Mass Communication Theory

FOUNDATIONS, FERMENT, AND FUTURE

EIGHTH EDITION

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To Sidney Kraus

*His words and actions—indeed, how he chose to live
his life and career—in the years since the first edition of this
book have convinced us of the wisdom of our original decision
to honor him—our friend, mentor, and colleague.*

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PREFACE

In this edition we mark a milestone in the development of the American media system. We detail the reasons our media system has entered an important new stage in its development, one that appears likely to bring stability after what has been a tumultuous two decades of rapid change in media technology and, therefore, mass communication theory. In previous editions we noted the many changes to the media system caused by the introduction of the Internet and mobile communication technology that began in the 1990s. Along with other scholars we were challenged by these changes and speculated about the revisions to media theory required to address them. Was mass media theory even useful in this new era? Prominent media scholar Steven Chaffee (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001) asserted, "Many people no longer consider the term *mass communication* to be an accurate descriptor of what it is that some communication scholars study" (p. 365). But if these scholars weren't studying mass communication, what were they studying? Was it going to be necessary to create an entirely new body of theory so we could explain what people were doing with Internet and mobile media–based applications? Among the many predictions made about the future of social media was that virtual communities would develop, centered around shared production and consumption of media content. The more time people spent in these communities, the less time they would spend using legacy media.

Chaffee articulated a perspective on the rise of virtual communities. He explained why new media would bring an end to mass communication. Internet-based media would enable everyone to produce as well as consume media content. People would be active participants in virtual communities rather than passive members of mass audiences. Attractive new mobile devices would permit people to be much more creative and involved in their use of media. Media use would center around personal passions for cooking, classical music, modern dance, politics, country music, romance fiction, anything that stirred the interest of ordinary individuals. Personal passions would be shared—not just by passing along content we liked but by producing our own. We would all become "produsers" (producers and users) of media content. Myriad taste cultures of virtual communities would replace mass culture dominated and promoted by big media corporations. Communities would jointly produse bodies of knowledge that would enhance the collective intelligence of society. Power in society would be effectively redistributed. Elites would be no longer be able to use their control over centralized media

technology to promote ideologies that served their interests first. If this change happened on a large scale, we would need to develop new theories to understand it.

If Internet-based media held the potential to free us from the grip of "big media," why does that potential seem to have evaporated after less than two decades? One answer resides in what has happened with the media industries that have rapidly grown up around these new digital technologies—Facebook, Google, Amazon, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, Netflix, and their kin. For the most part these industries have sought to exploit the easy profits available to them by delivering what mass audiences numbering in the billions want rather than risk trying to cultivate and serve small virtual communities. They worked hard to become large-scale media capable of reaching millions of people on a daily basis. Though they delivered content via new technology, that content served the same purposes as the content delivered by traditional media. Though there was the potential to allow users control over content production, these corporations chose to retain a high level of control and discourage or limit user involvement. Much of the content that was delivered was the very same content distributed by the traditional media. Content that appeared to be innovative was actually produced according to old formulas developed by older media. When truly innovative content was created, it often was problematic, less useful in attracting or holding mass audiences, or likely to ignore standards for truth or aesthetics. The most watched YouTube videos are music videos produced by major studio recording artists, not the expression of communities of music lovers. Many other highly viewed YouTube videos are created by entrepreneurs who earn money based on the number of people who see the ads associated with their videos. We are not completely pessimistic about the long-term outcome of innovative media technology, but we are realistic about what current technology is or isn't doing for most people. Some might wish for the end of *mass* communication, longing for the emancipation from the influence of big media companies once envisioned by the coming of the Internet, but we don't see that happening soon, now that the newer forms of media have fallen under the control of corporations dedicated to profits rather than public service.

There is another reason Internet-based media have failed to deliver the future Chaffee envisioned. As a society we simply haven't found the time, energy, or resources needed to use them to serve innovative purposes. We have allowed large-scale social media corporations to take control of them. Often we welcomed this control when it delivered free services we thought useful in our daily lives. For over a decade, as it grew, Facebook worked quite effectively to maintain a façade as a company that existed mainly to provide services to people while it crushed its competitors and aggressively pursued advertising revenue and income from the sale of its users' data. On the whole, Americans have demonstrated very limited interest in the truly innovative purposes that Internet-based media could serve. To a very great extent we continue to use all forms of media to serve the same purposes served by media in the past. There have been important shifts in where and how we access media content, but for the most part we are accessing content that does what media content has done for much of the last century. We continue to participate in mass audiences rather than virtual communities. We spend most of our time seeking entertainment and information produced and distributed by centralized sources. The only change that has occurred is that large-scale social media have become the new mass media.

Our thinking on these tech giants parallels that of technology scholar Shoshana Zuboff (2019), articulated in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. She argues that older forms of capitalism, where people exchanged goods and services, have been disrupted by these data-gathering giants, giving them massive economic control over just about all aspects of human discourse, if not human life. These "attention merchants . . . generate wealth by putting as many trackers, devices, and screens inside our homes and as close to our bodies as possible," explains law professor Tim Wu (2019). "Accumulated data creates competitive advantage, and money can be made by consolidating everything that is known about an individual" (p. SR3). In a traditional media system operating under traditional capitalism, the economic exchange was media content for audience attention. In surveillance capitalism, however, our very existence, all our experiences, become a free source of raw material to be mined and exploited. In this "new" mass communication system, the exchange is similar to, but different from, the older content/attention exchange. It is no longer enough for media corporations "simply to gather information about what people do," explains tech writer Jacob Silverman (2019). "Eventually, [they] have to influence behavior, beyond the simple suasion practiced by targeted ads. It's not about showing someone the right ad; [they] have to show it at the right place and time, with the language and imagery calibrated for precise effect. [They] have to lead people through the physical world, making them show up at the sponsored pop-up store or vote for the preferred candidate. Armed with a veritable real-time feed of a user's thoughts and feelings, companies are beginning to practice just this kind of coercion" (p. 10). As such, this remains *mass* communication, sufficiently similar to our traditional notions of that process to render existing theories—sometimes "as is," sometimes with refinement or addition—useful, but sufficiently different to demand new understandings.

In our presentation and assessment of these theories, we focus some attention on how they are being adapted to study all forms of mass media, including large-scale social media. We trace how new research methods are being applied to assess large-scale social media. These media are earning large profits by gathering Big Data from their users. But Big Data can also be gathered by researchers, and it can be used to develop theories that explain the social role and effects of social media.

As in previous editions, we place the development of media theory in historical context. We point out that the rise of large-scale social media should have been expected. In our capitalist society, control over new forms of media has always fallen into the hands of bright, aggressive entrepreneurs who recognize their potential to earn profits by delivering mass audiences. As the companies founded by these entrepreneurs grow, they aren't bound by the regulations and ethical standards that have been imposed on and accepted by older media corporations. Debates over regulation of Internet-based media and the need to rein in their unethical actions will likely go on for decades. They will likely mirror similar debates from the 1920s, the 1950s, and the 1970s. Though they will be framed as necessary to better serve the public, the biggest players in these debates will be the media corporations. It will be important that media theory and research play a significant role in this conversation. The debate should be grounded in an understanding of media provided by mass communication theory.

This edition of the textbook follows the basic structure of the last edition. We have made substantial revisions within some of the chapters to recognize the latest research

and to explain how specific theories or bodies of theory are developing. Research is changing now that researchers have access to Internet-based tools that allow them to access and analyze media content in ways that were impossible just a few years ago. Big Data has found its uses in academia as well as in industry and politics. It's an exciting time to be involved in media research and in the development of media theories.

A UNIQUE APPROACH

One unique feature of this book is the balanced, comprehensive introduction to the two major bodies of theory currently dominating the field: the social/behavioral theories and the cultural/critical theories. We need to know the strengths and the limitations of these two bodies of thought. We need to know how they developed in the past, how they are developing in the present, and what new conceptions they might produce, because not only do they represent the mass communication theory of today, they also promise to dominate our understanding of mass communication for some time to come. This balanced approach is becoming even more useful as more and more prominent scholars are calling for the integration of these bodies of theory (Potter, 2009; Delli Carpini, 2013; Jensen & Neuman, 2013).

Many American textbooks emphasize social/behavioral theories and either ignore or denigrate cultural/critical theories; European texts do the opposite. As cultural/critical theories have gained popularity in the United States, there have been more textbooks written that explain these theories, but they often ignore or disdain social/behavioral theories. Instructors and students who want to cover all types of media theories are forced to use two or more textbooks and then need to sort out the various criticisms of competing ideas these works offer. To solve this problem (and we hope advance understanding of all mass communication theory), we systematically explain the legitimate differences between these theories and the research based on them. We also consider possibilities for accommodation or collaboration. This edition considers these possibilities in greater depth and detail, especially with the development of large-scale social media. It is becoming increasingly clear how these bodies of theory can complement each other and provide a much broader and more useful basis for thinking about and conducting research on media.

THE USE OF HISTORY

In this book we assume that it is important for those who study mass communication theory to have a strong grounding in its historical development. Therefore, in the pages that follow, we trace the history of theory in a clear, straightforward manner. We include discussions of historical events and people we hope students will find inherently interesting, especially if instructors use widely available DVDs, video downloads and streams, and other materials to illustrate them (such as political propaganda, the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, newsreels from the World War II era and the early days of television, and so on).

Readers familiar with previous editions of this textbook will find that we've made some significant changes in the way we present the unfolding of media theory. For example, one theme of this book ever since its first edition is that theory is inevitably

a product of its time. You will see that this edition is replete with examples of media's performance during the recent presidential and congressional elections, the administration of Donald Trump, large-scale social movements, and their own ongoing institutional upheaval, but you will also see that many individual conceptions of mass communication theory themselves have been reinvigorated, challenged, reconsidered, or otherwise altered.

We have made an important change in how we discuss the emergence of the two important bodies of media theory. We no longer refer to specific eras in theory development, and we don't use the term *paradigm* to refer to them. Instead we talk about the development of *trends in media theory*, as we think this approach better represents the way the field has evolved. We identify four trends in theory development. The first—the mass society and mass culture theory trend—was dominant from the 1920s until the 1940s. It gradually gave way to the media effects theory trend—a trend that dominated media research from the 1950s until the 1980s, when it began to be challenged by the critical cultural theory trend. Eventually, the discipline's dominant focus turned to questions of how people make meaning through mass communication.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

As has been the case in each of the past editions, we have updated all statistics and examples. And as in the past, we have made a number of more significant changes. Although we have substantially reduced our discussion of older theories, our condensed consideration of the history of the discipline is still much more extensive and detailed than in other theory textbooks. This paring of history made room for a wide variety of new thinking in mass communication theory. Some of the ideas you'll encounter that are new to this edition are

- a revised definition of mass communication that incorporates new large-scale social media
- mediatization theory
- deep mediatization
- intersectionality in critical research and theory
- Big Data
- the obsolescence of the First Amendment
- the marketplace of attention
- automaticity in media consumption
- the argument that all science is value-laden
- the relationship between hate speech and propaganda
- the renewed interest in and research on propaganda in the Trump era
- undermining propaganda and undermining demagoguery
- challenged norms of journalism in the Trump era and declining respect for journalism
- captured agencies and regulation of media
- disintermediation (loss of gatekeepers)
- social network sites and selective processes
- the specification of ignorance

- the selective perception of African Americans and crime and police shootings
- an increased focus on critical feminist theory
- media and rape culture
- media and theory of mind
- the scope of self model
- recent (further debunking) thinking on catharsis
- scripting theory
- nomophobia
- the brain drain hypothesis
- social comparison theory
- the selective exposure self- and affect-management (SESAM) model
- the temporarily expanding the boundaries of the self perspective
- social media addiction
- Facebook depression
- the affective forecasting error
- the social skills model of problematic social media use
- epistemic spillover and political division
- outrageous political opinion
- the sufficiency principle of information processing
- digital inequalities
- the OMA (opportunities-motivation-ability) model
- municipal broadband
- social capital theory
- news deserts
- intermedia agenda-building
- genre-specific cultivation theory
- parental mediation theory for digital media
- enabling mediation
- news media literacy
- critical media education
- health communication
- health literacy
- agenda-chasing
- ideology-based polarization in news selection
- social media and cross-cutting vs. ideological homophily
- manosphere and Gamergate

THE USE OF TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

It is important, too, that students realize that researchers develop theories to address important questions about the role of media—enduring questions that will again become important as new media continue to be introduced and as we deal with a world reordered by the ongoing war on terrorism, systemic economic distress, and seemingly intractable political and cultural divides. We must be aware of how the radical changes in media that took place in the past are related to the changes now taking place.

