence their audience members' opinions. In each of the photos below, what message about war is being portrayed? How much freedom do you think news outlets should have in showing potentially controversial scenes from war?

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

over reporting a war? Are there topics that should not be covered?

These kinds of questions have also created ethical quagmires for local TV stations that cover war and its effects on communities where soldiers have been called to duty and then injured or killed. In one extreme case, the nation's largest TV station owner—Sinclair Broadcast Group—would not air the ABC News program *Nightline* in 2004 because it devoted an episode to reading the names of all U.S. soldiers killed in the Iraq war up to that time. Here is an excerpt from a *New York Times* account of that event:

> *Sinclair Broadcast Group, one of the largest owners of local television stations, will preempt tonight's edition of the ABC News program "Nightline," saying the program's plan to have Ted Koppel [who then anchored the program] read aloud the names of every member of the armed forces killed in action in Iraq was motivated by an antiwar agenda and threatened to undermine American efforts there.*
>
> *The decision means viewers in eight cities, including St. Louis and Columbus, Ohio, will not see "Nightline." ABC News disputed that the program carried a political message, calling it "an expression of respect which simply seeks to honor those who have laid down their lives for their country."*
>
> *But Mark Hyman, the vice president of corporate relations for Sinclair, who is also a conservative commentator on the company's newscasts, said tonight's edition of "Nightline" is biased journalism. "Mr. Koppel's reading of the fallen will have no proportionality," he said in a telephone interview, pointing out that the program will ignore other aspects of the war effort.*
>
> *Mr. Koppel and the producers of "Nightline" said earlier this week that they had no political motivation behind the decision to devote an entire show, expanded to 40 minutes, to reading the names and displaying the photos of those killed. They said they only intended to honor the dead and document what Mr. Koppel called "the human cost" of the war.*[1]

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

Arriving at ethical decisions is a particular kind of criticism involving several steps. These include (1) laying out the case; (2) pinpointing the key issues; (3) identifying the parties involved, their intents, and their potentially competing values; (4) studying ethical models and theories; (5) presenting strategies and options; and (6) formulating a decision or policy.[2]

As a test case, let's look at how local TV news directors might establish ethical guidelines for war-related events. By following the six steps above, our goal is to make some ethical decisions and to lay the groundwork for policies that address TV images or photographs—for example, those of protesters, supporters, memorials, or funerals—used in war coverage. (See Chapter 13 for details on confronting ethical problems.)

Examining Ethics Activity

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

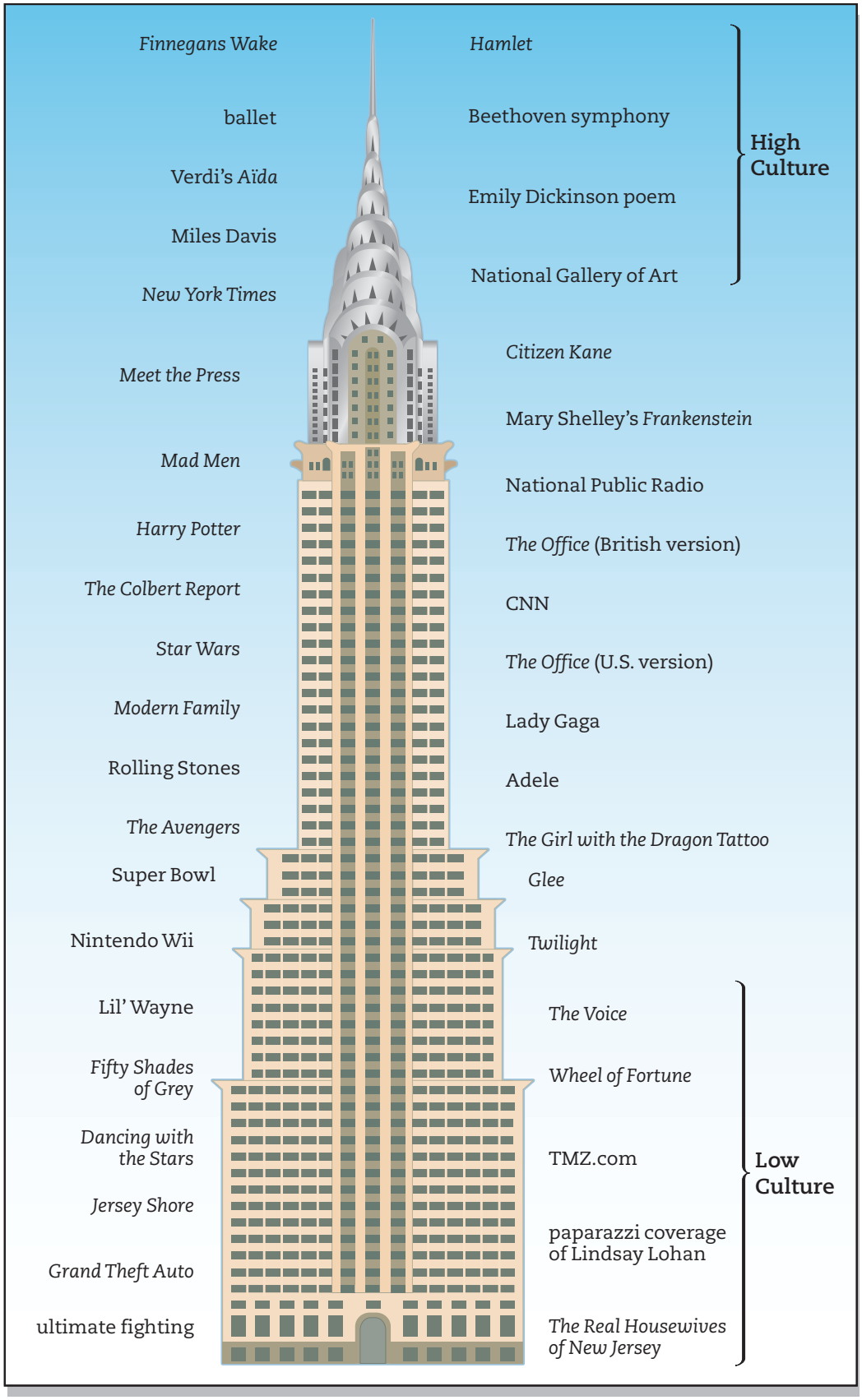
Do they have guidelines? If so, are they adequate? Are there certain types of images they will not show? If the Obama administration had released photographic evidence of bin Laden's death, should a local station show it? Finally, if time allows, send the policies to various TV news directors and/or station managers; ask for their evaluations and whether they would consider implementing the policies.

