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- PowerPoint slides
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1 Introducing Critical Media Studies

KEY CONCEPTS

CONVERGENCE
CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES
FRAGMENTATION
GLOBALIZATION
MASS MEDIA
MEDIUM
MOBILITY
POSTMODERNITY
SOCIALIZATION
THEORY
SIMULATION

How We Know What We Know

Everything we know is learned in one of two ways.[1] The first way is *somatically*. These are the things we know through direct sensory perception of our environment. We know what some things look, smell, feel, sound, or taste like because we personally have seen, smelled, felt, heard, or tasted them. One of the authors of this text knows, for example, that "Rocky Mountain oysters" (bull testicles) are especially chewy because he tried them once at a country and western bar. In short, some of what we know is based on first-hand, unmediated experience. But the things we know through direct sensory perception make up a very small percentage of the total things we know. The vast majority of what we know comes to us a second way, *symbolically*. These are the things we know *through* someone or something, such as a parent, friend, teacher, museum, textbook, photograph, radio, film, television, or the internet. This type of information is mediated, meaning that it came to us via some indirect channel or **medium**. The word "medium" is derived from the Latin word *medius*, which means "middle" or that which comes between two things: the way that BBC's *Planet Earth* production team might come between us and the animals of the Serengeti, for instance.

In the past 30 seconds, those readers who have never eaten Rocky Mountain oysters have come to know that they are chewy, as that information has been communicated to them through, or mediated by, this book. When we stop to think about all the things we know, we suddenly realize that the vast majority of what we know is mediated. We may know something about China even if we

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have never been there thanks to Wikipedia; we may know something about Winston Churchill despite our never having met him thanks to *Darkest Hour* (2017); we may even know something about the particulars of conducting a homicide investigation even though we have likely never conducted one thanks to the crime drama *CSI*. The mass media account, it would seem, for much of what we know (and do not know) today. But this has not always been the case.

Before the invention of mass media, the spoken or written word was the primary medium for conveying information and ideas. This method of communication had several significant and interrelated limitations. First, as the transmission of information was tied to the available means of transportation (foot, horse, buggy, boat, locomotive, or automobile, depending upon the time period), its dissemination was extraordinarily slow, especially over great distances such as across continents and oceans. Second, because information could not easily be reproduced and distributed, its scope was extremely limited. Third, since information often passed through multiple channels (people), each of which altered it, if only slightly, there was a high probability of message distortion. Simply put, there was no way to communicate a uniform message to a large group of people in distant places quickly prior to the advent of the modern mass media. What distinguishes mass media like print, radio, and television from individual media like human speech and hand-written letters, then, is precisely their unique capacity to address large audiences in remote locations with relative efficiency.

Critical Media Studies is about the social and cultural consequences of that revolutionary capability. Recognizing that mass media are, first and foremost, communication technologies that increasingly mediate both what we know and how we know, this book surveys a variety of perspectives for evaluating and assessing the role of mass media in our daily lives. Whether listening to Spotify while walking across campus, sharing pictures with friends on Instagram, receiving the latest sports scores via your mobile phone, retweeting your favorite YouTube video, or binge watching popular Netflix series like *Stranger Things* or *13 Reasons Why*, the mass media are regular fixtures of everyday life. But before beginning to explore the specific and complex roles that mass media play in our lives, it is worth looking at who they are, when they originated, and how they have developed.

Categorizing Mass Media

As is perhaps already evident, "media" is a very broad term that includes a diverse array of communication technologies, such as cave drawings, speech, smoke signals, letters, books, telegraphy, telephony, magazines, newspapers, radio, film, television, smartphones, video games, and networked computers, to name just a few. But this book is principally concerned with **mass media**, or those communication technologies that have the *potential* to reach a large audience in remote locations. What distinguishes mass media from individual

media, then, is not merely audience size. While a graduation speaker or musician may address as many as 40 000 people at once in a stadium, they are not mass mediated because the audience is not remote. Now, of course, if an Ariana Grande concert is being broadcast live via satellite, those watching at home on their televisions or over the internet are experiencing it through mass media. Mass media collapse the distance between artist and audience, then. Working from this definition, we have organized the mass media into four subcategories: print media, motion picture and sound recording, broadcast media, and new media. These categories, like all acts of classification, are arbitrary, meaning that they emphasize certain features of the media they group together at the expense of others. Nonetheless, we offer them as one way of conceptually organizing mass communication technologies. As our media environment becomes increasingly digital, the utility and value of these categories is mostly historical.

Print media

In an electronically saturated world like the one in which we live today, it is easy to overlook the historical legacy and contemporary transformations of print media, the first mass medium. German printer Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type printing press in 1450, sparking a revolution in the ways that human beings could disseminate, preserve, and ultimately relate to knowledge. Printed materials before the advent of the press were costly and rare, but the invention of movable type allowed for the (relatively) cheap production of a diverse array of pamphlets, books, and other items. This flourishing of printed materials touched almost every aspect of human life. Suddenly knowledge could be recorded for future generations in libraries or religious texts, and social power increasingly hinged upon literacy and ownership of printed materials. Most importantly, the press allowed for an unprecedented circulation of knowledge to far-flung cities across Europe. Though still limited by class distinctions, access to information from outside of one's immediate context was a real possibility. Mass media was born.

