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Mass Communication, Culture, and Media Literacy

1

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Mass communication, mass media, and the culture that shapes us (and that we shape) are inseparable. After studying this chapter you should

- know the definitions of *communication*, *mass communication*, *mass media*, and *culture*.
- understand the relationships among communication, mass communication, culture, and those who live the culture.
- have a basis for evaluating the impact of technology and economics on those relationships.
- understand the relationship between communication and culture.
- understand the relationship between literacy and power.
- understand media literacy.
- possess the basis for developing good media literacy skills.
- be encouraged to practice media literacy.

The clock radio jars you awake. It's Beyoncé, the last few bars of "Single Ladies." The laughing deejay shouts at you that it's 7:41 and you'd better get going. But before you do, he adds, listen to a few words from your friends at Best Buy electronics, home of fast, friendly, courteous service—"Buyer be happy!"

In the living room, you find your roommate has left the television on. You stop for a moment and listen: The Supreme Court has refused to hear an affirmative action appeal, your U.S. representative is under investigation for sexual harassment, and you deserve a break today at McDonald's. As you head toward the bathroom, your bare feet slip on some magazines littering the floor—*Wired*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*. You need to talk to your roommate about picking up!

After showering, you quickly pull on your Levi's, lace up your Nike cross-trainers, and throw on an Under Armour jacket. No time for breakfast; you grab a Nature Valley granola bar and the newspaper and head for the bus stop. As the bus rolls up, you can't help but notice the giant ad on its side: *Die Hard IX—Kill Before You're Killed*. Rejecting that as a movie choice for the weekend, you sit down next to a teenager listening to music on his headphones and playing a video game. You bury yourself in the paper, scanning the lead stories and the local news and then checking out *Doonesbury* and *Dilbert*.

Hopping off the bus at the campus stop, you run into Chris from your computer lab. You walk to class together, talking about last night's *Simpsons* episode.

It's not yet 9:00, and already you're involved in mass communication.

In this chapter we define *communication*, *interpersonal communication*, *mass communication*, *media*, and *culture* and explore the relationships among them and how they define us and our world. We investigate how communication works, how it changes when technology is introduced into the process, and how differing views of communication and mass communication can lead to different interpretations of their power. We also discuss the opportunities mass communication and culture offer us and the responsibilities that come with those opportunities. Always crucial, these issues are of particular importance now, when we find ourselves in a period of remarkable development in new communication technologies. This discussion inevitably leads to an examination of media literacy, its importance and practice.

What Is Mass Communication?

“Does a fish know it’s wet?” influential cultural and media critic Marshall McLuhan would often ask. The answer, he would say, is “No.” The fish’s existence is so dominated by water that only when water is absent is the fish aware of its condition.

So it is with people and mass media. The media so fully saturate our everyday lives that we are often unconscious of their presence, not to mention their influence. Media inform us, entertain us, delight us, annoy us. They move our emotions, challenge our intellects, insult our intelligence. Media often reduce us to mere commodities for sale to the highest bidder. Media help define us; they shape our realities.

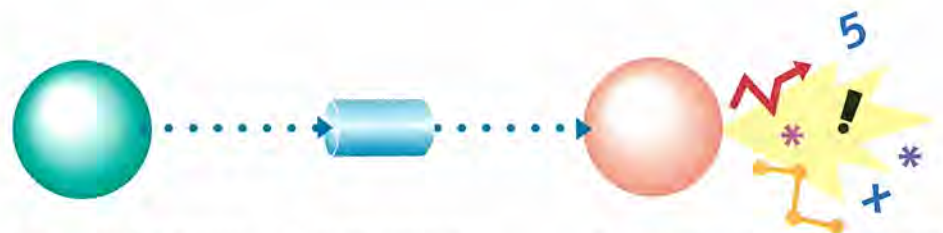
A fundamental theme of this book is that media do none of this alone. They do it *with us* as well as *to us* through mass communication, and they do it as a central—many critics and scholars say *the* central—cultural force in our society.

Communication Defined

In its simplest form, **communication** is the transmission of a message from a source to a receiver. For over 60 years now, this view of communication has been identified with the writing of political scientist Harold Lasswell (1948). He said that a convenient way to describe communication is to answer these questions:

- Who?
- Says *what*?
- Through *which* channel?
- To *whom*?
- With *what effect*?

Expressed in terms of the basic elements of the communication process, communication occurs when



A source sends a message through a medium to a receiver producing some effect.

Straightforward enough, but what if the source is a professor who insists on speaking in a technical language far beyond the receiving students’ level of skill? Obviously, communication does not occur. Unlike mere message-sending, communication requires the

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More on McLuhan
www.marshallmcluhan.com

response of others. Therefore, there must be a *sharing* (or correspondence) of meaning for communication to take place.

A second problem with this simple model is that it suggests that the receiver passively accepts the source's message. However, if our imaginary students do not comprehend the professor's words, they respond with "Huh?" or look confused or yawn. This response, or **feedback**, is also a message. The receivers (the students) now become a source, sending their own message to the source (the offending professor), who is now a receiver. Hence, communication is a *reciprocal* and *ongoing process* with all involved parties more or less engaged in creating shared meaning. Communication, then, is better defined as *the process of creating shared meaning*.

Communication researcher Wilbur Schramm, using ideas originally developed by psychologist Charles E. Osgood, developed a graphic way to represent the reciprocal nature of communication (Figure 1.1). This depiction of **interpersonal communication**—communication between two or a few people—shows that there is no clearly identifiable source or receiver. Rather, because communication is an ongoing and reciprocal process, all the participants, or "interpreters," are working to create meaning by **encoding** and **decoding** messages. A message is first *encoded*, that is, transformed into an understandable sign and symbol system. Speaking is encoding, as are writing, printing, and filming a television program. Once received, the message is *decoded*; that is, the signs and symbols are interpreted. Decoding occurs through listening, reading, or watching that television show.

The Osgood-Schramm model demonstrates the ongoing and reciprocal nature of the communication process. There is, therefore, no source, no receiver, and no feedback. The reason is that, as communication is happening, both interpreters are simultaneously source and receiver. There is no feedback because all messages are presumed to be in reciprocation of other messages. Even when your friend starts a conversation with you, for example, it can be argued that it was your look of interest and willingness that communicated to her that she should speak. In this example, it is improper to label either you or your friend as the source—Who really initiated this chat?—and, therefore, it is impossible to identify who is providing feedback to whom.

Not every model can show all aspects of a process as complex as communication. Missing from this representation is **noise**—anything that interferes with successful communication. Noise is more than screeching or loud music when you are trying to read. Biases that lead to incorrect decoding, for example, are noise, as is newsprint that bleeds through from page 1 to page 2.

Encoded messages are carried by a **medium**, that is, the means of sending information. Sound waves are the medium that carries our voice to friends across the table; the telephone is the medium that carries our voice to friends across town. When the medium is a technology that carries messages to a large number of people—as newspapers carry the printed word and radio conveys the sound of music and news—we call it a **mass**

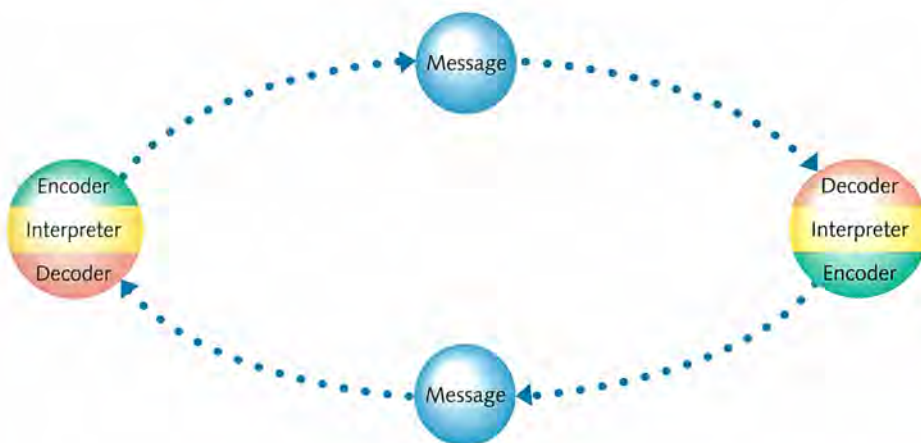


Figure 1.1 Osgood and Schramm's Model of Communication.

Source: From *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* by Wilbur Lang Schramm, 1954. Reprinted by permission of Wilbur Schramm's heirs.

medium (the plural of medium is **media**). The mass media we use regularly include radio, television, books, magazines, newspapers, movies, sound recordings, cell phones, and computer networks. Each medium is the basis of a giant industry, but other related and supporting industries also serve them and us—advertising and public relations, for example. In our culture we use the words *media* and *mass media* interchangeably to refer to the communication industries themselves. We say, “The media entertain” or “The mass media are too conservative (or too liberal).”

Mass Communication Defined

We speak, too, of mass communication. **Mass communication** is the process of creating shared meaning between the mass media and their audiences. Schramm recast his and Osgood’s general model of communication to help us visualize the particular aspects of the mass communication process (Figure 1.2). This model and the original Osgood–Schramm model have much in common—interpreters, encoding, decoding, and messages—but it is their differences that are most significant for our understanding of how mass communication differs from other forms of communication. For example, whereas the original model includes “message,” the mass communication model offers “many identical messages.” In addition, the mass communication model specifies “feedback,” whereas the interpersonal communication model does not. When two or a few people communicate face-to-face, the participants can immediately and clearly recognize the feedback residing in the reciprocal messages (our boring professor can see and hear the students’ disenchantment as they listen to the lecture). Things are not nearly as simple in mass communication.

In Schramm’s mass communication model, feedback is represented by a dotted line labeled **delayed inferential feedback**. This feedback is indirect rather than direct. Television executives, for example, must wait a day, at the very minimum, and sometimes a week or a month, to discover the ratings for new programs. Even then, the ratings measure only how many sets are tuned in, not whether people liked or disliked the programs. As a result, these executives can only infer what they must do to improve programming; hence the term *inferential feedback*. Mass communicators are also subject to additional feedback, usually in the form of criticism in other media, such as a television critic writing a column in a newspaper.

