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Media Literacy in the Digital Age

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- >> Define media literacy.
- >> Explain how mediated and nonmediated communication differ.
- >> Define the role of semiotics and framing in influencing our understanding of the world and media content.
- >> Define media grammar and describe its various aspects in different media.
- >> Explain how commercial forces influence media organizations and content.
- >> Define media bias and its effects on media content.
- >> Use basic media-literacy skills to improve your critical thinking when consuming media content.

Fake news became a major issue in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and has only grown in its importance and impact since the election. Of course, the notion of fake news is not new: It has been around since at least the nineteenth century. In fact, in 1896 U.S. populist presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan complained bitterly about the fake news of his day. He said that you simply should not trust the lying media. His words resonant loudly in the twenty-first century.[1]

And it isn't only in the United States that fake news resonates. In countries as far away as China, complaints of fake news have become widespread.[2] In March 2017 the state-run media of the People's Republic of China declared that reports of torture against political opponents were fabrications. One government tweet claimed such accusations were "FAKE NEWS," and another said they were "prejudice-based." An article in the *People's Daily* claimed the criticisms were nothing but "cleverly orchestrated lies."

Knowing what news and information to trust has become a major challenge as political leaders offer "alternative facts" and question virtually every established source of once-recognized reliable sources, from the FBI to CNN.[3] In an era in which no source of information seems sacred, the notion of media literacy has never been more vital. Being able to evaluate news and information quickly, confidently, and judiciously is a skill of critical importance to both the average citizen and the media professional.

News flows via the Internet at breakneck speed and reaches the public in interactive form. Each person must decide what to believe in a blizzard swirling with news and information. Moreover, each citizen can make choices about what information to "like" or "share" online with friends, family, or followers. The impact of such decisions may be far-reaching and might play a key role in a wide variety of areas—from elections to the marketplace.

News and information, whether in digital or analog form, bear certain qualities and characteristics. The grammar of the media can offer important clues about what information is credible, what is of dubious value, what is likely propaganda

meant to deceive, and what is offered as satire and humor in an otherwise sometimes bleak media arena.

Comparing the varying perspectives on fake news across the centuries and the continents raises interesting questions about the role of media in our increasingly global society. Have the media gradually helped change public attitudes about the nature of news and information? As political leaders increasingly decry what they see as fake news, has public trust in any source of information eroded?

Also, a media outlet itself may influence the acceptance of stories as truthful or false. If a piece of news bursts into public view via Twitter instead of a mainstream news source such as the *New York Times*, do you think public reaction will be any different?

We live in a media society. Mass media surround and influence our world in a variety of ways. They entertain us, they inform us, and they sell us everything from household products to political candidates. Although we often tend to study media and mass communications as something separate from our culture, society, and daily lives, the fact is that media are just as real as the "real world."

Media are pervasive in modern life, making it more important than ever to understand how their messages may influence us. We must look critically at all media we encounter: We need to understand how media organizations work as businesses, how they fit into other aspects of society, and how they can influence culture and manipulate public opinion.

In this chapter, we explain some basic principles of media literacy in both non-digital and digital media while teaching you to analyze critically the media messages you encounter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Compare news articles about the size of the crowd at President Trump's inauguration. Look at how the *Huffington Post* characterized the crowd size.[4] What differences do you see in how the stories were depicted, and what effect do you think such framing had on public opinion about President Trump and his popularity as reflected in the size of the inaugural crowd?

Education and Media

In school, we learn to read, write, and do arithmetic. We learn about history, other cultures, literature, science, and politics. We learn athletic skills and teamwork; we can even learn about art, mechanics, computer programming, and cooking.

But we also learn much from our daily and extensive interactions with media content—some may even argue that we learn more of practical value from daily exposure to media than to class content during a typical school day. The common component of the four functions of mass communication mentioned in the previous chapter—surveillance, correlation, cultural transmission, and entertainment—is that they essentially educate and inform us.

This raises a significant question: If media are so pervasive in our lives, why aren't we studying them in the same way that we study geography or biology, for example? Why can we take a class in high school on how to dismantle a car engine

but not one that teaches us how to deconstruct our modern systems of media and mass communications?

The question highlights two interesting and related issues. First, it shows that education, like media, is not something separate from our lives. We are learning all the time, even when not in a formal academic setting such as a classroom or when doing homework. Second, given that we are learning all the time through our interactions with each other and with media content, we must strive to ensure that what we are learning is accurate and useful. This requires skills to examine where that learning is coming from and how it may be affecting our thought processes.

Educators have recognized a growing need to teach media-literacy skills to school-age children, starting as young as kindergarten or elementary school and continuing to high school graduation. Some countries, such as Canada and Australia, have taken the lead in media-literacy education, while the United States generally lags behind. This is changing, however, and a growing number of states, such as New Jersey, have implemented statewide media-literacy guidelines for K–12 schools.

media literacy

The process of interacting with and critically analyzing media content by considering its particular presentation, its underlying political or social messages, and its ownership or regulation issues that may affect what is presented and in what form.

What Is Media Literacy?

Being able to read a book, navigate a website or post a tweet, and recognize that a background music change signals a scary part of a movie are all types of media literacy. Some fall under what we would consider the traditional meaning of the term "literacy," and others can be classified as visual literacy or computer literacy. Media literacy encompasses all these skills and many more, and the various approaches to media education differ to some degree on what exactly media-literacy education should entail.

Media literacy can be defined as the process of critically analyzing media content by considering its particular presentation, its underlying political or social messages, and its media ownership or regulation that may affect the type of content we receive. Some approaches to media education emphasize media-creation skills as a way to examine our media critically, through either creative media projects or alternative media production such as recreating a popular commercial from a feminist perspective.

Developing media literacy is an ongoing process, not simply a goal. Even though you can never attain perfection, it is always possible to improve your media literacy and thus become a wiser media user. The importance of media in contemporary society makes it imperative that audience members think critically about media content to better control their actions and not be controlled by media messages. Learning new skills in creating media, such as taking courses on graphic design or video production, can help further your media literacy.

Media-literacy scholar W. James Potter talks about building "knowledge structures," ways to visualize developing one's level of knowledge on a given topic or topics.[5] If, for example, you have a basic understanding of the history of the World Wide Web, and someone claims to have been on Facebook since 2001, you can be confident that he or she is incorrect: Facebook was not created until 2004 (and then only for Harvard students).

Still, media literacy entails more than simply remembering historical facts. Media consumers should always question what they see, hear, or otherwise experience when receiving or interacting with mediated communication. Is a news story

Learning media-literacy skills has become even more important for students today. At campuses around the nation, professors like Melissa Zimdars at Merrimack College are addressing media literacy issues and skills head-on. When Zimdars started keeping a list of popular but unreliable news sites and then made her list public, she received a lot of attention—some praise and some criticism. Why do you think some readers might be critical of Zimdars's list?

biased? Why is it even news? Does a popular television show or video game encourage gender or racial stereotypes or antisocial behavior? What is an advertiser really trying to sell and to whom? These are just a sample of the kinds of questions critical media consumers should ask.

It is important to develop knowledge not just about the media but also about the larger social, political, and economic forces that influence media content, media production, and communication technologies in general. To that end, we must first step back and consider what a medium is. Then we will look at some of the concerns people have had over the years about the effects that media may or may not have on us.

What Makes Mediated Communication Different?

