

EVALUATION COPY — NOT FOR RESALE

Richard Campbell
Christopher R. Martin
Bettina Fabos



MEDIA & CULTURE

MASS COMMUNICATION IN A DIGITAL AGE

Mass Communication

A Critical Approach

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NEVER IN U.S. HISTORY has a national election been so shaped by such a wide swath of media forces—both new and old—from the wave of true and untrue social media stories to the tide of partisan Web sites like Breitbart News, whose publisher, Steve Bannon, served as chief executive for Donald Trump’s successful presidential campaign. Trump, whose fame grew on the “old” medium of television as the host of the NBC reality program, *The Apprentice*, used his celebrity standing and late-night tweeting to generate enormous free media coverage, especially during the Republican primary, where his campaign spent virtually no money on expensive TV ads and easily defeated seventeen opponents.

During the 2016 election, Donald Trump, who declared himself the champion of the “working man” and “the forgotten,”

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¶ The media were a huge part of the 2016 presidential election, from Donald Trump’s history as a reality TV star, to his late night Twitter rants, to his verbal and written brawls with news anchors such as Megyn Kelly and newspapers like the *New York Times*.

embodied all the narrative skills of a compelling TV character—to some symbolizing a con man who pulled off the biggest hoax since P.T. Barnum in the 19th century (see Ch. 12) and to others a shoot-from-the-hip gunslinger who would clean up the mess in Washington (or, as he phrased it, “drain the swamp”). He criticized other candidates for taking “special interest” money (including from him); he denigrated legal and illegal immigrants, promising to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico—and making Mexico pay for it; and he even survived the revelation of an old video on which he brags about how easy it is for a celebrity like him to harass women.

Then the billionaire businessman defied almost all the polling data and defeated Hillary Clinton. Like George W. Bush in 2000, Donald Trump won the Electoral College and the presidency, but lost the overall popular vote (by more than one million votes).

Throughout the national election, his shocking comments about opponents were recirculated in what seemed like a continuous loop—for free—by major news outlets and their Web sites, including ABC, CNN, CBS, Fox News, NBC, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The Trump campaign did not even buy anti-Clinton ads until the final months of the election. Still, in the Age of the Internet, the fate of our national elections increasingly rests with social media-savvy young voters and a candidate’s ability to gain their support. In the 2016 election, only about half the eligible millennials, who were turned off in part by traditional news media downplaying complex policy issues, voted, while the 65+ voters, who millennials outnumber and who went for Trump, participated at over a 70 percent rate.¹

New York Times media reporter Jim Rutenberg says the real challenge going forward in the merged old-new media

world will be the submersion of traditional fact-based journalism in this tide of opinion blogs, a wave he calls “fake news,” often rerouted by partisans to much larger audiences through Facebook and Twitter. As the legacy print media continue to seek new business models in a world where Google and Facebook command almost two-thirds of all digital ad revenue, newspapers struggle mightily even though their combined online and print readerships are larger than ever (with many readers not paying for the online stories that are simply aggregated on social media, which rake in the ad dollars). So, as we enter this time of Trump, we need more reporters, not fewer, especially to counter what some have called a “post-fact” or “post-truth” world, where someone’s unsupported opinion about climate change or immigrant crime rates outweighs documented evidence and scientific verification. As *Washington Post* editor Martin Baron notes: “If you have a society where people can’t agree on basic facts, how do you have a functioning democracy?”²

In an actual functioning democracy, we depend on news media to provide information to help us make decisions about who will lead us and what we can do to help make society work better. Despite their limitations, news media continue to serve as our watchdogs over politicians, government, and business, and we need to be vigilant, serving as watchdogs over media. We can achieve this by pointing a critical lens back at the media and by describing, analyzing, and interpreting news stories, reality TV shows, and political ads, arriving at informed judgments, based on evidence, about the media’s performance. This textbook offers a map to help us become more *media literate*, critiquing the media—not as detached cynics or rabid partisans—but as informed citizens with a stake in the outcome.

SO WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF NEWSPAPERS AND MEDIA IN GENERAL?