FIGURE 1.2

CULTURE AS A SKYSCRAPER

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

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



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

and ultimately transformed into multiple popular forms. Today, the tale is best remembered by virtue of two movies: a 1931 film version starring Boris Karloff as the towering and tragic monster, and the 1974 Mel Brooks comedy *Young Frankenstein*. In addition to the movies, television turned the tale into *The Munsters*, a mid-1960s situation comedy. The monster was even resurrected as sugar-coated Frankenberry cereal. In the recycled forms of the original story, Shelley's powerful themes about abusing science and judging people on the basis of appearances are often lost or trivialized in favor of a simplistic horror story, a comedy spoof, or a form of junk food.

A Throw-Away Ethic

Unlike an Italian opera or a Shakespearean tragedy, many elements of popular culture have a short life span. The average newspaper circulates for about twelve hours, then lands in a recycle bin or lines a litter box; a new Top 40 song on the radio lasts about one month; and most new Web sites or blogs are rarely visited and doomed to oblivion. Although endurance does not necessarily denote quality, many critics think that so-called better or "higher" forms of culture have more staying power. In this argument, lower or popular forms of culture are unstable and fleeting; they follow rather than lead public taste. In the TV industry in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, network executives employed the "least objectionable programming" (or LOP) strategy that critics said pandered to mediocrity with bland, disposable programs that a "regular" viewer would not find objectionable, challenging, or disturbing.

A Diminished Audience for High Culture

Some observers also warn that popular culture has inundated the cultural environment, driving out higher forms of culture and cheapening public life.[20] This concern is supported by data showing that TV sets are in use in the average American home for nearly eight hours a day, exposing adults and children each year to thousands of hours of trivial TV commercials, violent crime dramas, and superficial reality programs. According to one story critics tell, the prevalence of so many popular media products prevents the public from experiencing genuine art. Forty or more radio stations are available in large cities; cable and/or satellite systems with hundreds of channels are in place in 70 percent of all U.S. households; and Internet services and DVD players are in more than 90 percent of U.S. homes. In this scenario, the chances of audiences finding more refined forms of culture arguably become very small, although critics fail to note the choices that are also available on a variety of radio stations, cable channels, and Web sites. (For an alternate view, see "Case Study: The Sleeper Curve" on pages 22-23.)

CASE STUDY

The Sleeper Curve

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

In his 2005 book, *Everything Bad Is Good for You,* Steven Johnson makes a controversial argument about TV and culture based on the movie. He calls his idea the "Sleeper Curve" and claims that "today's popular culture is actually making us smarter."[1] Johnson's ideas run counter to those of many critics who worry about popular culture and its potentially disastrous effects, particularly on young people. An influential argument in this strain of thinking appeared nearly thirty years ago in Neil Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death.* Postman argued that we were moving from the "Age of Typology" to the "Age of Television," from the "Age of Exposition" to the "Age of Show Business."[2] Postman worried that an image-centered culture had overtaken words and a print-oriented culture, resulting in "all public discourse increasingly tak[ing] the form of entertainment." He pointed to the impact of advertising and how "American businessmen discovered, long before the rest of us, that the quality and usefulness of their goods are subordinate to the artifice of their display."[3] For Postman, image making has become central to choosing our government leaders, including the way politicians are branded and packaged as commodity goods in political ads. Postman argued that the TV ad has become the "chief instrument" for presenting political ideas, with these results: "that short simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems."[4]

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

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

DALLAS (1978–1991)

BREAKING BAD (2008-)

audience would be "bored" watching a show like *Dallas*, in part "because the show contains far less information in each scene, despite the fact that its soap-opera structure made it one of the most complicated narratives on television in its prime. With *Dallas*, the modern viewer doesn't have to think to make sense of what's going on, and not having to think is boring."

In addition to *24*, a number of contemporary programs offer complex narratives, including *Mad Men, Breaking Bad, True Blood, Dexter*, *Game of Thrones, The Good Wife, Revolution, The Newsroom,* and *Girls*. Johnson says that in contrast to older popular programs like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, the best TV storytelling today layers "each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you're exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information, that connect multiple narrative threads." Johnson argues that younger audiences today—brought up in the Age of the Internet and in an era of complicated interactive visual games—bring high expectations to other kinds of popular culture as well, including television. "The mind," Johnson writes, "likes to be challenged; there's real pleasure to be found in solving puzzles, detecting patterns or unpacking a complex narrative system."

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

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

Are you more persuaded by Postman's 1985 account—that the word has been displaced by an image-centered culture and, consequently, that popular culture has been dumbed down by its oversimplification and visual triviality? As you consider Postman, think about the Internet: Is it word based or image based? What kinds of opportunities for learning does it offer?