Not long after the settlement of Jamestown in 1607, the new American colonies established their first printing press. Located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the press was printing popular religious tracts – such as the *Bay Psalm Book*, a 148-page collection of English translations of Hebrew – by 1640.[2] Though much of the early printing in the colonies was religion-oriented, novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Tom Jones* (1749), imported from England, were also popular. Religious tracts were eventually followed by almanacs, newspapers, and magazines. The most well-known early almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which included information on the weather along with some political opinions, was printed by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia from 1733 to 1757. Though various cities had short-lived or local non-daily newspapers in the 1700s, the New York *Sun*, which is considered the first successful mass-circulation newspaper, did not begin operations until 1833.[3] The failure of earlier newspapers is often attributed to the fact that they were small operations run by

local printers. It was not until newspapers began using editors and receiving substantial financial backing – first from political parties and later from wealthy elites like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst – that the newspaper industry mushroomed.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the newspaper industry experienced rapid growth. This trend continued until 1973, at which point there were 1774 daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 63.1 million copies. This meant that about 92 percent of US households were subscribing to a daily newspaper in 1973. Since then, however, newspaper production and circulation have steadily declined, and, as of 2016, there were only 1286 daily newspapers in the United States, with a total estimated circulation 30.9 million in 2017: a more than 50 percent drop from the high water point in 1973.[4]

In many ways, the history of the magazine industry in the United States mirrors that of the newspaper industry. It began somewhat unsteadily, underwent tremendous growth, and is currently experiencing a period of instability. The first US magazine, *American Magazine*, was published in 1741. But the boom did not really begin until the mid-19th century. And though the industry continued to experience growth throughout the 20th century, more recently it has suffered a decline in both the total number of titles (Table 1.1) and paid circulation (Table 1.2). Table 1.1 illustrates that the number of magazine titles in the United States grew by roughly 38 percent from 2002 to 2012, before beginning a slow decline over the next five years.

Moreover, as Table 1.2 shows, the total paid circulation of the top 10 magazines in 2017 was more than 5 million less than the total paid circulation of the top 10 magazines in 2012, and a whopping 33 million less than in 1992. Interestingly, the highest circulating magazine in 1992, *Reader's Digest*, had fallen to 10th in 2017, while the second highest circulating magazine in 2017, *Game Informer Magazine*, was not among the top 10 in 1992, as it had then only been in existence for 1 year. Despite declining circulation and unit sales in the newspaper and magazine industries, Americans are still reading. But how they are reading is changing. Increasingly, readers are turning to online newspapers and magazines. As of 2016, nearly twice as many US adults (38%) were getting their news online – either through news websites/apps or social media – as were getting it through print newspapers (20%).[5] The book publishing industry has not experienced the deep losses occurring in the newspaper and magazine industries over the past two decades. But in 2012, unit sales of traditional paper

Table 1.1 Number of magazines in the United States from 2002 to 2017 (in 5-year intervals)

	2002	2007	2012	2017
Number of magazines	5340	6809	7390	7176

Source: MPA. (n.d.). Number of Magazines in the United States from 2002 to 2017. In *Statista – The Statistics Portal*. Retrieved October 10, 2018, from https://www.statista.com/statistics/238589/number-of-magazines-in-the-united-states/.

Table 1.2 Top 10 US consumer magazines by paid circulation in 1992, 2012, and 2017*

1992		2012		2017	
Rank/Publication	Circulation	Rank/Publication	Circulation	Rank/Publication	Circulation
Reader's Digest	16 258 476	*Game Informer Magazine*	7 864 326	*Better Homes and Gardens*	7 645 364
TV Guide	14 498 341	*Better Homes and Gardens*	7 621 456	*Game Informer Magazine*	6 353 075
National Geographic	9 708 254	*Reader's Digest*	5 527 183	*Good Housekeeping*	4 315 026
Better Homes and Gardens	8 002 585	*Good Housekeeping*	4 354 740	*Family Circle*	4 056 156
The Cable Guide	5 889 947	*Family Circle*	4 143 942	*People*	3 418 555
Family Circle	5 283 660	*National Geographic*	4 125 152	*Woman's Day*	3 275 962
Good Housekeeping	5 139 355	*People*	3 637 633	*National Geographic*	3 147 721
Ladies' Home Journal	5 041 143	*Woman's Day*	3 374 479	*Sports Illustrated*	3 057 042
Woman's Day	4 810 445	*Time*	3 281 175	*Time*	3 032 581
McCall's	4 704 772	*Taste of Home*	3 268 549	*Reader's Digest*	3 024 031
Total circulation of top 10	79 336 978	**Total circulation of top 10**	47 198 635	**Total circulation of top 10**	41 325 513

Source: *Adweek*, March 29, 1993; Alliance for Audited Media, February 7, 2013 and June 30, 2017. *Data exclude magazines whose circulation is tied to membership benefits (i.e. *AARP The Magazine* [formerly *Modern Maturity*], *AARP Bulletin*, *Costco Connection*, and *AAA Living*).

books fell by about 9 percent for the third year in a row; adult nonfiction was the hardest hit, falling 13 percent.[6] It is worth noting that since 2012, however, sales of printed books have stabilized and even increased somewhat, indicating that adoption rates for e-book technologies may have plateaued among some demographics.