In an age of economic and social upheaval, 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 critics disapprove of how media, particularly TV and the Internet, 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 the skyscraper and map models for organizing and categorizing culture
- Trace important cultural values in both 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? What do your current media preferences indicate about your identity now? Do your current tastes reveal anything about you? For more questions to help you think about the role of media in your life, see “Questioning the Media” in the Chapter Review.

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

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concepts from this chapter.

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 are usually 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. For example, the American ideal of “rugged individualism”—depicting heroic characters overcoming villains or corruption, for instance—has been portrayed on television for decades through a tradition of detective stories like HBO’s *True Detective* and crime procedurals like CBS’s *NCIS*.

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 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 BCE to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

Early tensions between oral and written communication played out among ancient Greek philosophers and writers. Many philosophers who believed in the superiority of the oral tradition feared that the written word would threaten public discussion. In fact, Plato 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 in which we ask whether TV news, Twitter, or online comment sections cheapen public discussion and discourage face-to-face communication.

The Print Revolution

While paper and block printing developed in China around 100 CE 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 spread rapidly across Europe in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Early on, the size and expense of books limited their audience

to the wealthy and powerful, but as printers reduced the size and cost of books, they became available and affordable to more people. Books eventually became the first mass-marketed products in history because of the way the printing press combined three necessary elements.

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, as people began to think of themselves as part of a country whose interests were broader than local or regional concerns. While oral and written societies had favored decentralized local governments, the print era supported the ascent of more centralized nation-states.

Eventually, machine production became an essential factor in the mass production of other goods, which led to the Industrial Revolution, modern capitalism, and the consumer culture of 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 nobility or 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 many leaders have tried). 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 insulated tribal life and rituals, the printing press “fostered the modern idea of individuality,” disrupting “the medieval sense of community and integration.”³ 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.

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 focal point 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



Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris/Scala-Art Resource, NY

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 fourteenth century.

communication from transportation, making media messages instantaneous—unencumbered by stagecoaches, ships, or the pony express.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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, and smartphones—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 to cable channels and partisan radio talk shows. By the 2012 national elections, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites had become key players in news and politics, especially as information resources for younger generations who had grown up in an online and digital world.

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. Furthermore, many repressive and totalitarian regimes have had trouble controlling messages sent out over the borderless Internet, as opposed to hard copy “snail mail.”

Oral culture has been further reinvented by 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 disrupted 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. One older and outdated explanation of how media operate viewed mass communication as a linear process of producing and delivering messages to large audiences. According to this model, senders (authors, producers, and organizations) transmitted 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) functioned as message filters. Media gatekeepers made decisions about what messages actually got produced for particular receivers. The process also allowed for feedback, in which citizens and consumers, if they chose, returned messages to senders or gatekeepers through phone calls, e-mail, Web postings, talk shows, or letters to the editor.

But the problem with the linear model was 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 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 more complex model of mass communication, audiences actively affirm, interpret, refashion, or reject the messages and stories that flow through various media channels. For example, when Donald Trump referred to other candidates as “losers” during the 2016 election, his supporters saw such language as strong leadership—“telling it like it is”—but his critics viewed this kind of name-calling as uncivil and unpresidential.

While the linear model may have shown 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, moviemakers, writers, news editors, and ad agencies) 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 Trump example illustrates, consumers 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.

In addition, a cultural approach to media focuses us on how meaning is produced rather than on how messages are transmitted. Under this model, a key point is understanding that meaning emerges at the tangled intersection of (1) the creator’s vision, usually conveyed in story form; (2) the industry’s control of production and distribution processes, or the telling and selling of stories; and (3) audiences’ fragmented responses—that is, why we choose and enjoy particular stories (and not others), how we use and consume various media, and how we impose our own varied meanings on the array of media available.

The rise of the Internet and social media has also complicated the communication and meaning-making process. 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 many gatekeepers. 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 obtaining approval—or editing—from 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 today constitute a wide variety of industries and merchandise. 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 society and by individuals.

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, the Internet 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 Pentagon and government researchers helped develop early prototypes for the Internet, commercial interests and individual entrepreneurs 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 into newer media. However, this does not necessarily 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. 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 consume and chase particular products, 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. The term actually has two meanings—one referring to technology and one to business—and describes changes that have a great impact on how media companies are charting a course for the future.

The Dual Meanings of Media Convergence

The first meaning 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.



