Mass Media Effects II: Societal Effects

*Welcome to the Digital Revolution, a curious revolution
if ever there was one. Its target is not the levers of political
or economic power but rather the dials on your television
and buttons on your PC. Its weapons aren't guns or street
protests but cutthroat commerce and high-risk finance.
It promises not deliverance from oppression, but rather
entry into a high-tech utopia so advanced it will make
the gee-whiz gadgetry of the Jetsons seem more like
the simple stone tools of the Flintstones. And ironically,
while aiming to empower the individual with hybrid
"tele-computers" that deliver a host of new information
and entertainment services, the Digital Revolution will actu-
ally do more to alter the shape of government, the economy,
and the American way of life than even the most radical
social activists have imagined in their wildest dreams*
—BURSTEIN AND KLINE 1995:32–33

The year was 1987, the place, the small town of Midland, Texas, an unlikely location
for the world's attention to be focused. *Newsweek* reporters Evan Thomas and Peter
Anin (1997: 34) describe the scene:

*Jessica McClure was almost 1½ when she fell down an eight-inch-wide well
in her aunt's backyard. Her mother had gone inside—just for a moment—
to answer the phone. For 58 hours, nearly 100 rescue workers labored to
get her out, drilling a shaft 29 feet down and five across. Diamond-tipped
drill bits snapped on the bedrock; the progress was slowed when the drill-
ers, exhausted, broke down and sobbed because they could hear the girl,*

still alive, singing nursery rhymes and crying for her mother. While she was being pulled free, inch by inch, by a paramedic using K–Y lubricating jelly, 3.1 million people were watching live on CNN—at the time, the largest audience ever to watch the cable news service.

Jessica McClure ("Baby Jessica" to the mass media) survived, but the lives of townspeople were changed forever. Jessica's parents divorced. The man who pulled her to safety appeared on *Oprah,* judged the "G. I. Joe American Heroes" contest and, according to Thomas and Anin, became intoxicated with fame. He committed suicide in 1995. Meanwhile, the townspeople divided into factions over whose stories would be told in the Hollywood movie.

Of course not all of the problems faced by people in Midland are due to media attention. But there is plenty of anecdotal evidence, from the bombing in Oklahoma City to the death of Princess Diana, to suggest that when media attention is turned on people and places, things change. Not because of any particular message—as was the concern in the previous chapter, but because the media change the context within which people interact with each other (an audience of local townspeople expands into millions), create status differences, and dispense or withhold recognition and money. These are not just effects on individuals, they are social effects, altering the framework of social interaction.

We saw in the previous chapter that, while it makes sense that mass media messages would have impacts on individual behavior, such effects are difficult to show empirically. This is due to both the complexity of the ways in which the media might affect the individual, and the limitations of methodologies for uncovering

The death of Princess Diana highlighted issues pertaining to media invasions of privacy.

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effects. What we do know is that the history of human beings has been a history of developing new technologies to solve the problems of living. And we also know, as Max Weber pointed out long ago, that each new technology brings with it unintended consequences, a new set of problems to solve. Even if the exact dynamics of how media interact with daily life are not yet fully understood, it is clear that these new technologies and new ways of communicating have given us solutions to some of our old problems, as well as a whole new set of challenges and opportunities.

In some ways, societal effects are easier to see than are internalized individual effects. For example, just cruising through a mall with video stores, music stores, computer software and hardware stores, and electronics dealers, it is easy to see how the mass media have changed the way people entertain themselves and receive information. It is easy to see that, where once riding alone in an automobile would normally put you out of touch with others at home or work, now the car can become an extension of home or office through the technology of the cellular phone. It is easy to see that where once people limited their discussion of emotional trauma in their privates lives to family members, small therapy groups, or close acquaintances, now virtual support groups on the Internet provide new environments for such interaction. In this chapter we will look at some of the ways in which the media have changed our social world.

New Ways of Communicating

Impersonal

As we saw in earlier chapters, technology has provided human beings with vast new ways of communicating across time and space. In traditional societies communication was almost entirely face-to-face. Face-to-face communication provides multiple layers of messages from words and gestures, to body language, to facial expressions. More often than not this communication is carried out in the context of a real relationship and a context that is well known to the participants. Thus, there are a variety of ways of extracting meaning from that communication. Another important element of this comparatively very personal type of communication is that it is potentially interactive. Each person, to some degree, can press the other for clarification, further information, and so on.

New technologies have altered one or more of these elements of face-to-face communication. The written word removes most of everything but the obvious content. While the context may be well understood in the particular time and place of the document's creation, it becomes less obvious as it moves outside its own culture and time period. For example, Wendy Griswold (1987) has shown how the novels of West Indian writer George Lamming have been interpreted differently by literary critics from the West Indies, Great Britain, and the United States. It is often the case that context, contributing to meaning, must be added back in by experts specializing in a particular cultural genre. To the modern reader *Gulliver's Travel's* may seem to

The mass media change the context of communication.
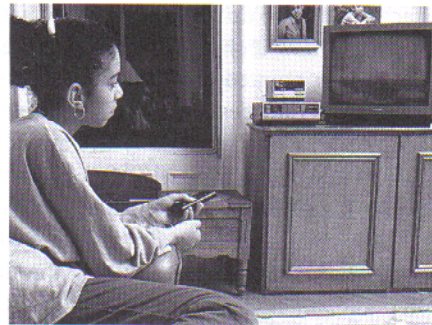
be a simple fable, but to readers in the 18th century most of the scenes and characters had political and social implications.