Motion picture and sound recording

Sound recording and motion pictures may seem like an odd pairing at first, but their histories are deeply intertwined, thanks in large part to Thomas Edison. In the span of 15 years, Edison and his assistant, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, created what would later develop into the first two new mass media since print. Edison's first invention, the phonograph, in 1877, was a device that played recorded sound, and his second, the kinetoscope, in 1892, was an early motion picture device that showed short, silent films in peep-show fashion to individual viewers. Edison's goal was to synchronize audio and visual images into a film projector that would allow for more than one viewer at a time. Though sound film did not become possible until the early 1920s, improvements in film projection – namely, the development of the vitascope – gave rise to the silent film era in the meantime. The eventual synchronization of sound and film launched talking pictures, or "talkies." The first commercially successful, feature-length talkie was a musical film, *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927. Hollywood was about to enter its Golden Age of the 1930s and 1940s, in which "the studios were geared to produce a singular commodity, the feature film."[7]

With the motion picture industry firmly established, sound recording began to receive independent attention and the record industry came to dominate the music industry, which had previously been involved primarily in the production of sheet music. By the start of the 20th century, profits from the sale of sound recordings quickly eclipsed those from the sale of sheet music. This shift was fueled in large part by the continuous development of cheap and easily reproducible formats such as magnetic tape in 1926, long-playing (LP) records in 1948, compact or audio cassettes in 1963, optical or compact discs (CDs) in 1982, and lossy bitcompression technologies such as MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (MP3s) in 1995. With the exception of magnetic tape for sound recording, which was invented by German engineer Fritz Pfleumer, and Columbia Records' LP, Sony and Philips were responsible for all of the previously mentioned recording formats, as well as the Betamax (1975), LaserDisc (1978), Video2000 (1980), Betacam (1982), Video8 (1985), Digital Audio Tape (1987), Hi8 (1989), CD-i (1991), MiniDisc (1992), Digital Compact Disc (1992), Universal Media Disc (2005), Blu-ray Disc (2006), and DVD (as part of the 1995 DVD Consortium) formats. Several of these more recent formats have had implications for the motion picture industry, as they allow for the playback and recording of movies on DVD players and computers at home.

Broadcast media

The development of broadcast technologies changed the media landscape once again. Instead of media physically having to be distributed to stores or shipped to audiences, as books, magazines, and newspapers are, or audiences physically having to travel to the media, as in the case of film, media could now be brought directly to audiences over public airwaves. This was an important development, because it freed mass media from transportation for the first time in history. (We have excluded the electrical telegraph (1830s) because, like the telephone (1870s), it is better classified as a personal medium than a mass medium.) Radio came on the scene first, experimenting with transmissions as early as the 1890s and making scheduled broadcasts in the 1920s. But television followed shortly thereafter, with Philo T. Farnsworth, a Mormon from the small farm community of Rigby, Idaho, applying for the first television patent in 1927 and CBS launching the first television schedule in 1941. Not only do radio and television share an overlapping technological history, but they also share an overlapping professional history, as many of television's early stars came from radio. After the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) sorted out broadcast frequencies for radio in 1945 and for television in 1952, commercial broadcast stations spread rapidly (see Table 1.3).

The tremendous growth in the number of commercial radio and television stations since 1950 suggests strong consumer demand for their content. This perception is confirmed by the data on radio and television ownership and usage. As of 2011, 99 percent of US households had at least one radio and 96.7 percent of US households had at least one television set (the lowest percentage since 1975, and down from 98.9 percent at the height of television's penetration).[8] The average US home is equipped with 8 radios and 2.93 television sets.[9] And by all accounts, these devices garner substantial use. While radio usage is difficult to measure, as we listen to the radio at work, at home, in cars, and in a variety of other contexts, industry experts estimate that the typical American listens to about 1 hour and 30 minutes of radio per day. But television is still, far and away, the dominant medium in terms of usage. The Nielsen Company estimates that, in 2010, the average American watched more than 35½ hours of television per week.[10] Suffice it to say, Americans spend a significant amount of time with radio and television.

Table 1.3 Number of commercial broadcast stations in the United States*

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
AM radio stations	2118	3539	4323	4589	4987	4685	4782	4684
FM radio stations	493	815	2196	3282	4392	5892	6526	6701
Television stations	47	515	677	734	1092	1288	1390	1387

Source: The Federal Communications Commission; US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001, Table 1126; and US Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2016, Table 1132. *Data exclude educational broadcast stations.