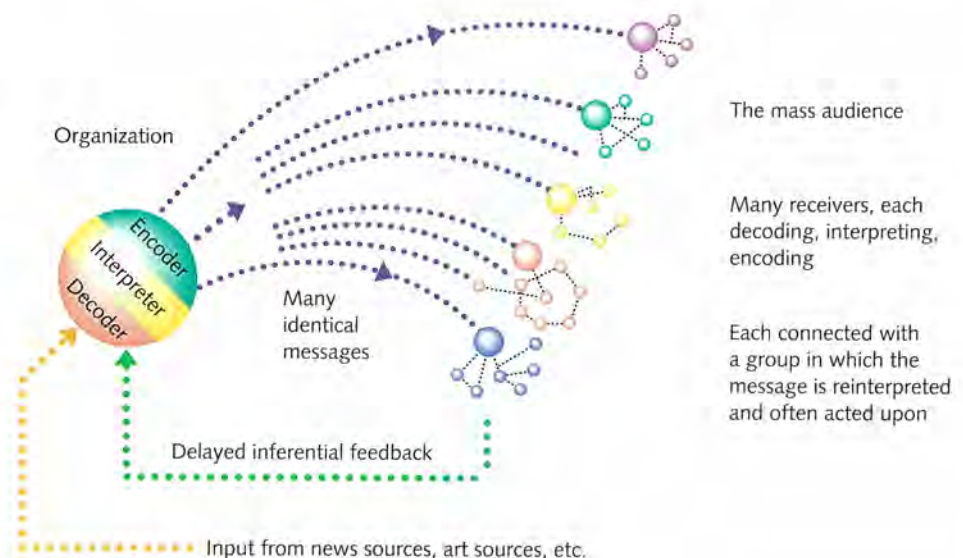
The differences between the individual elements of interpersonal and mass communication change the very nature of the communication process. How those alterations influence the message itself and how the likelihood of successfully sharing meaning varies are shown in Figure 1.3. For example, the immediacy and directness of feedback in

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Figure 1.2 Schramm’s Model of Mass Communication.

Source: From *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* by Wilbur Lang Schramm, 1954. Reprinted by permission of Wilbur Schramm’s heirs.





Interpersonal Communication
You invite a friend to lunch.



Mass Communication
Imagine Entertainment produces 24.

	Interpersonal Communication		Mass Communication	
	Nature	Consequences	Nature	Consequences
Message	Highly flexible and alterable	You can change it in midstream. If feedback is negative, you can offer an alternative. Is feedback still negative? Take a whole new approach.	Identical, mechanically produced, simultaneously sent Inflexible, unalterable The completed 24 episode that is aired.	Once production is completed, 24 cannot be changed. If a plotline or other communicative device isn't working with the audience, nothing can be done.
Interpreter A	One person—in this case, you	You know your mind. You can encode your own message to suit yourself, your values, your likes and dislikes.	A large, hierarchically structured organization—in this case, Imagine Entertainment Productions and the Fox television network	Who really is Interpreter A? Imagine Entertainment's executives? The writers? The director? The actors? The network and its standards and practices people? The sponsors? All must agree, leaving little room for individual vision or experimentation.
Interpreter B	One or a few people, usually in direct contact with you and, to a greater or lesser degree, known to you—in this case, Chris	You can tailor your message specifically to Interpreter B. You can make relatively accurate judgments about B because of information present in the setting. Chris is a vegetarian; you don't suggest a steak house.	A large, heterogeneous audience known to Interpreter A only in the most rudimentary way, little more than basic demographics—in this case, several million viewers of 24.	Communication cannot be tailored to the wants, needs, and tastes of all audience members or even those of all members of some subgroup. Some more or less generally acceptable standard is set.
Feedback	Immediate and direct yes or no response	You know how successful your message is immediately. You can adjust your communication on the spot to maximize its effectiveness.	Delayed and inferential Even overnight ratings too late for this episode of 24 Moreover, ratings limited to telling the number of sets tuned in	Even if the feedback is useful, it is too late to be of value for this episode. In addition, it doesn't suggest how to improve the communication effort.
Result	Flexible, personally relevant, possibly adventurous, challenging, or experimental		Constrained by virtually every aspect of the communication situation A level of communication most likely to meet the greatest number of viewers' needs A belief that experimentation is dangerous A belief that to challenge the audience is to risk failure	

Figure 1.3 Elements of Interpersonal Communication and Mass Communication Compared.

interpersonal communication free communicators to gamble, to experiment with different approaches. Their knowledge of one another enables them to tailor their messages as narrowly as they wish. As a result, interpersonal communication is often personally relevant and possibly even adventurous and challenging. In contrast, the distance between participants in the mass communication process, imposed by the technology, creates a sort of “communication conservatism.” Feedback comes too late to enable corrections or alterations in communication that fails. The sheer number of people in many mass communication audiences makes personalization and specificity difficult. As a result, mass communication tends to be more constrained, less free. This does not mean, however, that it is less potent than interpersonal communication in shaping our understanding of ourselves and our world.

Media theorist James W. Carey (1975) recognized this and offered a **cultural definition of communication** that has had a profound impact on the way communication scientists and others have viewed the relationship between communication and culture. Carey wrote, “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (p. 10).

Carey’s (1989) definition asserts that communication and reality are linked. Communication is a process embedded in our everyday lives that informs the way we perceive, understand, and construct our view of reality and the world. Communication is the foundation of our culture. Its truest purpose is to maintain ever-evolving, “fragile” cultures; communication is that “sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (p. 43).

What Is Culture?

Culture is the learned behavior of members of a given social group. Many writers and thinkers have offered interesting expansions of this definition. Here are four examples, all from anthropologists. These definitions highlight not only what culture *is* but also what culture *does*:

Culture is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. (Harris, 1983, p. 5)

Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives, rather than more narrowly to the opera or art of museums. (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 26)

Culture is the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization’s arch and is the medium through which all of life’s events must flow. We are culture. (Hall, 1976, p. 14)

Culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, as cited in Taylor, 1991, p. 91)

Culture as Socially Constructed Shared Meaning

Virtually all definitions of culture recognize that culture is *learned*. Recall the opening vignette. Even if this scenario does not exactly match your early mornings, you probably recognize its elements. Moreover, all of us are familiar with most, if not every, cultural reference in it. *The Simpsons*, *Rolling Stone*, McDonald’s, Under Armour, *Dilbert*—all are points of reference, things that have some meaning for all of us. How did this come to be?

Creation and maintenance of a more or less common culture occurs through communication, including mass communication. When we talk to our friends; when a parent raises a child; when religious leaders instruct their followers; when teachers teach;

when grandparents pass on recipes; when politicians campaign; when media professionals produce content that we read, listen to, or watch, meaning is being shared and culture is being constructed and maintained.

Functions and Effects of Culture

Culture serves a purpose. It helps us categorize and classify our experiences; it helps define us, our world, and our place in it. In doing so, culture can have a number of sometimes conflicting effects.

Limiting and Liberating Effects of Culture A culture's learned traditions and values can be seen as patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Culture limits our options and provides useful guidelines for behavior. For example, when conversing, you do not consciously consider, "Now, how far away should I stand? Am I too close?" You simply stand where you stand. After a hearty meal with a friend's family, you do not engage in mental self-debate, "Should I burp? Yes! No! Arghhhh. . . ." Culture provides information that helps us make meaningful distinctions about right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, good and bad, attractive and unattractive, and so on. How does it do this?

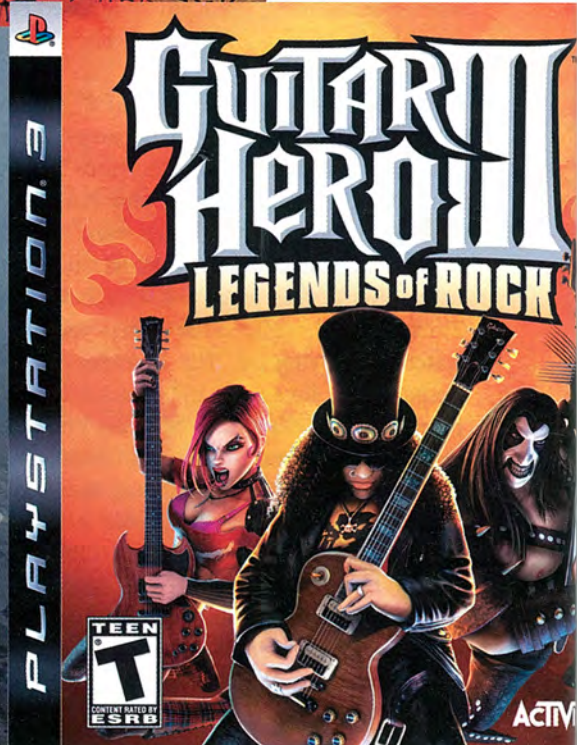
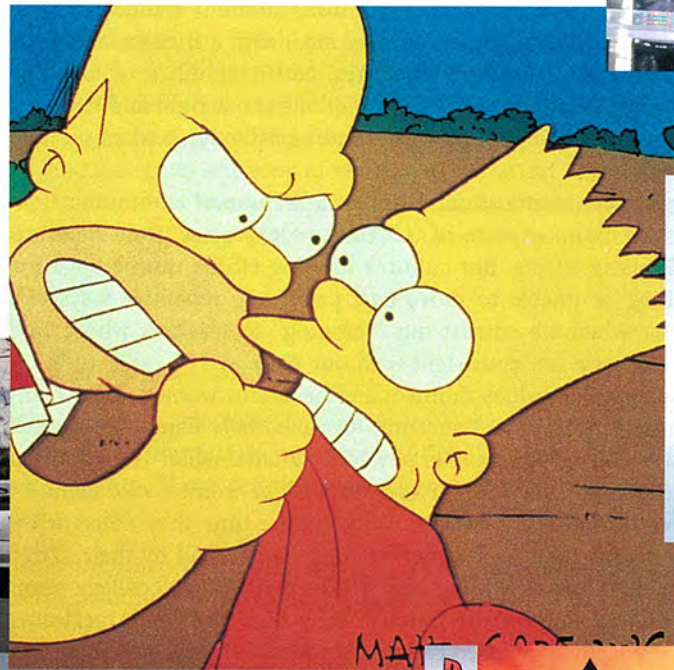
Obviously, through communication. Through a lifetime of communication we have learned just what our culture expects of us. The two examples given here are positive results of culture's limiting effects. But culture's limiting effects can be negative, such as when we are unwilling or unable to move past patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting or when we entrust our "learning" to teachers whose interests are selfish, narrow, or otherwise not consistent with our own.