One way of describing these effects is to say that much of modern communication is impersonal, while much communication in traditional society is personal. But it is not quite that simple. Technologies such as television and the Internet are capable of mimicking elements of face-to-face communication. Television, for example, shows visual images of human faces that can, especially in advertising and newscasts, seem to speak directly to viewers. Messages are often designed to appeal to familiar situations and strong emotions. Thus, modern societies are awash in communication that appears to be personal but lacks some crucial elements of the personal. From a societal standpoint, one of the most crucial of these missing elements is the ability to judge the accuracy of the message. Because of the anonymity of developed society, we cannot be sure of the authenticity even of face-to-face messages. The mass media can exaggerate this problem. We are constantly exposed to messages from speakers we do not know for purposes we are not quite sure of.

Political and Economic Control

Another characteristic of mass-mediated communication is that, in many places in the world, it is communication for profit. In other places it is politically controlled. In either case, the idea is not simply to convey information but rather to serve powerful interests in some way.

There are some obvious societal effects of this. In a politically dominated media system, it is likely that what is transmitted is designed to serve the interests of those in power. As we will see in the chapter on industry structure, even in the United States, where most of the media are privately held, some would argue that the overall effect of the media is to maintain the legitimacy of those in power (see, for example, Giddens 1987).

Likewise, in profit-oriented media, the message is skewed toward legitimating consumption and attempts at manipulating demand for particular products. As we

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Speed and Volume

Not only are the media bombarding us with messages rooted in economic and political agendas, they do so at incredible speed, over vast distances, in enormous volume. If nothing else, this means that people have large amounts of information coming into their lives that they must deal with in some way, even if dealing with it means ignoring it. Increasingly, in modern society it seems that the problem is information overload rather than a lack of information. Sorting out information, assimilating it, handling discordant information, these are the central problems. It also means that we are more connected to the world outside our immediate environment than ever before. Many people are more connected to the distant world than to the world right around them. How is this possible?

One factor is the decline of "community" in large-scale societies. One of the characteristics of modern leisure is a high degree of privatization (Rojek 1985). This means that people in developed societies spend a large amount of their leisure time in their homes interacting with the mass media, video and computer games, the Internet, and so on. They do this instead of congregating in public places. Part of this is due to the allure of these leisure activities, but it is also due to conditions in the larger society. People often move several times in their lifetimes and are unlikely to reside near their family of origin or the friends they grew up with or met in school. In new locations they are likely to rely primarily on their spouse and children for companionship. At the same time, public places, especially in urban areas, are often perceived as dangerous. Ironically, there is an interaction between this perception and reality. When people stay in their homes rather than frequent public places, those public places are often taken over by deviant activities. Fear of the deviant activities then makes people even more reluctant to go out. As we saw in the last chapter, some (see, for example Gerbner 1986) would argue that the mass media contribute to this cycle by cultivating fear in heavy viewers.

Further compounding this problem is that, in many cases, truly local media may not exist. With the decline of face-to-face communication in local areas, those without a local newspaper, radio station, or television station may be cut off from local news, all the while tuning into satellite broadcasts from around the globe (meta-information). A possible effect is a lack of awareness and interest in local issues (local off-year election turnouts typically vary from 10 to 20 percent of eligible voters), precisely as political trends push more and more decision making to that level.

Time Use

If the mass media have no other effect, they certainly have altered patterns of time use. We know that people spend more of their leisure time interacting with the mass

media than doing anything else. In fact, the most important thing about television is that while people are watching it they may not be doing something else. The U.S. General Social Survey data from 1993 indicate that people spend an average of nearly three hours a day watching television. Because this is primarily passive time, one wonders how many books have not been written, songs composed, paintings painted, or inventions discovered because it was easier to turn on the television and watch reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show.* More realistically, how many books have not been read, household conversations missed, family outings not planned for the same reason? It is certainly true that television is a very easy and involving form of leisure activity.

Television had a major impact on time spent with other mass media. In the years prior to the popularization of television, it was the radio that was at the heart of home entertainment. Television quickly ate up large segments of time that had been devoted to radio listening and radio would not begin to recover until the 1960s. Likewise, with the advent of television, movie attendance declined and newspaper and magazine consumption went down. In 1955 the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare reported results from a survey on how other media were affected by television. This study showed that, after the purchase of a television set, magazine use declined 41 percent, newspaper use declined 18 percent, and radio use declined 57 percent (Brody 1990:269).

Of course television is not immune to encroachments from other media. It appears that video games and, more recently, Internet cruising, have begun to take bites out of the amount of time spent watching television.