Before turning to the fourth and final category of mass media, two recent developments with regard to radio and television need to be addressed: satellite radio and cable and satellite television. In many ways, these developments are analogous. Both technologies charge for content, include some content that cannot be broadcast over public airwaves, and trouble the traditional understanding of broadcast media. Satellite radio and television and, increasingly, cable television employ a digital signal, which qualifies them for inclusion in the category of new media. That said, not all cable television is digital, and satellite radio and television, which use a digital signal, are broadcast. As such, neither cable nor satellite technology fits neatly into the category of broadcast *or* new media. Confusion over how to categorize satellite radio and cable and satellite television has not stopped either one from being successful, however. Sirius XM Radio Inc., the sole satellite radio provider in the United States, has 21 million paying subscribers and made $763 million in 2017.[11] Meanwhile, from 1970 to 2011, the number of US households with either cable or satellite television grew from 7 to over 85 percent.[12] As these data suggest, satellite radio and cable and satellite television are growing rapidly, though even their success is threatened by the proliferation of new media.

New media

New media is the broadest and, hence, most difficult of the four categories of mass media to delimit and define. Though we offer a definition from Lev Manovich, even he is aware of its problematic nature: "new media are the cultural objects which use digital computer technology for distribution and circulation."[13] One difficulty with this definition is that what it includes must continuously be revised as computing technology becomes a more common mode of distribution. The development of digital television, film, photography, e-books, and podcasts, for instance, would place them in the category of new media along with the internet, websites, online computer games, and internet-capable mobile telephony. The ever-expanding character of this category raises a second problem, which can be posed as a question: Will it eventually come to include all media and therefore be a meaningless category? The likely answer is "yes," for reasons we will discuss later under the topic of Convergence. But, for the time being, it remains a helpful way to differentiate these forms from traditional print, celluloid film, and broadcast radio and television. As long as there are mass media that exist as something other than 0s and 1s, new media will remain a useful and meaningful category.

The history of new media begins with the development of the microprocessor or computer chip. Introduced in 1971, the world's first commercial microprocessor, the 4-bit Intel 4004, executed about 60000 calculations a second. By the early 1990s, the 486 microprocessor, which was typical of computers at the time, could perform 54 million calculations per second. Intel's Pentium Pro, introduced in 1995, increased performance yet again to roughly 250 million calculations per second. But computers were not only rapidly becoming more powerful, they

were also rapidly becoming more connected. Developed initially as a communication technology for the US Department of Defense, the internet began to catch the public's attention in the 1970s, when its potential for sending personal electronic messages (emails) became evident. But it was the development of a graphic-based user interface and common network protocols in the early 1990s that really popularized the internet, by transforming it into the hypertextual platform we know now as the World Wide Web. At the turn of the millennium, experts estimated that there were more than 8 billion web pages, a number that was then doubling every 6 months.[14] Today, with the infrastructure in place, the cost of computing technology declining, and the opportunity for ordinary people to become mass producers of information, the adoption of new media in the United States is growing exponentially.

Let us consider the rate at which a few of these technologies have invaded our lives. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that only 10 percent of American adults were using the internet in 1995. By August 2011, that number had grown to 78 percent of adults and 95 percent of teenagers.[15] Today, millions of people use the internet for everything from online banking and bill paying to job searching and social networking. Indeed, the social networking site Facebook, which first appeared in 2004, attracted more than a billion active users worldwide in its first decade. Other new media technologies, like cell phones, MP3 players, and digital games, have also experienced staggering adoption rates. Though cell phone adoption in the United States lags behind that in many European countries, mobile telephony still boasts one of the fastest penetration rates of any communication technology in history. In 2004, only about 39 percent of youth (8- to 18-year-olds) owned a cell phone, but that number had jumped to 66 percent by 2009. In that same time span (2004 to 2009), the percentage of youth who owned an MP3 player skyrocketed from 18 to 76 percent.[16] As of 2018, 46 percent of US households (roughly 162 million people) owned a gaming console.[17] Table 1.4 shows the use of select new media technologies in 2017.

Table 1.4 Use of select new media for 2017 in the United States

	Users in millions 2017	% increase over 2016	% of US population
Internet use			
Internet users	273.3	2.2%	83.9%
Social network users	191.1	2.9%	58.7%
Online video viewers	221.8	3.1%	68.1%
Facebook users	171.4	15.8%	52.6%
Dual device users	214.6	2.0%	65.9%
Computer-only users	17.9	−11.8%	5.5%
Mobile phone use			
Mobile internet users	223.0	6.0%	68.4%
Mobile social networkers	169.7	5.0%	52.1%
Mobile internet only users	40.7	11.2%	12.5%
Wearables (adult) users	44.4	12.6%	13.6%

Source: eMarketer, *US Digital Media Usage: A Snapshot of 2017*, March 2017.

Living in Postmodernity

As the previous section illustrates, the mass media develop and change over time. It is important, therefore, to study them in historical context. Since the focus of this book is on *contemporary* mass media, this section reflects on the character of the contemporary historical moment. The present moment has variously been described as the information age, the network era, the third wave, post-industrial society, the digital age, and postmodernity. While none of these labels is without its shortcomings, we prefer the term postmodernity to refer to the contemporary moment, given its widespread adoption by media scholars. **Postmodernity** describes the historical epoch that began to emerge in the 1960s as the economic mode of production in most Western societies gradually shifted from commodity-based manufacturing to information-based services. Postmodernity should not be confused with *postmodernism*, an aesthetic sensibility or "style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a … self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art."[18] In the transition from modernity to postmodernity, the mass production of standardized, durable goods such as automobiles and toasters has steadily given way to the reproduction of highly customizable soft goods such as digital content providers and cell phone plans. Table 1.5 highlights some of the key differences between modernity and postmodernity. As the mass media have both contributed to and been transformed by this historical transition, the remainder of this section explores five key trends driving the mass media in postmodernity: convergence, mobility, fragmentation, globalization, and simulation.