U.S. culture, for example, values thinness and beauty in women. How many women endure weeks of unhealthy diets and succumb to potentially dangerous surgical procedures in search of a body that for most is physically unattainable? How many men (and other women) never get to know, like, or even love those women who cannot meet our culture's standards of thinness and beauty? Why, by the time they enter *first grade*, do more than 40% of girls say they are happier when on a diet, and by their 17th birthdays do 78% say they hate their bodies (Miller, 2007)? Why do 91% of all college women report dieting, with 22% dieting "always" or "often"? Why do 7 million American girls and women suffer from clinically diagnosed eating disorders? Why do 90% of American high school girls think they are overweight, up from 34% in 1995 (Brubach, 2007)? Why, when the United States has the lowest rate of savings of any industrialized nation in the world, do Americans spend more than \$12 billion annually on cosmetic surgery (Moynihan, 2009)? Why has the need to surgically remake our bodies become so essential that chains of retail cosmetic procedure "convenience stores" with names like SleekMedSpa, Sona MedSpa International, and Pure Med Spa have opened more than 2,500 outlets in American shopping malls, up from 25 in 2002 (Morrissey, 2008)?

Now consider how this situation may have come about. Our mothers did not bounce us on their knees when we were babies, telling us that thin was good and fat was bad. Think back, though, to the stories you were told and the television shows and movies you watched growing up. The heroines (or, more often, the beautiful love interests of the heroes) were invariably tall, beautiful, and thin. The bad guys were usually mean and fat. From Disney's depictions of Snow White, Cinderella, Beauty, Tinker Bell, and Pocahontas to the impossible dimensions of most video-game heroines, the message is embedded in the conscious (and unconscious) mind of every girl and boy: You can't be too thin or too beautiful! Or as one 10-year-old girl explained to Courtney Martin (2007), author of *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters*, "It is better to be pretty, which means thin and mean, than to be ugly, which means fat and nice. That's just how it is." And as one plastic surgeon who runs a number of mall-based cosmetic procedure outlets testified, "Virtually every office patient I see talks about the reality TV shows" like *Extreme Makeover* and VH1's *Remaking Vince Neil* (Morrissey, 2008, p. BU8).



These images have meaning for all of us, meaning that is socially constructed through communication in our culture. How many can you recognize? What specific meaning or meanings does each have for you? How did you develop each meaning? How closely do you think your meanings match those of your friends? Of your parents? What value is there—if any—in having shared meaning for these things in our everyday lives?





This message and millions of others come to us primarily through the media, and although the people who produce these media images are not necessarily selfish or mean, their motives are undeniably financial. Their contribution to our culture's repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting is most certainly not primary among their concerns when preparing their communication.

Culture need not only limit. That media representations of female beauty often meet with debate and disagreement points up the fact that culture can be liberating as well. This is so because cultural values can be *contested*.

Especially in a pluralistic, democratic society such as ours, the **dominant culture** (or **mainstream culture**)—the one that seems to hold sway with the majority of people—is often openly challenged. People do meet, find attractive, like, and even love people who do not fit the standard image of beauty. In addition, media sometimes present images that suggest different ideals of beauty and success. Cooking impresario Rachael Ray; singer-actresses Queen Latifah, Jennifer Lopez, and Raven-Symoné Pearman; and *Mad Men*'s Christina Hendricks all represent alternatives to our culture's idealized standards of beauty, and all have undeniable appeal (and power) on the big and small screens. Liberation from the limitations imposed by culture resides in our ability and willingness to learn and use *new* patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; to challenge existing patterns; and to create our own.

Defining, Differentiating, Dividing, and Uniting Effects of Culture Have you ever made the mistake of calling a dolphin, porpoise, or even a whale a fish? Maybe you have heard others do it. This error occurs because when we think of fish, we think “lives in the water” and “swims.” Fish are defined by their “aquatic culture.” Because water-residing, swimming dolphins and porpoises share that culture, we sometimes forget that they are mammals, not fish.

We, too, are defined by our culture. We are citizens of the United States; we are Americans. If we travel to other countries, we will hear ourselves labeled “American,” and this label will conjure up stereotypes and expectations in the minds of those who use and hear it. The stereotype, whatever it may be, will probably fit us only incompletely, or perhaps hardly at all—perhaps we are dolphins in a sea full of fish. Nevertheless, being American defines us in innumerable important ways, both to others (more obviously) and to ourselves (less obviously).

What is our culture's definition of beauty? Adolescence researchers argue that media offer young girls few examples of healthy beauty (Daniels, 2009). They point to the fact that female sports and athletes are woefully underrepresented in American media, appearing in only 8% of print and 6% of television sports coverage (Miller, 2007). Pictured here is four-time Olympic Gold Medal winner Lisa Leslie, recently retired from the WNBA where she was the league's three-time MVP. Have you heard of her? Also pictured is MTV reality TV star Heidi Montag, who had 10 cosmetic surgeries in one day, almost died as a result, and found herself on the cover of *People* magazine and a frequent guest on television shows such as *Access Hollywood* and *Good Morning America* (Ball & Bennett, 2010). Have you heard of her? Which woman has attracted more attention from our culture? Why?



For more on the topic of culture's defining effect, watch “Cartoon Controversy” on the book's Online Learning Center Web site.



Culture can be contested. When a *New York Times* fashion writer commented unfavorably on Christina Hendricks's size, calling her a "big girl," the Internet erupted in defense of the *Mad Men* actress, forcing critic Cathy Horyn to defend herself on the paper's Web site (Wedemeyer, 2010). The makers of Dove soap take a different approach, contesting the culture's narrow image of beauty with its "Real Women Have Curves" campaign, placing images like this on billboards and bus stops across the country, running it in national magazines, and making it the focus of its TV commercials.

Within this large, national culture, however, there are many smaller, **bounded cultures** (or **co-cultures**). For example, we speak comfortably of Italian neighborhoods, fraternity row, the South, and the suburbs. Because of our cultural understanding of these categories, each expression communicates something about our expectations of these places. We think we can predict with a good deal of certainty the types of restaurants and shops we will find in the Italian neighborhood, even the kind of music we will hear escaping from open windows. We can predict the kinds of clothes and cars we will see on fraternity row, the likely behavior of shop clerks in the South, and the political orientation of the suburb's residents. Moreover, the people within these cultures usually identify themselves as members of those bounded cultures. An individual may say, for example, "I am Italian American" or "I'm from the South." These smaller cultures unite groups of people and enable them to see themselves as different from other groups around them. Thus culture also serves to differentiate us from others.

In the United States, we generally consider this a good thing. We pride ourselves on our pluralism and our diversity and on the richness of the cultural heritages represented within our borders. We enjoy moving from one bounded culture to another or from a bounded culture to the dominant national culture and back again.

Problems arise, however, when differentiation leads to division. All Americans were traumatized by the horrific events of September 11, 2001, but that tragedy was compounded for the 2.35 million Muslim Americans whose patriotism was challenged simply because of membership in their particular bounded culture. The Council on American-Islamic Relations reported a 25% increase in complaints of anti-Muslim bias between 2005 and 2006, half-a-decade after 9/11 (Haynes, 2007). These included threats, beatings, arsons, shootings, and even murder. The number of complaints of workplace religious discrimination against Muslim Americans doubled after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Bazar, 2008). For these good Americans, regardless of what was in their hearts or minds, their religion, skin color, maybe even their clothing "communicated" disloyalty to the United States to many other Americans. Just as culture is constructed and maintained through communication, it is also communication (or miscommunication) that turns differentiation into division.

Yet, U.S. citizens of all colors, ethnicities, genders and gender preferences, nationalities, places of birth, economic strata, and intelligences often get along; in fact, we *can* communicate, *can* prosper, *can* respect one another's differences. Culture can divide us, but culture also unites us. Our culture represents our collective experience. We converse



One Tree Hill, *CSI Miami*, and *Gossip Girl*—these three television programs are aimed at different audiences, yet in each the characters share certain traits that mark them as attractive. Must people in real life look like these performers to be considered attractive? Successful? Good? The 18 people shown are all slender, tall, and young. Yes, they are just make-believe television characters, but the producers of the shows on which they appear chose these people—as opposed to others—for a reason. What do you think it was? How well do you measure up to the cultural standard of beauty and attractiveness represented here? Do you ever wish that you could be just a bit more like these people? Why or why not?





What is it about Muslim Americans that “communicated disloyalty” to the United States in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington?

easily with strangers because we share the same culture. We speak the same language, automatically understand how far apart to stand, appropriately use titles or first or last names, know how much to say, and know how much to leave unsaid. Through communication with people in our culture, we internalize cultural norms and values—those things that bind our many diverse bounded cultures into a functioning, cohesive society.

Defining Culture From this discussion of culture comes the definition of culture on which the remainder of this book is based:

Culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed and maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel, and act.

Mass Communication and Culture

Because culture can limit and divide or liberate and unite, it offers us infinite opportunities to use communication for good—if we choose to do so. James Carey (1975) wrote,

Because we have looked at each new advance in communication technology as opportunities for politics and economics, we have devoted them, almost exclusively, to government and trade. We have rarely seen them as opportunities to expand [our] powers to learn and exchange ideas and experience. (pp. 20–21)

Who are “we” in this quote? *We* are everyone involved in creating and maintaining the culture that defines us. *We* are the people involved in mass media industries and the people who compose their audiences. Together we allow mass communication not only to occur but also to contribute to the creation and maintenance of culture.