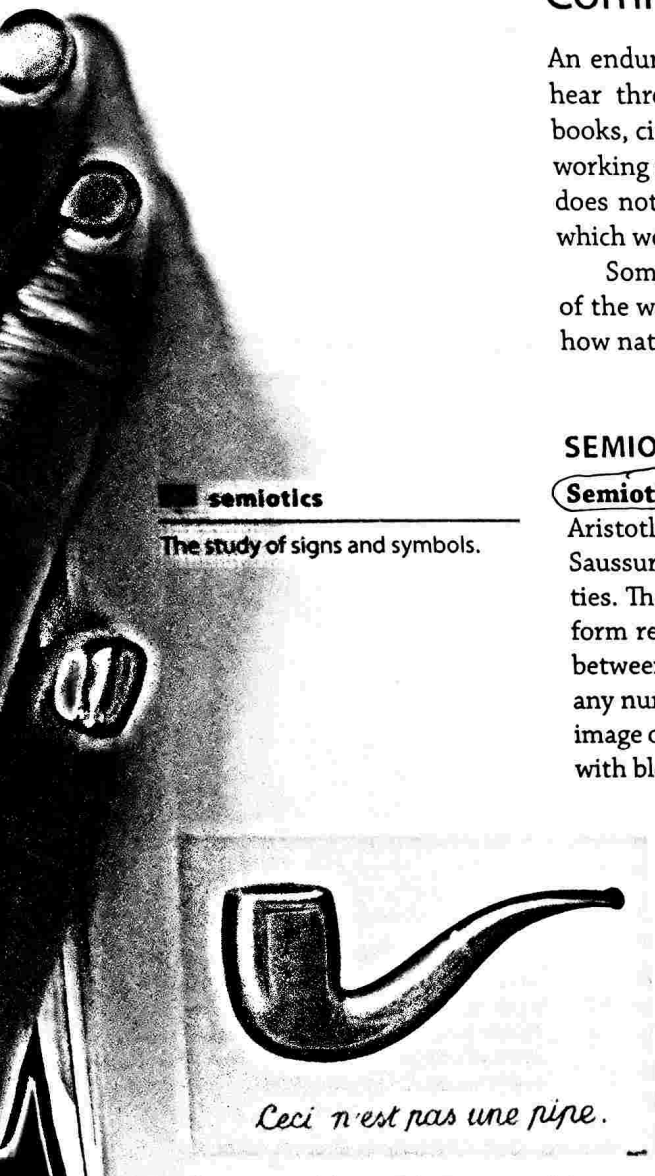
An enduring and fundamental concern about the media is that what we see and hear through mediated communication—the signs, symbols, and words from books, cinema, radio television, and various digital platforms including social networking media—can somehow affect us in ways that nonmediated communication does not. This assumption has led to a large body of research on media effects, which we discuss in more detail in Chapter 13.

Some theoretical frameworks offer explanations of how we may make sense of the world through media and how the media messages we receive seem somehow natural.

SEMIOTICS

semiotics
The study of signs and symbols.

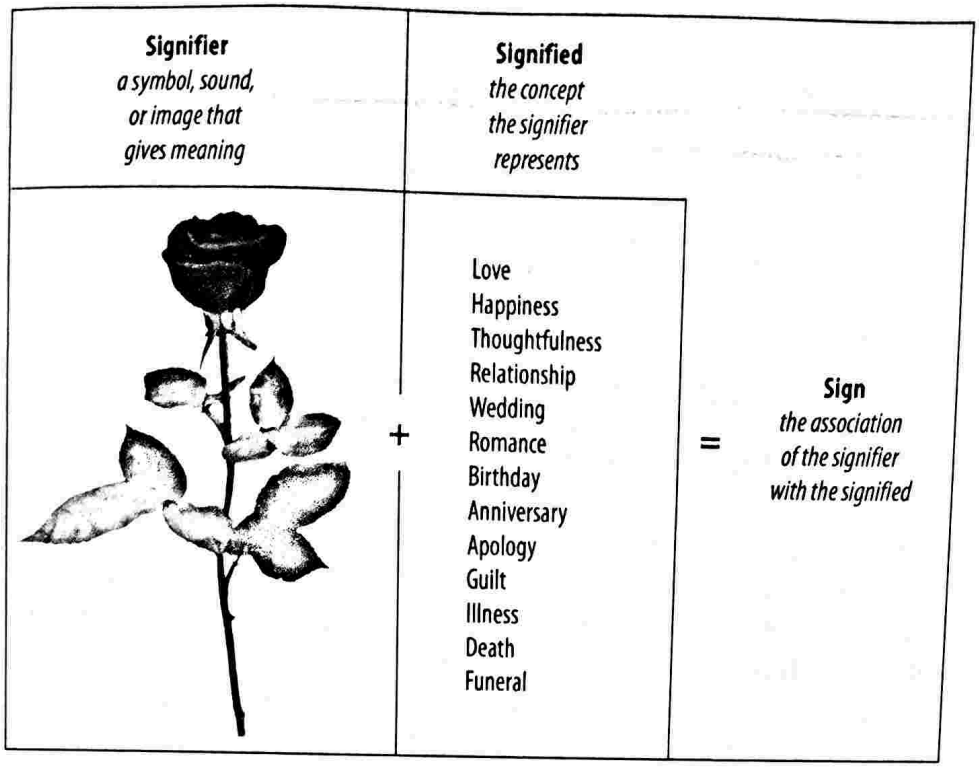
Semiotics the study of signs and symbols, goes back in some form to Plato and Aristotle. Contemporary semiotics has been greatly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of linguistics, and his notion of signs as having dual properties. These properties are the signifier, or the form; and the signified, or what the form represents (some semioticians propose a third component, an interpretant, between these two). For example, an image of a rose, the signifier, may signify any number of things, or signifieds, depending on the context (see Figure 2-1). An image of a rose on a Valentine's Day card may mean one thing, whereas a rose tattoo with blood-dipped thorns on the arm of a biker may mean something else entirely. Context plays a major role in the audience's understanding of the signified, even when the signifier remains the same. The power of signs to affect our thinking should not be underestimated. René Magritte's famous painting of a pipe that also says "This is not a pipe" illustrates how we typically take the sign as reality. Most people, when shown his painting and asked what it is, will reply, "A pipe." But Magritte is absolutely correct: His picture of a pipe is not actually a pipe—it is simply a picture of a pipe.



Rene Magritte's famous "This is not a pipe" picture reminds us how we mistakenly understand the representation of something as the thing itself.

We must also remember that in semiotics, "sign" does not simply refer to visual images but to words as well. Words could be considered a more complex form of sign, for we have to learn that certain sounds carry particular meanings (which are entirely arbitrary). There is no logical reason that the color red is called "red" in English, "rojo" in Spanish, and "aka" in Japanese; all of these are simply linguistic conventions for those particular languages.

FIGURE 2-1 Semiotic Signifier and Signified



When Gertrude Stein said, "A rose is a rose is a rose," she was highlighting the semiotic principle that we subconsciously associate items, such as a rose, with imagery and emotions. A rose (the signifier) can mean many different things (the signified), depending on the context. Examining this relationship (the sign) deepens our understanding of the ways we generate meaning when we communicate.

Although this point may seem rather obvious, another semiotic insight is not quite so evident. Once we learn what certain sounds mean (or what certain visual images mean), we take what we have learned as natural and accept it largely without question. This fact makes the creation and use of signs extremely powerful because it not only influences our thinking but even directs certain behaviors. Think of what you do without question, for example, whenever you are driving and come to a stop sign.

Similarly, an indexical sign is visual but signifies something else to which it is not actually related except by association. Consider the image of a floppy disk in most software programs that indicates the "save file" function. Most computers in use today do not even have floppy-disk drives, yet we understand what the image has come to represent.

Some scholars argue that semiotics is the heart of communication. Noted semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, in his book *A Theory of Semiotics*, asserts, "Every act of communication to or between human beings—or any other intelligent biological or mechanical apparatus—presupposes a signification system as its necessary condition." In other words, without a common understanding of what signs mean, whether they are visual or lingual, we would not be able to communicate.

Some knowledge of semiotics is required for a deeper understanding of the processes of communication and the production of meaning among people and in cultures. It is also especially important for advertising professionals who seek insights into how target audiences may receive various ad and branding campaigns.

FRAMING

framing

The presentation and communication of a message in a particular way that influences our perception of it.

Trump, in Optimistic Address, Asks Congress to End 'Trivial Fights'

BREITBART NEWS DAILY: TRUMP'S TRIUMPHANT ADDRESS

The New York Times and *Breitbart News* quite differently frame their coverage of President Donald Trump's first address to a Joint Session of Congress on February 28, 2017. The *Times*, a mainstream news source, describes the address in more reserved tones, calling it "optimistic," adding that the president told the members of Congress it is time to end "trivial fights." Meanwhile, *Breitbart*, a conservative news source, describes Trump's speech as "triumphant."