However, if we simply look at the time spent on television and other mass media we would be missing a significant portion of their impact. The mass media, especially television, become part of our way of ordering the world. What industrial work has done for the rational ordering of the workday around fairly rigid time schedules, first radio, and then television, have done for the ordering of leisure time. It is not unusual for individuals to schedule their leisure time, sometimes their entire day, around the scheduling of their favorite programs. We know that young children stay up later than they have in the past and some observers attribute this to the influence of the television schedule: Popular programs often do not start until 8 PM. It is interesting that, although the VCR held the promise of liberating us from the tyranny of the program schedulers, people rarely use the technology in that way. Few people actually use VCRs for "time shifting," recording a program for later viewing. Most use the machine for playing back prerecorded videos.

This may have something to do with what people perceive as the complexity of the technology. However, it may also have something to do with the role that television plays in creating ritual events in our lives. Popular programs become the focal point of these rituals in which family and friends either gather together or at least know that the others are watching the same program at a particular time, the "topic circles" predicted from our discussion of Mead in Chapter 2. Even watching in physical isolation may have the effect of connecting one to a community of other viewers in ways that watching a time-shifted tape may not.

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Globalization and Shared Identity

As we shall see in Chapter 7, the mass media today are truly global. Not only does ownership sometimes transcend national boundaries, programming flows at an ever-increasing rate across penetrable borders. Beamed down from satellites, carried by cable or telephone wire, shipped in crates and carried by trucks, pirated in back rooms and warehouses, cultural products are shared quickly and easily around the world.

Take, for example, some Roper data reported by Walker (1996). In 1995, data were collected that examined various activities done in the previous day by people in six separate regions of the world: North America, Latin America, Western Europe, Central Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Asia. Excluding work and sleep, in every region, the only activity more likely to have been performed than TV watching was toothbrushing. Television watching ranked higher than reading, listening to the radio, showering, or bathing.

The mere fact of placing television at the top of leisure activities globally may have some effect, but more important are the commonalities in content around the world. As developing nations have adopted television technology, it has proven quite difficult to provide viable local programming. Television production, especially of credible dramatic programs, requires large investments in technology and production, and the creation of technological and artistic expertise. Inexpensively available, slickly produced programming from the developed countries (especially the United States) is an easy substitute for creating a local TV infrastructure.

The mass media are increasingly able to penetrate every region of the world.

Local programming is further hindered by the voracious appetite of television. It requires enormous, expensive resources and technical expertise to fill all available airtime on all channels with ever-changing content. Traditional sources of drama, dance, music, and other cultural expressions are quickly used up by the medium. To cite an example from the United States, break dancing, after a long history of development in African American culture, became a highly visible component of the larger popular culture in the 1980s. For a period of time this cultural expression seemed to be everywhere: in music videos, motion pictures, documentaries, and even in McDonalds commercials. As a result, the public became bored with it and it dropped from popularity. What had been a long-evolving folk expression of creativity became merely cliché and "out of style."

It is not just television that crosses borders. Music has become an international business as well, with world sales reaching nearly $40 billion. The importing of music produced by multinational corporations has had profound impacts on local music, in some cases wiping out the local music industry entirely.

The outcome of all of this is a real threat that the culture receiving these products will be seriously altered or become secondary to that of the producing nation. This is not just a problem for developing nations, as witnessed by Canada's attempts to limit the influence of the United States on its cultural industries. An editorial (August 10, 1997: F2, excerpted below) in the *Toronto Star,* entitled "Ottawa Must Be Firm on Protecting Culture," is illustrative of this concern over cultural contamination. The editorial attacks Canada's leadership for failing to protect Canada's cultural industry, in particular the magazine industry, from U.S. competition. The editorial suggests that the Canadian government insist on the following points in negotiating with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development on trade agreements:

- Culture should be taken off the table, not just exempted from the agreement. It is not negotiable.
- Canada should make common cause with countries such as France that are determined to resist the homogenizing influence of Hollywood.
- If the United States refuses to accept the right of other states to protect their own forms of cultural expression, Canada negotiators should leave the talks.

What is sometimes called **cultural imperialism,** the domination of one culture by another, is not just an issue for developing nations. As the above editorial suggests, even developed nations fear that their culture will be swept aside or assimilated into the tide of material emanating from the United States. Such concerns may be warranted. For example, Fine et al. (1995) demonstrate that popular books published in Canada differ little from popular books published in the United States. The researchers attribute this fact to a strong U.S. presence in Canadian publishing, as well as to the mass market strategies of publishers.

As the Canadian example suggests, the preservation of local cultures is difficult and rarely fully successful. The question often becomes, "whose culture is to be preserved?"

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Often a variety of subcultures or folk cultures exist within the boundaries of a nation–state. Yet, the mass media are by definition designed to cut across such boundaries. Countries usually end up elevating a few of their folk cultures, at the expense of others, as they attempt to develop a mass medium. Cultural diversity is often best accommodated in state-run systems that do not need to develop a generalized market. However, technologies such as fiber-optic cable and satellite direct broadcast open the possibility of more easily accommodating diversity, even in commercial systems. For example, large cities in the United States now typically carry Hispanic and Asian programming on their cable systems.