Everyone involved has an obligation to participate responsibly. For people working in the media industries, this means professionally and ethically creating and transmitting content. For audience members, it means behaving as critical and thoughtful consumers of that content. Two ways to understand our opportunities and our responsibilities in the mass communication process are to view the mass media as our cultural storytellers and to conceptualize mass communication as a cultural forum.

Mass Media as Cultural Storytellers

A culture’s values and beliefs reside in the stories it tells. Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? How many of your childhood heroines were chubby? How many good guys dressed in black? How many heroines lived happily ever after without marrying Prince Charming? Probably not very many. Our stories help define our realities, shaping the ways we think, feel, and act. “Stories are sites of observations about self and society,” explains media theorist Hanno Hardt (2007). “These fictional accounts are the constitutive material signs of a shared conversation” (p. 476). Therefore, the “storytellers” have a responsibility to tell their stories in as professional and ethical a way as possible.



There we are, huddled around the tribal campfire, telling and retelling the stories of our people.

Storytellers play an important role in helping us define ourselves. BALLARD STREET by permission of Jerry Van Amerongen and Creators Syndicate, Inc.

At the same time, we, the audience for these stories, also have opportunities and responsibilities. We use these stories not only to be entertained but to learn about the world around us, to understand the values, the way things work, and how the pieces fit together. We have a responsibility to question the tellers and their stories, to interpret the stories in ways consistent with larger or more important cultural values and truths, to be thoughtful, to reflect on the stories' meanings and what they say about us and our culture. To do less is to miss an opportunity to construct our own meaning and, thereby, culture.

For example, as journalists tried to tell the story of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina, they had a nearly infinite number of images and words available to craft their narratives. The wire-service photos and accompanying captions featured on this cover of *Extra!* were just two. They had appeared in newspapers around the world and in proximity to each other on Web portal Yahoo! News. The young African American man "walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store." The White couple, though, wades "through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." The plot line is clear—the lazy Black man looted . . . naturally . . . while those hardworking White folks were fortunate enough to have found sustenance! Readers and Web surfers of all races, in an instantaneous (and angry) cultural conversation with newspapers and Yahoo!, rejected their offensive, racially simplistic, stories. The images and captions immediately disappeared from Yahoo! News. Yahoo! and many newspapers apologized (Bacon, 2005).

Mass Communication as Cultural Forum

Imagine a giant courtroom in which we discuss and debate our culture—what it is, and what we want it to be. What do we think about welfare? Single motherhood? Labor unions? Nursing homes? What is the meaning of "successful," "good," "loyal," "moral," "honest," "beautiful," "patriotic"? We have cultural definitions or understandings of all these things and more. Where do they come from? How do they develop, take shape, and mature?

Mass communication has become a primary forum for the debate about our culture. Logically, then, the most powerful voices in the forum have the most power to shape our definitions and understandings. Where should that power reside—with the media industries or with their audiences? If you answer "media industries," you will want members of these industries to act professionally and ethically. If you answer "audiences," you will want individual audience members to be thoughtful and critical of the media messages they consume. The forum is only as good, fair, and honest as those who participate in it.

Scope and Nature of Mass Media

No matter how we choose to view the process of mass communication, it is impossible to deny that an enormous portion of our lives is spent interacting with mass media. On a typical Sunday night, about 40 million people in the United States will tune in to a prime-time television show. Television viewing is at record levels, averaging 8 hours and 21 minutes a day for a typical household; 50% of those homes have three or more sets (TV Viewing, 2009; Nielsen, 2010a), and the average American home has 26 electronic devices for communication and entertainment (Brown, 2010). Ninety-six percent of America's 223 million Internet users access their e-mail at least once a week; 71% log on



The events captured in these images sent globally by Yahoo! News were the same—people trying to survive the horrors of Hurricane Katrina. But as the race of the "characters" changed, so too did the stories. People complained. Yahoo! listened.

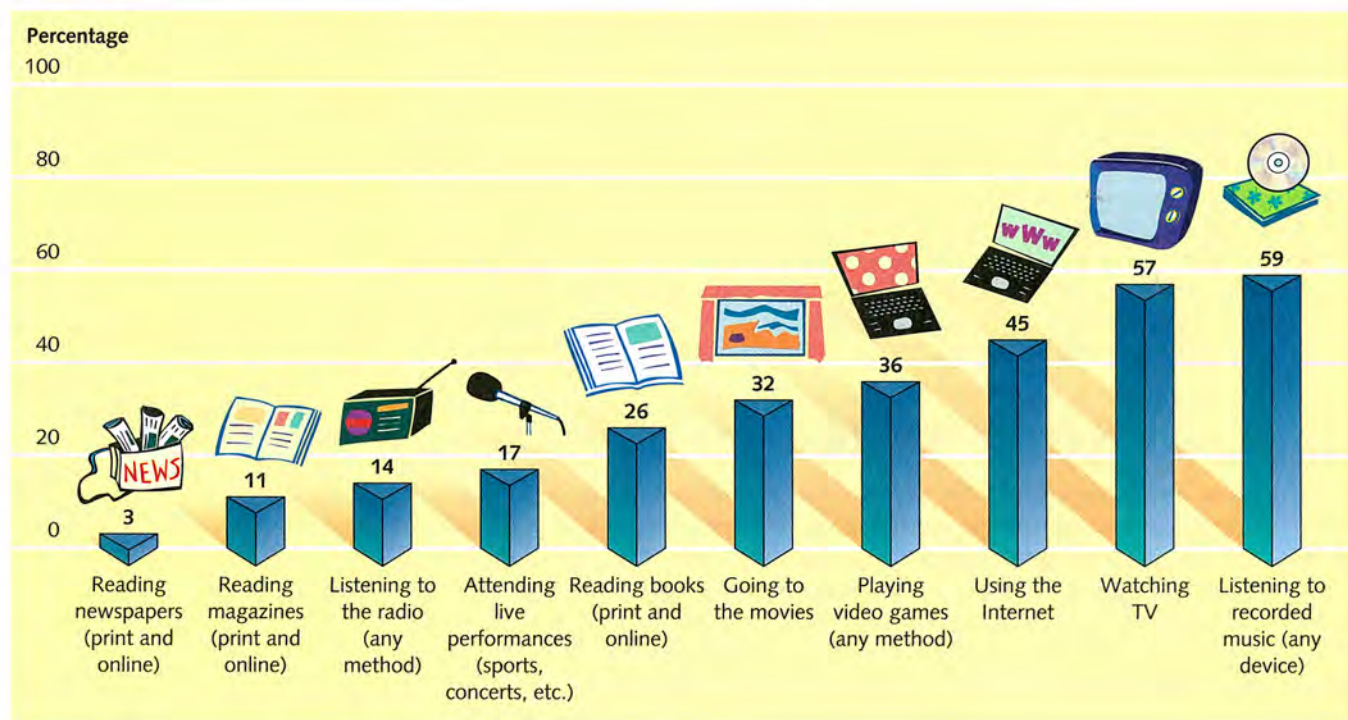
weekly to surf the Net with no specific destination in mind (Digital Future Project, 2008). Social networking site Facebook has 500 million members across the globe, meeting in 40 languages. Teens and adults spend more than 8 hours a day watching television, going to the movies, surfing the Internet, listening to the radio, playing music, or reading books and newspapers. They average more than 2 months a year in front of the television, 41 days tuned to the radio, and a full week online. Nearly 80% of American parents consider watching television with their children “quality time” (Bulik, 2007b). Fifty million of us buy a daily newspaper, and 171 million read one in print or online every week (Nielsen, 2009).

We spend nearly \$11 billion a year going to the multiplex, buying more than 1.4 billion tickets, and another \$20 billion renting, buying, and downloading video versions of movies (Sony, 2010). Sixty-eight percent of American households play video games (Entertainment Software Association, 2009), and 58% of 12-year-olds own their own cell phones (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Typical high school or college-aged Americans spend 42% of their leisure time watching television, 3% reading for fun, 11% playing video games, and 6% participating in sports and exercise (“How Americans,” 2007). We Americans use 60% of our waking time consuming various forms of media content, and we spend more on entertainment media than we do on clothes and health care combined. Figure 1.4 provides data on typical high school and college-aged Americans’ media preferences.

Despite the pervasiveness of mass media in our lives, many of us are dissatisfied with or critical of the media industries’ performance and much of the content provided. For example, a General Social Survey poll (Silver, 2009) reported that only 9% of Americans had a “great deal of confidence in the press.” More than half felt American news outlets were politically biased, inaccurate, and did not care about the people they report on (AFP, 2007). One-third of U.S. adults report being overwhelmed by media and that they are “crowding out other important things in their lives” (Mandese, 2004).

Our ambivalence—we criticize, yet we consume—comes in part from our uncertainties about the relationships among the elements of mass communication. What is the role of technology? What is the role of money? And what is *our* role in the mass communication process?

Figure 1.4 Media Preferences of High School and College-Aged Americans, 2010 (3 choices permitted).
Source: eMarketer, 2010.



The Role of Technology

To some thinkers, it is machines and their development that drive economic and cultural change. This idea is referred to as **technological determinism**. Certainly there can be no doubt that movable type contributed to the Protestant Reformation and the decline of the Catholic Church's power in Europe or that television changed the way members of American families interact. Those who believe in technological determinism would argue that these changes in the cultural landscape were the inevitable result of new technology.

But others see technology as more neutral and claim that the way people *use* technology is what gives it significance. This perspective accepts technology as one of many factors that shape economic and cultural change; technology's influence is ultimately determined by how much power it is given by the people and cultures that use it.

This disagreement about the power of technology is at the heart of the controversy surrounding the new communication technologies. Are we more or less powerless in the wake of advances such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, and instant global audio and visual communication? If we are at the mercy of technology, the culture that surrounds us will not be of our making, and the best we can hope to do is make our way reasonably well in a world outside our control. But if these technologies are indeed neutral and their power resides in *how* we choose to use them, we can utilize them responsibly and thoughtfully to construct and maintain whatever kind of culture we want. As film director and technophile Steven Spielberg explained, "Technology can be our best friend, and technology can also be the biggest party pooper of our lives. It interrupts our own story, interrupts our ability to have a thought or daydream, to imagine something wonderful because we're too busy bridging the walk from the cafeteria back to the office on the cell phone" (quoted in Kennedy, 2002, p. 109). Or, as Dr. Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) said in Spielberg's 1997 *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, "Oooh! Ahhh! That's how it always starts. Then later there's running and screaming."