All forms of mass communication, including news, employ **framing**, which works in much the same manner as signs in semiotics. It relies on the notion that we classify, organize, and interpret things into certain schema, or frameworks, to simplify the complex. We have to do this just to get through the day; if we carefully considered and analyzed every message we received, we would never be able to leave the house in the morning. Instead, we take mental shortcuts with much of what we encounter, letting some things go unexamined as we carry on with our lives.

Frames act much like signs and symbols in semiotics: Once accepted, they appear natural and go largely unquestioned. They also shape our perceptions of people, places, issues, and events. Two words—"rights" versus "benefits"—provide a simple example of framing. If an Iraq War veteran is lobbying the government to obtain better health care and services for injuries, demanding veterans' rights has a different connotation than asking for veterans' benefits. The term "benefits" suggests something extra, a privilege perhaps not available to other people and therefore unequal or unfair. Arguing for veterans' rights, on the other hand, suggests something fundamental that is being withheld.

Framing may sound simply like spin, but it is not. We all frame our world, and good communicators know how to frame debates in ways that favor their views and disadvantage those of opponents. A persuasive communicator who wins the framing battle also likely wins that particular debate. Pollster and political communications consultant Frank Luntz helps conservative politicians reframe words to persuade others. See Table 2-1 for examples.

Similarly, George Lakoff, UC Berkeley professor of linguistics and cognitive science, discusses liberal framing, often chastising Democrats for failing to employ persuasive depictions of controversial issues such as health care. See Table 2-2 for examples of liberal reframing. Note how some of these have successfully become the dominant term for the issue, just as some terms have for conservative frames.

Framing is of great consequence in today's world because of the ubiquity of mass-communication media. It is easy to see how this media coverage can shape our perceptions of

Through framing, the media tell us how to think about an issue or topic. For example, one news outlet might frame a story about funding for Planned Parenthood as a matter of women's reproductive rights, while another might frame it in the context of abortion.

TABLE 2-1 Reframing Political Issues for Conservatives

NEVER SAY	INSTEAD SAY
Tax cuts	Tax relief
Inheritance tax	Death tax
Undocumented workers/aliens	Illegal immigrants
Drilling for oil	Exploring for energy

Source: Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*

TABLE 2-2 Reframing Political Issues for Liberals

ISSUE OR CAUSE	DISCUSSED AS
Tax subsidies	Corporate welfare (Ralph Nader)
Gay marriage	Same-sex marriage
Tax increases for the wealthy	Paying a fair share
Abortion debate	Pro-choice or women's rights

the world, especially when "framed" conversations are intensified by the **echo effect**, a phenomenon that occurs when people surround themselves with online voices that echo their own, reinforcing their views and the belief that those opinions are in the majority when, in fact, they may not be. But, as we will see, concerns about media effects are not new.

echo effect

A phenomenon that occurs when people surround themselves with online voices that echo their own, reinforcing their views and the belief that those opinions are in the majority when, in fact, they may not be.

Early Concerns of Media Effects

Over the last century, public concern has arisen about the possible effects of each new medium of mass communication as it has emerged. Questions have been asked about each medium's impact on culture, political processes, children's values and behaviors, and the like. In the 1920s, much of the public became worried about the depiction of sex, violence, and lawlessness in film. In recent years, questions have proliferated about how the Internet and video games may influence us, even perhaps altering how we think.

Such anxieties have a long history. In the 1800s, critics warned that newspapers caused juvenile crime. Moralists believed that the flow of sensational news stories about crime and vice would lead people to imitate such immoral behavior. In 1888, *Punch* magazine attributed Jack the Ripper's crimes committed in Whitechapel, a rough inner-city district of London, to "highly coloured pictorial advertisements."

Alarm about the effects of media on children has even deeper roots. We know that in ancient Greece, philosophers Socrates and Plato worried about the influence of literacy on children. Plato was especially apprehensive about the morally corrupting resonance of poetry, particularly allegorical tales such as Homer's *Battles of the Gods*, which he sought to ban.[6] In 360 BCE, Plato offered this reasoning:

> Children cannot distinguish between what is allegory and what isn't, and opinions formed at that age are usually difficult to eradicate or change; it is therefore of the utmost importance that the first stories they hear shall aim at producing the right moral effect.
>
> *HE REPUBLIC*

It is hard today to appreciate the profound effect writing once had on society. No longer was a good memory prized as it was in a nonliterate oral culture, because memorization was not needed to store information. The form of storytelling changed with writing because repetitive phrases were no longer needed as memory

prompts for storytellers, and the rhythm and cadences of what was written differed from what had been spoken.

Moreover, storytellers could lose control of their words in written form. Someone could take a person's words and twist their meaning, with no chance for an immediate response or perhaps any response at all. In fact, the author of a work had no way of knowing who might read it or when. Greek children sneaking off with a scroll of poetry to read in secret may seem comical; but in a fundamental sense, this is no different from kids today sneaking into an R-rated movie in the multiplex or surreptitiously removing the parental controls on the cable TV service or computer.

Plato's issues with writing as a new medium relate to its particular media grammar, knowledge of which is integral to the development of media literacy.

Media Grammar

media grammar

The underlying rules, structures, and patterns by which a medium presents itself and is used and understood by the audience.

First, a critical consumer of media messages must understand **media grammar**, the underlying rules, structures, and patterns by which a medium presents itself and is used and understood by the audience. Each medium of mass communication presents its messages uniquely. With media familiar through widespread use or exposure, we do not often think about the extent to which media grammar affects our perceptions—what we see and how we see it. In many respects, it becomes background in much the same way that semiotic signs become natural to us. Nevertheless, media grammar can have profound implications for our understanding of media content. We become more aware of it when we encounter a new medium whose rules we do not yet know.

Here, we will look briefly at the main forms of media, the basics of their particular grammar, and their potential effects on our perceptions and expectations.

Even without knowing the language, we can often recognize what kind of foreign newspaper we are viewing simply from the look of the publication. **CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION: What visual aspects of the newspaper help us identify its type of publication and its type of target audience?**

PRINT MEDIA

Print media, partly due to their long history compared to other types of mass communication, have developed a very sophisticated media grammar. Everything about a printed book—its physical dimensions, the artwork on its jacket, the size and style of the typeface, whether it is hardcover or paperback, whether it contains pictures or not—conveys important messages to the potential buyer beyond the actual content. Within a book itself, several aspects of media grammar have evolved over the years. Spacing between words to aid reading comprehension is an early example, as are page numbering, tables of contents, indexes, and chapter headings. Many of these conventions we now take for granted actually took years to become widely adopted and standard in books.

Newspapers have their own types of media grammar that have also evolved over time and that continue to change. An

obvious example is the number of color photos and graphics in newspapers today compared to forty years ago. Because space is limited in a newspaper, more graphics means less room for text. Many media critics and journalists have complained that this packaging of news into relatively short, easy-to-read units accompanied by splashy visuals does readers a disservice by not providing them with the necessary depth of information. Proponents of the trend argue that to compete with television and other visual media for audience attention, newspapers must present news in formats that accommodate readers' busy lifestyles.

Most newspapers are organized into sections, such as sports, business, and local news. Not only do these help organize information so that readers can quickly find stories that interest them, but they also create parameters for what types of stories to expect. Sections also help define where certain advertisers prefer to appear in the paper, showing how media grammar can intersect with commercial interests.

Magazines use sophisticated graphic and design techniques, even more so than newspapers, and feature more long-form writing, often with just one or two articles per page and multipage pieces. Advertising often takes up a full page, and in some magazines it is hard to tell immediately if something is an ad rather than graphics at the beginning of a feature. Magazines combine certain elements of books and newspapers in their media grammar. Because of their length, they usually have a table of contents (many also have an advertiser index) that helps readers rapidly access specific articles. Like newspapers, magazines are often divided into subject-related sections within their topic areas.

Given that the grammar for print media developed over hundreds of years, we have adapted surprisingly quickly to the rise of electronic media, especially audio and, later, video.

actualities

Edited audio clips from interviews with people.

voice-over

An unseen announcer or narrator talking while other activity takes place, either on radio or during a television scene.