We attempt this engagement with mass communication theory in several ways. Every chapter begins with a list of Learning Objectives designed to guide student thinking. Each chapter also includes a Critical Thinking Questions section. Its aim, as the title suggests, is to encourage students to think critically, even skeptically, about how that chapter's theories have been applied in the past or how they are being applied today. Also designed to encourage critical thinking, Thinking about Theory boxes are placed at appropriate places throughout the text. Some of these discuss how a theorist addressed an issue and tried to resolve it, while others highlight and criticize important, issue-related examples of the application of media theory. Students are asked to relate material in these boxes to contemporary controversies, events, and theories. A few examples are Chapter 4's essay on drug arrests, police shootings, and race; Chapter 14's box on #GamerGate and its attacks on women in video gaming; and Chapter 12's essay on media literacy as the antidote to the fake news plague. We hope that students will find these useful in developing their own thinking about these issues. We believe that mass communication theory, if it is to have any meaning for students, must be used by them.

We have also sprinkled the chapters with Instant Access boxes, presenting the advantages and disadvantages of the major theories we discuss. The advantages are those offered by the theories' proponents; the disadvantages represent the critics' views. These presentations are at best sketchy or partial, and although they should give a pretty good idea of the theories, the picture needs to be completed with a full reading of the chapters and a great deal of reflection on the ideas they present. All chapters also provide glossary definitions of important terms, chapter summaries, and chapter-ending reviews tied specifically to each chapter's learning objectives. Finally, at the end of the text there are a thorough index and complete chapter-based reference lists.

THE BIG PICTURE

This textbook offers a comprehensive, authoritative introduction to mass communication theory. We provide clearly written examples, graphics, and other materials to illustrate key theories. We trace the emergence of four trends in media theory—mass society/mass culture, media effects, critical/cultural, and meaning-making. Then we discuss how each contributes to our understanding of media and human development, the use of media by audiences, the influence of media on cognition, the role of media in society, and finally the links between media and culture. We offer many examples of social/behavioral and critical/cultural theory and an in-depth discussion of their strengths and limitations. We emphasize that media theories are human creations typically intended to address specific problems or issues. We believe that it is easier to learn theories when they are examined with contextual information about the motives of theorists and the problems and issues they addressed.

In the next few years, as mass media industries continue to experience rapid change and our use of media evolves, understanding of media theory will become even more necessary and universal. We've continued to argue in this edition that many of the old questions about the role of media in culture, in society, and in people's lives have resurfaced with renewed relevance. This book traces how researchers and theorists have traditionally addressed these questions, and we provide insights into how they might do so in the future.

THE SUPPORTING PHILOSOPHY OF THIS BOOK

The philosophy of this book is relatively straightforward: Though today's media technologies might be new, their impact on daily life might not be so different from that of past influences. Changes in media have always posed challenges but have also created opportunities. We can use media to improve the quality of our lives, or we can permit our lives to be seriously disrupted. As a society we can use media wisely or foolishly. To make these choices, we need theories—theories explaining the role of media for us as individuals and guiding the development of media industries for our society at large. This book should help us develop our understanding of theory so we can make better use of media and play a bigger role in the development of new media industries.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For Instructors: An **Online Instructor's Manual** is available to assist faculty teaching a mass communication theory or media and society course. The Instructor's Manual offers assignment ideas, suggestions for audiovisual materials and for using many of the text's special features, syllabus preparation tools, and a sample syllabus. A Test Bank features chapter-by-chapter test questions in both multiple-choice and discussion/essay formats. You can download the Instructor's Manual by accessing the text's password-protected Instructor Companion Site, which also provides PowerPoint summations of the chapters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this eighth edition we have had the assistance of many people. Most important, we have drawn on the scholarly work of several generations of social and cultural theorists. Their ideas have inspired and guided contemporary work. It's an exciting time to be a communication scholar! We work within a research community that, although it may be in ferment, is also both vibrant and supportive. In these pages we acknowledge and explain the contributions that our many colleagues across the United States and around the world have made to mass communication theory. We regret the inevitable errors and omissions, and we take responsibility for them. We are also grateful to our reviewers:

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These reviewers helped us avoid some errors and omissions, but they bear no responsibility for those that remain. We also wish to thank our Oxford University Press friends, whose encouragement and advice sustained us. If you're reading this preface, you likely have some familiarity with what is happening in the textbook industry. Much of it isn't pretty. But Oxford, more than any other publisher, remains committed to *the book* and the ideas that venerable medium houses and generates. Their task was made less difficult than it might otherwise have been by our first editor, Becky Hayden, and Chris Clerkin, the editor for the first edition of this text. These accomplished professionals taught us how to avoid many of the sins usually committed by novice authors. The Oxford team, especially Alyssa Quinones, is as sharp as any we have worked with in the past and quite adept at using a gentle hand with what by now are two veteran textbook authors.

We must also thank our families. The Davis children—Jennifer, Kerry, Andy, Mike— are now scattered across the Midwest in Norman, Lincoln, Nashville, and Chicago, so they have been less involved with (or impacted by) the day-to-day development of this edition. Nonetheless, they often assisted with insights drawn from the academic fields in which they themselves have become expert: history, philosophy, Asian studies, marketing, and computer science. The Baran kids—Jordan and Matt Dowd— are scattered as well, but because of Internet and phone access, they were always available when the authors had questions about those "newfangled" technologies. They suffered our questions with charm and love.

It would be impossible to overstate the value of our wives' support. Nancy Davis continues to provide a sympathetic audience for efforts to think through media theory and brainstorm ways to apply it. Susan Baran, an expert in media literacy in her own right, has a remarkable ability to find the practical in the most theoretical. This is why more than a few of the ideas and examples in these pages found their refinement in her sharp mind. She keeps her husband grounded as a thinker and author while she lifts him as a man and father.

Finally, this book is the product of a collaboration that has gone on for nearly 50 years. We started our professional careers at Cleveland State University in 1973 in a communication department headed by Sidney Kraus. Sid inspired us, along with most other junior faculty, to become active, productive researchers. Today a disproportionate number of active communication scholars have direct or indirect links to the Cleveland State program. Sid, who, sadly, passed in 2014, demonstrated the many ways that one individual can have a powerful impact on a discipline. Through his scholarship, his mentorship, and his friendship, he has left a truly indelible mark.

S.J.B. & D.K.D

Understanding and Evaluating Mass Communication Theory

Social media site Facebook debuted on the Internet in 2003. Within 5 years it grew to 100 million users, and in October 2012 the company proudly announced it had one billion members visiting monthly, networking in over 70 languages (Delo, 2012). Six years later technology writer Mathew Ingram (2018) declared Facebook "one of the most powerful forces in media—with more than 2 billion users every month and a growing lock on the ad revenue that used to underpin most of the media industry" (p. 1). But what is Facebook? How can it be earning so much advertising income? Isn't it just a world community of happy teens posting what they had for lunch, gossiping, and uploading party pictures? It is not. Yes, 62% of Americans ages 12 to 34 use the platform, but so do 69% of 35- to 54-year-olds and 53% of people over 55 (McCarthy, 2019). Teens are not the only people on Facebook.

So maybe the typical Facebooker isn't who we usually think of when we consider who's using the site. What else do we want to know about these two billion-plus users? How many friends does a typical Facebooker have? Forty percent have fewer than 200 friends; 38% have 200 to 500; and 21% have more than 500 ("Average Number," 2016). But this raises another question. What exactly is a *friend*? If you can have 500, are they really friends? Of course they are, claim psychologists Ashwini Nadkarni and Stefan Hofmann (2012), who argue that Facebook fosters a sense of belonging and lets people express themselves as they'd like, two obvious functions served by real friends. But in a two-billion-person community there must be a lot of different kinds of people looking for different things from their online friendships. Of course there are. Researchers Laura Buffardi and Keith Campbell (2008) claim that narcissists and people with low self-esteem spend more time on Facebook than do others. But according to other scholars, personality differences may have little to do with *why* people use Facebook. As Samuel D. Gosling and his research team discovered, rather than using the site to compensate for aspects of their offline personalities, users simply carry those everyday characteristics over to their online selves (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011).

Clearly Facebook is a useful medium for a lot of people. Many log onto the site several times every day and frequently post updates. The Facebook News Feed, a constantly updated list of news stories tailored to users' needs and interests, provides many users

with all the news they care to read or watch. Despite the fact that 57% of Americans expect the news they get from social media to be largely inaccurate, four in 10 get at least some of their news from Facebook (the number increasing to seven in 10 if we count all social media sites; Matsa & Shearer, 2018). How can this be? The answer is that most users don't give much thought to what they are doing and why. If asked, most say they are simply passing time, being entertained, or engaging in casual communication with friends and family. The News Feed helps them keep up on what they care to know. But could Facebook be more important than they realize? What about your own use of Facebook? Is it making an important difference in your life, or is it just another way for you to pass time? How do you view the company that provides you with this service? How much profit do you think it earns from selling your attention and your personal data to advertisers? If you regularly upload a lot of personal information, you are trusting that Facebook will not misuse this information and will provide you with the level of privacy that you want. But should you be so trusting? Facebook aggressively markets what it calls "Audience Insights" to businesses, helping them more precisely target ads aimed at you. Should you care more about what Facebook does with the information you provide? Does it trouble you that 40% of your fellow Facebook users have lost trust in the site to protect their personal information, five times more than those who distrust Twitter and Amazon (Feldman, 2018)?

Your answers to these questions are naturally based on *your* ideas or assumptions about Facebook, its users, and your own experiences. You can take into account what your friends say about Facebook and what you happen to read in the media. You might wonder if what you think is happening for you and your friends is the same for all those "old people" Facebook says are there. Researchers Nadkarni, Hofmann, Buffardi, Campbell, and Gosling and his colleagues had their ideas and assumptions, too, but they moved beyond their immediate personal experience to conduct research. They collected data and systematically assessed the usefulness of their ideas. They engaged in social science. Working together with others in a research community, they sought to develop a formal, systematic set of ideas about Facebook and its role in the social world. They are helping develop a mass communication theory that can be used to better understand large-scale social media use.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter you should be able to

- Define *legacy media*, *large-scale social media*, and *mass communication*.
- Explain differences in the operation of the natural and social sciences.
- Describe the relationship between the scientific method and causality.
- Define *theory*.
- Differentiate the four broad categories of mass communication theory—postpositive, cultural, critical, and normative theory—by their ontology, epistemology, and axiology.
- Establish criteria for judging theory.
- Differentiate the four trends in media theory—the mass society and mass culture, media-effects, critical cultural, and meaning-making trends.

OVERVIEW

In this chapter we will define *mass communication* and explain how it has changed since the introduction of social media in the 1990s. We will consider what separates an idea, a belief, or an assumption from a theory. We will examine mass communication theories created by social scientists and humanists. We'll look at some of the difficulties faced by those who attempt to systematically study and understand human behavior. We'll consider the particular problems encountered when the concern involves human behavior *and* the media. We'll see, too, that the definition of *social science* can be quite elusive. We'll define *theory* and offer several classifications of communication theory and mass communication theory. We'll trace the way theories of mass communication have been created and we will examine the purposes they serve. Most important, we will try to convince you that the difficulties that seem to surround the development and study of mass communication theory aren't really difficulties at all; rather, they are challenges that make the study of mass communication theory interesting and exciting.