Technology does have an impact on communication. At the very least it changes the basic elements of communication (see Figure 1.3 on page 7). What technology does not do is relieve us of our obligation to use mass communication responsibly and wisely.

The Role of Money

Money, too, alters communication. It shifts the balance of power; it tends to make audiences products rather than consumers.

The first newspapers were financially supported by their readers; the money they paid for the paper covered its production and distribution. But in the 1830s a new form of newspaper financing emerged. Publishers began selling their papers for a penny—much less than it cost to produce and distribute them. Because so many more papers were sold at this bargain price, publishers could "sell" advertising space based on their readership. What they were actually selling to advertisers was not space on the page—it was readers. How much they could charge advertisers was directly related to how much product (how many readers) they could produce for them.

This new type of publication changed the nature of mass communication. The goal of the process was no longer for audience and media to create meaning together. Rather, it was to sell those readers to a third participant—advertisers.

Some observers think this was a devastatingly bad development, not only in the history of mass communication but in the history of democracy. It robbed people of their voice, or at least made the voices of the advertisers more powerful. Others think it was a huge advance for both mass communication and democracy because it vastly expanded the media, broadening and deepening communication. Models showing these two different ways of viewing mass communication are presented in the box "Audience as Consumer or Audience as Product?" Which model makes the most sense to you? Which do you think is the most accurate? ABC journalist Ted Koppel told the *Washington Post*, "[Television] is an industry. It's a business. We exist to make money. We exist to put commercials on the air. The programming that is put on between those commercials is simply

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Audience as Consumer or Audience as Product?

People base their judgments of media performance and content on the way they see themselves fitting into the economics of the media industry. Businesses operate to serve their consumers and make a profit. The consumer comes first, then, but who is the consumer in our mass media system? This is a much-debated issue among media practitioners and media critics. Consider the following models.

	Producer	Product	Consumer
Basic U.S. Business Model	A manufacturer . . .	produces a product . . .	for consumers who choose to buy or not. The manufacturer must satisfy the consumer. Power resides here.
Basic U.S. Business Model for Cereal: Rice Krispies as Product, Public as Consumer	Kellogg's . . .	produces Rice Krispies . . .	for us, the consumers. If we buy Rice Krispies, Kellogg's makes a profit. Kellogg's must satisfy us. Power resides here.
Basic U.S. Business Model for Television (A): Audience as Product, Advertisers as Consumer	NBC . . .	produces audiences (using its programming) . . .	for advertisers. If they buy NBC's audiences, NBC makes a profit. NBC must satisfy its consumers, the advertisers. Power resides here.
Basic U.S. Business Model for Television (B): Programming as Product, Audience as Consumer	NBC . . .	produces (or distributes) programming . . .	for us, the audience. If we watch NBC's shows, NBC makes a profit. NBC must satisfy us. Power resides here.

The first three models assume that the consumer *buys* the product; that is, the consumer is the one with the money and therefore the one who must be satisfied. The last model makes a different assumption. It sees the audience, even though it does not buy anything, as sufficiently important to NBC's profit-making ability to force NBC to consider its interests above others' (even those of advertisers). Which model do you think best represents the economics of U.S. mass media?

the bait we put in the mousetrap" (in "Soundbites," 2005, p. 2). Do you think Koppel is unnecessarily cynical or is he correct in his analysis of television?

The goals of media professionals will be questioned repeatedly throughout this book. For now, keep in mind that ours is a capitalist economic system and that media industries are businesses. Movie producers must sell tickets, book publishers must sell books, and even public broadcasting has bills to pay.

This does not mean, however, that the media are or must be slaves to profit. Our task is to understand the constraints placed on these industries by their economics and then demand that, within those limits, they perform ethically and responsibly. We can do this only by being thoughtful, critical consumers of the media.

Mass Communication, Culture, and Media Literacy

Culture and communication are inseparable, and mass communication, as we've seen, is a particularly powerful, pervasive, and complex form of communication. Our level of skill in the mass communication process is therefore of utmost importance. This skill is not necessarily a simple one to master (it is much more than booting up the computer, turning on the television set, or flipping the pages of your favorite magazine). But it is, indeed, a learnable skill, one that can be practiced. This skill is **media literacy**—the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use any form of mediated communication. But before we can fully understand *media* literacy, we must understand why literacy, in and of itself, is important.

Let's begin by looking at the development of writing and the formation of **literate culture**. An expanding literate population encouraged technological innovation; the printing press transformed the world. Other communication technology advances have also had a significant impact; however, these technologies cannot be separated from how people have used them. Technology can be used in ways beneficial and otherwise. The skilled, beneficial use of media technologies is the goal of media literacy.

Oral Culture

Oral or **preliterate cultures** are those without a written language. Virtually all communication must be face-to-face, and this fact helps define the culture, its structure, and its operation. Whether they existed thousands of years ago before writing was developed or still function today (for example, among certain Eskimo peoples and African tribes where **griots**, or “talking chiefs,” provide oral histories of their people going back hundreds of years), oral cultures are remarkably alike. They share these characteristics:

The meaning in language is specific and local. As a result, communities are closely knit, and their members are highly dependent on each other for all aspects of life.

Knowledge must be passed on orally. People must be *shown* and *told* how to do something. Therefore, skilled hunters, farmers, midwives, and the like hold a special status; they are the living embodiments of culture.

Memory is crucial. As repositories of cultural customs and traditions, elders are revered; they are responsible for passing knowledge on to the next generation.

Myth and history are intertwined. Storytellers are highly valued; they are the meaning makers, and, like the elders, they pass on what is important to the culture.

What does the resulting culture look like? People know each other intimately and rely on one another for survival. Roles are clearly defined. Stories teach important cultural lessons and preserve important cultural traditions and values. Control over communication is rarely necessary, but when it is, it is easily achieved through social sanctions.

The Invention of Writing

Writing, the first communication technology, complicated this simple picture. More than 5,000 years ago, alphabets were developed independently in several places around the world. **Ideogrammatic** (picture-based) **alphabets** appeared in Egypt (as hieroglyphics), Sumer (as cuneiform), and urban China.

Ideogrammatic alphabets require a huge number of symbols to convey even the simplest idea. Their complexity meant that only a very select few, an intellectual elite, could read or write. For writing to truly serve as effective and efficient communication, one more advance was required.

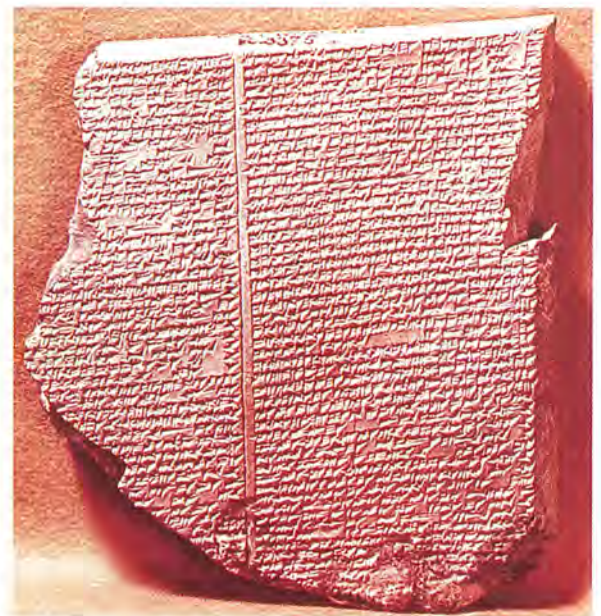
The Sumerians were international traders, maintaining trade routes throughout known Europe, Africa, and Asia. The farther the Sumerian traders traveled, the less they could rely on face-to-face communication and the greater their need for a more precise writing form. Sumerian cuneiform slowly expanded, using symbols to represent sounds rather than objects and ideas. Appearing around 1800 B.C.E., these were the first elements of a **syllable alphabet**—an alphabet employing sequences of vowels and consonants, that is, words.

The syllable alphabet as we know it today slowly developed, aided greatly by ancient Semitic cultures, and eventually flowered in Greece around 800 B.C.E. Like the Sumerians long before them, the Greeks perfected their easy alphabet of necessity. Having little in the

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This Sumerian cuneiform dates from 700 years before the birth of Christ.



way of natural resources, the Greek city-states depended and thrived on bustling trade routes all around the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. For orders to be placed, deals arranged, manifests compiled, and records kept, writing that was easy to learn, use, and understand was required.

A medium was necessary to carry this new form of communication. The Sumerians had used clay tablets, but the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans eventually employed **papyrus**, rolls of sliced strips of reed pressed together. Around 100 B.C.E. the Romans began using **parchment**, a writing material made from prepared animal skins, and in 105 C.E. medieval Chinese bureaucrat Ts'ai Lun perfected a papermaking process employing a mixture of pressed mulberry tree bark, water, rags, and a sophisticated frame for drying and stretching the resulting sheets of paper. This technology made its way to Europe through various trade routes some 600 years later, and the importance of writing cannot be overemphasized. As explained by historian David Owen (2004), "It made ideas permanent, portable, and endlessly reproducible" (p. 91).

Literate Culture

But writing required **literacy**—the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use written symbols. And with the coming of literacy, the social and cultural rules and structures of preliterate times began to change. People could accumulate a permanent body of knowledge and transmit that knowledge from one generation to another. Among the changes that writing brought were these:

Meaning and language became more uniform. The words "a bolt of cloth" had to mean the same to a reader in Mesopotamia as they did to one in Sicily. Over time, communities became less closely knit and their members less dependent on one another. The definition of "community" expanded to include people outside the local area.

This Egyptian funeral papyrus depicts the weighing of a heart when a person dies.



Communication could occur over long distances and long periods of time. With knowledge being transmitted in writing, power shifted from those who could show others their special talents to those who could write and read about them.