RADIO AND RECORDED MUSIC

Radio and recorded music have their own grammar, one based only on sound. Radio uses a combination of audio techniques to achieve different ends. These include volume changes, multiple audio tracks, **actualities** (i.e., edited audio clips from interviews with people), sound effects, and **voice-overs**, all of which can be used to convey information, capture attention, or evoke a mood or scene.

Recorded music typically conforms to particular stylistic conventions, especially regarding length (less than five minutes a song) and music format. Popular music genres, such as hip-hop, rock, and country, have certain rhythms, lyrical styles, and sounds that make them clearly distinguishable. This underlying media grammar of specific categories or genres makes it easier to market and promote artists. Once again, we see how media grammar can interact with the economic interests of the media. Radio stations brand themselves by the genres they generally play, making it easier for audiences to pick stations that play music they like.

Rush Limbaugh is a conservative commentator, considered the father of today's politically oriented talk show format.

Still, putting music into genres such as this has its drawbacks. Someone with a sound or style that does not readily conform to a well-established genre may find it harder to get airplay because radio stations are reluctant to play something that does not fit nicely into their established formats. An artist may also find it difficult to get a recording contract in the first place, for a recording label will not want to sign someone it believes radios will not want to promote.

Even the apparently chaotic talk radio has a well-defined media grammar. It is one of the few traditional mass-communication formats to include frequent interaction between media producers or hosts and the audience. Despite its highly interactive nature, however, those who call in are obviously in a subordinate position, as they do not control how long they speak and can even be disconnected at any time.

Although radio developed years before television became a mass medium, and some of the earliest television shows were taken directly from popular radio programs, media producers and audiences had already developed a fairly complex visual grammar, thanks in large part to the popularity of movies.

FILM AND TELEVISION

Film and television have much shorter histories than print, but they have developed an intricate media grammar based on editing, camera angles, lighting, movement, and sound.

In the early history of film, for example, most movies were only a few minutes long and either simply recorded daily activities or essentially filmed short stage plays. Filmmakers started producing more sophisticated story lines for their short films and introduced a technique unique to film at the time—crosscut scenes. By crosscutting different scenes to simulate events happening simultaneously in two different locations (think of the classic scenes of a train heading down the tracks and a woman tied to the tracks by the villain), filmmakers were able to tell much more complex and dramatic stories. Further, increasing the speed between crosscut scenes increased dramatic tension.

In what has been dubbed geek-chic TV, *The Big Bang Theory*, the most popular comedy since *Friends*, follows the exploits of another group of friends, most of whom are nerdy scientists. This multi-cam sitcom prompts mirthful responses from its devoted and enormous TV audience with a prominent laugh track. **CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION: With closed captions instead of volume on, watch an episode of your favorite sitcom that has a laugh track. Do you chuckle as readily without the auditory cues?**

With many more such tools at their disposal, today's filmmakers are able to convey a lot of information, all through visual or audio techniques. Think of how we respond to background music and strong shadows in horror movies, or how we understand a dream sequence or flashback, or how we visually distinguish good characters from bad even before the plot or dialog has revealed their true natures.

The media grammar of television fiction employs many of the same techniques seen in movies, although television production budgets are, of course, much smaller than movie budgets. Consider the media grammar of an average sitcom—it is usually shot on a set, with perhaps fewer than half a dozen locations (almost always indoors), and the actors come and go as if on a stage. The camera is usually stationary, although multiple camera angles are used; and punchlines are reinforced by

a **laugh track**, which in some sitcoms can be timed with almost clockwork precision (even if the line isn't particularly funny).

Other types of television shows—such as game shows, soap operas, talk shows, and news—have their own media grammars. Television news, especially, has borrowed some elements of online media grammar—which had originally borrowed heavily from television for graphical user interfaces such as windows and digital video. Examples include multiple windows on the television screen showing different kinds of information and scrolling news tickers across the bottom of the screen giving updates.

laugh track

A television sitcom device that generates prerecorded laughter timed to coincide with punchline of jokes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Consider the media grammar of a popular film, focusing especially on how camera angles give the audience cues as to what to think and feel about the characters. Identify as many different camera techniques and their possible meanings as you can and compare with other students' interpretations.

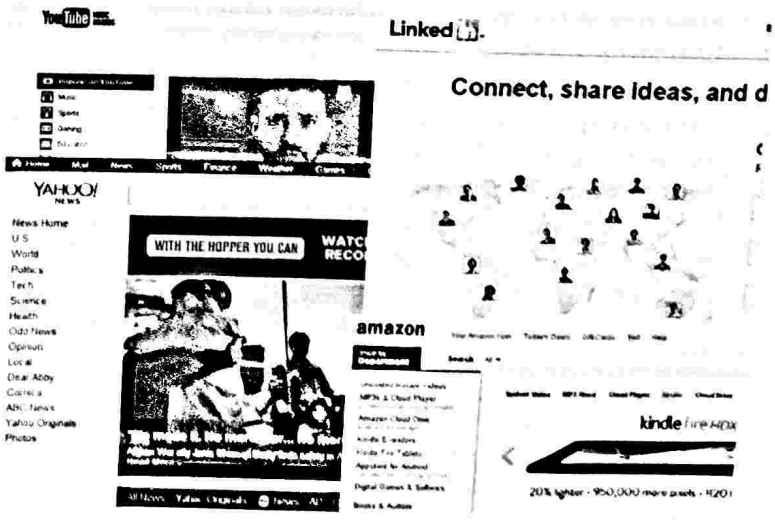
DIGITAL-MEDIA GRAMMAR

We may be thoroughly familiar and comfortable with the Internet and social media, but many people throughout the world have limited or no contact with the online realm, whose grammar is still developing. The web of 2004 bears little resemblance to the web today, and the web will look even more different ten years from now.

Even with constant changes in the web, certain elements of media grammar have been established. **Hypertext**, for example, is generally either underlined or otherwise set apart typographically or graphically from nonlinked text. More and more web designers are following an unwritten rule to include a website logo in the upper-left corner of the screen linked to the website's home page. Icons in the form of buttons, badges, and other symbols create a visual, interactive language that lets us interact easily with the content and inform others on our social networks what we are reading or doing. Other examples include more or less standardized icons for functions such as printing, opening a document, playing a video, emailing a document, and zooming in or out.

hypertext

Text online linked by HTML coding to another web page or website or to a different part of the same web page.



Many websites share certain conventions that users have come to expect, such as a link in the upper-left corner back to the home page. Of increasing importance as well is the grammar of various mobile and social networking media. The compactness of a 140-word tweet, the visual dynamics of a ten-second video on Snapchat, or the social capital of liking someone or something on Facebook all shape our perceptions of reality.

The media grammar of digital media evolves with our communication devices. Today, we think nothing of swiping across the screen on our mobile phone to move to a new window or pinching the screen to zoom out. These kinds of touch-screen interfaces, in turn, affect the design and features of websites, further changing the look and feel of the web.

The digital media grammar has adopted freely from traditional media forms that it has absorbed, but it has also continued to innovate and create new ways for us to interact with the media. For example, the shift from a point-and-click interaction with a mouse to touch-screen swipes and "pinches" to manipulate the content helps make us aware that there is nothing

natural about how we use media today. The same principle applies to how the lution of our current media system operates and how it has evolved, even th we are often so embedded in that system that it is hard to step outside of it examine it critically.

Implications of Commercial Media

Even in open and democratic societies with a free press, economic factors and c porate decisions often influence what is and is not covered in the news and wh kind of entertainment is created for the general public. Rarely do typical med consumers think of the commercial factors that shape the content they see ever

MEDIA PIONEERS

Marshall McLuhan

International cultural icon and provocative media prophet Marshall McLuhan is known today less for a prolific body of writing than for a couple of prescient precepts so oft repeated they now border on the cliché. Yet the scholar who coined aphorisms as familiar as "the global village" and "the medium is the message" leaves a colorful pioneering legacy as a public intellectual few academics can claim.