Table 1.5 Comparison of modernity and postmodernity

Modernity	Postmodernity
~1850s to 1960s	~1960s to present
Monopoly (imperial) capitalism	Multinational (global) capitalism
Industrialism	Informationalism
Fordism	Flexible accumulation
Manufacturing and production	Marketing and public relations
Mechanization	Computerization
Standardization	Customization
Heavy industries	Image industries
Durable goods	Information and ideas
Product-based	Service-oriented
Mass markets	Niche markets
Economies of scale	Economies of speed
Nation state	Global corporation
State macro-economic regulation	Free-market neoliberalism

Convergence

The previous section organizes the media into four categories as a way of sketching a brief history of mass communication technologies. Ironically, the first major trend in the mass media today involves the erasure of such boundaries. Increasingly, contemporary media reflect **convergence**, the tendency of formerly diverse media to share a common, integrated platform. As strange as it may seem today in light of the prevalence of streaming video, internet radio, and online newspapers, convergence is a relatively recent phenomenon that was considered visionary in the early 1980s when Nicholas Negroponte and others at the MIT Media Lab began exploring multimedia systems. Before media convergence could become a reality, it had to overcome two major obstacles. First, the noise associated with analog signals such as those used in television and radio broadcasting generated message distortion and decay over long distances. This problem was solved through digitization, which reduces distortion by relying on bits rather than a continuous signal. Second, bandwidth limitations prevented large data packets involving images and video from being transmitted quickly and easily over a communication channel. However, improved data-compression techniques and bandwidth expansions have made possible the real-time transmission of large data packets over communication channels. As these technical hurdles have been overcome, convergence has accelerated.

Mobility

Historically, mass media have not been very portable. If you wanted to see a film, you had to go to the theater. If you wanted to watch your favorite television show, you had to do so in the privacy of your own home. Even print media such as books, magazines, and newspapers were limited in their mobility, as their size and weight significantly restricted the amount of printed material one was likely to carry around. But the development of powerful microprocessors and wireless technology is rapidly changing all this, and today, instead of us going *to* places for media, media can increasingly go places *with* us. **Mobility** refers to the ease with which an object can be moved from place to place. As one of the book's authors typed this paragraph, for instance, he was sitting in his favorite café, listening to music on his iPhone, and working on his laptop. In addition to being able to take his whole music library with him, much of the research for this book is stored on his computer. When he needed to locate information not on his computer, he simply connected wirelessly to the university library and downloaded the necessary research. In fact, in the past few years, this author has pretty much stopped going to the library altogether. Even when he requires a book that does not exist electronically (yet!), he simply logs into the library website and arranges for delivery to his office. As technology becomes more and more mobile, media are being transformed from generic home appliances into highly personal (often fashion) accessories. In light of the drive toward mobility,

the next evolutionary stage is likely to see media go from being something we carry around or wear to something we embody or become in the form of cybernetic implants.

Fragmentation

Despite its continued use, the phrase "mass media" is rapidly becoming a misnomer. The *mass* in mass media has traditionally referred to the large, undifferentiated, anonymous, and passive audience addressed by television, radio, and print's standardized messages. But the explosion of information in postmodernity has given way to cultural **fragmentation**, a splintering of the consuming public into ever more specialized taste cultures. This, in turn, has resulted in a tremendous proliferation of media content, if not media ownership, along with niche marketing. What Alvin Toffler has called the "de-massification" of media has been underway since at least the early 1970s.[19] Decreasing production costs have greatly altered the economics of the media industry, reducing the necessity for standardization. The result has been a dramatic increase in media output that caters to specific interests and tastes. Long gone are the days of only three television networks, which could not fill 24 hours of programming. Today, there are hundreds of networks, as well as premium cable services, with around-the-clock programming. Nor is television unique; the print media and radio have witnessed a similar proliferation of specialty outlets. General-purpose magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Life*, which dominated the magazine industry in the 1960s, had by 1980 been replaced by 4000 special-interest magazines.[20] The internet, of course, reflects the most diversified medium, delivering a dizzying array of content. Even an online bazaar like Amazon.com has country-specific portals and employs tracking software, or so-called cookies, that record user preferences to create a highly customized shopping experience. As this technology improves, we can count on media becoming more and more tailored to individual tastes.