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

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

– Steven Johnson, 2005

THE POPULAR *HUNGER GAMES* book series, which has also become a blockbuster film franchise, mixes elements that have, in the past, been considered "low" culture (young-adult stories, science fiction) with the "high" culture of literature and satire. It also doubles as a cautionary story about media used to transform and suppress its audience: In the books and films, the media, controlled by a totalitarian government, broadcast a brutal fight to the death between child "tributes," fascinating the population while attempting to quash any hope of revolution.

Dulling Our Cultural Taste Buds

Another cautionary story, frequently recounted by academics, politicians, and TV pundits, tells how popular culture, especially its more visual forms (such as TV advertising and YouTube videos), undermines democratic ideals and reasoned argument. According to this view, popular media may inhibit not only rational thought but also social progress by transforming audiences into cultural dupes lured by the promise of products. A few multinational conglomerates that make large profits from media products may be distracting citizens from examining economic disparity and implementing change. Seductive advertising images showcasing the buffed and airbrushed bodies of professional models, for example, frequently contradict the actual lives of people who cannot hope to achieve a particular "look" or may not have the money to obtain the high-end cosmetic or clothing products offered. In this environment, art and commerce have become blurred, restricting the audience's ability to make cultural and economic distinctions. Sometimes called the "Big Mac" theory, this view suggests that people are so addicted to mass-produced media menus that they lose their discriminating taste for finer fare and, much worse, their ability to see and challenge social inequities.

Culture as a Map

The second way to view culture is as a map. Here, culture is an ongoing and complicated process—rather than a high/low vertical hierarchy—that allows us to better account for our diverse and individual tastes. In the map model, we judge forms of culture as good or bad based on a combination of personal taste and the aesthetic judgments a society makes at particular historical times. Because such tastes and evaluations are "all over the map," a cultural map suggests that we can pursue many connections from one cultural place to another and can appreciate a range of cultural experiences without simply ranking them from high to low.

Our attraction to and choice of cultural phenomena—such as the stories we read in books or watch at the movies—represent how we make our lives meaningful. Culture offers plenty of places to go that are conventional, familiar, and comforting. Yet at the same time, our culture's narrative storehouse contains other stories that tend toward the innovative, unfamiliar, and challenging. Most forms of culture, however, demonstrate multiple tendencies. We may use

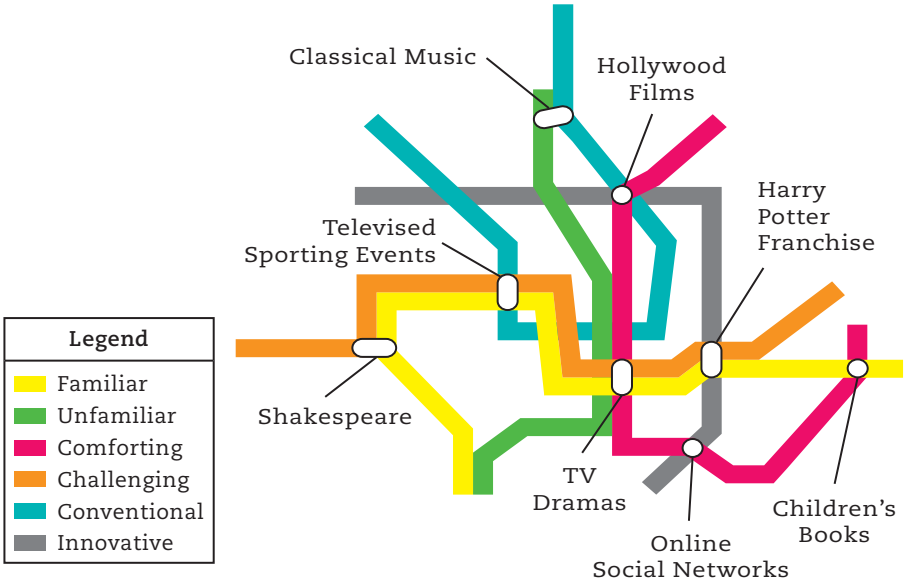


FIGURE 1.3

CULTURE AS A MAP

In this map model, culture is not ranked as high or low. Instead, the model shows culture as spreading out in several directions across a variety of dimensions. For example, some cultural forms can be familiar, innovative, and challenging like the Harry Potter books and movies. This model accounts for the complexity of individual tastes and experiences. The map model also suggests that culture is a process by which we produce meaning—i.e., make our lives meaningful—as well as a complex collection of media products and texts. The map shown is just one interpretation of culture. What cultural products would you include in your own model? What dimensions would you link to and why?

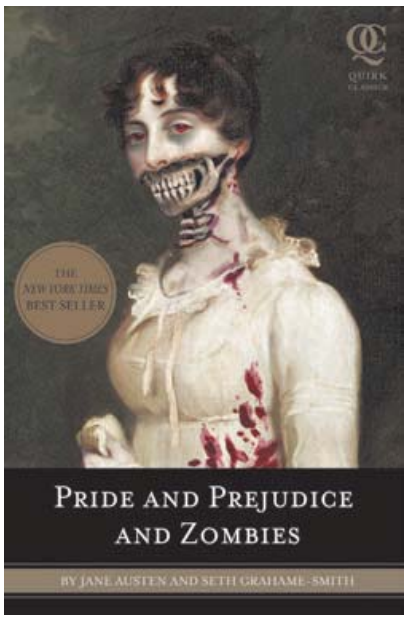
online social networks because they are both comforting (an easy way to keep up with friends) and innovative (new tools or apps that engage us). We watch televised sporting events for their familiarity and conventional organization, and because the unknown outcome can be unpredictable or challenging. The map offered here (see Figure 1.3) is based on a familiar subway grid. Each station represents tendencies or elements related to why a person may be attracted to different cultural products. Also, more popular culture forms congregate in more congested areas of the map, while less popular cultural forms are outliers. Such a large, multidirectional map may be a more flexible, multidimensional, and inclusive way of imagining how culture works.