DEFINING AND REDEFINING MASS COMMUNICATION

In recent decades the number and variety of mass communication theories have steadily increased. Development of media technologies has radically altered how media are used, and that has encouraged revision of existing theories and the development of new ones. Mass communication theory has emerged as a more or less independent body of thought in both the social sciences and the humanities. This book is intended as a guide to this diverse and sometimes contradictory thinking. You will find ideas developed by scholars in communication and in many other social sciences, from history and anthropology to sociology and psychology. Ideas have also been drawn from the humanities, especially from philosophy and literary analysis. The resulting ferment of ideas is both challenging and heuristic. These theories provide the raw materials for constructing even more useful and powerful theoretical perspectives.

If you are looking for a concise, definitive definition of *theory*, you won't find it in this book. We have avoided narrow definitions of theory in favor of an inclusive approach that finds value in most systematic, scholarly efforts to make sense of media and their role in society. We include theories that have sparked controversy and criticism. Some of the theories we review are **grand**; they try to explain entire media systems and their role in society. Others are narrowly focused and provide insight into specific uses or effects of certain types of media. Our selection of theories is based partly on their enduring historical importance, partly on their continuing use by some researchers, and partly on their potential to contribute to future scholarship. This process is necessarily subjective and is based on our own understanding of media and mass communication. Our consideration of contemporary perspectives is focused on those that illustrate enduring or innovative conceptualizations. But before we embark on that examination, we need to offer definitions of a number of important concepts.

First, we need to define and differentiate between two different types of mass media—**legacy media** and **large-scale social media**. *Legacy media* refers to older forms of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, and most importantly television. These media are operated by large, complex organizations directly responsible for producing and distributing content using media technology. Their technology

permits large numbers of messages to be cheaply and easily reproduced and distributed to large audiences. These legacy media have developed over the past 200 years.

The newest forms of mass media are large-scale social media. Unlike legacy media, large-scale social media are dependent on Internet technology for distribution of messages. Users must access the Internet using computers or mobile devices. But much like legacy media, large-scale social media are developed and controlled by complex organizations. These organizations seek to attract the attention of large audiences by a variety of strategies. Some strategies resemble those of legacy media, but others are quite different. Social media enable audiences to do many different things. They allow users to routinely access, create, and share messages. They provide access to attractive content from many sources, and they serve a variety of needs for users. Like legacy media much of what they do serves to entertain or inform. Initially some social media, like Facebook and YouTube, relied on individuals to create content, but as they became more successful they turned to other content sources such as computer game makers and independent video producers. Large-scale social media organizations, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, operate in other ways that resemble legacy media. They are highly dependent on advertising income, and they prioritize policies and strategies that maximize this income even when it reduces the usefulness of the services they provide or disrupts the communities they serve. In the worst cases these services are operated in ways that threaten the welfare of individuals and the public at large. Unlike legacy media, large-scale social media are largely unregulated and are bound by few social or professional norms. Regulations that do exist are often ignored, since regulators are highly dependent on these companies themselves to provide information about their actions or policies. Facebook has been especially reluctant to share information about its activities.

Second, we have adopted a revised definition of mass communication that can be applied to both legacy media and large-scale social media. The old definition of mass communication was fairly simple. **Mass communication** was said to occur when a large organization employed a technology as a medium to communicate with a large, geographically dispersed audience. This definition has been routinely used for over a century, but the rise of social media has necessitated a rethinking. James Potter (2013) proposed a more contemporary definition:

> [In mass communication] the sender is a complex organization that uses standardized practices to disseminate messages while actively promoting itself in order to attract as many audience members as possible, then conditioning those audience members for habitual repeated exposures. Audiences members are widely dispersed geographically, are aware of the public character of what they are seeing or hearing, and encounter messages in a variety of exposure states, but most often in a state of automaticity. Channels of message dissemination are technological devices that can make messages public, extend the availability of messages in time and space, and can reach audiences within a relatively short time. (p. 1)

Some of the concepts used in this definition will be briefly explained here. Longer explanations will come later. Mass communication occurs when large organizations, whether legacy media or social media, use media technology to attract large numbers of people and train or condition them to routinely and frequently use their messages. They

do this in order to cultivate large audiences that enable them to earn profits by selling messages directly to users or by selling those users' attention to advertisers. Mass media organizations usually structure messages so they will be used without much thought. They intentionally induce **automaticity**—a state of mind in which audience members automatically take in and respond to message content without critical reflection. When you "zone out" while watching television or YouTube or browsing through Facebook pages, you are experiencing automaticity. We will later review research that has found that automaticity has important consequences. For example, you can be more easily persuaded by messages if you simply take them in and don't think about them.

Let's consider now some questions about what constitutes mass communication. You could achieve some fame and maybe even a bit of income by posting funny cat videos on YouTube that go viral. Does this make you a mass communicator? Are you engaging in mass communication? Potter's definition makes it clear that, in this scenario, *you* are not a mass communicator because you are not a complex organization. YouTube is the mass communicator. By agreeing to YouTube's policies so that you are permitted to post the video, you become a member of that organization and YouTube gives you access to its medium. In contrast to people who work in legacy mass media, you don't have a job title, office, or regular salary. You have to rely on YouTube to promote your work and pay you fairly. Your ability to engage in mass communication is completely dependent on YouTube's policies and protocols, written to maximize YouTube's ability to make money from advertisers who put ads in your cat videos.

When social media were initially developed it was assumed that they would empower individuals and undermine the ability of legacy media to hold people's attention and interest. These new media would provide more useful ways of spending time, unleashing the creativity of individuals and connecting people in innovative and useful ways. Virtual communities would be created in which people could participate meaningfully without the barriers of income, social class, nationality, or race. But with the rise of large-scale social media over the past decade, much of this potential has been lost. We have seen the transformation of social media organizations from small groups of technology-minded "geeks" with grand visions into complex organizations spanning the globe, regularly attracting millions of users, and earning staggering profits. In 1995 few people predicted that social media could earn even small profits. How could they make money? Most people didn't have access to the Internet, and those who did had little interest in using it to network with other people. They had telephones and e-mail; what use was there for social media? Social media became successful only after they demonstrated their usefulness as a medium for advertising. Once social media organizations started earning advertising revenue, they changed their policies and practices to earn even more. They incorporated applications (apps) that would attract the time and attention of users. They collected and sold user data to advertisers and to app developers. Above all, they focused on growth, adding more and more users who spent more time on their sites. These changes inevitably "massified" social media—they became less useful for individuals and more useful for social media organizations and their shareholders and investors. Social media technology was harnessed just as newspapers, radio, movies, and television were harnessed to earn profits for powerful media organizations. As social media have changed, their role in society and their effects have become similar to those of legacy media.

James Webster (2017) offers useful insights into the way that large-scale social media operate in what he calls the **marketplace of attention**. In this marketplace social media are competing against each other and against legacy media to gain and hold the attention of people. Users approach social media with the belief that, within these media, they will have the freedom to choose what they want, the freedom to create, and the freedom to share. Webster argues that each of these abilities has been compromised and diminished by social media themselves—the existence of such freedoms is a myth. Instead social media have come to dominate their users. "Today," he observes, "websites instantly recognize a person's presence, auction their attention to an advertiser, and serve them a targeted advertisement—all in a fraction of a second. This can happen anywhere, anytime" (p. 354). Users are unable to make rational choices about media content because there is simply too much content and they have only limited ability to make meaningful choices. Instead they rely on algorithms to steer them toward content that will attract and hold their attention. As a result, social media users engage in mass behaviors that are useful to advertisers but of limited usefulness to themselves. These mass behaviors are much more complex than those of television audiences during the era when three networks dominated the industry. However, the behaviors can be measured and analyzed by the same social media computers that deliver content. These measurements generate gigantic datasets, or **big data**. Big data is yielding powerful insights into user behavior, allowing large-scale social media to gain ever greater control over users. As you'll see in later chapters, big data has become increasingly important to media researchers as well (Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jang, & Bae, 2014).

Throughout this textbook we discuss how theories originally developed to understand legacy media remain useful despite the introduction of social media. Most existing theories can be adapted to apply to the range of mass media that includes large-scale social media. The "massified" social media are best studied as another form of mass media, not as a transformative force producing useful, radical changes. But you might ask how this can be true when your use of media is so different from that of your parents. You don't spend as much time on a couch in front of a glowing screen; media must be doing different things for you and to you. But is your use of media really so different? If most of the time you spend communicating involves legacy mass media and large-scale social media, it's unlikely that the purposes it serves or its effects are all that much different. Your choices of media content are being dominated and directed. You are engaging in mass behavior that can be sold to advertisers. This is especially true if your primary use of media is to be passively entertained or informed, whether by television shows, Facebook, Snapchat, or YouTube.

How can you evaluate whether your use of media is different? One beneficial way to do this is to think of **mediated communication** as existing on a continuum that stretches from **interpersonal communication** at one end to mass communication at the other. Where different media fall along this continuum depends on the amount of control and involvement people have in the communication process. The telephone, for example (the phone as traditionally understood—not the smartphone you might own that has Internet access, GPS, and some 500 other "killer apps"), sits at one end. It is obviously a communication technology, but one that is most typical of interpersonal communication. At most a very few people can be involved in communicating

at any given time, and they have a great deal of involvement with and control over that communication. The conversation is theirs, and they determine its content. A big-budget Hollywood movie or a network telecast of the Super Bowl sits at the opposite pole. Viewers have limited control over the communication that occurs. Certainly people can apply idiosyncratic interpretations to the content before them, and they can choose to direct however much attention they wish to the screen. They can choose to actively seek meaning from media content, or they can choose to passively decode it. But their control and involvement cannot directly alter the content of the messages being transmitted. Message content is centrally controlled by media organizations, and those organizations are seeking to maximize profits.

When social media were introduced, their various forms and technologies seemed to fit in the middle of the continuum between interpersonal and mass communication. Proponents of these new media argued that some features allowed ordinary people to effectively engage in creative forms of mass communication while others promised to connect people more efficiently and effectively to friends and family. New communication technologies could fill the middle of the continuum between the telephone and television. Suddenly media consumers would have the power to alter message content if they were willing to invest the time and had the necessary skill and resources. People could choose to be more *active* with media, and that could have many useful consequences for themselves, their friends, and their communities.

In earlier editions of this textbook we were optimistic about the way that social media would develop. We saw signs that media users were taking advantage of the control over messages offered by some new media companies. We had hope that the increasingly successful and powerful social media companies—Google, Facebook, Apple—might develop social media so that individuals were empowered. They might facilitate the creation of new communities and strengthen existing ones. But after almost 30 years it's become clear that large-scale social media provide us primarily with another form of mass communication. They're more diverse and seemingly tailored to our personal interests, but we have quite limited control over or involvement in message production. Facebook is a good example of the problematic development of social media. Initially Facebook facilitated creation and sharing of individually created content. It claimed an ability to build and sustain groups or even communities. Now the individually created content on Facebook serves mainly to attract users to the site so that they can be held there by more engaging content while they are exposed to advertising. Facebook has become one of the most successful competitors in the marketplace of attention. It proudly touts to advertisers its ability to attract and hold the attention of users so they are more likely to be influenced by the ads. It sells information about users that enables advertisers to target ads at people who are more likely to be influenced by and act on advertising messages. Large-scale social media offer little that is truly innovative. Social media companies are delivering the same basic content offered by legacy media but are packaging it in new ways and allowing easier access to it. For example, Twitter runs programming from producers like Walt Disney, ESPN, Viacom, and Vice News. Snapchat has an original video channel, Snap, and for payment provides "monetization opportunities" to scores of "influencers" who sell their online fame to sponsors (Sloane, 2018). YouTube has thousands of professional (as opposed to amateur or amateurs-hoping-to-make-some-money) channels. And Facebook

alone spends a billion dollars a year on entertainment, news, and sports programming produced by legacy media companies ABC, CNN, Fox, and Univision for its video-on-demand service, Facebook Watch (Spangler, 2018).