Culver Pictures/The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY



Blend Images/Getty Images

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, helping radio survive the eventual emergence of television with more music-based content. 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, made its name by selling the world’s oldest mass medium—the book—on the world’s newest mass medium—the Internet.

A second meaning 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 important issue or a significant event, 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 profitable company of the digital era so far (see Chapter 2). Google is the Internet’s main organizer because it finds both “new” and “old” media content—like videos and newspapers—and aggregates that content for vast numbers of online consumers. Although Google does own YouTube, the company does not produce traditional media content, but functions instead as a delivery or distribution site. Most consumers who find a news story or magazine article through a Google search pay nothing to the original media content provider or 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, much of the company’s money comes from shopping-related searches,

rather than from the information searches it is best known for. 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.⁶ 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 creation business, they are still dependent on news organizations to produce the quality information and news stories 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 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 the pre-Internet days (say, back in the late 1980s), most people would watch popular TV shows like *Dallas*, *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, Amazon, and Netflix or through 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 traditional network programs. While these options allow us to connect with friends or family and give us more choices, they also break down old rituals like a family's gathering one evening a week to watch the comedy lineup on ABC or NBC. Instead, most media experiences find us chasing our individual interests online and on our smartphones. However, the upside in the digital age is that today, many families gather on weekends or during holidays to binge-watch TV series they've missed during the week.

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 television sets, and played video games on a console. Today, we are able to do all these 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 young people. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that today's youth packed ten hours and forty-five minutes' worth of media content into the seven and a half hours they spent daily consuming media.⁷ But while we might be consuming more media, are we really engaging with our friends when we communicate with them by texting or posting on Facebook or Twitter? 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 much closer attention to the media device in our hand than to the person standing next to us.

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, 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” them and by how many related trending topics they have on Twitter. 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.

Stories: The Foundation of Media

The stories that circulate in the media can shape a society's perceptions and attitudes. 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 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. In the 1980s, during TV's Network Era, most of us sat down at night to watch the professionally produced evening news or the scripted sitcoms and dramas written by paid writers and performed by seasoned actors. But in the digital age, many of the performances are enacted by "ordinary" people. The stories we watch on YouTube and read on blog sites are mostly produced by amateurs. Audiences are fascinated by stories of couples finding love, relationships gone bad, and backstabbing friends on shows like *The Bachelor* or *Real Housewives of New York City*. Other reality shows—like *Pawn Stars* or *Say Yes to the Dress*—give us glimpses into the lives and careers of everyday people, while amateurs entertain us on singing, dancing, and cooking shows like *The Voice*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Top Chef*. While these shows are all professionally produced, the performers are almost all ordinary people (or celebrities and professionals performing alongside amateurs). This is part of the appeal of reality TV—relating to the characters or comparing our lives with theirs, because they seem just like us. Part of the appeal too is feeling superior to characters who often make bad decisions that we can judge or laugh about.

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 last night's presidential debate. This cultural blending of old and new ways of telling stories—told by both 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. 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 the stories we have inside us.⁸ 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. Narratives are, in the end, the dominant way we make sense and meaning of our experiences. As writer Joan Didion once put it, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."⁹

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."¹⁰

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?



Marc Riboud/Magnum Photos

LaunchPad

macmillanlearning.com
/mediaculture11e



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?

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.

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 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 and rock and roll 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. Children, who watch nearly forty thousand TV commercials each year, are particularly vulnerable to marketers selling junk food, toys, and “cool” clothing.

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 TV network or Web site that carried the ad? Or are parents, teachers, and religious leaders failing to instill strong moral values? 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 in 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 a vast array of media stories that are too often taken for granted. (For further discussion, see “Examining Ethics: Covering War” on pages 16–17.)