The Comfort of Familiar Stories

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

Innovation and the Attraction of "What's New"

Like children, adults also seek comfort, often returning to an old Beatles or Guns N' Roses song, a William Butler Yeats or Emily Dickinson poem, or a TV rerun of *Seinfeld* or *Andy Griffith*. But we also like cultural adventure. We may turn from a familiar film on cable's American Movie Classics to discover a new movie from Iran or India on the Independent Film Channel. We seek new stories and new places to go—those aspects of culture that demonstrate originality and complexity. For instance, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) created language anew and challenged readers, as the novel's poetic first sentence illustrates: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's,



PRIDE* AND *PREJUDICE AND ZOMBIES is a famous "mash-up"—a new creative work made by mixing together disparate cultural pieces. In this case, the classic novel by Jane Austen is re-imagined as taking place among zombies and ninjas, mixing elements of English literature and horror and action films. Usually intended as satire, such mash-ups allow us to enjoy an array of cultural elements in a single work and are a direct contradiction to the cultural hierarchy model.

from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." A revolutionary work, crammed with historical names and topical references to events, myths, songs, jokes, and daily conversation, Joyce's novel remains a challenge to understand and decode. His work demonstrated that part of what culture provides is the impulse to explore new places, to strike out in new directions, searching for something different that may contribute to growth and change.

A Wide Range of Messages

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

Challenging the Nostalgia for a Better Past

Some critics of popular culture assert—often without presenting supportive evidence—that society was better off before the latest developments in mass media. These critics resist the idea of re-imagining an established cultural hierarchy as a multidirectional map. The nostalgia for some imagined "better past" has often operated as a device for condemning new cultural phenomena. This impulse to criticize something that is new is often driven by fear of change or of cultural differences. Back in the nineteenth century, in fact, a number of intellectuals and politicians worried that rising literacy rates among the working class might create havoc: How would the aristocracy and intellectuals maintain their authority and status if everyone could read? A recent example includes the fear that some politicians, religious leaders, and citizens have expressed about the legalization of same-sex marriage, claiming that it would violate older religious tenets or the sanctity of past traditions.

Throughout history, a call to return to familiar terrain, to "the good old days," has been a frequent response to new, "threatening" forms of popular culture or to any ideas that are different from what we already believe. Yet over the years many of these forms, including the waltz, silent movies, ragtime, and jazz, have themselves become cultural "classics." How can we tell now what the future has in store for such cultural expressions as rock and roll, soap operas, fashion photography, dance music, hip-hop, tabloid newspapers, graphic novels, reality TV, and social media?

Cultural Values of the Modern Period

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

Modernization involved captains of industry using new technology to create efficient manufacturing centers, produce inexpensive products to make everyday life better, and make

commerce more profitable. Printing presses and assembly lines made major contributions in this transformation, and then modern advertising spread the word about new gadgets to American consumers. In terms of culture, the modern mantra has been "form follows function." For example, the growing populations of big cities placed a premium on space, creating a new form of building that fulfilled that functional demand by building upwards. Modern skyscrapers made of glass, steel, and concrete replaced the supposedly wasteful decorative and ornate styles of premodern Gothic cathedrals. This new value was echoed in journalism, where a front-page style rejected decorative and ornate adjectives and adverbs for "just the facts." To be lean and efficient, modern news de-emphasized complex analysis and historical context and elevated the new and the now.

Cultural responses to and critiques of modern efficiency often manifested themselves in the mass media. For example, Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World* (1932), created a fictional world in which he cautioned readers that the efficiencies of modern science and technology posed a threat to individual dignity. Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* (1936), set in a futuristic manufacturing plant, also told the story of the dehumanizing impact of modernization and machinery. Writers and artists, in their criticisms of the modern world, have often pointed to technology's ability to alienate people from one another, capitalism's tendency to foster greed, and government's inclination to create bureaucracies whose inefficiency oppresses rather than helps people.

While the values of the premodern period (before the Industrial Revolution) were guided by a strong belief in a natural or divine order, modernization elevated individual self-expression to a more central position. Modern print media allowed ordinary readers to engage with new ideas beyond what their religious leaders and local politicians communicated to them. Modern individualism and the Industrial Revolution also triggered new forms of hierarchy in which certain individuals and groups achieved higher standing in the social order. For example, those who managed commercial enterprises gained more control over the economic ladder, while an intellectual class of modern experts acquired increasing power over the nation's economic, political, and cultural agendas.

To be modern also meant valuing the ability of logical and scientific minds to solve problems by working in organized groups and expert teams. Progressive thinkers maintained that the printing press, the telegraph, and the railroad, in combination with a scientific attitude, would foster a new type of informed society. At the core of this society, the printed mass media—particularly newspapers—would educate the citizenry, helping to build and maintain an organized social framework.[21]

A leading champion for an informed rational society was Walter Lippmann, who wrote the influential book *Public Opinion* in 1922. He distrusted both the media and the public's ability to navigate a world that was "altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance," and to reach the rational decisions needed in a democracy. Instead, he advocated a "machinery of knowledge" that might be established through "intelligence bureaus" staffed by experts. While such a concept might look like the modern "think tank," Lippmann saw these as independent of politics, unlike think tanks today, such as the Brookings Institution or Heritage Foundation, which have strong partisan ties.[22]

Walter Lippmann's ideas were influential throughout the twentieth century and were a product of the **Progressive Era**—a period of political and social reform that lasted roughly from the 1890s to the 1920s. On both local and national levels, Progressive Era reformers championed social movements that led to constitutional amendments for both women's suffrage and Prohibition, political reforms that led to the secret ballot during elections, and economic reforms that ushered in the federal income tax to try to foster a more equitable society. Muckrakers—journalists who exposed corruption, waste, and scandal in business and politics—represented media's significant contribution to this era (see Chapter 9).