SCIENCE AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR

This is a social science textbook. It presents theories that can be used to scientifically explore, describe, and explain mass communication. We can assess the usefulness of these theories, and we can them to make them more useful. To do this we must use scientific methods—methods that have been developed over centuries. You likely have a basic understanding of these methods and are aware of the enormous power over the physical world provided by scientific theories and research. Physical science theorists and researchers like Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, and Louis Pasteur are widely known and respected, and science is one of the fundamental reasons we enjoy our admirable standard of living and have a growing understanding of the world around us. But not all scientists or the science they practice are understood or revered equally. When nations confront difficult problems, there is frustration when science can't provide easy solutions. There is even more frustration when science and the industries it spawns seemingly generate as many problems as they solve.

If there are doubts about the problems associated with the natural sciences, there tends to be even more skepticism about the social sciences. What has social science done for us lately? Is the social world a better place as a result of social science? Do we understand ourselves and others better? Are there stunning achievements that compare to splitting the atom or landing on the moon? Compared to the natural sciences, the social sciences seem much less useful and their theories less practical and more controversial.

Why does our society seem to have greater difficulty accepting the theories and findings of **social scientists**, those who apply logic and observation—that is, science—to the understanding of the social world rather than the physical world? Why do we have more trust in the people who wield telescopes and microscopes to probe the breadth of the universe and the depth of human cells, but skepticism about the tools used by social observers to probe the breadth of the social world or the depth of human experience? You can read more about the levels of respect afforded to scientists of different stripes in the box entitled "All Scientific Inquiry Is Value-Laden."

One important basis for our society's reluctance to accept the findings of the social scientists is the logic of **causality**. We readily understand this logic. You've no doubt had it explained to you during a high school physics or chemistry class, so we'll use a simple example from those classes: boiling water. If we (or our representatives, the scientists) can manipulate an independent variable (heat) and produce the same effect (boiling at 100 °C) under the same conditions (sea level) every time, then a **causal relationship** has been established. Heating water at sea level to 100 °C will cause water to boil. No matter how many times you heat beakers of water at sea level, they will all boil at 100 °C. Lower the heat; the water does not boil. Heat it at the top of Mount Everest; it boils at lower temperatures. Go back to sea level (or alter the atmospheric pressure in a laboratory test); it boils at 100 °C. This is repeated observation under controlled conditions. We even have a name for this—the **scientific method**—and there are many definitions for it. Here is a small sample:

ALL SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY IS VALUE-LADEN

Science writer Shawn Lawrence Otto (2011) would argue that the elevated respect afforded the natural sciences, to the positivists, is not as high as this text's discussion might lead you to believe. "At its core, science is a reliable method for creating knowledge, and thus power," he wrote, "Because science pushes the boundaries of knowledge, it pushes us to constantly refine our ethics and morality, and that is always political. But beyond that, science constantly disrupts hierarchical power structures and vested interests in a long drive to give knowledge, and thus power, to the individual, and that process is also political. . . . Every time a scientist makes a factual assertion—Earth goes around the sun, there is such a thing as evolution, humans are causing climate change—it either supports or challenges somebody's vested interests" (p. 22). In other words, the findings of the natural scientists are increasingly likely to be just as unsatisfying to some as those of the social scientists.

Public reaction to the theory of evolution and the science behind climate change offer two obvious examples. Vincent Cassone, chair of the University of Kentucky's biology department, defends evolution as the central organizing principle of all the natural sciences, "The theory of evolution is the fundamental backbone of all biological research. There is more evidence for evolution than there is for the theory of gravity, than the idea that things are made up of atoms, or Einstein's theory of relativity. It is the finest scientific theory ever devised" (as cited in Blackford, 2012). Yet the legislature of his state moved to strike the teaching of evolution from Kentucky's public schools. Climate scientists do not fare much better. Despite overwhelming evidence that the earth is warming, that human activity contributes to that change, and that the oceans are rising, the Virginia legislature has banned the term "sea-level rise" from a state-commissioned study of the problem because it was a "left-wing term," replacing it with "recurrent flooding" (Pollitt, 2012). In a time of massive wildfires, destructive droughts, murderous famines, giant hurricanes, and record high temperatures across the globe, 40% of Americans refuse to accept the scientific evidence of the existence of man-made global warming (Wise, 2018). Why the resistance to even traditional physical sciences? Otto (2011) answers, "The very essence of the scientific process is to question long-held assumptions about the nature of the universe, to dream up experiments that test those questions, and, based on the observations, to incrementally build knowledge that is independent of our beliefs and assumptions" (p. 24). Still, this doesn't explain why social scientists seem to suffer greater skepticism than their physical science colleagues? Why do you think this is the case?

1. "A means whereby insight into an undiscovered truth is sought by (1) identifying the problem that defines the goal of the quest, (2) gathering data with the hope of resolving the problem, (3) positing a **hypothesis** both as a logical means of locating the data and as an aid to resolving the problem, and (4) empirically testing the hypothesis by processing and interpreting the data to see whether the interpretation of them will resolve the question that initiated the research" (Leedy, 1997, pp. 94–95).

2. "A set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena" (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 9).

3. "A method . . . by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect. . . . The method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man [*sic*] shall be the same. Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis . . . is this: There are real things whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them" (Pierce, 1955, p. 18).

Throughout the last century and into this one, some social researchers have tried to apply the scientific method to the study of human behavior and society. As you'll soon see, an Austrian immigrant to the United States, Paul Lazarsfeld, was an especially important advocate of applying social research methods to the study of mass media. But although the essential logic of the scientific method is quite simple, its application in the social (rather than physical) world is necessarily more complicated. Philosopher Karl Popper, whose 1934 *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* is regarded as the foundation of the scientific method, explained, "Long-term prophecies can be derived from scientific conditional predictions only if they apply to systems which can be described as well-isolated, stationary, and recurrent. These systems are very rare in nature; and modern society is not one of them" (as cited in Stevens, 2012).

Take, for example, the much-discussed issue of press coverage of political campaigns and its impact on voter turnout. Or the issue of how much fake news on social media affected the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. We know that more media attention is paid to elections than ever before. Today television permits continual eyewitness coverage of candidate activity. Mobile vans trail candidates and beam stories off satellites so that local television stations can air their own coverage. The Internet and Web offer instant access to candidates, their ideas, and those of their opponents—Twitter and YouTube let us continually track their every move. Yet despite advances in media technology and innovations in campaign coverage, voter participation in the United States remains low. During the past 30 years, in spite of the ever-growing media coverage, presidential election turnout has averaged below 60%, with some dips into the mid-50s. Even in the 2008 race between Barack Obama and John McCain, considered "the most technologically innovative, entrepreneurially driven campaign in American political history," only 61.6% of the voting-eligible population (VEP) cast ballots (US Election Project, 2018b). Though the contentious 2016 Donald Trump–Hillary Clinton election drew enormous media coverage, featured millions of dollars in political advertising, and exacerbated political divisions, it elicited only 60.1% of the VEP (US Election Project, 2018a). Should we assume that media campaign coverage suppresses potential voter turnout? This is an assertion that some mass communication observers might be quick to make. But would they be right? Perhaps turnout would have been even lower without this flood of media coverage? How could or should we verify which of these assertions is valid?

As we shall see, the pioneers of mass communication research faced a similar situation during the 1930s. There were precious few scientific studies of, but many bold assertions about, the bad effects of mass media. A small number of social scientists began to argue that these claims should not be accepted before making **empirical** observations that could either support them or permit them to be rejected. While these early researchers often shared the widely held view that media were powerful, they believed that the scientific method might be used to harness this power to avoid negative effects like juvenile delinquency. They hoped to produce positive effects such as promoting Americans' trust in their own democratic political system while subverting the appeal of totalitarian propaganda. In this way scientific research would allow media to be a force for good in shaping the social world. If their dreams had been fulfilled, we would be living in a very different sort of social world. Social scientists would be engineering the construction of social institutions in much the same way that natural scientists engineer the construction of skyscrapers or Mars rovers. But that didn't happen. Why?

Researchers faced many problems in applying the scientific method to the study of the social world. When seeking to observe the effects of political news or political ads, how can there be repeated observations? No two audiences, never mind any two individuals, who see news stories are the same. No two elections are the same. News stories vary greatly in terms of content and structure. Even if a scientist repeatedly conducted the same experiment on the same people (showing them, for example, the same excerpts of coverage or ads and then asking them if and how they might vote), these people would now be different each additional time because they would have learned from previous exposure and had a new set of experiences. Most would complain about having to watch the same story or ad over and over. They might say whatever they think the researcher wants to hear in order to get out of the experiment.

How can there be control over conditions that might influence observed effects? Who can control what people watch, read, or listen to, or to whom they talk, not to mention what they have learned about voting and civic responsibility in their school, family, and church? One solution is to put them in a laboratory and limit what they watch and learn. But people don't grow up in laboratories or use social media with the types of strangers they meet in a laboratory experiment. They don't consume media messages hooked to galvanic skin response devices or scanned by machines that track their eye movements. And unlike atoms under study, people can and sometimes do change their behaviors as a result of social scientists' findings, which further confounds claims of causality. And there is another problem. Powerful media effects rarely happen as a result of exposure to a few messages in a short amount of time. Effects take place slowly, over long periods of time. At any moment, nothing may seem to be happening.

As a result, this implementation of the scientific method is difficult for those studying the social world for four reasons:

1. **Most of the significant and interesting forms of human behavior are quite difficult to measure.** We can easily measure the temperature at which water boils. With ingenious and complex technology, we can even measure the weight of an atom or the speed at which the universe is expanding. But how do we measure something like civic duty? Should we count the incidence of voting? Maybe a person's decision not to vote is her personal expression of that duty. Try something a little easier, like measuring aggression in a television violence study. Can aggression be measured by counting how many times a child hits a rubber doll? Is maliciously gossiping about a neighbor an aggressive act? How do we measure an attitude (a predisposition to do something rather than an observable action)? What is 3 kg of tendency to hold conservative political views or 16.7 mm of patriotism?

2. **Human behavior is exceedingly complex.** Human behavior does not easily lend itself to causal description. It is easy to identify a single factor that causes water to boil. But it has proved impossible to isolate single factors that serve as the exclusive cause of important actions of human behavior. Human behavior may simply be too complex to allow scientists to ever fully untangle the different factors that combine to cause observable actions. We can easily control the heat and atmospheric pressure in our boiling experiment. We can control the elements in a chemistry experiment with relative ease. But if we want to develop

a theory of the influence of mediated communication on political campaigns, how do we control which forms of media people choose to use? How do we control the amount of attention they pay to specific types of news? How do we measure how well or poorly they comprehend what they consume? How do we take into account factors that influenced people long before we started our research? For example, how do we measure the type and amount of political socialization fostered by parents, schools, or peers? All these things (and countless others) will influence the relationship between people's use of media and their behavior in an election. How can we be sure what *caused* what? The very same factors that lead one person to vote might lead another to stay home.

3. **Humans have goals and are self-reflexive.** We do not always behave in response to something that has happened; very often we act in response to something we hope or expect will happen. Moreover, we constantly revise our goals and make highly subjective determinations about their potential for success or failure. Water boils *after* the application of heat. It doesn't think about boiling. It doesn't begin to experience boiling and then decide that it doesn't like the experience. We think about our actions and inactions; we reflect on our values, beliefs, and attitudes. Water doesn't develop attitudes against boiling that lead it to misperceive the amount of heat it is experiencing. It stops boiling when the heat is removed. It doesn't think about stopping or have trouble making up its mind. It doesn't have friends who tell it that boiling is fun and should be continued even when there is insufficient heat. But people do think about their actions, and they frequently make these actions contingent on their expectations that something will happen. "Humans are not like billiard balls propelled solely by forces external to them," explained cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura (2008). "Billiard balls cannot change the shape of the table, the size of the pockets, or intervene in the paths they take, or even decide whether to play the game at all. In contrast, humans not only think, but, individually and collectively, shape the form those external forces take and even determine whether or not they come into play. Murray Gell-Mann, the physicist Nobelist, underscored the influential role of the personal determinants when he remarked, 'Imagine how hard physics would be if particles could think'" (pp. 95–96).