Local programming has been growing as media systems around the world mature. However, U.S.-produced programs still enjoy enormous success worldwide. When one of the authors of this book recently had the opportunity to teach a seminar in Holland with students from eleven different countries, one of the most popular shows among members of the group was *The X-Files.* Other programs, such as *ER* and, in an earlier period, *Dallas,* have enjoyed tremendous worldwide success. The general rule among producers is that action movies and dramas seem to translate particularly well cross-culturally, and comedies translate the least. This is because humor tends to be much more culturally specific than violence, which is fairly easily understood by everyone. Among teenagers worldwide, the most popular programming after movies is MTV. However, MTV has adapted to cultural differences by adopting regional variations. Thus, in Europe there is MTV Europe and in Japan MTV Japan and in India MTV India. These variations retain much of the familiar look and feel of U.S. MTV, with only a portion of the same artists.

Watching Dallas

Similarities in programming, however, do not necessarily lead to the globalization of culture. A study by Liebes and Katz (1993) on audience interpretation of the television show *Dallas* suggests that local culture has an effect on the way such programming is received or understood. The researchers looked at the impact of the program on four ethnic groups in Israel—Arabs, newly arrived Russian Jews, Moroccan Jews, and kibbutz members. A comparison study was conducted in Japan where the program had failed to attract an audience. The researchers found that the program, despite its complexity for people living in other countries, was quite popular—viewing was an important part of social life for many people and it became a major source of conversation in social gatherings—but it was interpreted differently according to one's culture. While most study members treated the program as real—that is, accepting that people really live as portrayed on *Dallas*—at a general level, the more modern and educated the group, the more they reacted to the program at an intellectual, analytical level. More traditional groups had greater emotional involvement with the program. Arabs tended to interpret the program as a morality play, highlighting differences between American culture and their own. The Russians were most critical of the program, emphasizing its manipulative aspects and its inferiority to the writings of Pushkin and Tolstoy. The Americans and kibbutzniks

engaged the program at a more playful level. The Japanese did not care for the program because of its fast pace and the fact that each episode did not end with harmony among family members.

Likewise, the international students in Holland "read" *The X-Files* in different ways. For example, students from developing countries were more likely to believe that characters Fox Mulder and Dana Scully were real people in situations that were based on reality. This anecdotal example, as well as the *Dallas* examples, points out the adaptability of culture—the tendency of people to remain in their own cultural frame. The subtle influences are undoubtedly assimilated into viewers' perpsectives, but mass-marketing of cultural products is unlikely to result in a single world culture.

Global Marketing

Kline (1995) has outlined some potential effects of global marketing on world culture. **Global marketing** is the purposeful transcending of national boundaries in the marketing strategies of large multinational corporations. As part of this process, **consumerism** has become a driving force in the social life of many cultures. That is, it is primarily through the purchase of goods and services that people create status, identities, and entertainment, and provide meaning in their lives. And, anything that can be turned into a commodity and sold will be sold. Anything: food, clothing, history, childhood, religion.

Kline argues that, worldwide, the media are more commercialized than ever before. Therefore marketing and product promotion are more important than ever in the mass media production process, and the overall impact of massive marketing on other cultures needs more study. Of special concern to Kline is the fact that children and their play are being targeted by marketers and, increasingly, through alliances between various types of producers. Spurred on by the lucrative practice of tying children's television programming to toy license agreements, an increasingly larger portion of worldwide marketing has focused on children. As the editor of an industry publication devoted to children's advertising put it, "There is not a company on the globe that does not have some vested interest in marketing to kids" (quoted in Horovitz 1997:2A).

In recent years there has been a shift in the strategy of global marketers. One of the most successful global campaigns in history was the Coca-Cola "teach the world to sing" campaign. The campaign consisted of advertisements that were virtually the same in every country. Today it is more likely that campaigns and products will be altered to fit local cultures. Kline refers to this trend as the movement from global to **glo-local** marketing—the global parallel to the practice of "narrowcasting."

However, there is a question as to whether such differences of local marketing are really meaningful or whether they are mostly trivial as compared to the underlying consumerism messages. If meaningful, then this is illustrative of the power of local cultures. If mostly trivial, then the mass-marketing of products around the world may indeed lead to a globalization of culture. What certainly is true is that, especially for young people around the world, consumerism is increasingly a positive value, as they

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Cultural symbols are exported from the United States and consumed by young people in widely varying contexts around the world.

seek status and create identities through the consumption of a remarkably similar set of mass-produced products—including Coca-Cola and Levis jeans.

Parents and Children

The mass media have had an effect on social relationships as well. For example, the media penetrate into the relationship between parents and children. We have already seen that bedtimes may be altered by the effect of mass media schedules. Even if parents resist such pressure, it becomes "just one more thing" they have to deal with in raising their children. Likewise, advertising aimed at children may create desires that parents must respond to in some way. Children view some 20,000 ads per year, many of them aimed directly at them. Advertisers spend considerable time, effort, and money trying to find out more about the private lives of children. Some parents find themselves running from store to store and waiting in long lines to find the latest fad toy, whether it be "Tickle Me Elmo," "Beanie Babies," or "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers." Some parents may resist, but they are under powerful pressure when other parents do not resist in a culture that equates buying with caring.

Many children seem to be highly status conscious and very aware of the relationship between brand names and status. One of the authors knows of an incident in which a first grader came home crying after being teased by classmates because her doll was not a *real* Cabbage Patch Doll (it wasn't). In another incident, a junior high school child was teased for wearing a discount store brand of tennis shoes. Anyone

who has experienced a toddler in a supermarket tantrum over some cereal made like little chocolate donuts knows the impressionability of children and the tension this can create in the parent–child relationship.