Influenced by the Progressive movement, the notion of being modern in the twentieth century meant throwing off the chains of the past, breaking with tradition, and embracing progress. For example, twentieth-century journalists, in their quest for modern efficiency, focused on "the now" and the reporting of timely events. Newly standardized forms of front-page journalism that championed "just the facts" and events that "just happened yesterday" did help reporters efficiently meet tight deadlines. But realizing one of Walter Lippmann's fears, modern newspapers often failed to take a historical perspective or to analyze sufficiently the ideas and interests underlying these events.

Shifting Values in Postmodern Culture

For many people, the changes occurring in the **postmodern period**–from roughly the mid-twentieth century to today–are identified by a confusing array of examples: music videos, remote controls, Nike ads, shopping malls, fax machines, e-mail, video games, blogs, *USA Today*, YouTube, iPads, hip-hop, and reality TV (see Table 1.1). Some critics argue that postmodern culture represents a way of seeing–a new condition, or even a malady, of the human spirit. Although there are many ways to define the postmodern, this textbook focuses on four major features or values that resonate best with changes across media and culture: populism, diversity, nostalgia, and paradox.

As a political idea, *populism* tries to appeal to ordinary people by highlighting or even creating an argument or conflict between "the people" and "the elite." In virtually every campaign, populist politicians often tell stories and run ads that criticize big corporations and political favoritism. Meant to resonate with middle-class values and regional ties, such narratives generally pit Southern or Midwestern small-town "family values" against the supposedly coarser, even corrupt, urban lifestyles associated with big cities like Washington or Los Angeles.

In postmodern culture, populism has manifested itself in many ways. For example, artists and performers, like Chuck Berry in "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956) or Queen in "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975), intentionally blurred the border between high and low culture. In the visual arts, following Andy Warhol's 1960s pop art style, advertisers have borrowed from both fine art and street art, while artists appropriated styles from commerce and popular art. Film stars, like

TABLE 1.1
TRENDS ACROSS HISTORICAL PERIODS

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

Angelina Jolie and Ben Affleck, often champion oppressed groups while appearing in movies that make the actors wealthy global icons of consumer culture.

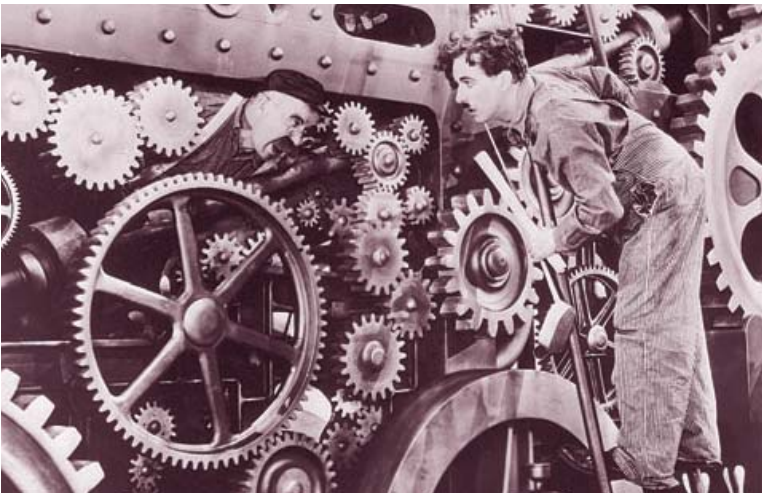
Other forms of postmodern style blur modern distinctions not only between art and commerce but also between fact and fiction. For example, television vocabulary now includes infotainment (*Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood*) and infomercials (such as fading celebrities selling anti-wrinkle cream).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

Closely associated with populism, another value (or vice) of the postmodern period emphasizes *diversity* and fragmentation, including the wild juxtaposition of old and new cultural styles. In a suburban shopping mall, for instance, Gap stores border a food court with Vietnamese, Italian, and Mexican options, while techno-digitized instrumental versions of 1960s protest music play in the background to accompany shoppers. Part of this stylistic diversity involves borrowing and transforming earlier ideas from the modern period. In music, hip-hop deejays and performers sample old R&B, soul, and rock classics, both reinventing old songs and creating something new. Critics of postmodern style contend that such borrowing devalues originality, emphasizing surface over depth and recycled ideas over new ones. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, films were adapted from books and short stories. More recently, films often derive from old popular TV series: *Mission Impossible*, *Charlie's Angels*, and *The A-Team*, to name just a few. Video games like the *Resident Evil* franchise and *Tomb Raider* have been made into Hollywood blockbusters. In fact, in 2012 more than twenty-five video games, including *BioShock* and the *Warcraft* series, were in various stages of film production.

Another tendency of postmodern culture involves rejecting rational thought as "the answer" to every social problem, reveling instead in *nostalgia* for the premodern values of small communities, traditional religion, and even mystical experience. Rather than seeing science purely as enlightened thinking or rational deduction that relies on evidence, some artists, critics, and politicians criticize modern values for laying the groundwork for dehumanizing technological advances and bureaucratic problems. For example, in the renewed debates over evolution, one cultural narrative that plays out often pits scientific evidence against religious belief and literal interpretations of the Bible. And in popular culture, many TV programs—such as *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *Angel*, *Lost*, and *Fringe*—emerged to offer mystical and supernatural responses to the "evils" of our daily world and the limits of science and the purely rational.