4. **The simple notion of causality is sometimes troubling when it is applied to ourselves.** We have no trouble accepting that heat causes water to boil at 100 °C at sea level; we relish such causal statements in the physical world. We want to know how things work, what makes things happen. As much as we might like to be thrilled by horror movies or science fiction films in which physical laws are continually violated, we trust the operation of these laws in our daily lives. But we often resent causal statements when they are applied to ourselves. We can't see the expanding universe or the breakup of the water molecule at the boiling point, so we are willing to accept the next best thing, the word of an objective expert—that is, a scientist. But we can see ourselves watching cable news and not voting and going to a movie and choosing a brand-name pair of jeans and learning about people from lands we've never visited. Why do we need experts telling us about ourselves or explaining to us why we do things? We're not so easily influenced by media, we say. But ironically most of us are convinced that

other people are much more likely to be influenced by media (the **third-person effect**). So although we don't need to be protected from media influence, *others* might; they're not as smart as we are (Grier & Brumbaugh, 2007). We are our own men and women—independent, freethinking individuals. We weren't affected by those McDonald's ads; we simply bought that Big Mac, fries, and a large Coke because, darn it, we deserved a break today. And after all, we did need to eat something, and Mickey D's did happen to be right on the way back to the dorm.

DEFINING THEORY

Scientists, natural or social (however narrowly or broadly defined), deal in **theory**. "Theories are stories about how and why events occur. . . . Scientific theories begin with the assumption that the universe, including the social universe created by acting human beings, reveals certain basic and fundamental properties and processes that explain the ebb and flow of events in specific processes" (Turner, 1998, p. 1). "A good theory clarifies things, aids our understanding," explains Stephen Kearse (2018). "It's prepared for us to scrutinize and audit, testing its explanatory power. The strongest ones have been refined, continually, until the case they make is as resilient as it is persuasive" (p. 9). Theory has numerous other definitions. John Bowers and John Courtright (1984) offered a traditional scientific definition: "Theories . . . are sets of statements asserting relationships among classes of variables" (p. 13). So did Charles Berger (2005): "A theory consists of a set of interrelated propositions that stipulate relationships among theoretical constructs and an account of the mechanism or mechanisms that explain the relationships stipulated in the propositions" (p. 417). Kenneth Bailey's (1982) conception of theory accepts a wider array of ways to understand the social world: "Explanations and predictions of social phenomena . . . relating the subject of interest . . . to some other phenomena" (p. 39).

Our definition, though, will be drawn from a synthesis of two even more generous views of theory. Assuming that there are a number of different ways to understand how communication functions in our complex world, Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss (2011) defined theory as "any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience" (p. 19). Emory Griffin (1994) also takes this broader view, writing that a theory is an idea "that explains an event or behavior. It brings clarity to an otherwise jumbled situation; it draws order out of chaos. . . . [It] synthesizes the data, focuses our attention on what's crucial, and helps us ignore that which makes little difference" (p. 34). These latter two writers are acknowledging an important reality of communication and mass communication theories: There are a lot of them; the questions they produce are testable to varying degrees; they tend to be situationally based; and they sometimes seem contradictory and chaotic. As communication theorist Katherine Miller (2005) explained, "Different schools of thought will define *theory* in different ways depending on the needs of the theorist and on beliefs about the social world and the nature of knowledge" (pp. 22–23). As such, scholars have identified four major categories of communication theory—(1) postpositivism, (2) cultural theory, (3) critical theory, and (4) normative theory—and although they

"share a commitment to an increased understanding of social and communicative life and a value for high-quality scholarship" (Miller, 2005, p. 32), they differ in:

- their goals;
- their view of the nature of reality, what is knowable and worth knowing—their **ontology**;
- their view of the methods used to create and expand knowledge—their **epistemology**; and
- their view of the proper role of human values in research and theory building—their **axiology**.

These differences not only define the different types of theory but also help make it obvious why a broader and more flexible definition of *social science* in mass communication theory is useful.

Postpositivist Theory

When researchers in the 1930s wanted to systematically study the role of mass media in social world, some turned to the natural sciences for their model. Those in the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, and so on) believed in *positivism*, the idea that knowledge could be gained only through empirical, observable, measurable phenomena examined through the scientific method. But as we saw earlier in this chapter, the social world is very different from the physical world. Causality needs to be understood and applied differently. After a half century of trial and error, social scientists committed to the scientific method developed **postpositivist theory**. This type of theory is based on empirical observation guided by the scientific method, but it recognizes that humans and human behavior are not as constant as elements of the physical world.

The goals of postpositivist theory are the same as those set by physical scientists for their theories: explanation, prediction, and control. For example, researchers who want to explain the operation of political advertising, predict which commercials will be most effective, and control the voting behavior of targeted citizens would, of necessity, rely on postpositivist theory. Its ontology accepts that although the world, even the social world, exists apart from our perceptions of it, human behavior is sufficiently predictable to be studied systematically. Postpositivists recognize that the social world does have more variation than the physical world, hence the *post* of postpositivism. Its epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced through the systematic, logical search for regularities and causal relationships employing the scientific method. Advances come when there is **intersubjective agreement** among scientists studying a given phenomenon. That is, postpositivists find confidence "in the community of social researchers," not "in any individual social scientist" (Schutt, 2009, p. 89). It is this cautious reliance on the scientific method that defines postpositivism's axiology— the objectivity inherent in the application of the scientific method keeps researchers' and theorists' values out of the search for knowledge (as much as is possible). They fear that values could bias the choice and application of methods so that researchers would be more likely to get the results that they want (results that are consistent with their values). Postpositivist communication theory, then, is theory developed through a system of inquiry that resembles as much as possible the rules and practices of what we traditionally understand as science.

Cultural Theory

But many communication theorists do not want to explain, predict, and control social behavior. Their goal is to *understand* how and why that behavior occurs in the social world. This **cultural theory** seeks to understand contemporary cultures by analyzing the structure and content of their communication. Cultural theory finds its origin in **hermeneutic theory—**the study of understanding, especially through the systematic interpretation of actions or texts. Hermeneutics originally began as the study or interpretation of the Bible and other sacred works. As it evolved over the last two centuries, it maintained its commitment to the examination of "objectifications of the mind" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 236), or what Miller (2005) calls "social creations" (p. 52). Just as the Bible was the "objectification" of early Christian culture, and those who wanted to understand that culture would study that text, most modern applications of hermeneutics are likewise focused on understanding the culture of the users of a specific text.

There are different forms of cultural theory. For example, **social hermeneutics** has as its goal the understanding of how those in an observed social situation interpret their own place in that situation. Ethnographer Michael Moerman (1992) explained how social hermeneutic theory makes sense of "alien" or "unknown" cultures. Social hermeneutic theory tries to understand how events "in the alien world make sense to the aliens, how their way of life coheres and has meaning and value for the people who live it" (p. 23). Another branch of cultural theory looks for hidden or deep meaning in people's interpretation of different symbol systems—for example, in media texts. As you might have guessed from these descriptions, cultural theory is sometimes referred to as *interpretive theory*. It seeks to interpret the meaning of texts for the agents that produce them and the audiences that consume them. Another important idea embedded in these descriptions is that any **text**, any product of social interaction—a movie, the president's State of the Union Address, a series of Twitter tweets, a conversation between a soap opera hero and heroine—can be a source of understanding. Understanding can in turn guide actions.

The ontology of cultural theory says that there is no truly "real," measurable social reality. Instead "people construct an image of reality based on their own preferences and prejudices and their interactions with others, and this is as true of scientists as it is of everyone else in the social world" (Schutt, 2009, p. 92). As such, cultural theory's epistemology, how knowledge is advanced, relies on the subjective interaction between the observer (the researcher or theorist) and his or her community. Put another way, knowledge is local; that is, it is specific to the interaction of the knower and the known. Naturally, then, the axiology of cultural theory embraces, rather than limits, the influence of researcher and theorist values. Personal and professional values, according to Katherine Miller (2005), are a "lens through which social phenomena are observed" (p. 58). A researcher interested in understanding teens' interpretations of social networking websites like Instagram, or one who is curious about meaning making that occurs in the exchange of information among teen fans of an online simulation game, would rely on cultural theory.

Critical Theory

There are still other scholars who do not want explanation, prediction, and control of the social world. Nor do they seek understanding of that world as the ultimate goal for their work. They start from the assumption that some aspects of the social world are

deeply flawed and in need of transformation. Their aim is to gain knowledge of that social world so they can change it. This goal is inherently—and intentionally—political because it challenges existing ways of organizing the social world and the people and institutions exercising power in it. **Critical theory** is openly political (therefore its axiology is aggressively value-laden). It assumes that by reorganizing society we can give priority to its most important human values. Critical theorists study inequality and oppression. Their theories do more than observe, describe, or interpret; they criticize. Critical theories view "media as sites of (and weapons in) struggles over social, economic, symbolic, and political power (as well as struggles over control of, and access to, the media themselves)" (Meyrowitz, 2008, p. 642). Critical theory's epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced only when it serves to free people and communities from the influence of those more powerful than themselves. Critical theorists call this emancipatory knowledge. Its ontology, however, is a bit more complex.

According to critical theory, what is real, what is knowable, in the social world is the product of the interaction between **structure** (the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs) and **agency** (how humans behave and interact in that world). Reality, then, is constantly being shaped and reshaped by the **dialectic** (the ongoing struggle or debate) between the two. When elites control the struggle, they define reality (in other words, their control of the structure defines people's realities). When people are emancipated, *they* define reality through their behaviors and interactions (agency). Researchers and theorists interested in the decline (and restoration) of the power of the labor movement in industrialized nations or those interested in limiting the contribution of children's advertising to the nation's growing consumerism would rely on critical theory. Some critical theorists are quite troubled by what they view as the uncontrolled exercise of **capitalist** corporate power around the world. They see media as an essential tool employed by corporate elites to constrain how people view their social world and to limit their agency in it. They worry about the spread of what they see as a global culture of celebrity and consumerism that is fostered by capitalist-dominated media.

Normative Theory

Social theorists see postpositivist and cultural theory as *representational*. That is, they are articulations—word pictures—of some other realities (for postpositivists, those representations are generalizable across similar realities, and for interpretive theorists, these representations are local and specific). Critical theory is *nonrepresentational*. Its goal is to *change* existing realities.

There is another type of theory, however. It may be applied to any type of social institution, but our focus will be on media institutions. Its aim is neither the representation nor the reformation of reality. Instead its goal is to set an ideal standard against which the operation of a given media system can be judged. A **normative media theory** explains how a media system *should* operate in order to conform to or realize a set of ideal social values. As such, its ontology argues that what is known is situational (or like interpretive theory, local). In other words, what is real or knowable about a media system is real or knowable only for the specific social system in which that media system exists. Its epistemology, how knowledge is developed and advanced, is based in *comparative analysis*—we can judge (and therefore understand) the worth of a given media system only in comparison to the ideal espoused by the particular

social system in which it operates. Finally, normative theory's axiology is, by definition, value-laden. Study of a media system or parts of a media system is undertaken in the explicit belief that there is an ideal mode of operation based in the values of the larger social system. Theorists interested in the press's role in a democracy would most likely employ normative theory, as would those examining the operation of the media in an Islamic republic or an authoritarian state. Problems arise if media systems based on one normative theory are evaluated according to the norms or ideals of another normative theory. Chapter 3 is devoted in its entirety to normative theory. You can more deeply investigate the role of values in the four broad categories of theory we've discussed when reading the box entitled "True Values: A Deeper Look at Axiology."

THINKING ABOUT THEORY

TRUE VALUES: A DEEPER LOOK AT AXIOLOGY

As we've seen, different communication theorists deal differently with the role of values in the construction of their ideas. Inasmuch as they model their research on that of those who study the physical world, postpositivists would ideally like to eliminate values from their inquiry. But they know they can't, so objectivity becomes their regulatory ideal; that is, they rely on the scientific method to reduce the impact of values on their work as much as possible. They also distinguish between two types of values in their work. Postpositivists cherish **epistemic values**—they value high standards in the conduct of research and development of theory. But they also confront **nonepistemic values**—the place of emotion, morals, and ethics in research and theory development. There is little debate about the former among postpositivists—who wouldn't want high standards of performance? But what about emotions, morals, and ethics? Why, for example, would researchers want to study media violence? Certainly they believe a relationship exists between media consumption and human behavior on some level. But what if an individual theorist strongly believes in the eradication of all violence on children's television because of her own son's problems with bullies at school? How hard should she work to ignore her personal feelings in her research and interpretation of her findings? Should she examine some other aspect of mass communication to ensure greater objectivity? But why should anybody have to study something that he or she has no feeling about?