Likewise, the relationship between parents and children is used to sell products to parents. Commercials tell parents (and, less directly, children) that if they don't buy a certain kind of tire or use a particular brand of gasoline they are endangering the life of their child. Another advertisement depicts a young man going off to college only to flunk out of school. Why? The ad tells us it was because he did have his own personal computer. Such advertisements attempt to influence the buying patterns of parents by linking love and guilt with the purchase of a product.

In the previous chapter we saw the difficulty in linking mass media messages to changes in specific behaviors. However, when the mass media deliver content to children that parents disapprove of, this must certainly affect the authority of parents and the relationship between parents and children. The mass media are agents of socialization that may compete with parents when parents' values differ from those of the media. Children may be exposed to the high levels of violence or sexual behavior on television or in music, either at home or elsewhere, well before parents intended or expected such exposure to take place. The way activities are portrayed may not be what parents want. For example, television sitcoms frequently use scenes with sexual display, casual sexual encounters, and a sort of immature locker room approach to sexual matters. Many parents want other attitudes and values portrayed to their adolescents, who are exploring the world of sexual relationships.

All of this suggests that the mass media regularly expose children to points of view other than those their parents grew up with. For example, Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman (1991) argue that the mass media have a distinct "liberal" bias on social issues such as gender, race relations, and homosexuality. They believe that this bias clashes with "traditional mainstream" values held by most Americans. If this is the case, most Americans are not opposed to being entertained by actors behaving in ways they do not approve of for themselves. Similarly, Prindle and Endersby (1993) have shown that a sample of Hollywood opinion leaders were more liberal than the American general public on political ideology and social issues (e.g., abortion and homosexuality). A new genre known as "advocacy sitcoms" has emerged as in the attempts to normalize homosexual behavior on programs such as the much-publicized *Ellen*. It would appear that this program was out of step with the majority of the public. For example, according to General Social Survey data from 1993, 67 percent of the respondents in this national survey believe that sexual relations between adults of the same sex are always wrong or almost always wrong (Chapman 1994). Not surprisingly, once the main focus of the program became Ellen's homosexuality, ratings dropped, and the show was subsequently canceled.

Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman (1991) believe that the liberal bias on social issues is directly linked to the urban elite background of media workers. If the bias

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that these researchers describe exists, then many parents may in fact find themselves in conflict with the mass media as agents of socialization of children.

The Internet

The proliferation of home connections to the Internet creates many new opportunities for children to be exposed to material their parents do not approve of. For example, between 2 and 3 percent of Internet sites deliver pornographic material. This small fraction still means that there are thousands of such sites—the fast growing type of site on the Internet. From a parent's point of view, the number of sites is not as important as the ease with which they can be reached. Particularly problematic is that children may accidentally stumble across these sites while using search engines to look for other types of material. For example, entering the search term *toys* in the search engine Infoseek results in a listing of nearly 40,000 links. Of these links, approximately 7,455 are sites that display sexual material or sell sex-related products. These include a site that advertises "The Good Looks Sex Machine Dual-Action Double Climaxer" and "Porn Link," a site that advertises links to the "best adult sites that you can get free on the net." While it is true that getting into one of these sites requires clicking on the link and then on another link after various disclaimers, curious children have temptations that were previously less available. There are software products that, when installed on a home computer, can block access to these sites, but the effectiveness of these programs is not guaranteed.

It is not that all parents are incapable of dealing with these pressures; many *are* capable. But the point is that consumerism, as well as the pervasive sexuality and violence of the mass media complicate the relationship between parents and children—even those who are able to say no.

Not all media effects on relationships are negative. In some families the television can be a focal point, what has been called the "electronic hearth" (Tuchman et al. 1978). This metaphor suggests that just as families once gathered around the hearth for fellowship and conversation, the modern family comes together around the television set to share a common experience. It has been suggested that this type of experience may even be more conducive to interaction than sitting together and reading individual books. This is because family members viewing the same program are likely to interact in the sharing of their experiences.

However, this scenario may be an artifact of a particular moment in mass media history when there was a very limited range of broadcast programming—just the three major networks and PBS—and when most families owned only one television set. Today, in an era of almost unlimited programming choice that is much more narrowly targeted, it is not unusual to own two and more television sets. The average number of TV sets per household in 1994 was 2.2. In many families, children and parents have their own sets in their own rooms and watch separately.

Similarly, music is, more often than not, generation-specific and consumed in the isolated environment of the Walkman or Discman. It is always amazing to see a couple out for a walk or jog with one or both wearing headphones—beside one another and yet not together. The Internet too is primarily an individualized experience. All of this suggests that the privatization effect of the mass media, which has moved leisure experience out of the public arena into the home, continues within the family unit itself to divide members from each other.

Agenda Setting

It has been suggested that events covered in the mass media are perceived by the public as being the most important. Thus, even though the media may not be able to directly change opinions, they do set the public agenda. Studies support the idea of a modest relationship between media attention and public interest (Shaw and McCombs 1974). For example, research on voting behavior indicates that political issues emphasized in the media are those deemed most important by voters.