The culture's memory, history, and myth could be recorded on paper. With written histories, elders and storytellers began to lose their status, and new elites developed. Homer (some historians believe he was actually several scribes), for example, compiled in written form several generations of oral stories and histories that we know as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

What did the resulting culture look like? It was no longer local. Its members could survive not only by hunting or farming together but by commercial, political, or military expansion. Empires replaced communities. There was more compartmentalization of people based on what they did to earn a living—bakers baked, herders herded, merchants sold goods. Yet, at the same time, role and status were less permanently fixed. Slaves who learned to read to serve their masters took on new duties for those masters and rose in status.

Power and influence now resided not in the strongest hunter, wisest elder, or most engaging storyteller but in those who could read and write; that is, power and influence now rested with those who were literate. They could best engage in widespread official communication, and they wrote the histories and passed on cultural values and lessons. With this change from preliterate to literate culture, the first stirrings of a new political philosophy were born. Reading and writing encouraged more open and robust debate, political exchange, and criticism of the powerful; in other words, it fostered democracy.

It is important to remember that in the newly literate cultures, communication was still quite limited. An orator could address at most a few hundred people at a time. Writers could reach only those literate few who held their handwritten scrolls or letters. The printing press would change this, making it possible to duplicate communication, thereby expanding our ability to communicate with one another.

The Gutenberg Revolution

As it is impossible to overstate the importance of writing, so too is it impossible to overstate the significance of Johannes Gutenberg's development of movable metal type. Historian S. H. Steinberg (1959) wrote in *Five Hundred Years of Printing*:

Neither political, constitutional, ecclesiastical, and economic, nor sociological, philosophical, and literary movements can be fully understood without taking into account the influence the printing press has exerted upon them. (p. 11)

Marshall McLuhan expressed his admiration for Gutenberg's innovation by calling his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. In it he argued that the advent of print is the key to our modern consciousness. Why was Gutenberg's invention so important? Simply, because it allowed mass communication.

The Printing Press Printing and the printing press existed long before Gutenberg perfected his process in or around 1446. The Chinese were using wooden block presses as early as 600 C.E. and had movable clay type by 1000 C.E. A simple movable metal type was even in use in Korea in the 13th century. Gutenberg's printing press was a significant leap forward, however, for two important reasons.

Gutenberg was a goldsmith and a metallurgist. He hit on the idea of using metal type crafted from lead molds in place of type

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www.mainz.de/gutenberg/english/index.htm

This page from a Gutenberg Bible shows the exquisite care the printer used in creating his works. The artwork in the margins is handpainted, but the text is mechanically printed.



made from wood or clay. This was an important advance. Not only was movable metal type durable enough to print page after page, but letters could be arranged and rearranged to make any message possible. And Gutenberg was able to produce virtually identical copies.

In addition, Gutenberg's advance over Korean metal mold printing was one of scope. The Korean press was used to produce books for a very small, royal readership. Gutenberg saw his invention as a way to produce many books for profit. He was, however, a poor businessman. He stressed quality over quantity, in part because of his reverence for the book he was printing, the Bible. He used the highest-quality paper and ink and turned out far fewer volumes than he otherwise could have.

Other printers, however, quickly saw the true economic potential of Gutenberg's invention. The first Gutenberg Bible appeared in 1456. By the end of that century, 44 years later, printing operations existed in 12 European countries, and the continent was flooded with 20 million volumes of 7,000 titles in 35,000 different editions (Drucker, 1999).

The Impact of Print Although Gutenberg developed his printing press with a limited use in mind, printing Bibles, the cultural effects of mass printing have been profound.

Handwritten or hand-copied materials were expensive to produce, and the cost of an education, in time and money, had made reading an expensive luxury. However, with the spread of printing, written communication was available to a much larger portion of the population, and the need for literacy among the lower and middle classes grew. The ability to read became less of a luxury and more of a necessity; eventually literacy spread, as did education. Soldiers at the front needed to be able to read the emperor's orders. Butchers needed to understand the king's shopping list. So the demand for literacy expanded, and more (and more types of) people learned to read.

Tradespeople, soldiers, clergy, bakers, and musicians all now had business at the printer's shop. They talked. They learned of things, both in conversation and by reading printed material. As more people learned to read, new ideas germinated and spread and cross-pollination of ideas occurred.

More material from various sources was published, and people were freer to read what they wanted when they wanted. Dominant authorities—the Crown and the Church—were

Johannes Gutenberg takes the first proof from his printing press.



now less able to control communication and, therefore, the people. New ideas about the world appeared; new understandings of the existing world flourished.

In addition, duplication permitted standardization and preservation. Myth and superstition began to make way for standard, verifiable bodies of knowledge. History, economics, physics, and chemistry all became part of the culture's intellectual life. Literate cultures were now on the road to modernization.

Printed materials were the first mass-produced product, speeding the development and entrenchment of capitalism. We live today in a world built on these changes. Use of the printing press helped fuel the establishment and growth of a large middle class. No longer were societies composed of rulers and subjects; printing sped the rise of democracy. No longer were power and wealth functions of birth. Power and wealth could now be created by the industrious. No longer was political discourse limited to accepting the dictates of Crown and Church. Printing had given ordinary people a powerful voice.

Tech writer Kevin Kelly connected printing directly to freedom and the rule of law:

When technology shifts, it bends the culture. Once, long ago, culture revolved around the spoken word. The oral skills of memorization, recitation, and rhetoric instilled in societies a reverence for the past, the ambiguous, the ornate, and the subjective. Then, about 500 years ago, orality was overthrown by technology. Gutenberg's invention of metallic moveable type elevated writing into a central position in the culture. By means of cheap and perfect copies, text became the engine of change and the foundation of stability. From printing came journalism, science and the mathematics of libraries and law. (2008, p. 48)

The Industrial Revolution

By the mid-18th century, printing and its libraries of science and mathematics had become one of the engines driving the Industrial Revolution. Print was responsible for building and disseminating bodies of knowledge, leading to scientific and technological developments and the refinement of new machines. In addition, industrialization reduced the time necessary to complete work, and this created something heretofore unknown to most working people—leisure time.

Industrialization had another effect as well. As workers left their sunrise-to-sunset jobs in agriculture, the crafts, and trades to work in the newly industrialized factories, not only did they have more leisure time but they had more money to spend on their leisure. Farmers, fishermen, and tile makers had to put their profits back into their jobs. But factory workers took their money home; it was spendable. Combine leisure time and expendable cash with the spread of literacy and the result is a large and growing audience for printed *information* and *entertainment*. By the mid-19th century a mass audience and the means to reach it existed.

Media Literacy

Television influences our culture in innumerable ways. One of its effects, according to many people, is that it has encouraged violence in our society. For example, American television viewers overwhelmingly say there is too much violence on television. Yet, almost without exception, the local television news program that has the largest proportion of violence in its nightly newscast is the ratings leader. "If it bleeds, it leads" has become the motto for much of local television news. It leads because people watch.

So, although many of us are quick to condemn improper media performance or to identify and lament its harmful effects, we rarely question our own role in the mass communication process. We overlook it because we participate in mass communication naturally, almost without conscious effort. We possess high-level interpretive and comprehension skills that make even the most sophisticated television show, movie, or magazine story understandable and enjoyable. We are able, through a lifetime of interaction with the media, to *read media texts*.

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More on the Industrial
Revolution
www.wsu.edu/~dee/enlight/industry.htm

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Center for Media Literacy
www.medialit.org

Media literacy is a skill we take for granted, but like all skills, it can be improved. And if we consider how important the mass media are in creating and maintaining the culture that helps define us and our lives, it is a skill that *must* be improved.

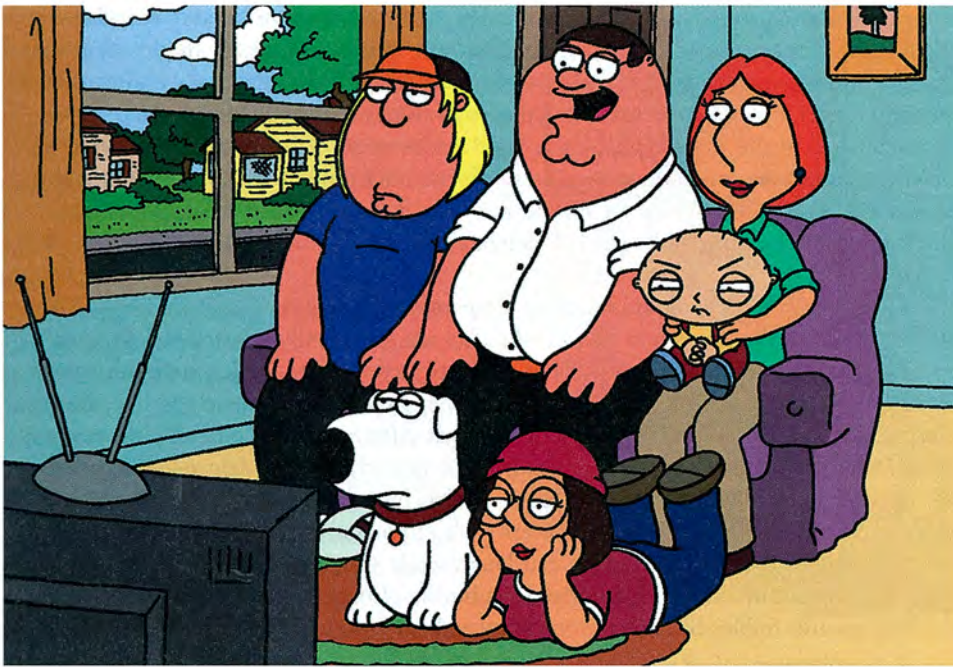
Hunter College media professor Stuart Ewen (2000) emphasized this point in comparing media literacy with traditional literacy. “Historically,” he wrote, “links between literacy and democracy are inseparable from the notion of an informed populace, conversant with the issues that touch upon their lives, enabled with tools that allow them to participate actively in public deliberation and social change. . . . Literacy was about crossing the lines that had historically separated men of ideas from ordinary people, about the enfranchisement of those who had been excluded from the compensations of citizenship” (p. 448). To Ewen, and others committed to media literacy, media literacy represents no less than the means to full participation in the culture.