"Academic" was nonetheless a profession the twenty-year-old undergraduate expressly rejected in 1930s Western Canada. As Terence Gordon explains, "He was learning *in spite of his professors* (emphasis in original), but he would become a professor of English in spite of himself."[7] After receiving a BA from the University of Manitoba, McLuhan went on to Cambridge University, where he finished another BA (1936), required to proceed to an MA (1939) and a PhD (1942). Following a period of agnosticism in his youth, McLuhan became a devout Roman Catholic (a conversion his Baptist mother had discouraged); and from 1946 until experiencing a stroke in 1979, he taught at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto.

With spectacular sales of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) came pop-culture fame, a degree of mainstream recognition arguably unprecedented for a North American academic. During the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies, McLuhan counted iconic figures as diverse as then Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau and hippie guru Timothy Leary among those he influenced. Marshall advised Pierre on television appearances and allegedly inspired Tim's buzz phrase "turn on, tune in, drop out."[8] "Whatcha doin', Marshall McLuhan?" was a recurring line on *Laugh-In*, a popular TV comedy of the era. In 1969, *Playboy* made a serious attempt to answer such a question in a lengthy interview with McLuhan at home in the Toronto suburbs where he lived with his wife and several children. Woody Allen, in his 1977 tour de force *Annie Hall*, even cast McLuhan as himself in a cameo scene satirizing a pedantic and pretentious media professor.

McLuhan, however, was not simply famous for being famous. A rare visionary, he foresaw in the sixties, long before the Internet, a global village created by the movement from print to electronic media. And one of his most significant and enduring contributions to the yet undefined area of media literacy was a directive to look beyond the superficial content of the message and consider how the intrinsic, various, and complex effects of the medium—another message in itself—affect our perceptions.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, his arresting pronouncements and his celebrity status, the work of the Canadian media theorist has been denounced by some for dilettantism, cryptic rhetoric, and empirically unsubstantiated claims that unabashedly baffle, among other perceived flaws. McLuhan, characterizing his academic inquiries as "probes," remained apparently unfazed by critics, even wryly professing to share some of their confusion: "I don't pretend to understand it. After all, my stuff is very difficult."[9]

day, forces that affect everything from what types of entertainment shows are produced to what kind of news is reported.

These activities happen at the local, national, and international levels. At the local level, reducing the number of reporters at a news organization to save money can result in a noticeable drop in local coverage, such as coverage of area schools. The newspaper company may save money, but the public is poorer for the lessened coverage of local issues. A company that advertises heavily in a local newspaper may gain undue influence in the paper's decision as to whether to publish articles critical of it by threatening to withdraw its advertising. Or a newspaper publisher with other business interests in tourism or real estate, for example, may influence coverage by discouraging or even forbidding reports on certain crimes that may hurt these commercial ventures.

Such manipulation of content is not confined to small-town media outlets. In 1998, HarperCollins, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, cancelled a book by Chris Patten, former British governor of Hong Kong. *East and West* was reportedly highly critical of China's policies, and Murdoch at the time was courting China to accept Murdoch's Star TV satellite and cable programs. Similarly, a few years prior, he removed the BBC from Star TV when Chinese leaders expressed displeasure at the BBC's reports on the killings in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. More recently, accusations swirled about Murdoch's undue influence on the 2013 elections in his native Australia, where he controls 70 percent of the capital city news circulation. The publishing mogul was allegedly using his newspaper headlines and even front pages to promote his candidate and party of choice.[10]

These incidents are not meant to illustrate that Rupert Murdoch is particularly greedy or selfish; similar stories of corporate decisions influencing what we see or do not see can be told about all of the major media corporations and will be covered in more detail throughout the book, especially Chapter 11 on media ethics.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Would you be willing to pay an annual television licensing fee if television networks and cable companies promised to show fewer commercials? If so, how much would you be willing to pay? Would you pay more to see no commercials?

COMMERCIAL-MEDIA DEBATE

Media scholar Robert McChesney has written several books that reveal how corporate media have adversely affected the quality of communications content we receive and how media companies have lobbied the government to further their own corporate interests at the expense of the public interest. He claims that today's corporate media giants actually harm our democracy and political processes in a number of ways. These range from poor news coverage that does not challenge the status quo (especially when it comes to media companies' own business investments) to banal entertainment that dulls our senses and incessant advertising that implies happiness is found through consumerism—although, as we discuss later, most media outlets depend on that very advertising to exist.

According to McChesney, the commercial nature of mass communications underlies all mass media. And all would agree, regardless of political ideology, that

Media scholar Robert McChesney founded Free Press to promote media reform and to weaken the power of corporate media giants.

it takes money to run a media organization. The question becomes one of where the money comes from—the commercial marketplace or public sources of funding.

Arguably, media companies are businesses just like any other; and a business that fails to turn a profit will fail to do right by its private owners or shareholders if it is publicly traded. In recent history, media businesses have been among the most profitable of any industry, with annual profit margins typically around 20 percent.

On the other hand, critics of our corporate media system argue that media companies are not like other companies, that their "products"—the signs and symbols that shape our culture and views of the world through the news and entertainment we consume—influence our thinking and behavior considerably more than other types of products. Therefore, media companies should be publicly funded so that they are not as beholden to the marketplace and the influence of market logic on media content.

Proponents of commercial media identify the profit motive as a key incentive for media companies to produce quality content that people will want to watch or read. The Disney Company, for example, is among the most profitable of major publicly owned media companies in the United States. And it is recognized for its quality entertainment products, including award-winning motion pictures, recorded music, and television (it owns the ABC television network and ESPN, the sports channel on television).

Critics claim, however, that financial pressures can lead media companies, especially publicly traded companies, to focus on the short term with decisions such as cutting costs or laying off staff, actions that may increase near-term profits but decrease the quality of a product such as news coverage. These profits may be immediate but not sustainable.

Critics also assert that consumers actually have fewer media content choices than we believe, thanks in large part to the concentration of media ownership.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Imagine a media system that is entirely publicly funded and government run. What problems might arise with such a system, and how might programming be different?

CONCENTRATION OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP

Economies of scale provide financial incentives for most companies. Strictly speaking, "economy of scale" refers to the decrease in unit manufacturing cost that results from mass production. Media enterprises can reduce costs and increase profit by becoming larger and reaching a larger market with their content. Of course, just getting bigger doesn't necessarily translate into greater economies of scale, but it is the

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Mobile Telephony in the Developing World

Despite the prevalence of the Internet and personal computers in the United States and other industrialized countries in Europe, South America, and the Asia-Pacific region, an even stronger competitor to the Internet and PC has emerged in the developing world—the mobile phone.

Mobile telephony can hold several advantages over the Internet in many developing countries. First, poor telecommunications infrastructures in these countries often make landline calls expensive and sporadic at best for those who have phones. Without adequate phone lines, let alone consistent electric power, it is nearly impossible to depend on a PC or regular Internet service. Many of these countries do not have cable television

wires, relying instead on satellite transmission of cable content, when allowed by the governments. In countries such as Malaysia, for example, owning a satellite dish is a crime.

Mobile telephones provide an easy and relatively cheap way to communicate, and text messaging allows further mass coordination so that the phone becomes part of a larger, ad hoc, mass-communication system. They also foster a sense of community among phone users. In Nigeria, for example, women generally run the various stalls in the urban market, coordinating prices with sellers in different locations by mobile phone. What's more, recognizing their common interests and grievances, these sellers joined together to try to alleviate some of the greater problems they faced.

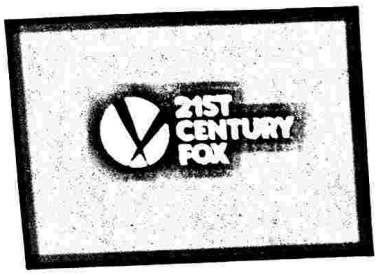
Kenya's M-Pesa, a mobile payment system, has become the primary source of remittances by Kenyans in the city to relatives in the countryside. So popular is M-Pesa that its transactions comprise 31 percent of Kenya's gross domestic product (GDP).[11] M-Pesa was launched by mobile telecommunications company Safaricom, which has nineteen million customers in Kenya, fifteen million of whom use M-Pesa.