But the question is this: Do media cause public interest in an issue, or does public interest cause media coverage? This is a problem of "causal direction." Establishing causal direction is difficult because media producers try to attune themselves to the interests of the public. However, some statistical techniques, such as lagged correlations, do show that the media can increase public interest in an issue. The question of causal direction assumes the mass media are not part of their audience's climate of opinion. Local newspapers, radio, and TV stations clearly attempt to reflect their intended audiences, exactly because they are local. National media compete for audiences and try to gauge the interests of the nation, but they cannot possibly reflect the hundreds of ideologically diverse U.S. locales.

Coverage increases awareness and concern which, in turn, may lead to even more coverage. At some point, however, the issue is resolved or, more likely, media producers suspect that the public has tired of the issue and coverage recedes. Thus, while the media may help to create and perpetuate controversies such as "acid rain," "global warming," or the "hole in the ozone layer," at some point the public becomes saturated and loses interest. What sometimes happens is that extensive media coverage of an issue may lead to public burnout well before the problem is resolved, as in the case of people who are "sick of hearing about the environment."

Of course it is not just perceptions of public interest that drive media coverage. Media producers are often responding to each other as much as to the audience. After all, they are concerned about prestige and business competition. Thus, the "if the *New York Times* covers it it must be important" syndrome tends to drive coverage as well.

An important point here is that the actual importance of the problem in the real world is not a direct factor in the amount of coverage (Funkhouser 1973). Rather it is the *perception* of what might be the audience's interest that drives the process. For

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example, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1997), recent research suggests that while the homicide rate was decreasing by 20 percent in the United States in the mid-1990s, television coverage of murder, driven by the O. J. Simpson Case, increased 721 percent! In fact, one out of every twenty network news stories during the period 1993–1996 was about murder, and crime stories were the top category.

As we saw in the previous chapter, linking media content to specific behavioral and attitudinal changes is difficult. There is no doubt, however, that at a higher level the kinds of things people pay attention to and consider important are influenced in part by information gleaned from various media sources. The amount of influence depends on at least four factors: (1) the nature of the message (how well is it constructed.); (2) the medium (music, TV, newspapers, etc.); (3) the issue itself (how relevant is it?); and (4) the characteristics of audience members (have they already made up their minds? Do they have alternative sources of information?).

Social Movements

The agenda-setting function of the media is an important component of social constructionist and resource mobilization theories of social problems. The basic idea of these theories is that social problems are not simply "out there" as the most important issues in society. There are, in fact, any number of issues available to compete for public attention. For an issue to become defined as an important social problem a number of things must occur. Principal among them is that an individual or group must adopt the issue as their own and actively work to promote the issue to the public and to policymakers. Groups that are likely to be most successful are those that mobilize such resources as volunteers, money, communication networks, and, most importantly for our purposes, media attention. Thus, social problems researchers explicitly acknowledge the importance of the media in understanding the menu of social problems before the public at any given period of time.

Framing the News

In keeping with this perspective, researchers such as Molotch (1970) and Gitlin (1980) have conducted studies on how social activists have attempted to be both the authors and subjects of media attention on such issues as an oil spill in Santa Barbara, the safety of nuclear power, and the Vietnam conflict. Activists may take various routes, including public demonstrations, to induce media coverage. However, just as important is the effort to control the nature of that coverage. There are, after all, many different ways to slant a story. Some elements are left in, others left out. Some are emphasized and some de-emphasized. On television, the images selected, the narrative, the tone of voice of the reporter or news presenter, body language, and even the order in which stories are placed in the newscast all contribute to our

understanding of the story. For example, Ryan and Sim (1990) have shown that network coverage of art and artists tends to place art stories near the end of the broadcast, creating stories that ridicule fine art and artists and link artistic production to bureaucratic waste. This process of slanting stories in one direction or another is called **framing.**

A demonstration can, and often is, framed in such a way as to discredit the participants. Some events, such as the Million Man March on Washington, may be generally framed positively but others, such as the 1997 Promise Keepers March, are not. Todd Gitlin (1980), in his work on the organization called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), shows how media coverage can have a profound effect on an organization attempting to engage in social change. In the mid-1960s, early coverage of the SDS and its antiwar activities attempted to trivialize the movement while emphasizing internal dissention and the marginal character of the participants. Later, other elements were added to this negative frame, including a focus on Communists in the movement, violence, and the highly inflammatory symbol of the carrying of the Viet Cong flag. The overall impression was of an extremist movement harmful to the public good.

Gitlin argues that this coverage only focused on certain elements of SDS, but in doing so created a type of self-fulfilling prophesy. New members were attracted to, and expected to find, the organization that they had seen portrayed on television and in the papers. These members looked, behaved, and thought in ways that corresponded more closely to the media image. They were, as Gitlin (1980:30) describes them, "less intellectual, more activist, more deeply estranged from the dominant institutions" than were the original members. Their estrangement from dominant institutions was often reflected in unconventional clothing and hairstyles and the conscious use of profanity. They were also more narrowly focused on the antiwar issue than the broad social program of the original members. As they moved into leadership positions they directed the organization in such a way as to fit this new model. Thus, Gitlin argues, media coverage successfully and unintentionally modified an organization to match the media frame.