Elements of Media Literacy

Media scholar Art Silverblatt (2008) identifies seven fundamental elements of media literacy. To these we will add an eighth. Media literacy includes these characteristics:

1. *A critical thinking skill enabling audience members to develop independent judgments about media content.* Thinking critically about the content we consume is the very essence of media literacy. Why do we watch what we watch, read what we read, listen to what we listen to? If we cannot answer these questions, we have taken no responsibility for ourselves or our choices. As such, we have taken no responsibility for the outcome of those choices.
2. *An understanding of the process of mass communication.* If we know the components of the mass communication process and how they relate to one another, we can form expectations of how they can serve us. How do the various media industries operate? What are their obligations to us? What are the obligations of the audience? How do different media limit or enhance messages? Which forms of feedback are most effective, and why?
3. *An awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society.* Writing and the printing press helped change the world and the people in it. Mass media do the same. If we ignore the impact of media on our lives, we run the risk of being caught up and carried along by that change rather than controlling or leading it.
4. *Strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages.* To consume media messages thoughtfully, we need a foundation on which to base thought and reflection. If we make meaning, we must possess the tools with which to make it (for example, understanding the intent and impact of film and video conventions, such as camera angles and lighting, or the strategy behind the placement of photos on a newspaper page). Otherwise, meaning is made for us; the interpretation of media content will then rest with its creator, not with us.
5. *An understanding of media content as a text that provides insight into our culture and our lives.* How do we know a culture and its people, attitudes, values, concerns, and myths? We know them through communication. For modern cultures like ours, media messages increasingly dominate that communication, shaping our understanding of and insight into our culture.
6. *The ability to enjoy, understand, and appreciate media content.* Media literacy does not mean living the life of a grump, liking nothing in the media, or always being suspicious of harmful effects and cultural degradation. We take high school and college classes to enhance our understanding and appreciation of novels; we can do the same for media texts.

Learning to enjoy, understand, and appreciate media content includes the ability to use **multiple points of access**—to approach media content from a variety of directions and derive from it many levels of meaning. Thus, we control meaning making for our own enjoyment or appreciation. For example, we can enjoy the 2009 fan and critic



The Family Guy is a cartoon about a typical suburban family. It has all the things you would expect from a television situation comedy—an inept dad, a precocious daughter, a slacker son, a solid wife, and zany situations. Yet it also offers an intellectual dog philosopher and an evil genius, scheming baby. Why do you think the producers have gone to the trouble to populate this show with the usual trappings of a sitcom but then add other, bizarre elements? And what's going on in *Avatar*? Is it another special-effects, explosion-laden, action-adventure holiday blockbuster? A classic good-guy-rides-into-town movie—the *OK Corral* transported to Pandora? An environmental allegory? Commentary on war in the Middle East, with Na'vi unobtainium substituting for Muslim oil? Or maybe it is a cool way to spend a Saturday night, entertained by the same folks who created the *Alien* and *Terminator* movies.

favorite *Avatar* as an exciting, explosion-laden, action-adventure holiday blockbuster, the biggest moneymaker in cinematic history. But as movie buffs we might see it as a classic good-guy-rides-into-town movie, the OK Corral transported to Pandora. Or we might read it as an environmental allegory—don't mess with Mother Nature—or an attack on war in the Middle East, with Na'vi unobtainium substituting for Muslim oil. Maybe it's a history lesson disguised as sci-fi, reminding us of the futility of attempting to defeat a native insurgency. Or maybe it is a cool way to spend a Saturday night, entertained by the same folks who so delighted us with the *Alien* and *Terminator* movies.

In fact, television programs such as *Desperate Housewives*, *The Daily Show*, *The Simpsons*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *The Family Guy* are specifically constructed to take advantage of the media literacy skills of sophisticated viewers while providing entertaining fare for less skilled consumers. The same is true for films such as *Up*, *District 9*, *Hurt Locker*, and *Knocked Up*, magazines such as *Alarm*, and the best of jazz, rap, and rock. *Desperate Housewives* and *The Daily Show* are produced as television comedies, designed to make people laugh. But they are also intentionally produced to provide more sophisticated, media literate viewers with opportunities to make personally interesting or relevant meaning. Anyone can laugh while watching these programs, but some people can investigate hypocrisy in suburbia (*Housewives*), or they can examine the failings and foibles of contemporary journalism (*Daily Show*).

7. *Development of effective and responsible production skills.* Traditional literacy assumes that people who can read can also write. Media literacy also makes this assumption. Our definition of literacy (of either type) calls not only for effective and efficient comprehension of content but for its effective and efficient *use*. Therefore, media literate individuals should develop production skills that enable them to create useful media messages. If you have ever tried to make a narrative home video—one that tells a story—you know that producing content is much more difficult than consuming it. Even producing a telephone answering machine message that is not embarrassing is a daunting task for many people.

This element of media literacy may seem relatively unimportant at first glance. After all, if you choose a career in media production, you will get training in school and on the job. If you choose another calling, you may never be in the position of having to produce content. But most professions now employ some form of media to disseminate information: for use in training, to enhance presentations, or to keep in contact with clients and customers. The Internet and the World Wide Web, in particular, require effective production skills of their users—at home, school, and work—because online receivers can and do easily become online creators.

8. *An understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of media practitioners.* To make informed judgments about the performance of the media, we also must be aware of the competing pressures on practitioners as they do their jobs. We must understand the media's official and unofficial rules of operation. In other words, we must know, respectively, their legal and ethical obligations. Return, for a moment, to the question of televised violence. It is legal for a station to air graphic violence. But is it ethical? If it is unethical, what power, if any, do we have to demand its removal from our screens? Dilemmas such as this are discussed at length in Chapter 14.

Media Literacy Skills

Consuming media content is simple. Push a button and you have television pictures or music on a radio. Come up with enough cash and you can see a movie or buy a magazine. Media literate consumption, however, requires a number of specific skills:

1. *The ability and willingness to make an effort to understand content, to pay attention, and to filter out noise.* As we saw earlier, anything that interferes with successful

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National Association for Media
Literacy Education
www.aamlinfo.org

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Media Education Lab
www.mediaeducationlab.com

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Association for Media Literacy
www.aaml.ca/home

communication is called noise, and much of the noise in the mass communication process results from our own consumption behavior. When we watch television, often we are also doing other things, such as eating, reading, or chatting on the phone. We drive while we listen to the radio. Obviously, the quality of our meaning making is related to the effort we give it.

2. *An understanding of and respect for the power of media messages.* The mass media have been around for more than a century and a half. Just about everybody can enjoy them. Their content is either free or relatively inexpensive. Much of the content is banal and a bit silly, so it is easy to dismiss media content as beneath serious consideration or too simple to have any influence.

We also disregard media's power through the **third-person effect**—the common attitude that others are influenced by media messages but that we are not. That is, we are media literate enough to understand the influence of mass communication on the attitudes, behaviors, and values of others but not self-aware or honest enough to see its influence on our lives.

3. *The ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content and to act accordingly.* Media content is often designed to touch us at the emotional level. We enjoy losing ourselves in a good song or in a well-crafted movie or television show; this is among our great pleasures. But because we react emotionally to these messages does not mean they don't have serious meanings and implications for our lives. Television pictures, for example, are intentionally shot and broadcast for their emotional impact. Reacting emotionally is appropriate and proper. But then what? What do these pictures tell us about the larger issue at hand? We can use our feelings as a point of departure for meaning making. We can ask, "Why does this content make me feel this way?"

4. *Development of heightened expectations of media content.* We all use media to tune out, waste a little time, and provide background noise. When we decide to watch television, we are more likely to turn on the set and flip channels until we find something passable than we are to read the listings to find a specific program to view. When we are at the video store, we often settle for anything because "It's just a rental." When we expect little from the content before us, we tend to give meaning making little effort and attention.

5. *A knowledge of genre conventions and the ability to recognize when they are being mixed.* The term **genre** refers to the categories of expression within the different media, such as the "evening news," "documentary," "horror movie," or "entertainment magazine." Each genre is characterized by certain distinctive, standardized style elements—the **conventions** of that genre. The conventions of the evening news, for example, include a short, upbeat introductory theme and one or two good-looking people sitting at a space-age desk. When we hear and see these style elements, we expect the evening news. We can tell a documentary film from an entertainment movie by its more serious tone and the number of talking heads. We know by their appearance—the use of color and the amount of text on the cover—which magazines offer serious reading and which provide entertainment.



The third-person effect makes it easy to dismiss media's influence on ourselves . . . only those other folks are affected! Media literate people know that not only is this not the case, but even if it were, we all live in a world where people are influenced by mass communication. David Horsey. © Tribune Media Services, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

WWW

Media Alliance
www.media-alliance.org

It is one thing to understand the importance of being a media literate individual, of knowing its fundamental elements and necessary skills. It is quite another to live a media literate life. This is not as difficult as it may seem at first. For one thing, we live lives that are virtually awash in media and their messages, so the opportunities to practice media literacy are always there. But we can (and should) do more. We can live a media literate life and make media literacy a living enterprise. We can encourage media literacy and even teach others its value.

The margins of this text are replete with URLs that connect us to educational, professional, scholarly, public interest, governmental, and industry groups that, either directly or indirectly, contribute to our ability to be media literate. This chapter alone offers links to a dozen sites specifically devoted to advancing the cause of media literacy. In addition, every state in the Union maintains standards for teaching media literacy in their schools (Tugend, 2003). Montana and Massachusetts are notable examples. Get a copy of the standards used where you live. Read them and, if need be, challenge them.

But it's not only the states. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced in late 2009 that it was undertaking hearings to determine if democracy requires a minimum necessary level of media literacy and to ensure that all citizens have access to media literacy resources. At the same time, the Federal Trade Commission partnered with *Scholastic* magazine to produce in-class and online materials and games to boost kids' media literacy, especially in the realm of identifying commercial messages in media. Industry media literacy partnerships abound. For example, the Independent Film Channel joined with the National Association for Media Literacy Education to produce several seasons of the media literacy-themed *IFC Media Project*.