Africa's vast number of mobile phone users, estimated at seven hundred million, or 70 percent of the African population, and the lack of bank access for many, means that mobile phone payments are a promising growth area.[12] It shows how technology and economics converge to help developing countries leapfrog rich industrialized countries in some areas.

As low-cost smartphones expand their reach in the developing world, and as companies such as Google begin to deliver free, high-speed, wireless Internet service through its "Project Loon" using aerial balloons, mobile Internet becomes another compelling advantage to mobile media.

basic reason behind a fundamental trend in media over the past half-century. Successful media enterprises have acquired, either through purchase or merger, other media enterprises and have thereby grown in size and scope. Newspaper companies have bought other newspaper companies; radio-station groups have bought other radio-station groups. Cross-media enterprises have acquired other media enterprises, sometimes extending internationally as well. The result is a media system that is increasingly large, multifaceted, and global in ownership. These companies compete with other large media enterprises and across international borders.

Some critics have argued that despite the possible economies of scale, media conglomerates and media monopolies (i.e., when only one media organization serves the public or community) have a significant downside. Greater concentration



Despite News Corporation's split into two separate companies in 2013, one focusing on entertainment and the other on publishing, both are still independently in the top tier of media conglomerates based on company value.

of ownership, or fewer owners owning more media, results in less diversity of media voices and the possible silencing of minority and non-mainstream views—a disservice to the public.

In his book *New Media Monopoly*, Ben H. Bagdikian, one of the most vocal critics of concentrated media ownership, presents evidence that during the 1990s, a small number of the country's largest corporations purchased more public communications power than ever before. In 1983, the biggest media merger to date was a $340 million deal involving the Gannett Company, the newspaper chain that bought Combined Communications Corporation, whose assets included billboards, newspapers, and broadcast stations. In 1996, Disney's acquisition of Capital Cities/ABC cost $19 billion. In 2001, AOL's acquisition of Time Warner dwarfed even this deal at $160 billion.

Although we have not seen deals of this size in the 2000s and 2010s, acquisitions typically continue to occur in the billions of dollars. These include cable provider Comcast's acquisition of NBCUniversal from parent company General Electric for $30 billion in 2009 and completed in 2013; Google's purchase of YouTube in October 2006 for $1.6 billion; and the McClatchy newspaper chain purchase of thirty-two Knight-Ridder newspapers in March 2006 for $4.5 billion.

These large companies, Bagdikian contends, have built a communications cartel within the United States, a group of independent businesses that collaborate to regulate production, pricing, and marketing of goods. This cartel controls industrial products such as gasoline, refrigerators, or clothing. But also at stake are the symbols—the words and images—that define and shape the culture and political agenda of the country. In other words, a cable provider such as Comcast, which in many markets is the sole provider, now also controls the content from its NBCUniversal media properties. Bagdikian writes,

> Aided by the digital revolution and the acquisition of subsidiaries that operate at every step in the mass communications process, from the creation of content to its delivery into the home, the communications cartel has exercised stunning influence over national legislation and government agencies, an influence whose scope and power would have been considered scandalous or illegal twenty years ago.

Bagdikian further notes that 99 percent of the daily newspapers in the United States are the only daily in their cities. Similarly, all but a few of the nation's cable systems are monopolies in their cities. Most of the country's commercial radio stations are part of national ownership groups, and just a half-dozen formats (e.g., all news, rock, hip-hop, adult contemporary, oldies, easy listening) define programming. The major commercial television networks and their local affiliates carry programs of essentially the same type all across the country. Looked at from this perspective, the media do not offer the diversity in content that one would expect, even as the number of TV or radio channels increase.

media oligopoly

A marketplace in which media ownership and diversity are severely limited and the actions of any single media group affect its competitors substantially, including determining the content and price of media products for both consumers and advertisers.

This system is called a **media oligopoly**, a marketplace in which media ownership and diversity are severely limited and the actions of any single media group affect its competitors substantially, including determining the content and price of media products for both consumers and advertisers.

Nine diversified media giants dominate the media worldwide. Many of these international conglomerates are themselves part of a larger company comprising nonmedia business interests or contain in their financial portfolio significant nonmedia commercial properties and investments. They include a wide range of media or channels of distribution. Note that three of the nine started as computer or technology companies and that Google didn't even exist until late 1998.

Each of these nine companies is responsible for much of what we see, hear, or read in traditional media or interact with on the web. Of course, these are not the only media companies in the world: McChesney identifies a "second tier" of about fifty large media companies operating at the national or international level, each doing more than $1 billion of business a year. Any of these second-tier companies, in and of themselves, can be considered a huge media power with an array of business interests, although their revenues pale in comparison to the big nine.

Concentration of media ownership grew even more intense in 2016 with a series of major media mergers and acquisitions across the United States and worldwide. Among the notable acquisitions are Microsoft's $28 billion acquisition of the social network LinkedIn and the Gannett Company's acquisition of the previously family-owned *Record* newspaper of Bergen County, New Jersey, and other news properties.

Becoming literate about the concentration of media ownership and consolidation of media companies into ever-larger companies does not entail simply learning the inside scoop on who owns what. As Bagdikian, McChesney, and other scholars have indicated, the power that these media wield has serious political, societal, and cultural repercussions. If much of the media we consume comes from a handful of large conglomerates, it raises questions about the role that **media bias**, how information may be skewed toward a particular viewpoint, might play in forming our views of politics, society, and culture.

media bias

A real or perceived viewpoint held by journalists and news organizations that slants news coverage unfairly, contrary to professional journalism's stated goals of balanced coverage and objectivity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Consider your level of media diversity by listing the types of shows you watch, material you read, and music you listen to. Trace three different media in this list back to their corporate parents. Classify your tastes into genres, and compare with someone else to assess the diversity of your media consumption.

Media Bias

Both the left and the right claim that the media, especially the news, are biased against them; and both sides can cite various examples in the media, in scholarly studies, and in popular books that supposedly prove their points. If the media make neither side happy, then they must be doing something right, some might say. Still, this rather glib response to an apparent paradox circumvents the very real issue of media bias and how to recognize it.

Professional journalism has a strong culture of what used to be called "objectivity" but is now referred to as "fairness and balance," or the professional duty to cover an issue so that all sides are presented accurately and justly. This also means that professional news reporting should not reveal a journalist's personal views.

We tend to think of the news as objective—a belief supported by its media grammar, particularly the camera angles, lighting, distance between the subject and interviewer, sound, and intercut scenes that all affect our perceptions. The "objective point of view" in television news interviews treats the viewer as an observer. Typically, the camera is kept still, with shots over the shoulder of the journalist interviewing a subject. Prior to the interview, the journalist instructs the subject never to look directly into the camera, a privilege reserved for the news anchor or

Daytime TV shows such as *The Talk* can sometimes bring formerly taboo or controversial social subjects to the public's attention.

field reporter, who often summarizes or concludes her report in this manner that establishes eye contact with the audience. This grammar encourages the viewer to see significant differences between subject and reporter—specifically, the latter's greater authority and objectivity.

Any notion of objectivity or even balance in news coverage has been challenged for a number of reasons. Many question its very possibility. This becomes especially problematic with news stories that feature various groups who may not self-identify the same way they are identified by news organizations. A framing bias could affect a journalist's choice of terms, defining someone as a "terrorist" rather than "rebel," for example. Because most news is about some type of conflict, and because conflicts often involve a disagreement over basic facts or even definitions of terms, news organizations often get caught in semantic battles.

Another criticism of the balanced approach is that in striving for balance, news organizations can simply become stenographers for opposing sides, dutifully reporting what each side says but never providing any context for readers or viewers, thus depriving the audience of relevant information. According to this view, news organizations would serve the public better if they provided more openly partisan commentary and critique on news events, rather than trying to pretend they are above the fray and simply reporting from a fair and balanced perspective.