Globalization

Globalization is *the* buzzword of the moment, having captured the attention of academics, business leaders, and politicians alike.[21] Even as the world has become increasingly fragmented by specialized interests, it has simultaneously become more global as well. **Globalization** is a complex set of social, political, and economic processes in which the physical boundaries and structural policies that previously reinforced the autonomy of the nation state are collapsing in favor of instantaneous and flexible worldwide social relations. While globalization is multidimensional, we wish to focus chiefly on economic globalization. In the past few decades, the spread of capitalism has fueled the rise of multinational corporations that wish to profit from untapped "global markets." Hence, these corporations aggressively support free-trade policies that eliminate barriers such as trade tariffs between national and international markets. For the mass media, which are owned and controlled almost exclusively today by multinational corporations, globalization creates opportunities to bring their cultural products to distant local markets. This fact has raised fears about *cultural imperialism*, the imposition of one set of cultural values on other cultures. The process is dialectical or bidirectional, however. Local markets are influencing the products and thinking of the very companies targeting them, leading to concern that cultural difference is being eradicated in favor of one large hybridized culture.

Simulation

Though the concept of simulation can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, its current cultural cachet is due principally to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard and his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. "Simulation," Baudrillard writes, "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real."[22] According to Baudrillard, Western societies, and "America" in particular, are increasingly characterized by **simulation**, an implosion of the image (i.e. representations) and the real. This argument is premised on, in Baudrillard's words, the *precession* of simulacra, which suggests that the image has evolved from being a good representation of an external reality, to a distorted representation of an external reality, to a mask that conceals the absence of a basic reality, to bearing no relation to any reality at all.[23] The matter of simulation is an important one, as the mass media are the key social institutions fueling this social phenomenon. The media, for instance, endlessly produce and reproduce images of love, violence, and family (to name just a few) that no longer point or refer to some external reality. Rather, they exist only as images of images for which there is no original. Simulation suggests that the media no longer represent, if they ever did, our social world; they construct a realer-than-real space that *is* our social world.

Why Study the Media?

Perhaps the most important reason to study mass media today is because of their sheer ubiquity. In the transition to postmodernity, mass media have gone from being one institution among many within our cultural environment to being the very basis of our cultural environment. The further back in history one travels, the less central mass media are to social life and the more central are other social institutions such as the family, the church, the school, and the state. But today, these social institutions have been subsumed by, and are largely filtered through, the mass media. More than ever before, the mass media have replaced families as caretakers, churches as arbiters of cultural values, schools as sites of education, and the state as public agenda-setters. In the introduction, we explored the two ways we know

Table 1.6 Average time spent per day (in hrs:mins) with major media by US adults, 2012–2018

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Digital	**4:10**	**4:48**	**5:09**	**5:29**	**5:43**	**5:53**	**6:01**
• Mobile (nonvoice)	1:28	2:15	2:37	2:54	3:06	3:15	3:23
• Desktop/laptop	2:24	2:16	2:14	2:12	2:11	2:10	2:08
• Other connected device	0:18	0:17	0:19	0:23	0:26	0:28	0:30
TV	**4:38**	**4:31**	**4:22**	**4:11**	**4:05**	**4:00**	**3:55**
Radio	**1:32**	**1:30**	**1:28**	**1:27**	**1:27**	**1:26**	**1:25**
Print	**0:40**	**0:35**	**0:32**	**0:30**	**0:28**	**0:27**	**0:26**
• Newspapers	0:24	0:20	0:18	0:17	0:16	0:15	0:15
• Magazines	0:17	0:15	0:13	0:13	0:12	0:11	0:11
Other	**0:38**	**0:31**	**0:26**	**0:24**	**0:22**	**0:21**	**0:20**
Total hours	**11:39**	**11:55**	**11:57**	**12:00**	**12:05**	**12:07**	**12:08**

Source: Growth in Time Spent with Media Is Slowing, *eMarketer*, June 6, 2016, https://www.emarketer.com/Article/Growth-Time-Spent-with-Media-Slowing/1014042 (accessed November 30, 2018). Note: many of these hours are spent multitasking; numbers may not add up to total due to rounding.

things: somatically and symbolically (i.e. directly and indirectly). Not only do we know most things symbolically, but the media represent an ever-expanding piece of the total symbolic pie of social mediators. Table 1.6 illustrates the expanding number of hours the average American spends per day with select media.

As Table 1.6 indicates, though we may gradually be changing which media we use, the mass media remain a significant socializing force in contemporary society. **Socialization** describes the process by which persons – both individually and collectively – learn, adopt, and internalize the prevailing cultural beliefs, values, and norms of a society. Because all social institutions are mediators, they all contribute to socialization. When information passes through a channel or medium, it is translated from direct sensory experience into a set of symbols. Since symbols are selective, privileging some aspects of the thing being represented at the expense of others, they function as filters. Language is perhaps the most obvious example of how symbols operate as filters. When you listen to a friend tell a story or read about history in a textbook, you are not experiencing the events being described directly. You are only experiencing them symbolically. The words you hear or read are representations of the event you are learning about, not the actual event itself. This is why two accounts of the same event, while potentially very similar, are never identical. Stories are inevitably filtered through the symbols, and therefore the perspective, of the storyteller. As society's main storytellers, the mass media filter virtually every aspect of our world, shaping both *what* we learn and *how* we learn.