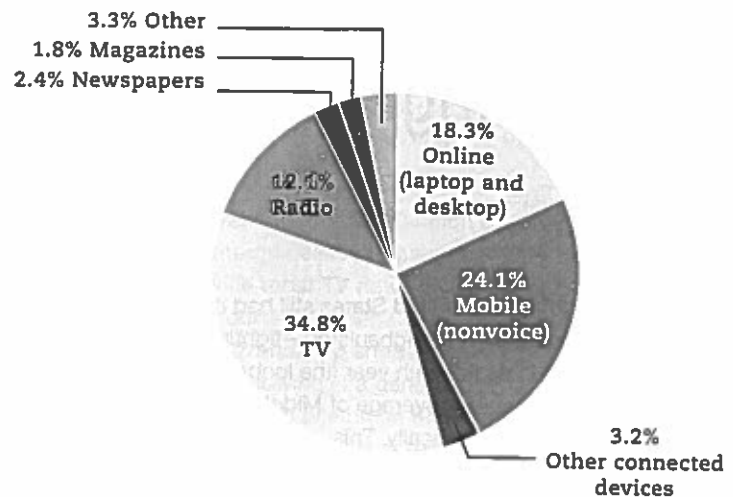


FIGURE 1.1
DAILY MEDIA CONSUMPTION BY PLATFORM, 2015

Data from: “Average Time Spent with Major Media per Day in the United States as of October 2015 (in minutes),” <http://www.statista.com/statistics/276683/media-use-in-the-us/>.

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 dance 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.