Interpretive theorists, even though they more readily accept the role of values in their work, also wrestle with the proper application of those values. Accepting the impossibility of separating values from research and theory development, interpretive theorists identify two ends of a continuum. Those who wish to minimize the impact of their personal values on their work **bracket** their values; that is, they recognize them, set them aside by figuratively putting them in brackets, and then do their work. At the other end of the continuum are those who openly celebrate their values and consciously inject them into their work. In truth, most interpretive researchers and theorists fall somewhere in the middle. If you were really thinking about theory, though, you would have asked, "But if an interpretive theorist openly celebrates his or her values and injects them into the research or theory development, hasn't she moved into critical theory?" And you would be correct, because it is hard to conceive of someone willing to inject personal values into social research and theory who did not want, at the very least, to advance those values. And in advancing those values, the status quo would be altered—hence, critical theory.

Critical and normative theorists, in their open embrace of values, face fewer questions about objectivity than do other theorists. But they, like all social researchers and theorists, must employ high epistemic values. Critical theorists advocate change; normative theorists advocate media striving to meet a social system's stated ideals of operation. These open articulations of nonepistemic values, however, do not excuse sloppy data gathering or improper data analysis.

What should be clear is that all involved in the serious study of human life must maintain the highest standards of inquiry within the conventions of their research and theory development communities. Given that, which axiology do you find most compatible with your way of thinking about human behavior? Should you someday become a mass communication researcher or theorist, which set of values do you think would prove most valuable in guiding your efforts?

EVALUATING THEORY

French philosopher André Gide wrote, "No theory is good unless it permits, not rest, but the greatest work. No theory is good except on condition that one uses it to go on beyond" (as cited in Andrews, Biggs, & Seidel, 1996, p. 66). In other words, good theory pushes, advances, improves the social world. There are some specific ways, however, to judge the value of the many theories we will study in this book.

When evaluating postpositivist theory, we need to ask these questions:

1. How well does it explain the event, behavior, or relationship of interest?
2. How well does it predict future events, behaviors, or relationships?
3. How testable is it? That is, is it specific enough in its assertions that it can be systematically supported or rejected based on empirical observation?
4. How parsimonious is it? Is it the simplest explanation possible of the phenomenon in question? Some call this *elegance.* Keep in mind that communication theories generally tend to lack parsimony. In fact, one of the reasons many social scientists avoid the study of communication is that communication phenomena are hard to explain parsimoniously.
5. How practical or useful is it? If the goals of postpositivist theory are explanation, prediction, and control, how much assistance toward these ends is provided by the theory?

When evaluating cultural theory, we need to ask these questions:

1. How much new or fresh insight into the event, behavior, or relationship of interest does it offer? How much does it advance our understanding?
2. How well does it clarify the values inherent in the interpretation, not only those embedded in the phenomenon of interest, but those of the researcher or theorist?
3. How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community also investigating the phenomenon of interest?
4. How much aesthetic appeal does it have? In other words, does it enthuse or inspire its adherents?

When evaluating critical theory, we need to ask the same questions we do of cultural theory, but we must add a fifth:

5. How useful is the critique of the status quo? Does it provide enough understanding of elite power so that power can be effectively challenged? Does the theory enable individuals to oppose elite definitions of the social world?

When evaluating normative theory, we need to ask the following questions:

1. How stable and definitive are the ideal standards of operation against which the media system (or its parts) under study will be measured?
2. What, and how powerful, are the economic, social, cultural, and political realities surrounding the actual operation of a system (or its parts) that must be considered in evaluating that performance?
3. How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community also investigating a specific media system (or its parts)?

FLEXIBLE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Now that you've been introduced to the four broad categories of social scientific theory, you might have guessed another reason that those who study the social world often don't get the respect accorded their physical science colleagues. Sociologist Kenneth Bailey (1982) wrote, "To this day you will find within social science both those who think of themselves as scientists in the strictest sense of the word and those with a more subjective approach to the study of society, who see themselves more as humanists than as scientists" (p. 5). His point, as you've just seen, is not all who call themselves social scientists adhere to the same standards for conducting research or accepting evidence. But complicating matters even more is the fact that social science researchers and theorists often blend (or mix and match) categories as they do their work (Benoit & Holbert, 2008). To some observers, especially committed postpositivists, this seems unsystematic. It also generates disagreement among social scientists, not about the issue under examination, say the influence of video violence on children's behavior, but about the appropriateness of the methods used, the value of the evidence obtained, or the influence of values on the work (that is, debates over ontology, epistemology, and axiology).

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

One way to approach the study of media theory is to consider how theories have developed over the past two centuries. Not surprisingly, theories have evolved in part as a reaction to changes in mass media technology and the rise of new mass media organizations that exploited this technology. Proponents for the four types of theories developed different but sometimes related theories. Specific issues or concerns such as the effects of violent content or elite control of media have motivated the development and evolution of theories. Whenever new forms of media have been developed, they have been praised by some and condemned by others. Debates over the usefulness of new forms of media have spawned numerous theories.

FOUR TRENDS IN MEDIA THEORY

For some time, those who study the shifting history of mass communication theory have pointed to large-scale paradigm shifts, as once-popular notions in one era gave way to very different views in the next. Critics have challenged this way of looking at media theory, arguing that these overarching perspectives were not as well integrated or as dominant as they might appear to have been in retrospect (for example, Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). These shifts were rarely as clear-cut as often assumed, and the retelling of the interaction between proponents of different types of theory tended to dwell on conflict between their advocates rather than on the potential for collaboration or corroboration. Here, instead of distinct *eras* of mass communication theory, we identify *trends* in theory development. To some extent these trends are similar to eras in that they trace the development of relatively stable perspectives on mass communication, and over time there has been a shift from one trend to another. At given points in time, however, trends overlap and to some extent influence each other.

The Mass Society and Mass Culture Trend
in Mass Communication Theory

Our description of the eras of mass communication theory begins with a review of some of the earliest thinking about media. These ideas were initially developed in the latter half of the 19th century, at a time when rapid development of large factories in urban areas was drawing more and more people from rural areas to cities. At the same time, ever more powerful printing presses allowed the creation of newspapers that could be sold at declining prices to rapidly growing populations of readers. Although some theorists were optimistic about the future that would be created by industrialization, urban expansion, and the rise of print media, many were extremely pessimistic (Brantlinger, 1983). They blamed industrialization for disrupting peaceful, rural communities and forcing people to live in urban areas, merely to serve as a convenient workforce in large factories, mines, or bureaucracies. These theorists were fearful of cities because of their crime, cultural diversity, and unstable political systems. For these social thinkers mass media symbolized everything that was wrong with 19th-century urban life. They singled out media for virulent criticism and accused them of pandering to lower-class tastes, fomenting political unrest, and subverting important cultural norms. Most of these theorists were educated **elites** who feared what they couldn't understand. The old social order was crumbling, and so were its culture and politics. Were media responsible for this, or did they simply accelerate or aggravate these changes? These types of concerns about the role of media are still prevalent today. As we'll see in Chapter 14, there is a new European theory of media, mediatization theory, that also considers the power of media to subvert and transform social institutions.

The dominant perspective on media and society that emerged during this period has come to be referred to as **mass society theory**. It is an inherently contradictory theory that is often rooted in nostalgia for a "golden age" that never existed, and it anticipates a nightmare future in which social order is broken down, ruthless elites seize power, and individual freedom is lost. Some version of mass society theory seems to recur in every generation as we try to reassess where we are and where we are going as individuals and as a nation wedded to technology as the means of improving the quality of our lives. Each new version of mass society theory has its criticisms of contemporary media. It is useful to recognize that this trend in media theory is still found today even though many earlier forms of mass society theory have been discarded.

Mass society theory can be regarded as a collection of conflicting notions developed to make sense of what is happening whenever there is large-scale and/or disruptive social change. Mass society notions can come from both ends of the political spectrum. Some are developed by people who want to maintain the existing political order, and others are created by revolutionaries who want to impose radical changes. But these ideological foes often share at least one assumption—mass media are troublesome if not downright dangerous. In general, mass society ideas hold strong appeal for any social elite whose power is threatened by change. Media industries, such as the **penny press** in the 1830s, **yellow journalism** in the 1890s, movies in the 1920s, radio in the 1930s, and TV in the 1950s, were easy targets for elites' criticisms. They catered to audiences in middle and lower social classes using simple, often sensational content. Content mostly entertained rather than informed or educated people. These industries were easily attacked as symptomatic of a sick society—a society needing to either

return to traditional, fundamental values or be forced to adopt a set of totally new values fostered by media. Many intense political conflicts strongly affected thinking about the mass media, and these conflicts shaped the development of various forms of mass society theory.

An essential argument of mass society theory is that media subvert and disrupt the existing social order. But media are also seen as a potential solution to the chaos they engender. They can serve as a powerful tool that can be used to either restore the old order or institute a new one. But who should be trusted to use this tool? Should established authorities be trusted to control media—to produce or censor media content? Should media be freely operated by private entrepreneurs whose primary goal is to make money? Should radical, revolutionary groups be given control over media so they can pursue their dreams of creating an ideal social order? At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, fierce debate erupted over these questions. This conflict often pitted traditional elites, whose power was based on an agrarian society, against urban elites, whose power was increasingly based on industrialization and urbanization.

Today the fallacies of both the critics and advocates of older forms of media technology are readily apparent. Early mass society notions greatly exaggerated the ability of media to quickly undermine social order, just as media advocates exaggerated their ability to create an ideal social order. These ideas failed to consider that media's power ultimately resides in the freely chosen uses that audiences make of it. Most mass society thinkers were unduly paternalistic and elitist in their views of average people and media's ability to have powerful effects on them. Those who feared media exaggerated their power to manipulate the masses and the likelihood they would bring inevitable social and cultural ruin. Technology advocates were also misguided and failed to acknowledge the many unnecessary, damaging consequences that resulted from applying technology without adequately anticipating its impact.

The Media-Effects Trend in Mass Communication Theory

In the late 1930s and early 1940s mass society notions began to be empirically investigated by Paul Lazarsfeld, who would eventually overturn some of its basic assumptions. Trained in psychological measurement, Lazarsfeld fled the Nazis in Austria and came to the United States on a Ford Foundation fellowship (Lazarsfeld, 1969). For the emerging field of mass communication research, he proved to be a seminal thinker and researcher. Like many of his academic colleagues, Lazarsfeld was interested in exploring the potential of newly developed social science methods, such as surveys and field experiments, to understand and solve social problems. He combined academic training with a high level of entrepreneurial skill. Within a few years after arriving in the United States, he had established a very active and successful social research center, the Bureau for Applied Social Research at Columbia University.

Lazarsfeld provides a classic example of a transitional figure in theory development—someone well grounded in past theory but also innovative enough to consider other concepts and methods for evaluating new ideas. Though quite familiar with and very sympathetic to mass society notions (Lazarsfeld, 1941), Lazarsfeld was committed to the use of empirical social research methods in order to establish the validity of theory. He was a strong advocate of postpositivism as a basis for doing so. He argued

that it wasn't enough to merely speculate about the influence of media on society. Instead he advocated the conduct of carefully designed, elaborate surveys and even field experiments in which he would be able to observe media influence and measure its magnitude. It was not enough to assume that political propaganda is powerful—hard evidence was needed to prove the existence of its effects (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). Lazarsfeld's most famous research efforts, the "American Voter Studies," actually began as an attempt to document the media's power during election campaigns, yet they eventually raised more questions about the influence of media than they answered.