Finally, some question whether balance, even if it were attainable, is always even a worthy goal. W. Lance Bennett in *News: The Politics of Illusion* argues that giving various positions equal consideration in a debate can confer on them equal legitimacy when this may not be the case, leaving readers and audiences confused about whose views are more credible. (Who knows? After all, both sides had equal airtime.) Many believe, for example, that challenging knowable and empirical realities on purely political grounds only muddies the waters of what should remain a scientific debate.[13]

Media scholars on the left claim that the media are not biased to favor liberals but actually skew toward promoting conservative or at least corporate-friendly

ideologies. Eric Alterman, author of *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News*, argues that the constant refrain from conservative commentators about the media's liberal bias has made many media outlets present more conservative views than they would have otherwise. When representatives of the political left are enlisted to provide an opposing perspective, they are often much closer to the center than some equally qualified experts who may be more liberal, thus shifting the debate to the political right.

Media scholars also cite many examples of pro-business and pro-government bias in news coverage, regardless of the political party in office. Some were highly critical of the complacency of news organizations during George W. Bush's administration as Republican leaders made their case to invade Iraq, which turned out to have neither weapons of mass destruction, as the administration claimed, nor a role in the Al Qaeda attacks on September 11. They also point to coverage of the financial crisis in 2008 that left fundamental issues leading to the crisis largely unquestioned. If media organizations truly had a liberal bias, they say, then there would have been greater critical reporting on such events and more discussion about reforms, rather than the considerable parroting of political and corporate elites that took place with few proposals for systemic changes.

ETHICS IN MEDIA

When Media Report Rape Allegations

Mainstream news media report on a wide range of violent crime. But one type gives journalists particular difficulty: reporting on violence against women, especially sexual assault and rape. Illustrative is a 2016 case involving the early release from prison of a man convicted of the sexual assault of an unconscious woman.

After serving just half of his six-month sentence, convicted sex offender Brock Turner was released from prison. The case had generated news headlines nationally and internationally for a number of reasons, including the short sentence he received for the horrific crime, and for his status as a student athlete at a highly respected and major U.S. university. As the *Intercept* noted, a broad spectrum of mainstream U.S. and international news media received heated criticism for their stories about Turner's release. Leading news sources, including the Associated Press, the BBC, CNN, MSNBC, *Sports Illustrated*, *TIME*, and *USA Today*, referred to Turner in their lead sentences as a "Stanford swimmer." "TIME," the *Intercept* reported, "referred to Turner as a swimmer and didn't note that he had committed a sexual assault until the third line of the story. The magazine called him a 'former Stanford student and star swimmer.'"[14]

The Turner case came at a time of intense national debate about not only sexual assault on college campuses but also how media report on the matter. Coverage sometimes casts doubt on the veracity of the victim's allegations, and often frames the perpetrator in ways that downplay the nature of the crime (e.g., "Stanford swimmer" rather than "convicted sex offender").

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS: Conduct a Google search on the topic of sexual assault or rape and Brock Turner. Read the report of the *Independent*, which examines the complexities of the case and how to accurately report it. Do news reports about sexual assault before the conclusion of a trial unfairly damage the reputation of the victims by questioning their veracity? Or do they unfairly harm the reputation of the accused? Should the media report on allegations that the legal system has not fully vetted?

Media bias occurs not only in news stories, however. Entertainment media play an important role in propagating stereotypes and demonizing certain behaviors. They can also normalize people and activities too. Popular daytime talk shows featuring formerly taboo subjects, ranging from transgender children to domestic violence, can help make discussion of such issues more acceptable, which can in turn lead to these subjects appearing on television shows or dramas, thus becoming even further embedded in our popular culture landscape.

Similarly, advertising can play a role in propagating certain stereotypes or in promoting cultural norms, which has drawn criticism from some groups. In 2013, a Cheerios ad depicting an interracial couple with their child generated thousands of complaints and negative comments in social media from those who considered the portrayal of a black husband and a white wife offensive. Children, on the other hand, saw nothing wrong with the commercial when asked.[15]

Understanding how media bias may affect our thinking and commonsense assumptions about the world is an important aspect of media literacy. Next, we will discuss how to develop media-literacy skills that improve our critical thinking.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: For one day, note how many social media posts you see expressing conservative political views, how many presenting liberal views, and how many dealing with pop culture or entertainment. How might the results influence your views of the world and news?

Developing Critical Media-Literacy Skills

One assumption underlying criticisms of media bias and media effects is that the public is largely passive and accepts unquestioningly the media it consumes. However, audience research has shown that audiences can be quite active in interpreting and using media. Media-literacy skills help us become more engaged and aware media consumers and producers as we learn to think critically about what we receive and transmit.

We have looked at basic media-literacy skills in the form of understanding media framing and bias, as well as the role of media grammars. More advanced critical media-literacy skills help us question our fundamental assumptions about media and think about it in alternative ways.

Here, we provide a brief guide on how to think critically about media you encounter. These skills can be applied in varying degrees with any media, ranging from advertisements to movies, news, and even video games.

1. **What is the purpose of the media content?** Is the purpose to persuade, inform, or entertain? How might the media be working across these functions, perhaps in hidden ways? For example, an advertisement's main purpose may be to persuade you to buy a product, but it may also entertain and inform while doing so. A news story may be presented as primarily informative, but the nature of the story may also persuade audiences to adopt a new position or confirm their existing assumptions about the world.
2. **Consider the source of the media.** Is the news story coming from a media organization known for its political views on either the left or the right? If the source is not a well-known media company but a blogger,

CONVERGENCE CULTURE

Evaluating Online Information

The Internet is full of hoaxes, cranks, scams, and cons. The up-to-the-minute, 24/7 nature of news online and via social media and its low-cost distribution make the Internet an ideal place for misinformation to spread quickly because facts cannot always be quickly verified. Exacerbating the problem is the growing frequency of cyberattacks from around the world. One such cyberattack occurred in October 2016 and caused the disruption of a wide array of online media services including Twitter, Spotify, and Amazon. Beyond retail, Amazon provides web hosting services to many media enterprises, including Netflix, and the cyberattack disrupted users' ability to access video and other content. Numerous other digital media were affected as well: Users experienced significant delays in accessing sites such as CNN, the *Guardian*, *Wired*, HBO, and *People*. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is reportedly investigating but has yet to identify a party responsible for the global denial-of-service attack. The rise of the Internet of things, or the billions of devices from TV sets to refrigerators to light bulbs connected to the Internet, is expected to make the threat of cyberattack even more acute, as each device gives cybercriminals another point of entry into a network or vulnerability.[16]

But perhaps even more pervasive are fake news stories meant to deceive or mislead. Such fake news can circulate widely and rapidly sometimes with little or no vetting for truthfulness. The importance of not understanding the grammar of social media and failing to recognize fake news became a particularly hot topic of debate during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign when social media platforms including Facebook were flooded with fake news items such as "Pope Endorses Trump" and shared by millions.

It is essential for the reader to employ critical thinking skills and media literacy to discern whether a story is likely false. In some cases, a fake story might be deliberately false, as in propaganda. In other cases, it might be satire and not meant to deceive. Fake news often has improbably bold headlines or is poorly written. In any case, the astute audience member will check out story with another source and do her or his own fact checking before sharing it with friends or family.

How do you know when you are being fed a line when online?

- Check the "About Us" section of a website to get background information on who runs it. Do the site's operators identify their mission, their principles, and their sponsors, or do they seem evasive and unclear?
- Scan the sites they link to. Most websites link to others who share their views or similar beliefs. Researchers have found that users of social media often live in an online echo chamber, being exposed to the same narrative over and over.[17] This can lead people to repeatedly see and hear the same points of view on a wide range of issues and events, and thereby reinforce their beliefs, even when those beliefs are belied by the facts. Those living inside a media echo chamber rarely see the diversity of viewpoints available in the wider world. As a result, users can often fall prey to false news or conspiracy theories as everyone they are sharing information with online seems to believe those same things.
- Compare the information on the website with similar stories on other websites, both from branded news names and from smaller sites. If a well-known or respected group has made an important and relevant announcement, the organization's website should post that information as well.
- Question the name of the organization that owns the website. Lobbying groups and other organizations trying to push a specific agenda will often adopt names that mask their true goals or cast them in a euphemistic light, or they will create front groups to hide behind. SourceWatch, a project of the Center for Media and Democracy, is one good website for learning more about the names behind the organizations that appear in the news.
- Do not immediately trust information that lacks a date somewhere on the page. Information that may have been accurate when first posted may well be out of date when you visit the site.
- Cautiously consider information you read from discussion groups, chat rooms, blogs, and tweets, even if the person posting claims to be an expert on the subject. Try to confirm the information with another source, and examine the speaker's academic or professional credentials through a quick Google search. As the famous *New Yorker* cartoon of a dog sitting at a computer talking to another dog said, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." In the Internet age, that dog could be just about anywhere or anyone in the world.

examine the types of organizations the blogger links to for a sense of his or her likely political views. Most websites and blogs link to other sites whose views reflect their own.