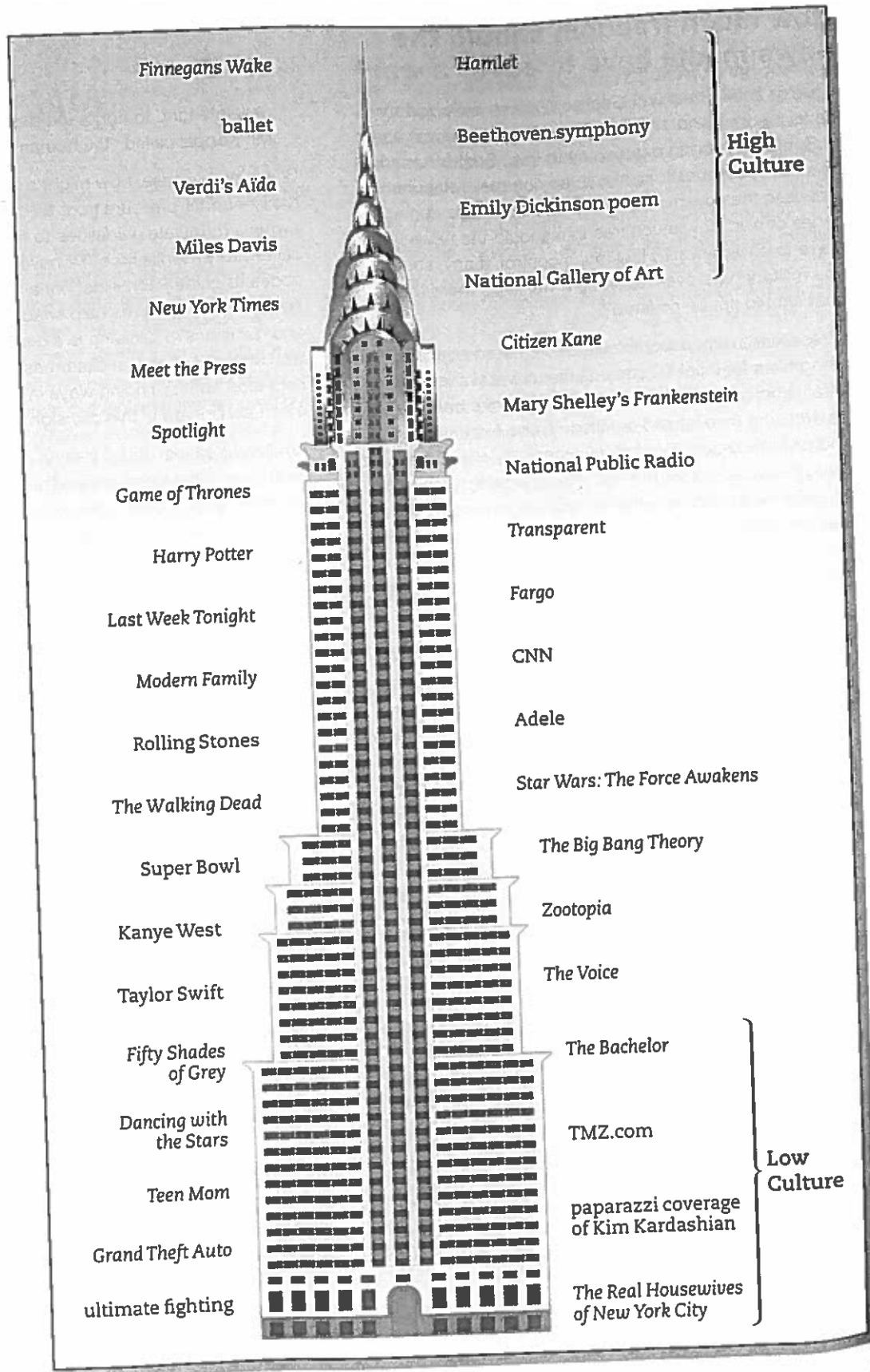
Culture as a Skyscraper

Throughout much of the twentieth-century, critics and audiences generally 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 reality television, teen pop music, TV wrestling shows, and violent video games (see Figure 1.2 on page 18). High culture, identified with “good taste” and higher education, and supported by wealthy patrons and

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?



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. Whether or not we agree with this cultural skyscraper model, the high-low hierarchy often determines or limits the ways we view and discuss culture today.¹¹ Using this model, critics have developed at least five areas of concern about so-called low culture: the depreciation of fine art, the exploitation of high culture, the disposability of popular culture, the decline of high culture, and the deadening of our cultural taste buds.

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.¹² 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 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*, alongside offshoots like the sitcom *The Munsters*, action movies like *I, Frankenstein*, or even the sugar cereal Franken Berry. 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 Throwaway Ethic

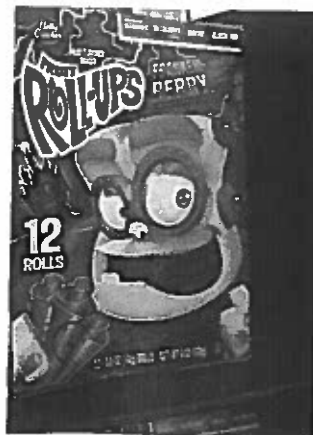
Unlike an Italian opera or a Shakespearean tragedy, many elements of popular culture have a short life span; a hit song, for example, might top the charts for a few weeks at a time. Although endurance does not necessarily denote quality, many critics think that so-called better or higher forms of culture have more staying power. In this argument, lower or popular forms of culture are unstable and fleeting; they follow rather than lead public taste.



PhotoQuest



20th Century Fox/PhotoQuest



Richard Levine/Alamy

Exploiting High Culture

Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, might not recognize our popular culture 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 Mel Brooks spoof *Young Frankenstein*. In 1972, the General Mills Corporation introduced "Franken Berry" cereal as part of its monster-themed breakfast cereal line. Today, the Franken Berry brand has expanded to other product lines, including Fruit Roll-Ups. Can you think of another example of a story that has developed and changed over time and through various media transformations?

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.¹³ 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—though this view fails to note the number of choices and options now available to media consumers.

Dulling Our Cultural Taste Buds

Another cautionary story suggests that 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. 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 lifestyle and who may not have the means to obtain high-end cosmetics, clothing, or cars. 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

While the skyscraper model is one way to view culture, another way to view it 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 across various media choices 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 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). The map offered here (see Figure 1.3 on page 24) is based on a 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, antihierarchical map may be a more flexible, multidimensional, and inclusive way of imagining how culture actually 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 plotline: 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



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.

day. Adult critics might mock this melodramatic formula, but many children found comfort in the predictability of the story. This quality is also evident when children ask their parents to read *Goodnight Moon* or *Where the Wild Things Are* night after night.

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 an 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 AMC to discover a new movie from Iran or India on the Sundance 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, 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.