By the mid-1950s Lazarsfeld's work and that of other empirical media researchers had generated an enormous amount of data (by precomputer standards). Interpretation of these data led Lazarsfeld and his colleagues to conclude that media were not nearly as powerful as had been feared or hoped. Instead these researchers found that people had numerous ways of resisting media influence, and their attitudes were shaped by many competing factors, such as family, friends, and religious communities. Rather than serving as a disruptive social force, media more often seemed to reinforce existing social trends and strengthen rather than threaten the status quo. They found little evidence to support the worst fears of mass society theorists. Though Lazarsfeld and others never labeled this theory, it came to be referred to as **limited-effects theory**.

Throughout the 1950s limited-effects notions about media continued to gain acceptance within academia. These ideas dominated the new field of mass communication research as it was developing in the 1950s and 1960s. Several important clashes occurred between their adherents and those who supported mass society ideas (Bauer & Bauer, 1960). This is hardly surprising since the rise of communism across Eastern Europe seemed to provide ample evidence that media could be used as powerful tools to meld increasingly large masses of individuals into an ever more powerful totalitarian state. How could the United States expect to win the Cold War unless it could somehow find a way to use mass media to confront and overcome the Soviets?

In 1960 several classic studies of media effects (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Deutschmann & Danielson, 1960; Klapper, 1960) provided apparently definitive support for the limited-effects view. Limited-effects notions about mass communication theory were now supported by a decade of postpositivist research. By contrast, advocates of mass society notions came under increasing attack as "unscientific" or "irrational" because they questioned "hard scientific findings." Mass society notions were further discredited within academia because they became associated with the anti-communist **Red Scare** promoted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s. McCarthy and his allies focused considerable attention on ridding alleged communists from the media. They justified these purges using mass society arguments—average people needed to be protected from media manipulation. Limited-effects theorists produced research showing that average people were well protected from media influence by opinion leaders who filtered out communist propaganda before it reached their followers.

By the mid-1960s the debate between mass society and limited-effects advocates appeared to be over—at least within the postpositivist research community. The body of empirical research findings continued to grow, and almost all were consistent with the latter view. Little or no empirical research supported mass society thinking. Most postpositivist researchers stopped looking for powerful media effects and concentrated

instead on documenting minimal, limited effects. Some of the original media researchers had become convinced that media research would never produce any important new findings and returned to work in political science or sociology. In a controversial essay, Bernard Berelson (1959), who worked closely with Paul Lazarsfeld, declared the field of communication research to be "worn out," its "great ideas" exhausted (p. 6). There simply was nothing left to study when it came to the mass media.

Ironically, Berelson's essay was published just before the field of mass communication research underwent explosive growth. As postpositivist researchers in sociology and psychology abandoned media research, they were quickly replaced by the increasing numbers of faculty members working in rapidly growing programs dedicated to the study of media and communication. As these programs grew, so did the volume of postpositivist research on media. Initially this research largely replicated work done by sociologists and psychologists, but by the 1970s media researchers began to make important new contributions to our understanding of media.

The Critical Cultural Trend in Mass Communication Theory

While postpositivist media research flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, it came under increasing criticism from European researchers. In Europe both left-wing and right-wing scholars had concerns about the power of media deeply rooted in World War II experiences with propaganda and government control over media. Europeans were also skeptical about the power of postpositivist, quantitative social research methods to verify and develop social theory (they saw this approach to research as reductionist—reducing complex communication processes and social phenomena to little more than narrow propositions generated from small-scale investigations). They viewed this **reductionism** as a distinctly American fetish, and some European academics were resentful of the influence enjoyed by American social researchers after World War II. They argued that American empiricism was both simplistic and intellectually sterile. Although some European academics welcomed and championed American notions about media effects, others strongly resisted them and argued for maintaining approaches considered less constrained or more traditionally European.

One group of European social theorists who vehemently resisted postwar US influence were the **neo-Marxists** (Hall, 1982). Consistent with communist theory, first formulated by Karl Marx, these left-wing social theorists argued that media enable dominant social elites to consolidate and maintain their economic power. Neo-Marxist theory is a form of critical theory. It argues that media provide elites with a convenient, subtle, yet highly effective means of promoting worldviews favorable to their interests. Mass media can be understood, they contended, as a public arena in which cultural battles are fought and a dominant, or hegemonic, culture is forged and promoted. Elites dominate these struggles because they start with important advantages. Opposition is marginalized, and the status quo is presented as the only logical, rational way of structuring society. Values favored by elites are subtly woven into and promoted by the narratives of popular programs—for example, even in children's cartoons. Within neo-Marxist theory, efforts to examine media institutions and interpret media content came to have high priority. Such theories differ from older forms of Marxism because they assume that culture is an important arena for political struggle. Elites can be challenged in the media as well as in the streets.

During the 1960s some neo-Marxists in Britain developed a school of social theory widely referred to as **British cultural studies**. It focused heavily on mass media and their role in promoting a hegemonic worldview and a dominant culture within society at large. British cultural studies drew on both critical theory and cultural theory to create **critical cultural theory**. Researchers studied how members of various subgroups used media and assessed how this use might serve group interests (cultural theory) or might lead people to develop ideas that supported dominant elites (critical theory). This research eventually produced an important breakthrough. As they conducted audience research, social scientists at Birmingham University discovered that people often resisted the hegemonic ideas and propagated new, alternative interpretations of the social world (Mosco & Herman, 1981). Although British cultural studies began with **deterministic assumptions** about the influence of media (that is, the media have powerful, direct effects), their work came to focus on audience reception studies that revived important questions about the potential power of media in certain types of situations and the ability of audience members to actively resist media influence—questions that 1960s postpositivist media scholars ignored because they were skeptical about the power of media and assumed that audiences were passive.

During the 1970s questions about the possibility of powerful media effects were again raised in American universities. Initially these questions were advanced by scholars in the humanities who were unaware of the limited-effects perspective, skeptical about postpositivism, and well trained in cultural theory. Their arguments were routinely ignored and marginalized by social scientists because they were unsupported by "scientific evidence." Some of these scholars were attracted to European-style critical cultural theory (Newcomb, 1974). Others attempted to create an "authentic" American school of cultural studies—though they drew heavily on Canadian scholars like Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan (Carey, 1977). This **cultural criticism**, although initially greeted with considerable skepticism by "mainstream" effects researchers, gradually established itself as a credible and valuable alternative to limited-effects notions.

The Meaning-Making Trend in Mass Communication Theory

During the 1970s and 1980s there was increasing competition between postpositivist and critical cultural scholars in both the United States and Europe. During much of this period postpositivist researchers were at a disadvantage because limited-effects theories failed to address how media might be playing a role in the social movements that were obviously transforming society—the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist social movements. Additionally, they could not address the possible consequences of small but cumulative effects of exposure to popular media content (such as televised violence) or to advertising. Gradually, limited-effects notions were altered, partially because of pressures from critical cultural studies, but also because of the emergence of new communication technologies that forced a rethinking of traditional assumptions about how people use (and are used by) media. During the past three decades researchers have been challenged by the rise of powerful new media that clearly are altering how most of us live our lives and relate to others. Children are growing up in a world dominated by screens. To address this challenge postpositivists have developed new research strategies and methods (as explained in later chapters) that provide them with better measures of media influence and that have already identified a number

of contexts in which media can have powerful effects (for example, Scheufele, 2000; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2010; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015).

At the same time that postpositivist researchers moved toward a focus on use of media rather than media effects, critical cultural scholars advanced a similar but slightly different focus. Their research traced the way that cultural groups rather than individuals use media to serve group purposes. They studied how groups used various forms of media content, from music to news. They found that group members often band together to criticize and resist ideas being promoted by media (Alasuutari, 1999).

At the heart of the meaning-making trend in theory is a focus on a more or less active audience that uses media content to create meaningful experiences. Theorists recognize that important media effects often occur over longer time periods and these effects can be intended by users. People, as individuals or as groups, can make media serve certain purposes, such as using media to learn information, manage moods, promote group identity, or seek excitement. When audiences use media in these ways, they are intentionally working to induce meaningful experiences. The various meaning-making perspectives assert that when people use media to make meaning—when they are able to intentionally induce desired experiences—there often are significant results, some intended and others unintended. So when young adults stream billions of songs from the Net in order to alter or sustain a mood, there will be consequences. Or have you ever sought thrills from a horror movie and then been troubled afterward by disturbing visual images? Some consequences of media use are intended, but sometimes the results are unanticipated and unwanted. Factors that intrude into and disrupt meaning making can have unpredictable consequences. The trend in meaning-making theory implies that future research will focus on people's successes or failures in their efforts to make meaning using media, and on intended and unintended consequences. These consequences should be considered both from the point of view of individuals and from the point of view of groups or society.

REVITALIZED EFFECTS RESEARCH

The popularity of critical cultural studies, new postpositivist research methods, and the rise of meaning-making theory have intensified and renewed research on many different types of media effects. Postpositivist and critical cultural scholars are addressing a variety of important research questions involving these effects. Here are just a few that we will consider in later chapters. What are the short-term and long-term consequences of routine exposure to violent images and sexual behavior in video games? Are these effects similar to those found for televised violence, or are there important differences? How much do television commercials for fast food and blockbuster movie tie-ins for junk food contribute to our country's epidemic of obesity? Does media coverage of important issues such as war, elections, or the economy contribute to or diminish public understanding and democratic discourse? Have social media aided or subverted democratic discourse? To what extent are media responsible for political polarization and political incivility? How susceptible are we as a nation to Internet-based foreign propaganda such as the Russian propaganda transmitted during the 2016 election campaign? Is there a relationship between some kids' social media or video game use and

poor school performance? Do sexy television shows or Internet-based pornography contribute to rising rates of teen pregnancy? Does political corruption grow and social conflict increase when local newspapers are forced to cut staff or close altogether? How much responsibility must teen and fashion magazines or YouTube videos take for young girls' dissatisfaction with their bodies? How much freedom of the press is too much—and who gets to decide? Are social media responsible for the rise of bullying? Have they increased social isolation or lowered adolescent self-esteem?

Even though these and a thousand similar questions serve to stimulate increased research and the development of better theories, they are also generating renewed controversy about the role of media. Critics use research findings to sometimes unfairly critique media, while defenders find ways to explain away problematic findings. Large-scale social media are being criticized for many of the same reasons that television was attacked in the 1960s. They're a plug-in drug without the plug. We must better understand why it has been so hard to come to a clear understanding of media influence and why it has been so easy to promote fallacious ideas about media. Media are powerful tools that can be used to generate profits and serve public interests. We need theory and research to use these tools wisely.

REVIEW OF LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define *legacy media*, *large-scale social media*, and *mass communication*.

Legacy media are older forms of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, and television. They are operated by large, complex organizations directly responsible for producing and distributing content using media technology. Like legacy media, large-scale social media are developed and controlled by complex organizations, but unlike legacy media, they are dependent on Internet technology for distribution of messages. In mass communication, senders—both legacy media and large-scale social media—are complex organizations that use standardized practices to distribute messages, actively promote themselves in order to attract as many audience members as possible, and strive to produce habitual, repeated exposure. They compete in a marketplace of attention. Big data is used to understand and dominate audience behavior. Audience members are geographically dispersed, aware that many others are consuming the messages, and exposed to content in a variety of ways but most often in a state of automaticity. Media users have limited or no control over media content production and distribution.

- Explain differences in the operation of the natural and social sciences.

Social science is sometimes controversial because it suggests causal relationships between things in the social world and people's attitudes, values, and behaviors. In the natural sciences, causal relationships are often easily visible and measurable. In the study of human behavior, however, they rarely are. Human behavior is quite difficult to quantify, often very complex, and often goal-oriented. Social science and human behavior make a problematic fit. The situation is even further complicated because social science itself is somewhat variable—it has many forms and can serve very different purposes.

- Describe the relationship between the scientific method and causality.

A causal relationship occurs when a given factor influences another, even by way of an intervening variable. The best, some scientists say, the only way to demonstrate causality is through the application of the scientific method, traditionally understood as identifying a problem, gathering data in hope of resolving the problem, offering a hypothesis, and testing that hypothesis.

- Define *theory*.