What we learn

Mediated messages are composed of content and form. Broadly speaking, the content influences what we learn and the form influences how we learn. Both content and form are central to the socializing function of the mass media, though content has typically been given more attention. *Content* refers to the informational component of a message, to the specific details, facts, ideas, and opinions communicated through mass media. Audiences are often consciously aware of the content of mediated messages. We know, for instance, that when we read the news we are learning specifics about our world. After just briefly scanning *USA Today* online, one author learned that the Marriott hotel corporation has acknowledged a data breach affecting more than 500 million people, that Facebook is dragging its heels over releasing the results of a civil rights audit, and that Vladamir Putin and the Saudi Crown Prince have shown remarkable closeness at the most recent G-20 Summit. It should probably be noted at this point that the content of a message need not have use-value or truth-value to be classified as informational. As both misinformation and disinformation would suggest, fairness and accuracy are not defining attributes of information. Information need only be *meaningful*, as opposed to gibberish, to count as information.

The content of the mass media matters for several reasons. First, by choosing to include or cover some topics and to exclude or ignore others, the media establish which social issues are considered important and which are considered unimportant. Simply put, the mass media largely determine what we talk and care about. Second, content lacking a diversity of views and opinions significantly limits the scope of public debate and deliberation on matters of social importance. Unpopular and dissenting viewpoints are essential to a healthy democracy, however, as they often reframe issues in fresh, productive ways. Third, because media content is communicated using symbols and all symbols are selective, media content is necessarily biased. The language and images used to inform, educate, and entertain you also convey selective attitudes and beliefs. In short, the content of the mass media socializes us to care about some issues and not others, to see those issues from some perspectives and not others, and to adopt particular attitudes toward the perspectives it presents.

How we learn

Whereas content refers to the informational component of a message, *form* describes the cognitive component of a message. Form can be thought of as the way a message is packaged and delivered. The packaging of a message is a consequence, first, of the medium and, second, of the genre or class. Every medium or communication technology packages messages differently.[24] The unique ways that a message is packaged influence how we process it. In other words, communication mediums train our conscious to think in particular ways: not *what* to think, but *how* to think. Media scholars generally agree, for instance,

that the way we interpret and make sense of language differs radically from the way we interpret and make sense of images. Whereas language is highly temporal and thus favors a sequential or linear way of knowing,[25] images are decidedly spatial and hence privilege an associative or nonlinear way of knowing. A simple way to confirm this difference is to place a page of printed text next to an image. While the printed text only makes sense when the words are read in succession, the elements within the image can be processed simultaneously.

Because the medium of a message conditions how one processes the informational elements within that message, some media scholars contend that message form is a more fundamental and important socializing force than message content. This position is most famously associated with Marshall McLuhan, who succinctly claimed, "The medium is the message." Given the transition to postmodernity, in which the image has steadily replaced the word as the prevailing form in mass media (even print media such as magazines and newspapers are increasingly filled with pictures), the belief that young people today are cognitively different than their parents is rapidly gaining adherents. If media guru Douglas Rushkoff is correct, then television and MTV, along with video games and the internet, may account for everything from the invention and popularity of snowboarding to the emergence and spread of attention deficit disorder. As such, critical media scholars must attend not only to what the mass media socialize us to think, but also to how they socialize us to think.

Doing Critical Media Studies

As powerful socializing agents that shape what we know of ourselves and the world, and how we know it, it is vital that we analyze and evaluate the mass media critically. **Critical media studies** is an umbrella term used to describe an array of theoretical perspectives that, though diverse, are united by their skeptical attitude, humanistic approach, political assessment, and commitment to social justice. Before turning to the individual perspectives that make up critical studies, let us examine the four key characteristics they share in greater detail.

Attitude: skeptical

The theoretical perspectives that make up critical studies all begin with the assumption that there is more at stake in mass media than initially meets the eye. To the lay-person, for instance, what gets reported on the evening news may appear to be an objective retelling of the day's major events. But to the critical scholar, the production of news is a complex process shaped by the pragmatic need to fill a 1-hour time block every day, as well as to garner high ratings. These factors, in large part, determine what counts as news, how the news is produced, and what the news looks like. Just as there is value in looking more closely at the news, there is value in looking more closely at all media. Thus, the

various perspectives within the field of critical media studies adopt an attitude of *skepticism*, not as a way of rejecting media, but as a way of understanding how they work and what they do. Some critics refer to this skeptical attitude as a "hermeneutics of suspicion."[26] Hermeneutics describes a mode of interpretation grounded in close analysis. So, a hermeneutics of suspicion would be a mode of close analysis with a deep distrust of surface appearances and "commonsense" explanations.