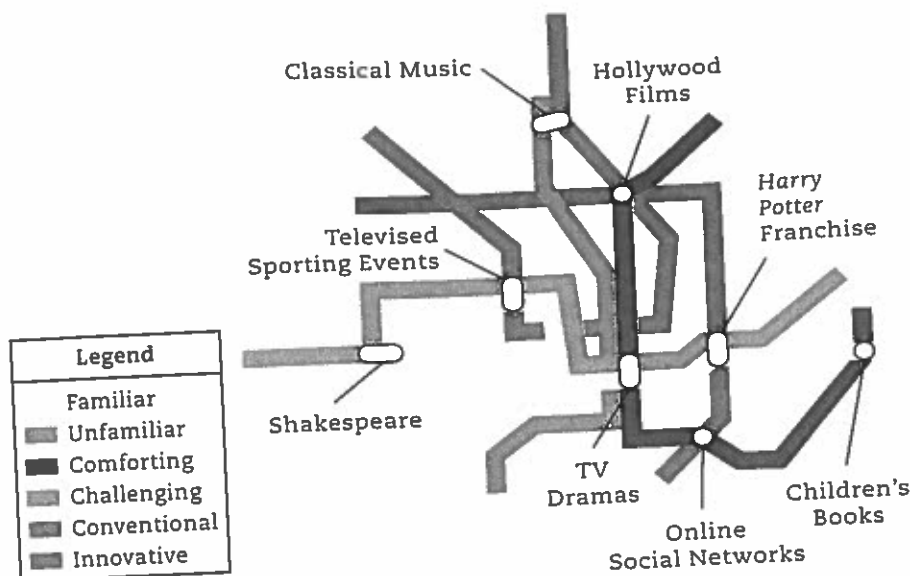
A Wide Range of Messages

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, Tennessee Williams, Apple, *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.

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—that is, make our lives meaningful—as well as a complex collection of intersecting 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 and intersections would you identify with, and why?



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 reimagining 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, or by political differences. Back in the nineteenth century, in fact, a number of intellectuals and politicians worried that rising literacy rates among the working class would 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 violates older religious tenets or the sanctity of past traditions.

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 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 upward. 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.”

Cultural responses to and critiques of modern efficiency often manifested themselves in the mass media. For example, in *Brave New World* (1932), Aldous Huxley 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.

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.¹⁴

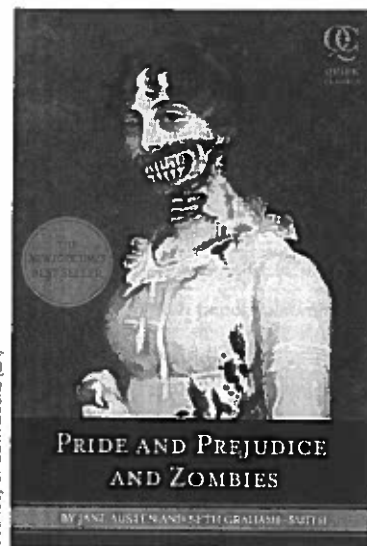
The idea of a well-informed rational society emerged out of the **Progressive Era**—a period of political and social reform that lasted roughly from the 1890s to the 1920s. On both local and national levels, Progressive Era reformers championed social movements that led to constitutional amendments for both Prohibition and women's suffrage, 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, new events. Newly standardized forms of front-page journalism that championed "just the facts" helped reporters efficiently meet tight deadlines. But 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 on page 26). 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 characteristics 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 presidential campaign, populist politicians often tell stories and run ads that criticize big corporations and wealthy donors. Meant to resonate with middle-class values and regional ties, campaign 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.



Courtesy of Quark Books (EA)

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 reimagined 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. A feature-film version of *Zombies* was released in 2016.

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

TABLE 1.1
TRENDS ACROSS
HISTORICAL PERIODS

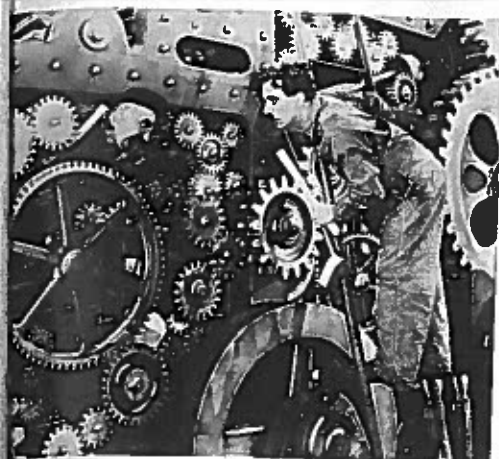
In postmodern culture, populism manifests itself in many ways. For example, artists and performers, like Chuck Berry in "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956) or Queen in "Bohemian Rhapsody" (1975), intentionally blur the border between high and low culture. In the visual arts, following Andy Warhol's 1960s pop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

Other forms of postmodern style blur modern distinctions not only between art and commerce but also between fact and fiction. For example, television programs—such as MTV's *The Real World* and *Teen Mom*—blur boundaries between the staged and the real, mixing serious themes and personal challenges with comedic interludes and romantic entanglements. Fake news programs, like HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, 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 is the emphasis on *diversity* and fragmentation, including the wild juxtaposition of old and new cultural styles. 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.