Private foundations also engage media literacy education. The Knight Commission (2009) issued its *Report on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy* urging the country to pursue three ambitious media literacy projects:

- Maximize the availability of relevant and credible information to all Americans and their communities;
- Strengthen the capacity of individuals to engage with information; and
- Promote individual engagement with information and the public life of the community.

Internationally, in 2009 the European Union, recognizing that “to participate in today’s information society, people need to understand how the various media (old and new) work,” adopted “policy guidelines calling on EU countries and industry to promote media literacy across Europe through activities that help people access, understand and critically evaluate all media they are exposed to, like TV and film, radio, music, print media, the internet and digital communication technologies” (European Commission, 2009).

Again, there is no shortage of information on how to improve your media literacy and to advance that of others. This text will help you get started. Each chapter ends with two sections. The first, *Developing Media Literacy Skills*, focuses on improving our

We can live a media literate life and make media literacy a living enterprise. We can encourage media literacy and even teach others its value.

personal media literacy. The second, *Living Media Literacy*, offers suggestions for using our media literacy skills in the larger culture.

As you read these sections, consider these reminders of what you’ve learned in this chapter. They are drawn from the National Association for Media Literacy Education’s (2007) *Core Principles*:

1. All media messages are “constructed.”
2. Each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique “language” construction.
3. Media messages are produced for particular purposes.
4. All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
5. People use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
6. Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process.



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Knowledge of these conventions is important because they cue or direct our meaning making. For example, we know to accept the details in a documentary film about the sinking of the *Titanic* as more credible than those found in a Hollywood movie about that disaster.

This skill is also important for another reason. Sometimes, in an effort to maximize audiences (and therefore profits) or for creative reasons, media content makers mix genre conventions. Are Oliver Stone's *Nixon* and *JFK* fact or fiction? Is Geraldo Rivera a journalist, a talk show host, or a showman? Is *Bratz* a kid's cartoon or a 30-minute commercial? *Extra!* and *E! News* look increasingly like *Dateline NBC* and the *CBS Evening News*. Reading media texts becomes more difficult as formats are co-opted.

6. *The ability to think critically about media messages, no matter how credible their sources.* It is crucial that media be credible in a democracy in which the people govern because the media are central to the governing process. This is why the news media are sometimes referred to as the fourth branch of government, complementing the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. This does not mean, however, that we should believe everything they report. But it is often difficult to arrive at the proper balance between wanting to believe and accepting what we see and hear unquestioningly, especially when frequently we are willing to suspend disbelief and are encouraged by the media themselves to see their content as real and credible.

Consider the *New York Times* motto "All the News That's Fit to Print" and the title "Eyewitness News." If it is all there, it must all be real, and who is more credible than an eyewitness? But if we examine these media, we would learn that the *Times* in actuality prints all the news that fits (in its pages) and that the news is, at best, a very selective eyewitness.

7. *A knowledge of the internal language of various media and the ability to understand its effects, no matter how complex.* Just as each media genre has its own distinctive style and conventions, each medium also has its own specific internal language. This language is expressed in **production values**—the choice of lighting, editing, special effects, music, camera angle, location on the page, and size and placement of headline. To be able to read a media text, you must understand its language. We learn the grammar of this language automatically from childhood—for example, we know that when the television image goes "all woosielike," the character is dreaming.

Let's consider two versions of the same movie scene. In the first, a man is driving a car. Cut to a woman lying tied up on a railroad track. What is the relationship between the man and the woman? Where is he going? With no more information than these two shots, you know automatically that he cares for her and is on his way to save her. Now, here is the second version. The man is driving the car. Fade to black. Fade back up to the woman on the tracks. Now what is the relationship between the man and the woman? Where is he going? It is less clear that these two people even have anything to do with each other. We construct completely different meanings from exactly the same two pictures because the punctuation (the quick cut/fade) differs.

Media texts tend to be more complicated than these two scenes. The better we can handle their grammar, the more we can understand and appreciate texts. The more we understand texts, the more we can be equal partners with media professionals in meaning making.



This television show offers all the conventions we'd expect from the news—background digital graphics, an anchor behind his desk, a well-known newsmaker as interviewee. But it also contains conventions we'd expect from a comedy program—a satirist as host and an unruly, loud audience. Why does *The Daily Show* mix the conventions of these two very different genres? Does your knowledge of those conventions add to your enjoyment of this hit cable program?

WWW

Online Kids' Media Literacy
pbskids.org

WWW

IFC Media Project
www.ifc.com/mediaproject

Resources for Review and Discussion

REVIEW POINTS

- Communication is the process of creating shared meaning.
- Culture is the world made meaningful. It resides all around us; it is socially constructed and maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and shapes the ways we think, feel, and act.
- Mass media are our culture's dominant storytellers and the forum in which we debate cultural meaning.
- Technological determinism argues that technology is the predominant agent of social and cultural change. But it is not technology that drives culture; it is *how people use* technology.
- With technology, money, too, shapes mass communication. Audiences can be either the consumer or the product in our mass media system.
- As oral, preliterate cultures gave way to literate cultures, literacy became the avenue to power and control over one's life.
- Media literacy, the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use any form of mediated communication, consists of several components:
 - a. critical thinking skills enabling the development of independent judgments about media content
 - b. an understanding of the process of mass communication
 - c. an awareness of the impact of the media on individuals and society
 - d. strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages
 - e. an awareness of media content as a "text" providing insight into contemporary culture
 - f. a cultivation of enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content
 - g. the development of effective and responsible production skills
 - h. the development of an understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of media practitioners
- Media literacy skills include
 - a. the ability and willingness to make an effort to understand content, to pay attention, and to filter out noise
 - b. an understanding of and respect for the power of media messages
 - c. the ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content and to act accordingly
 - d. the development of heightened expectations of media content
 - e. a knowledge of genre conventions and the recognition of their mixing
 - f. the ability to think critically about media messages
 - g. a knowledge of the internal language of various media and the ability to understand its effects

KEY TERMS



Use the text's Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/baran7e to further your understanding of the following terminology.

communication, 4	cultural definition of communication, 8	ideogrammatic alphabet, 19
feedback, 5	culture, 8	syllable alphabet, 19
interpersonal communication, 5	dominant culture (mainstream culture), 11	papyrus, 20
encoding, 5	bounded culture (co-culture), 12	parchment, 20
decoding, 5	technological determinism, 17	literacy, 20
noise, 5	media literacy, 18	multiple points of access, 24
medium (pl. media), 5	literate culture, 19	third-person effect, 27
mass medium, 5	oral (preliterate) culture, 19	genre, 27
mass communication, 6	griots, 19	conventions, 27
inferential feedback, 6		production values, 29

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW



Go to the self-quizzes on the Online Learning Center to test your knowledge.

1. What is culture? How does culture define people?
2. What is communication? What is mass communication?
3. What are encoding and decoding? How do they differ when technology enters the communication process?
4. What does it mean to say that communication is a reciprocal process?
5. What is James Carey's cultural definition of communication? How does it differ from other definitions of that process?
6. What do we mean by mass media as cultural storyteller?
7. What do we mean by mass communication as cultural forum?
8. Characterize the communication and organizational styles of preliterate cultures. Where does power reside in these cultures?
9. What social, cultural, and economic factors boosted the development and spread of writing?
10. How did literacy change communication and the organization of preliterate cultures? Characterize the newly literate cultures.

11. How did the printing press make possible mass communication?
12. What was the impact of printing on the culture of western Europe?
13. What was the role of the Industrial Revolution in furthering literacy? The development of the middle class? Democracy?
14. What is media literacy? What are its components?
15. What is meant by multiple points of access? What does it have to do with media literacy?
16. What are some specific media literacy skills?
17. What is the difference between genres and production conventions? What do these have to do with media literacy?

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you feel inhibited by your bounded culture? By the dominant culture? How so?
2. Have the events of September 11, 2001, caused you to look at your own culture differently? Amid all the flags and patriotism, are we, as Americans, undergoing a reassessment of the meaning of “American culture”? If so, can you predict the outcome of this reassessment? In addition, if you had no firsthand knowledge of “Muslim culture,” what did you know of it before that fateful day? Where did that knowledge come from? Now that there is more information about that culture available, how different is your understanding of it?
3. Who were your childhood heroes and heroines? Why did you choose them? What cultural lessons did you learn from them?
4. Critique the definition of culture given in this chapter. What would you personally add? Subtract?
5. Consider the changes brought about by the shift from oral to literate cultures. How similar or different do you think the changes will be as we move to a more fully computer literate culture?
6. The Gutenberg printing press had just the opposite effect from what was intended. What optimistic predictions for the cultural impact of the Internet and the World Wide Web do you think will prove as inaccurate as Gutenberg’s hopes for his innovation? What optimistic predictions do you think will be realized? Defend your answers.
7. How media literate do you think you are? What about those around you—your parents, for example, or your best friend? What are your weaknesses as a media literate person?
8. Can you take a piece of media content from your own experience and explain how you approach it from multiple points of access?
9. How do you choose which television programs you watch? How thoughtful are your choices? How do you choose videos? Movies? How thoughtful are you in choosing them?

IMPORTANT RESOURCES



Go to the Online Learning Center for additional readings.

INTERNET RESOURCES

More on McLuhan

TV Critics Assn.

More on Spielberg

More on Storytelling

More on Gutenberg

More on the Industrial Revolution

Center for Media Literacy

Media Education Foundation

Cable in the Classroom

Media Awareness Network

Issues in Information and Media Literacy

National Association for Media Literacy Education

Media Education Lab

Association for Media Literacy

Media Alliance

Online Kids’ Media Literacy

IFC Media Project

www.marshallmcluhan.com

www.tvcritics.org

www.filmakers.com/artists/spielberg

www.storynet.org

www.mainz.de/gutenberg/english/index.htm

www.wsu.edu/~dee/enlight/industry.htm

www.medialit.org

www.mediaed.org

www.ciconline.org

www.media-awareness.ca/

infoliteracy.ispress.org

www.amlainfo.org

www.mediaeducationlab.com

www.aml.ca/home

www.media-alliance.org

pbskids.org

www.ifc.com/mediaproject