Political Campaigns

Whatever the magnitude of the effect on voters' behavior, media coverage now plays a major role in political campaigns. Campaigns focus much of their activity on maximizing positive TV coverage for their candidate and negative coverage for the opposition. Because of this, candidates are chosen at least in part for their media-friendly characteristics. Reporters and media analysts believe that former President Ronald Reagan was the master of manipulating the media. He was dubbed "The Great Communicator" for his media charisma. Some suggest that this power contributed to more negative coverage for former President George Bush and for President Clinton

because reporters vowed never again to be so manipulated. President Reagan was a tough media relations act to follow.

The emphasis on popularity polls and the "horse race" approach to political coverage has also been suspected of impacting the political system. The media in the United States have been accused of focusing more on who is ahead and who is behind than the substance of political issues. In part, this is due to the complexity of such issues as healthcare and the economy. It is difficult to reduce this complexity to the types of short stories that will hold the audience's attention. It is particularly difficult given the production conventions of commercial television that limit most news stories to a few minutes at most. This problem has been worsened by personnel reductions in news divisions, which have reduced the opportunities for reporters to develop expertise in a particular area. Conversely, the ups and downs of political careers, scandals, and relative positions in the polls are fairly easily represented. Thus, media formats and perceptions of the audience prevent the media from wading into and teaching complex issues to the public. At the same time, it is easy for politicians to take advantage of the complexity of issues and the limited media formats and expertise to slant issues in particular ways.

The belief in the power of media images has led to huge expenditures on media advertising by candidates and parties. However, as noted in the previous chapter, it is not all clear that such spending is dollar-for-dollar effective. For example, the strongest candidates in terms of public and party support are also the ones who are likely to have the most money to spend. Further complicating the issue are numerous examples of candidates spending more than their opponent on media advertising and still losing—including the fact that then-candidate Bill Clinton was outspent by both President George Bush and third-party candidate Ross Perot. The sheer volume of exposure, beyond a point that ensures recognition, is not as important as the framing of that exposure. Nevertheless, the power of mass media campaigns is illustrated by the fact that both Ross Perot and Steve Forbes (a candidate in 1996) were able to buy and induce enough coverage to establish themselves as credible candidates outside of the two-party political structure. An important lesson must be noted. Media coverage proved to be a partial substitute for traditional political party organizing.

A secondary effect of the current state of involvement in mass-media political campaign is to divert considerable funds to them. Even though individual effects on voters are hard to show, these are large amounts of money that could be spent in other ways, including expanding opportunities to truly educate voters and increase participation in the political process.

Another potential effect of the mass media in the political arena is the effect on communication between political actors. The Iran Hostage Crisis (November 1979–January 1981) is a good example. During that crisis the media were more than passive spectators. The potential for media coverage helped to precipitate the crisis—providing motivation for the hostage-taking. Once the coverage began, it

helped to escalate the hostage-taking into an international incident. Media coverage may have also increased pressure to undertake an ill-fated airborne rescue attempt. What is particularly interesting is that the militants, the governments, both of the United States and Iran, used the news media as a vehicle of communication with each other. In several ways, the media became active participants in the incident.

The Legal System

The mass media have developed a close relationship with the legal system. The legal system has become the source of raw material for both news and entertainment media products. Much of what is defined as news focuses on issues of crime and law. Reporters scan the legal system for cases that might in some way appeal to the public interest. These tend to be sensational murder trials. *Sensational* can mean a number of things. Crimes are sensational when they involve a celebrity, or are particularly gruesome. Newsworthy crimes often involve killings that defy conventional stereotypes, such as a mother killing her children or murders committed by children or by middle-class citizens.

Prosecutions and trials of public officials or business leaders or lawsuits involving widely consumed products are also common raw material for the media. Some programming, such as *Cops* on the Fox Network, bridges the gap between legal news and entertainment. Fictional entertainment programming (e.g., *Nash Bridges, Law and Order*) portrays the legal system as an arena in which individual, organizational, and societal conflict are played out, mediated, and resolved.

This is not a one-way interaction. The media are increasingly intertwined with the day-to-day operations of the legal system. There are numerous examples of this interaction. Media framing of a particular story may influence public opinion in such a way that jury selection becomes difficult. Beginning with the Rodney King case in 1992, there has been increased concern that juries will consider public opinion in reaching a verdict. Fairly or unfairly, jurists in both the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson criminal cases have been accused of carrying out racial and personal agendas through their verdicts. At the same time, attorneys attempt to use the media to sway public opinion in favor of their clients, while building national celebrity status for themselves.

Two specific criticisms have emerged regarding mass media coverage of courtroom trials. One criticism is that most coverage is by its very nature partial—especially in the broadcast media. Thus, the public has a sense that they know what took place in a trial when, in fact, the jury was exposed to considerably more material than was reported. This disjunction may make the jury's decision incomprehensible to those not exposed to the entire trial. Some have argued that this phenomenon could be alleviated by the use of cameras and live coverage in the courtroom. But "gavel to gavel" coverage may not be the solution that it appears to be. Studies of

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the O. J. Simpson criminal trial suggest that few viewers had the time or inclination to watch all of the coverage. Exposure was still partial yet created in the audience the illusion of having seen the full trial and a false sense of expertise on the issues and evidence.