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*, *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.

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, 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



Chaplin/Zuma Press



Liam Daniels/© Channel 4/Everett Collection

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, left) satirized modern industry and the dehumanizing impact of a futuristic factory on its overwhelmed workers. Similarly, the science-fiction TV series *Black Mirror* (2011–present, right) takes a dark and satirical look at technology's impact on today's society. In an interview with the *Guardian*, series creator Charlie Brooker explains how the series relates to our world: “Like an addict, I check my Twitter timeline the moment I wake up. If technology is a drug—and it does feel like a drug—then what, precisely, are the side-effects? This area—between delight and discomfort—is where *Black Mirror* is set.”

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, as modernists warned, new technologies can isolate people or encourage them to chase their personal agendas (e.g., a student following her individual interests online), new technologies can also draw people together to advance causes; to solve community problems; or to discuss politics on radio talk shows, blog sites, or smartphones. Our lives today are full of such incongruities.

CRITIQUING MEDIA AND CULTURE

In contemporary life, cultural boundaries are being tested; the arbitrary lines between information and entertainment have become blurred. Consumers now read newspapers on their smartphones. Media corporations do business across vast geographic boundaries. We are witnessing media convergence, in which everything from magazines to movies is channeled onto screens through the Internet, TV, and smartphones.

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. While revelations about phone hacking and government surveillance make this distrust understandable, it's ultimately more useful to replace cynicism with genuine criticism. To deal with these shifts in how we experience media and culture, as well as 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”

MEDIA LITERACY AND THE CRITICAL PROCESS

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 fifty-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.

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 2012 and 2016 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.

3 INTERPRETATION

In the interpretation 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 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.

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 and watchdogs 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.

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 this fourth 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. Thus, we have added 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 letter or an e-mail 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 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 writing news stories for a local newspaper (and its Web site), producing a radio program or podcast 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 pages 28–29). 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 old 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*, which can artificially force media into predetermined categories. We might instead look at a wide range of issues generated by culture, from the role of storytelling in the 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 *Empire* 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 richer and more complicated 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 "rewind," or slow down the images, in order to understand how they make sense and create 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 technology to reveal oppressive conditions in China and Eastern Europe or to document crimes by urban police departments; and the role of blogs and Twitter in debunking bogus claims or protesting fraudulent elections. The media have also helped to renew interest in diverse cultures around the world and other emerging democracies.

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.

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 styles and 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 a melting pot of print, electronic, and digital culture.¹⁵ Either/or models of culture, such

as the high-low approach, are giving way to more inclusive and varied 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 to come more from Facebook, Twitter, John Oliver, *SNL*, and bloggers than from the *Wall Street Journal*, the *NBC Nightly News*, and *Time* magazine?¹⁸ 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 improve political, social, and economic practices. 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.

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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, 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 more 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, 5
culture, 5
mass media, 6
mass communication, 6
digital communication, 8
selective exposure, 9
convergence, 10

cross platform, 11
narrative, 13
high culture, 15
low culture, 15
modern period, 24
Progressive Era, 25
postmodern period, 25

media literacy, 27
critical process, 27
description, 28
analysis, 28
interpretation, 28
evaluation, 29
engagement, 29

For review quizzes, chapter summaries, links to media-related Web sites, and more, go to macmillanlearning.com/mediaculture11e.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Culture and the Evolution of Mass Communication

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

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 so?

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 ongoing wars in the Middle East. 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?

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- **REVIEW WITH LEARNINGCURVE**
LearningCurve, available on LaunchPad for Media & Culture, uses gamelike quizzing to help you master the concepts you need to learn from this chapter.

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