In the 2012 presidential campaign, this nostalgia for the past was frequently deployed as a narrative device, with the Republican candidates depicting themselves as protectors of tradition and small-town values, and juxtaposing themselves against President Obama's messages of change and progressive reform. In fact, after winning the Nevada Republican primary in 2012, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney framed the story this way: "President Obama says he wants to fundamentally transform America. We [Romney and his supporters] want to restore to America the founding principles that made the country great." By portraying change—and present conditions—as sinister forces that could only be overcome by returning to some point in the past when we were somehow "better," Romney laid out what he saw as the central narrative conflicts of the 2012 presidential campaign: tradition versus change, and past versus present.

Lastly, the fourth aspect of our postmodern time is the willingness to accept *paradox*. While modern culture emphasized breaking with the past in the name of progress,



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

postmodern culture stresses integrating—or converging—retro beliefs and contemporary culture. So at the same time that we seem nostalgic for the past, we embrace new technologies with a vengeance. For example, fundamentalist religious movements that promote seemingly outdated traditions (e.g., rejecting women's rights to own property or seek higher education) still embrace the Internet and modern technology as recruiting tools or as channels for spreading messages. Culturally conservative politicians, who seem most comfortable with the values of the 1950s nuclear family, welcome talk shows, Twitter, Facebook, and Internet and social media ad campaigns as venues to advance their messages and causes.

Although new technologies can isolate people or encourage them to chase their personal agendas (e.g., a student perusing his individual interests online), as modernists warned, new technologies can also draw people together to advance causes or to solve community problems or to discuss politics on radio talk shows, on Facebook, or on smartphones. For example, in 2011 and 2012 Twitter made the world aware of protesters in many Arab nations, including Egypt and Libya, when governments there tried to suppress media access. Our lives today are full of such incongruities.

Critiquing Media and Culture

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

H. L. MENCKEN, AMERICAN WRITER AND JOURNALIST

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

Considering the diversity of mass media, to paint them all with the same broad brush would be inaccurate and unfair. Yet that is often what we seem to do, which may in fact reflect the distrust many of us have of prominent social institutions, from local governments to daily newspapers. Of course, when one recent president leads us into a long war based on faulty intelligence that mainstream news failed to uncover, or one of the world's leading media companies—with former editors in top government jobs—engages in phone hacking and privacy invasion, our distrust of both government and media may be understandable. It's ultimately more useful, however, to replace a cynical perception of the media with an attitude of genuine criticism. To deal with these shifts in how we experience media and culture and their impact, we need to develop a profound understanding of the media focused on what they offer or produce and what they downplay or ignore.

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

Developing **media literacy**—that is, attaining an understanding of mass media and how they construct meaning—requires following a **critical process** that takes us through the steps of description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement (see "Media Literacy and the Critical Process" on pp. 32-33). We will be aided in our critical process by keeping an open mind, trying to understand the specific cultural forms we are critiquing, and acknowledging the complexity of contemporary culture.

Just as communication cannot always be reduced to the linear sender-message-receiver model, many forms of media and culture are not easily represented by the high-low model. We should, perhaps, strip culture of such adjectives as *high, low, popular,* and *mass.* These modifiers may artificially force media forms and products into predetermined categories. Rather than focusing on these worn-out labels, we might instead look at a wide range of issues generated by culture, from the role of storytelling in the mass media to the global influences of media industries on the consumer marketplace. We should also be moving toward a critical perspective that takes into account the intricacies of the cultural landscape. A fair critique of any cultural form, regardless of its social or artistic reputation, requires a working knowledge of the particular book, program, or music under scrutiny. For example, to understand W. E. B. Du Bois's essays, critics immerse themselves in his work and in the historical context in which he wrote. Similarly, if we want to develop a meaningful critique of TV's *Dexter* (where the protagonist is a serial killer) or Rush Limbaugh's radio program or a gossip magazine's obsession with Justin Bieber, it is essential to understand the contemporary context in which these cultural phenomena are produced.

To begin this process of critical assessment, we must imagine culture as more complicated and richer than the high-low model allows. We must also assume a critical stance that enables us to get outside our own preferences. We may like or dislike hip-hop, R&B, pop, or country, but if we want to criticize these musical genres intelligently, we should understand what the various types of music have to say and why their messages appeal to particular audiences that may be different from us. The same approach applies to other cultural forms. If we critique a newspaper article, we must account for the language that is chosen and what it means; if we analyze a film or TV program, we need to slow down the images in order to understand how they make sense and meaning.

Benefits of a Critical Perspective

Developing an informed critical perspective and becoming media literate allow us to participate in a debate about media culture as a force for both democracy and consumerism. On the one hand, the media can be a catalyst for democracy and social progress. Consider the role of television in spotlighting racism and injustice in the 1960s; the use of video

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

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

A cynical view usually involves some form of intolerance and either too little or too much information. For example, after enduring the glut of news coverage and political advertising devoted to the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, we might easily become cynical about our political system. However, information in the form of "factual" news bits and knowledge about a complex social process such as a national election are not the same thing. The critical process stresses the subtle distinctions between amassing information and becoming media literate.

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

2 ANALYSIS. In the second stage of the critical process, we isolate patterns that call for closer attention. At this point, we decide how to focus the critique. Because *60 Minutes* has produced thousands of hours of programs in its nearly forty-five-year history, our critique might spotlight just a few key patterns. For example, many of the program's reports are organized like detective stories, reporters are almost always visually represented at a medium distance, and interview subjects are generally shot in tight close-ups. In studying the *New York Times*, in contrast, we might limit our analysis to social or political events in certain countries that get covered more often than events in other areas of the world. Or we could focus on recurring topics chosen for front-page treatment, or the number of quotes from male and female experts.