Because there are a number of ways to understand how communication functions in our complex world, theory is an organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of social life that explains a human event or behavior. Media theories are developed to understand the effects that media have on individuals and the role mass communication plays in their lives and in the world around them.

- Differentiate the four broad categories of mass communication theory—postpositive, cultural, critical, and normative theory—by their ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

Postpositivist theory is traditionally social scientific. Its ontology accepts that the world is knowable and measurable; its epistemology argues that knowledge is advanced through the systematic, logical search for regularities and causal relationships; its axiology is objective. Cultural theory is based on interpretation of texts. Its ontology says that there is no truly "real," measurable social reality; its epistemology relies on the subjective interaction between the observer and his or her community; and its axiology embraces the influence of researcher and theorist values. Critical theory, in seeking to challenge the status quo, studies the struggle—the dialectic—between society's structure and its agency. The product of that struggle is its ontology; its epistemology is emancipatory knowledge; its axiology is political and value-laden. Normative theory is designed to judge the operation of a given media system against a specific social system's norms or ideals so these values can be achieved. Its ontology argues that what is known is situational; its epistemology is based on comparative analysis; and its axiology is value-laden.

- Establish criteria for judging theory.

When evaluating postpositivist theory, ask how well does it explain the event, behavior, or relationship of interest? How well does it predict future events, behaviors, or relationships? How testable is it? How parsimonious is it? How practical or useful is it? When evaluating cultural theory, ask how much new or fresh insight into the event, behavior, or relationship of interest does it offer? How well does it clarify the values inherent in the interpretation? How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community investigating the phenomenon of interest? How much aesthetic appeal does it have? When evaluating critical theory, ask the same questions as of cultural theory, but add how useful is the critique of the status quo? When evaluating normative theory, ask how stable and definitive are the ideal standards of operation against which the media system under study will be measured? What, and how powerful, are the economic, social, cultural, and political realities surrounding the actual

operation of a system that must be considered in evaluating that performance? How much support does it generate among members of the scholarly community investigating a specific media system?

- Differentiate the four trends in media theory—the mass society and mass culture, media-effects, critical cultural, and meaning-making trends.

The mass society and mass culture trend emerged in mass communication's earliest years. Often rooted in nostalgia for a "golden age" that never existed, it anticipated a nightmare future in which social order is broken down, ruthless elites seize power, and individual freedom is lost. In the late 1930s and 1940s the media-effects theory trend emerged. It viewed media as having little power to directly influence people; media's dominant effect was to reinforce existing social trends and strengthen the status quo. The critical cultural trend, in which researchers studied how members of various subgroups used media and assessed how this use might serve group interests (cultural theory) or might lead people to develop ideas that supported dominant elites (critical theory), emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The current meaning-making trend focuses on a more or less active audience that uses media content to create meaningful experiences and recognizes that important media effects often occur over longer time periods and these effects can be intended by users.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of any social science findings on media that you reject? What are they? On what grounds do you base your skepticism? Can you separate your personal experience with the issue from your judgment of the scientific evidence?
2. How do you interact with and use large-scale social media and legacy media? Can you identify effects that have occurred because of that use? Do you encounter fake news on social media, and how do you deal with it? Have you checked other news sources or warned your friends about it? Can you offer any possible negative effects to balance any positive effects that might have occurred from any of your media use?
3. How skilled are you at making meaning from media content? How media literate do you think you are? Do you often make meaning from content that is markedly different from that of your friends, or do you share their experience and interpretations of media? If so, why do you suppose this happens?

KEY TERMS

grand theory
legacy media
large-scale social media
mass communication
automaticity
marketplace of attention
big data
mediated communication

interpersonal communication
social scientists
causality
causal relationship
scientific method
hypothesis
empirical
third-person effect

theory
ontology
epistemology
axiology
postpositivist theory
cultural theory
hermeneutic theory
intersubjective agreement
social hermeneutics
text
epistemic values
nonepistemic values
bracket
cultural theory
critical theory
structure

agency
dialectic
capitalists
normative media theory
elites
mass society theory
penny press
yellow journalism
limited-effects theory
Red Scare
reductionism
neo-Marxists
British cultural studies
critical cultural theory
deterministic assumptions
cultural criticism

GLOSSARY

grand theory: Theory designed to describe and explain all aspects of a given phenomenon

legacy media: Mass media such as newspapers, radio, movies, and television that use older forms of technology to routinely attract large audiences by providing specific services

large-scale social media: Media that use Internet technology to routinely attract large audiences by providing many services while collecting information about users

mass communication: A large-scale organization's use of a communications technology and active promotion of itself to attract as many audience members as possible for habitual repeated exposures

automaticity: A state of media exposure in which media content is processed with little or no critical awareness or reflection

marketplace of attention: Audience attention is attracted and held by media so they can sell this attention to advertisers

big data: In media research, massive datasets created by measuring social media users' online behavior

mediated communication: Communication between a few or many people that employs a technology as a medium

interpersonal communication: Communication between two or a few people, typically face to face

social scientists: Scientists who examine relationships among phenomena in the human or social world

causality: When a given factor influences another, even by way of an intervening variable

causal relationship: When the alterations in a particular variable under specific conditions always produce the same effect in another variable

scientific method: A search for truth through accurate observation and interpretation of fact

hypothesis: A testable prediction about some event

empirical: Capable of being verified or disproved by observation

third-person effect: The idea that "media affect others, but not me"

theory: Any organized set of concepts, explanations, and principles of some aspect of human experience

ontology: The nature of reality, what is knowable

epistemology: How knowledge is created and expanded

axiology: The proper role of values in research and theory building

postpositivist theory: Theory based on empirical observation guided by the scientific method

intersubjective agreement: When members of a research community independently arrive at similar conclusions about a given social phenomenon

cultural theory: Theory seeking to understand contemporary cultures by analyzing the structure and content of their communication

hermeneutic theory: The study of understanding, especially by interpreting action and text

text: Any product of social interaction that serves as a source of understanding or meaning

social hermeneutics: Theory seeking to understand how those in an observed social situation interpret their own lot in that situation

critical theory: Theory seeking transformation of a dominant social order in order to achieve desired values

structure: In critical theory, the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs

agency: In critical theory, how humans behave and interact within the structure

dialectic: In critical theory, the ongoing struggle between agency and structure

capitalists: Economic elites whose power is based on the profits they generate and then reinvest

cultural theory: A form of hermeneutic theory that focuses on how communication shapes and is shaped by social groups

normative media theory: Theory explaining how a media system should be structured and operate in order to conform to or realize a set of ideal social values

epistemic values: High standards in the conduct of research and theory development

nonepistemic values: The place of emotion, morals, and ethics in research and theory development

bracket: In interpretive theory, setting values aside

elites: People occupying elevated or privileged positions in a social system

mass society theory: Perspective on Western, industrial society that attributes an influential but often negative role to media

penny press: Newspapers that sold for one penny and earned profits through newsstand sales and advertising

yellow journalism: Newspaper reporting catering to working and other lower social class audiences using simple, often sensational content

limited-effects theory: View of media as having little ability to directly influence people. The dominant effect of media is to reinforce existing social trends and strengthen the status quo

Red Scare: Period in US history, late 1950s to early 1960s, in which basic freedoms were threatened by searches for "Reds," or communists, in media and government

reductionism: Reducing complex communication processes and social phenomena to little more than narrow propositions generated from small-scale investigations

neo-Marxism: Social theory asserting that media enable dominant social elites to maintain their power

British cultural studies: Perspective focusing on mass media and their role in cultural groups and in promoting a public forum in which definitions of the social world are negotiated

critical cultural theory: An integration of critical theory and cultural theory first attempted by British cultural studies scholars

deterministic assumptions: Assumptions that media have powerful, direct effects

cultural criticism: Collection of perspectives concerned with the cultural disputes and the ways communication perpetuates domination of one group over another

Establishing the Terms of the Debate over Media: The First Trend in Mass Communication Theory—Mass Society and Mass Culture Theories

In India, mobs beat to death and lynched dozens of people—men, women, and toddlers—convinced, by fake and photoshopped posts on Facebook-owned WhatsApp, that their children were in danger of being stolen. In Brazil, false WhatsApp messages warned that the government-mandated yellow-fever vaccine was dangerous, leading people to avoid the life-saving treatment (Dwoskin & Gowen, 2018). Other phony social media posts, primarily from agents of the Russian government, were implicated in spreading chaos and racial and social discord in the United States during the 2016 presidential election in hope of securing the election of Russia's preferred candidate, Donald Trump (Apuzzo & LaFraniere, 2018), efforts that continued through the 2018 mid-term elections and into 2019 and were expanded in an effort to disrupt elections in other countries as well (Frenkel, Conger, & Roose, 2019).

These were not the only controversies swirling around social media at this time. Chamath Palihapitiya, one-time Facebook vice president, and Sean Parker, Facebook's founding president, independently admitted that the site was created expressly to foster addiction. Mr. Parker admitted that he and "other early Facebookers built the platform to consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible," employing a "system of users posting content and receiving likes as 'a social-validation feedback loop'" (as cited in Kircher, 2017). Mr. Palihapitiya described the site's "short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops" as "destroying how society works" (as cited in Gelles, 2018, p. B1). The American Psychiatric Association had several years before added "Internet addiction disorder" to the American *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, its authoritative list of recognized mental illnesses. Online video

games, too, came under scrutiny; in 2018 the World Health Organization added "Internet gaming disorder" to its manual of psychiatric diagnoses (Carey, 2018).

Technology-driven hate, political intrigue, and addiction are not the only media controversies of our times. Arguing that their State Constitution requires "government to protect the virtue and purity of the home," legislators on the Idaho House State Affairs Committee passed a 2013 resolution asking the federal government to prohibit conversations about and the portrayal, even implied, of premarital sex on television dramas, comedies, reality and talk shows, and commercials in order to, in the words of Representative Darrell Bolz, "stand up for the morality of what is best for the citizens of Idaho" (as cited in KBOI, 2013). Elsewhere, researchers at the National Institutes of Health discovered that 50 minutes of cellphone use could alter normal brain function (Parker-Pope, 2011); the scientific journal *Pediatrics* published a report tying teens' consumption of online and other media violence to subsequent "seriously violent behavior" (Ybarra et al., 2008) and another report linking exposure to sexual content on television to teen pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008); the journal *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* presented evidence of lagging language development in children as a result of infant television viewing (Bryner, 2009); and *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association* published research demonstrating that every daily hour spent watching television is linked to an 18% greater risk of dying from heart disease, an 11% greater risk of all causes of death, and a 9% greater risk of death from cancer (Dunstan et al., 2010). There is also evidence that consuming Disney movies, television shows, and marketing increases the likelihood that young boys and girls approve of girls adhering to traditionally feminine, subservient behaviors (Maldonado, 2017); that with the release of the Netflix hit *13 Reasons Why* (about teen suicide) "the overall suicide rate among 10- to 17-year-olds increased significantly" (Bridge et al., 2019); and watching the cable channel HGTV made the hanging of barn doors inside the home an acceptable interior design option (Buckman, 2018).

On the more optimistic side, research shows that women who watched the television show *The X-Files* were more likely to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (Ifeanyi, 2018); that when members of majority groups "meet" members of minority groups in the media, they demonstrate lower levels of real-world prejudice (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005); that fictional television narratives can improve viewers' health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013); and that well-designed prosocial video games can be used to reduce people's propensity for reckless and risky driving (Greitemeyer, 2013).

Fake social media accounts lead to murder, increased incidence of disease, and disrupted elections? Social media and video games are addictive? Watching TV and movies can influence career choices, foster sexist notions, and increase interest in suicide? Media can reduce prejudice, improve people's health, short-circuit reckless driving, and change the inside of people's homes? Cellphones mess with our brains? Watching television and going online creates violent kids, gets teens pregnant, stunts language acquisition, and increases the risk of death? Some say yes; some say no.

For more than a century now, society has debated the role of media. Conservatives lament the decline of values sped by a "liberal media elite." Liberals fear the power of a media system more in tune with the conservative values of its corporate owners than of its audiences. School boards and city councils debate installing filtering software on school and library computers, pitting advocates of free expression against proponents