A second criticism is that, increasingly, the mass media have intruded into the legal process in an attempt to "get the story." News programs and magazines, financed by large organizations and locked in fierce competition for audience, are willing to spend large sums of money for exclusive material on sensational stories. One outcome of this has been the paying of witnesses for their story. Known as "check-book journalism," this phenomenon has led to situations in which critical witnesses sell their stories to the media, sometimes even before talking with the police. Police are then left in the embarrassing position of following the media to the story.

Even entertainment programming can have an effect on the legal system (Hans and Dee 1991). Programs like *LA Law* and crime dramas such as *NYPD Blue* may create unrealistic portrayals of the legal system and occupations within that system. In entertainment programming crimes are usually solved, and guilt or innocence is clearly established. Attorneys are mostly highly paid professionals in designer clothes who spend most of their time engaged in exciting courtroom interchanges. No wonder that the popularity of such programs correlates with ups and downs in law school applications. Never mind that most attorneys do not live the lifestyle portrayed on these programs, that most cases are not solved, that there is considerable ambiguity in the process of establishing guilt and innocence, and that most attorneys spend only about 5 percent of their time in the courtroom.

Privacy

The mass media intrude into private lives. In a sense, this is a partial return to an earlier way of being. Throughout most of history there was little notion of a "private life." Lives were intertwined with extended family and community to a degree unheard of today. Like the community of old, the words, voices, and images of the mass media penetrate into every corner of our lives today. The difference is that this penetration is *not* that of a real community with shared experiences and a core of shared values and beliefs. Once more, it is a one-way interaction between parties who have never met and never will. It is communication to be sure, but it is not a relationship. As Silverstone (1995) has described it:

> The box in the corner is part of the furniture—a hearth—an indispensable focus for what remains of family life, a site (among others) for the construction of individual identities. Its images and narratives endlessly play and replay the dreams and nightmares of contemporary domestic life, as advertisements and sitcoms, chat shows and soap operas offer a chorus of

seductions and seditions, the murmuring of public voices in otherwise pri-
vate domains.

Nowhere is media penetration into the private more obvious than when the media change private grief into public spectacle: disaster victims, survivors, and their relatives are brought before the camera to bring their tragedy to the world.

Occasionally the media greatly magnify private intrusions by other public institutions. The FBI wrongly accused Richard Jewel of being the Olympic Bomber who struck the 1996 Olympics. The media promptly exposed every detail of Jewel's life, with framing that made him appear guilty. The FBI later admitted there was no good evidence against Jewel and made an unprecedented apology. Thanks to media coverage Jewel must struggle to restore his life and reputation.

Sometimes, being exposed to media attention can be particularly devastating when an act carries greater than normal social stigma—as in the case of child molestation. For example, once one is portrayed in the media as an "alleged child molester," a verdict of not guilty is not enough to remove the stigma. Further, to seek any sort of celebrity, even in the name of public service, is to give up any hope of a private life. Presidents and members of Congress are hounded by the press over issues that many would argue are irrelevant to their public life. And of course there is the interesting phenomenon of talk show guests who make their private lives public in the quest for celebrity. Some people see media celebrity of any sort as an accomplishment.

Summary

In this chapter we have looked at how the media influence society. The mass media have changed the way every person lives. Hours of every day are spent engaging the mass media through newspapers, radio, TV, magazines, recorded music, and books. Mass media have enlarged the volume of information, the range of topics and information sources, and generally regulate our access to the world beyond our face-to-face encounters. The mass media give us topics to talk about with our parents, friends, and children.

In a number of ways the mass media have changed the dynamics of personal relationships. They give us the historically exceptional flood of private information about strangers. We let TV and video games "babysit" our children while we go about other business. But we also must guard our children from these babysitters. We caution children against media overuse, try to keep them from inappropriate content, and negotiate over their demands for products pushed directly to them by advertisers. Thanks to the presence of the media in the most intimate moments, lovers can have an "our song." Family members can spend time together or escape from each other by using the media. And, by the way, who commands the remote control?

The mass media tend to elevate consumerism, harness public interest, and shape the form of political life. They can help raise political candidates out of obscurity,

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that is, candidates not supported by one of the two major parties. Their broadcasts cut across cultural and national boundaries, raising fears of culture loss and homogenization. They frame issues and facts, slanting the information that we have to work with as we construct our personal understanding of the world around us. Media overexposure can trivialize vital issues before the underlying dilemma can be fully explored or solved, but they can also make us aware of important social problems that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. The moral messages contained in media programming cannot possibly be coherent with the increasingly diverse religious and ideological backgrounds of a mass audience. These messages are then subject to attacks from those whose beliefs they threaten. Yet these mass-mediated moral messages are far from universally subversive to the traditional moral order. The same media that carry sitcom messages of casual sex have carried themes that extended the inclusiveness of democracy and civil rights. The same news programs that seem to fixate on crime and violence also may raise our awareness of environmental crises and other important social issues. The mass media are no single thing, neither all good nor all bad. The mass media are complex in their messages and complex in their effects.