3 INTERPRETATION. In the interpretive stage, we try to determine the meanings of the patterns we have analyzed. The most difficult stage in criticism, interpretation demands an answer to the "So what?" question. For instance, the greater visual space granted to *60 Minutes* reporters—compared with the close-up shots used for interview subjects—might mean that the reporters appear to be in control. They are given more visual space in which to operate, whereas interview subjects have little room to maneuver within the visual frame. As a result, the subjects often look guilty and the reporters look heroic—or, at least, in charge. Likewise, if we look again at the *New York Times*, its attention to particular countries could mean that the paper tends to cover

technology to reveal oppressive conditions in China and Eastern Europe or to document crimes by urban police departments; how the TV coverage of both business and government's slow response to the Gulf oil spill in 2010 impacted people's understanding of the event; and how blogs and Twitter can serve to debunk bogus claims or protest fraudulent elections. The media have also helped to renew interest in diverse cultures around the world and other emerging democracies (see "Global Village: Bedouins, Camels, Transistors, and Coke" on page 34).

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

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

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

nations in which the United States has more vital political or economic interests, even though the *Times* might claim to be neutral and evenhanded in its reporting of news from around the world.

4 **EVALUATION.** The fourth stage of the critical process focuses on making an informed judgment. Building on description, analysis, and interpretation, we are better able to evaluate the fairness of a group of *60 Minutes* or *New York Times* reports. At this stage, we can grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the news media under study and make critical judgments measured against our own frames of reference—what we like and dislike, as well as what seems good or bad or missing, in the stories and coverage we analyzed.

This fourth stage differentiates the reviewer (or previewer) from the critic. Most newspaper reviews, for example, are limited by daily time or space constraints. Although these reviews may give us key information about particular programs, they often begin and end with personal judgments—"This is a quality show" or "That was a piece of trash"—that should be saved for the final stage in the critical process. Regrettably, many reviews do not reflect such a process; they do not move much beyond the writer's own frame of reference or personal taste.

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

But engagement can also mean participating in Web discussions, contacting various media producers or governmental bodies like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with critiques and ideas, organizing or participating in public media literacy forums, or learning to construct different types of media narratives ourselves—whether print, audio, video, or online—to participate directly in the creation of mainstream or alternative media. Producing actual work for media outlets might involve doing news stories for a local newspaper (and its Web site), producing a radio program on a controversial or significant community issue, or constructing a Web site that critiques various news media. The key to this stage is to challenge our civic imaginations, to refuse to sit back and cynically complain about the media without taking some action that lends our own voices and critiques to the process.

On the other hand, competing against these democratic tendencies is a powerful commercial culture that reinforces a world economic order controlled by relatively few multinational corporations. For instance, when Poland threw off the shackles of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, one of the first things its new leadership did was buy and dub the American soap operas *Santa Barbara* and *Dynasty*. For some, these shows were a relief from sober Soviet political propaganda, but others worried that Poles might inherit another kind of indoctrination—one starring American consumer culture and dominated by large international media companies.

GLOBAL VILLAGE

Bedouins, Camels, Transistors, and Coke

Upon receiving the Philadelphia Liberty Medal in 1994, President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic described postmodernism as the fundamental condition of global culture, "when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born." He described this "new world order" as a "multicultural era" or state in which consistent value systems break into mixed and blended cultures:

> *For me, a symbol of that state is a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel's back. . . . New meaning is gradually born from the . . . intersection of many different elements.*[1]

Many critics, including Havel, think that there is a crucial tie between global politics and postmodern culture. They contend that the people who overthrew governments in the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were the same people who valued American popular culture—especially movies, pop music, and television—for its free expression and democratic possibilities.

Back in the 1990s, as modern communist states were undermined by the growth and influence of transnational corporations, citizens in these nations capitalized on the developing global market, using portable video, digital cameras and phones, and audio technology to smuggle out recordings of repression perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. Thus it was difficult for political leaders to hide repressive acts from the rest of the world. In *Newsweek*, former CBS news anchor Dan Rather wrote about the role of television in the 1989 student uprising in China:

> *Television brought Beijing's battle for democracy to Main Street. It made students who live on the other side of the planet just as human, just as vulnerable as the boy on the next block. The miracle of television is that the triumph and tragedy of Tiananmen Square would not have been any more vivid had it been Times Square.*[2]

This trend continues today through the newer manifestations of our digital world like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. As protestors sent out messages and images on smartphones and laptops during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and 2012, they spread stories that could not be contained by totalitarian governments.

At the same time, we need to examine the impact on other nations of the influx of U.S. popular culture (movies, TV shows, music, etc.), our second biggest export (after military and airplane equipment). Has access to an American consumer lifestyle fundamentally altered Havel's Bedouin on the camel? What happens when Westernized popular culture encroaches on the mores of Islamic countries, where the spread of American music, movies, and television is viewed as a danger to tradition? These questions still need answers. A global village, which through technology shares culture and communication, can also alter traditional customs forever.

To try to grasp this phenomenon, we might imagine how we would feel if the culture from a country far away gradually eroded our own established habits. This, in fact, is happening all over the world as U.S. culture has become the world's global currency. Although newer forms of communication such as tweeting and texting have in some ways increased citizen participation in global life, in what ways have they threatened the values of older cultures?

Our current postmodern period is double-coded: It is an agent both for the renewed possibilities of democracy and, even in tough economic times, for the worldwide spread of consumerism and American popular culture.

This example illustrates that contemporary culture cannot easily be characterized as one thing or another. Binary terms such as *liberal* and *conservative* or *high* and *low* have less meaning in an environment where so many boundaries have been blurred, so many media forms have converged, and so many diverse cultures coexist. Modern distinctions between print and electronic culture have begun to break down largely because of the increasing number of individuals who have come of age in what is *both* a print *and* an electronic culture.[23] Either/or models of culture, such as the high/low approach, are giving way to more inclusive ideas, like the map model for culture discussed earlier.