Approach: humanistic

Universities, like many other cultural institutions, are divided into various departments and units. Though the precise character of such divisions varies from one institution to the next, one common way of organizing disciplines and departments is according to the categories of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. These categories, while neither rigid nor entirely discrete, reflect a set of general distinctions concerning subject matter, outlook, and method (i.e. procedure of investigation). Whereas the natural sciences seek to understand the physical world by empirical and "objective" means, for instance, the humanities aim to understand cultural and social phenomena by interpretive and analytical means. To say that critical media studies is humanistic, then, is to associate it with a particular set of intellectual concerns and approaches to the discovery of knowledge. Adopting a humanistic approach to the social world and our place in it, critical media studies emphasizes self-reflection, critical citizenship, democratic principles, and humane education.[27] This is an approach that entails "thinking about freedom and responsibility and the contribution that intellectual pursuit can make to the welfare of society."[28] Because of the subjective element of humanistic criticism, the knowledge it creates is never complete, fixed, or finished.[29]

Assessment: political

In many scholarly arenas, the final step in research is the objective reporting of one's findings (usually in an academic journal). But critical media studies is interested in the practical and political implications of those findings and, thus, entails judgment. Though there is no universal criterion for leveling political judgments across individual studies of the mass media, critical studies are generally concerned with determining whose interests are served by the media, and how those interests contribute to the domination, exploitation, and/or asymmetrical relations of power. Research in this tradition interrogates how media create, maintain, or subvert particular social structures, and whether or not such structures are just and egalitarian. A Feminist study of television sitcoms, for instance, would examine how the representation of male and female characters in such programs functions to reinforce or challenge gender and sexual stereotypes. Critical studies view society as a complex network of interrelated power relations that symbolically privilege and materially benefit some individuals and groups over others. The

central aim of critical scholarship is to evaluate the media's role in constructing and maintaining particular relationships of power.

Ambition: social justice

One of the most unique and, at times, controversial characteristics of critical media studies is its desire to better our social world. While scholars in many fields believe that research should be neutral and non-interventionist, critical media studies aims not only to identify political injustices but also to confront and challenge them. Critical media studies is premised on a commitment to social justice and maintains that scholars should "have as their determinate goal the improvement of society."[30] Many media scholars who work within the critical media studies paradigm belong to media-reform organizations such as Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), the Media Education Foundation, Media Democracy in Action, Free Press, the Action Coalition for Media Education, the Center for Creative Voices in Media, and countless others. Critical media studies scholars believe that it is incumbent upon citizens, and not just their governments, to hold big corporate media accountable. Social activism can take many forms, from boycotts and culture jamming to producing alternative media and supporting independent media outlets.

Key Critical Perspectives

In an effort to assist students in evaluating the media critically, this book examines, explains, and demonstrates 12 critical perspectives, each of which is rooted in a different social theory. **Theory** is an explanatory and interpretive tool that simultaneously enables and limits our understanding of the particular social product, practice, or process under investigation. The term "theory" derives from the Greek word *theoria*, which refers to vision, optics, or a way of seeing. Since, as Kenneth Burke notes in *Permanence and Change*, "Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing,"[31] no theory is without limitations. We believe that since every theory has biases and blind spots, no theory ought to be treated as the final word on any subject. Theory is most useful when it is used and understood as a partial explanation of the phenomenon being studied. Students are strongly encouraged to take each perspective seriously, but none as infallible or universal. We have grouped the 12 critical perspectives in this book into three clusters based upon whether their primary focus is on media industries, messages, or audiences. A brief examination of these three theory clusters provides a chapter overview of the book.

Media industries: Marxist, Organizational, and Pragmatic

Part I of *Critical Media Studies* examines media industries and their practices of production, paying particular attention to the economic, corporate, and governmental structures that enable and constrain how mass media operate.

Chapter 2 explores the media from a Marxist theoretical perspective by examining the ways that capitalism and the profit-motive influence media-ownership patterns and corporate practices. Chapter 3 approaches the media from an Organizational perspective by focusing on the work routines and professional conventions within media industries. Chapter 4, the final chapter in Part I, investigates media industries from a Pragmatic perspective, exploring how government laws and regulations impact media products.

Media messages: Rhetorical, Cultural, Psychoanalytic, Feminist, and Queer

Part II of the book centers on media messages, and concerns how the mass media convey information, ideas, and ideologies. Chapter 5 utilizes a Rhetorical perspective to illuminate how the various structures within media texts work to influence and move audiences. Chapter 6 reflects a Cultural perspective and investigates how the media convey ideologies about matters such as class and race that, in turn, shape cultural attitudes toward various social groups. Chapter 7 adopts a Psychoanalytic perspective, considering parallels between media messages and the unconscious structures of the human psyche. Chapter 8 approaches media from a Feminist perspective, highlighting the complex ways that media influence our cultural performances of gender, whereas Chapter 9 adopts a Queer perspective to illustrate how media contribute to our attitudes about sexuality.

Media audiences: Reception, Sociological, Erotic, and Ecological

In Part III, *Critical Media Studies* turns to media audiences, attending to the diverse ways that audiences interpret, negotiate, and use media to create meanings, pleasures, and identities. Employing a Reception approach, Chapter 10 explores the various meaning-making practices in which audiences engage. Chapter 11 adopts a Sociological approach to media, exploring how audiences use media to negotiate the symbolic and material demands of their everyday lives. Chapter 12 employs an Erotic perspective to understand the transgressive pleasures that audiences experience as they increasingly become active producers as well as consumers of media. Chapter 13 concludes Part III by offering an Ecological perspective, which concerns the ways media technologies dominate our social environment and shape human consciousness.

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