3. **Examine framing of media content.** How might the choice of words affect how media consumers perceive the information? How could alternative words possibly change the overall impression of what was written? In news stories, who is interviewed, who is treated as an expert and what organizations do they work for, and how are they framed within the stories? Who is quoted earliest in the story, and who is quoted more often?
4. **What stereotypes are presented?** It takes practice to question stereotypes that appear so frequently they seem natural. One way to challenge your thinking about portrayals of other groups in the media is to consider what you would think if you or your group were portrayed that way. Would you agree with that representation or stereotype? Would you be offended?
5. **Question the media ecosystem.** Identify and question stereotypes as reflected in the media environment or community of channels both online and off (i.e., the media ecosystem). Think about whom the stereotypes help and whom they harm. Is a group or organization profiting in some way from promoting harmful stereotypes, and does the stereotyped group have the same access to media as the dominant group? If not, why not? What kind of media might the stereotyped group produce if it had equal access to media production and distribution?
6. **Make the media.** Learning media production skills beyond writing is invaluable for media literacy as well as for the job market, especially for communications professions. Reconstructing a commercial, a music video, or even a news program from an alternative perspective is an excellent way to challenge your assumptions about the presentation of media and their messages. Thinking about the entrepreneurial possibilities is valuable as well. With the media business in a state of disruption driven by technological, economic, and cultural shifts, innovation is urgently needed, and some of the best ideas have come from journalism and media students.

MEDIA CAREERS

Careers in the media are in transition as jobs evolve and new occupations emerge. According to Alissa Quart, senior editor at *the Atavist*, one of the most important new media career paths is in the area of social justice. These journalists contribute to media literacy by researching and writing on the often complex topics of criminal justice, income inequality, and race, gender, and class. Reporting on these sensitive matters requires both a good sense of societal concerns and strong critical thinking skills. Leading media organizations such as the *New York Times* have recently hired inequality editors and reporters, and more such positions are in the offing around the nation and the world.

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD

Media literacy is not a goal to reach but an ongoing process; skills can always be improved to become a better mass-media consumer, user, and participant. Media literacy involves thinking critically about the media and questioning how different media organizations may be biased in of their selection of stories, their coverage of stories, and even their choice of whom to quote in interviews or invite to speak in panel discussions.

Entertainment media also have biases and can propagate ethnic and gender stereotypes. We may be unaware of the commercial forces that shape the content, largely because we see the end product and not the processes behind the scenes that created the media product.

Consider how commercial forces may not always have the best interests of the public at heart, even when media companies claim they are serving the public or simply giving people what they want. Digital and social media present both an opportunity and a threat for the media and communication industries.

Longstanding corporations, institutions, and entire industries are being turned upside down by the digital revolution. Businesses built on analog technologies of production and distribution are trying to figure out how to adapt in the digital age. New efficiencies of creating and delivering content in a digital, networked environment are emerging throughout the world. Long-held, highly profitable business models based on analog technology are less viable in a digital marketplace. Changes in our media environment also create a greater need for media literacy, especially in the digital realm.

The problem of dealing with the enormous amounts of information available to us, **information overload**, affects everything from government agencies being able to act rapidly on intelligence they have gathered to workers being able to share relevant knowledge within companies.

information overload

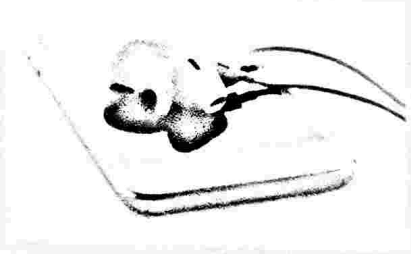
The difficulties associated with managing and making sense of the vast amounts of information available to us.

Some say information overload has also affected the quality of students' work and even their basic understanding of how to research and synthesize information to create new ideas. Some college students submit research papers that are simply cut-and-paste pastiches of material taken from different websites—sometimes without even changing original font styles. Even students who realize that this is not actually the correct way to write a paper can have a hard time discerning trustworthy sources of information on the web.

Some people claim that the constant interruptions typically seen in the workplace have hampered productivity and creativity, with tasks taking longer to complete than in the past and workers feeling less able to concentrate for the extended periods required to tackle complex problems. Email is a major culprit in information overload, but the rise of social media has no doubt contributed to today's frequent interruptions.

Nevertheless, the new digital world means new business opportunities. It means opening new markets formerly restricted by political, economic, and geographic boundaries. It means new storytelling formats that bring true interactivity to media. Whether these fresh opportunities will enhance media diversity remains to be seen. The continued concentration of media ownership suggests that the big media companies threatened by the digital shift are starting to regain control of the media environment.

The rise of user-generated content and social media directly challenges traditional media companies who commanded the public's attention throughout most



Critics contend that Apple deliberately deleted songs from users' iPods if they had been downloaded from competitors' services.

of the twentieth century. The ways the public is creating media, often on nonmarket principles and simply for the joy of sharing and interacting with others, belie the notion that the public is as happy with its mainstream media content as media conglomerates would have us believe.

As some people are discovering, profits are not necessarily the end goal in the sale of packaged media products such as bestselling books. Seth Godin, a noted author on Internet advertising and marketing, makes his books freely available for download on the Internet. What would appear to be the fast track to the poorhouse is Godin's successful strategy to get his books in the hands of many influential people, including business leaders and conference organizers, who then invite him (and pay him well) to speak at events and conferences.

Companies sustain their efforts to keep the public satiated with (and paying for) a never-ending stream of media content that maintains the primarily one-way flow of content from media producer to audience. Scholars such as McChesney doubt the Internet will become a transformational communication technology that can improve democracy and better engage citizens. Whether this occurs or not will depend largely on how media literate the public becomes and how well we develop our moral reasoning and ethical thinking to create the kind of society we want to live in, not just have to live in.

MEDIA MATTERS TESTING YOUR MEDIA LITERACY

You may consider yourself media literate and technologically savvy because you have grown up surrounded by traditional and digital media. But media literacy entails much more than being able to tweet or recalling all the movies in which your favorite actor has appeared. See what you know and what you can find out to determine some of what media literacy involves.

1. Consider a current popular movie that you have seen. Discuss some of its ethnic, religious, gender, or other stereotypes, and consider why they appear. Do they have any consequences for the groups stereotyped?
2. Working in a small group, describe your favorite genre of music (e.g., hip-hop, rock, country) without using the name of the genre, the titles of any songs, or the names of popular artists. Do not hum or imitate the music style. See who can figure out the genre first. Why do you think it was so hard for you to explain without explicitly naming the genre, the songs, or the artists?
3. What visual elements do you normally associate with television news? Compare your list with that of your classmates, and then discuss how and why you think these visual elements came to define the format called "news."
4. In what ways may an advertiser influence the news, if at all?
5. Do you consider information from a blog or tweet or via a mobile device more or less trustworthy than material found on an organization's website? Why do you think so? How do you decide what information to trust online?
6. Conduct an online search for the top ten movies of the past year, and note what genres they fall into (e.g., action, thriller, romantic comedy). Why do you think some genres seem more popular than others?
7. Would you sign a petition in support of tort reform that limits the amount people can sue companies via frivolous lawsuits? What about a petition against the Corporate Immunity Act, which would prevent litigants from fully recovering the damages inflicted on them by corporate wrongdoing? What is the difference between these two?