What are the social implications of the new, blended, and merging cultural phenomena? How do we deal with the fact that public debate and news about everyday life now seem as likely to come from *The View*, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, or bloggers as from the *Wall Street Journal*, *NBC Nightly News*, or *Time*?[24] Clearly, such changes challenge us to reassess and rebuild the standards by which we judge our culture. The search for answers lies in recognizing the links between cultural expression and daily life. The search also involves monitoring how well the mass media serve democracy, not just by providing us with consumer culture but by encouraging us to help political, social, and economic practices work better. A healthy democracy requires the active involvement of everyone. Part of this involvement means watching over the role and impact of the mass media, a job that belongs to every one of us—not just the paid media critics and watchdog organizations.

CHAPTER REVIEW

COMMON THREADS

In telling the story of mass media, several plotlines and major themes recur and help provide the "big picture"—the larger context for understanding the links between forms of mass media and popular culture. Under each thread that follows, we pose a set of questions that we will investigate together to help you explore media and culture:

- **Developmental stages of mass media.** How did the media evolve, from their origins in ancient oral traditions to their incarnation on the Internet today? What discoveries, inventions, and social circumstances drove the development of different media? What roles do new technologies play in changing contemporary media and culture?
- **The commercial nature of mass media.** What role do media ownership and government regulation play in the presentation of commercial media products and serious journalism? How do the desire for profit and other business demands affect and change the media landscape? What role should government oversight play? What role do we play as ordinary viewers, readers, students, critics, and citizens?
- **The converged nature of media.** How has convergence changed the experience of media from the print to the digital era? What are the significant differences between reading a printed newspaper and reading the news online? What changes have to be made in the media business to help older forms of media, like newspapers, in the transition to an online world?
- **The role that media play in a democracy.** How are policy decisions and government actions affected by the news media and other mass media? How do individuals find room in the media terrain to express alternative (nonmainstream) points of view? How do grassroots movements create media to influence and express political ideas?
- **Mass media, cultural expression, and storytelling.** What are the advantages and pitfalls of the media's appetite for telling and selling stories? As we reach the point where almost all media exist on the Internet in some form, how have our culture and our daily lives been affected?
- **Critical analysis of the mass media.** How can we use the critical process to understand, critique, and influence the media? How important is it to be media literate in today's world? At the end of each chapter, we will examine the historical contexts and current processes that shape media products. By becoming more critical consumers and engaged citizens, we will be in a better position to influence the relationships among mass media, democratic participation, and the complex cultural landscape that we all inhabit.

KEY TERMS

The definitions for the terms listed below can be found in the glossary at the end of the book. The page numbers listed with the terms indicate where the term is highlighted in the chapter.

communication, 6
culture, 6
mass media, 6
mass communication, 6
digital communication, 9
bloggers, 9
senders, 9
messages, 9
mass media channel, 9
receivers, 9
gatekeepers, 9
feedback, 9
selective exposure, 10
convergence, 11
cross platform, 12
narrative, 15
high culture, 17
low culture, 17
modern period, 26
Progressive Era, 27
postmodern period, 28
media literacy, 31
critical process, 31
description, 32
analysis, 32
interpretation, 32
evaluation, 33
engagement, 33

For review quizzes, chapter summaries, links to media-related Web sites, and more, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mediaculture.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Culture and the Evolution of Mass Communication

1. Define *culture, mass communication,* and *mass media,* and explain their interrelationships.
2. What are the key technological breakthroughs that accompanied the transition to the print and electronic eras? Why were these changes significant?
3. Explain the linear model of mass communication and its limitations.

The Development of Media and Their Role in Our Society

4. Describe the development of a mass medium from emergence to convergence.
5. In looking at the history of popular culture, explain why newer and emerging forms of media seem to threaten status quo values.

Surveying the Cultural Landscape

6. Describe the skyscraper model of culture. What are its strengths and limitations?
7. Describe the map model of culture. What are its strengths and limitations?
8. What are the chief differences between modern and postmodern values?

Critiquing Media and Culture

9. What are the five steps in the critical process? Which of these is the most difficult and why?
10. What is the difference between cynicism and criticism?
11. Why is the critical process important?

QUESTIONING THE MEDIA

1. Drawing on your experience, list the kinds of media stories you like and dislike. You might think mostly of movies and TV shows, but remember that news, sports, political ads, and product ads are also usually structured as stories. Conversations on Facebook can also be considered narratives. What kinds of stories do you like and dislike on Facebook, and why?
2. Cite some examples in which the media have been accused of unfairness. Draw on comments from parents, teachers, religious leaders, friends, news media, and so on. Discuss whether these criticisms have been justified.
3. Pick an example of a popular media product that you think is harmful to children. How would you make your concerns known? Should the product be removed from circulation? Why or why not? If you think the product should be banned, how would you do it?
4. Make a critical case either defending or condemning Comedy Central's *South Park*, a TV or radio talk show, a hip-hop group, a soap opera, or TV news coverage of the war in Afghanistan. Use the five-step critical process to develop your position.
5. Although in some ways postmodern forms of communication, such as e-mail, MTV, smartphones, and Twitter, have helped citizens participate in global life, in what ways might these forms harm more traditional or native cultures?

ADDITIONAL VIDEOS

Visit the* VideoCentral: Mass Communication *section at* bedfordstmartins.com/mediaculture *for additional exclusive videos related to Chapter 1, including:

- THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY
  This video traces the history of the media's role in democracy from newspapers and television to the Internet.