6 EDITION

GENDER, RACE, and CLASS in MEDIA

A CRITICAL READER

Bill Yousman
Lori Bindig Yousman
Gail Dines
Jean McMahon Humez

EDITORS

Gender, Race, and Class in Media

Sixth Edition

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PREFACE

The goal of this sixth edition of *Gender, Race, and Class in Media* remains the same as that of previous editions: to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to some of the richness, sophistication, and diversity that characterizes contemporary **media** scholarship, in a way that is accessible and builds on students' own media experiences and interests. We intend to help demystify the nature of **popular culture** and emerging media by examining their production, analyzing the **texts** of some of the most pervasive forms or **genres**, and exploring the processes by which audiences make meaning out of media images and stories—meaning that helps shape our economic, cultural, political, and personal worlds.[1] We start from the position that, as social beings, we construct our realities out of the cultural norms and values that are dominant in our society. Media and popular culture are among the most important producers and reproducers of such norms and values.

We have designed this as a volume to help educators (1) introduce the most powerful theoretical concepts in contemporary media studies; (2) explore some of the most influential and interesting forms of contemporary popular culture; and (3) focus on issues of **race**, **class**, and **gender** and **sexuality** from a **critical** perspective. Most of the readings in this book take an explicitly critical perspective that is also informed by a diversity of approaches, such as **political economy**, **feminism**, **cultural studies**, **critical race theory,** and **queer theory**. We have chosen readings that make the following assumptions: (1) that industrialized societies are stratified along lines of gender and sexuality, race, class, and other identifiers; (2) that everyone living in such societies "has" gender and sexuality, race, and class, and other aspects of social identity that help structure experience; and (3) that economic and other resources, advantages, and privileges are distributed inequitably, in part because of power dynamics involving these categories of experience (as well as others, such as age, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or ability). Our selection of material has been guided by our belief that an important goal of a critical education is to enable people to conceptualize social justice clearly and work toward it more effectively. For us, greater social justice requires a fairer distribution of our society's economic and cultural resources. In the current political era, we see these commitments as more urgent than ever.

Our book is situated within both media studies and cultural studies. When Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez started working on the first edition of *Gender, Race, and Class in Media* in the early 1990s, cultural studies was a relatively new academic field in the United States, although it had been popular for some time in England (where it originated at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham). The cultural studies approach has now been dominant in U.S. media studies for more than a generation. Several other interdisciplinary fields concerned with social issues and representation, such as American studies and gender and women's studies, have been heavily influenced by cultural studies.

The field of cultural studies is actually **multidisciplinary**, drawing on insights and approaches from history, critical race studies, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Because of its **progressive** politics and because it offers a much broader and apparently more democratic definition of culture than was used in

humanistic studies such as literary criticism in the past, many scholars and students particularly interested in race, gender, sexuality, and class have been attracted to its theories and **activist** potential. (For a more extended discussion of the development of multiculturalism and cultural studies, see Douglas Kellner's leadoff chapter, newly updated for this edition.)

In this sixth edition, we continue to emphasize three interconnected areas of analysis: **political economy**, **textual analysis**, and **audience reception**. It is crucial to integrate all three to provide a holistic understanding of the entire media culture communication process, from production through consumption. Indeed, one of the initial goals of cultural studies was to contextualize the media text within the wider society that informs its production, construction, consumption, and, more recently, distribution along a range of **media platforms**.

Traditionally, political economy has looked at the ways the profit motive affects how texts are produced within a society marked by class, gender, and racial inequality. Who owns and controls the media? Who makes the decisions about content? How does financing affect and shape the range of texts produced? In what other ways does the profit motive drive production? These are central questions asked by political economists. Examining this economic component is still essential to an understanding of what eventually gets produced and circulated in the mainstream commercial media industries. However, with the advent of **new media** technologies that enable consumers to produce and widely distribute their own content, we must broaden our view of production, as many of the readings in this book do.

Media representations are never just mirrors or "reflections of reality" but, rather, always artfully constructed creations designed to appeal to our emotions and influence our ideas, and especially our consumer behavior. Therefore, to educate ourselves as consumers, we need tools to help us closely examine the ways all cultural texts—from TV sitcoms, dramas, or reality shows to video games, YouTube videos, and social media sites—are structured, using complex combinations of words, sounds, and visual languages. Critical textual analysis provides a special focus on how to analyze the **ideological** significance of media texts—that is, to look at how, through the use of certain codes and conventions, they create or transmit meanings that may challenge and/or reinforce the economic, social, cultural, and political status quo.

Media studies has long acknowledged that audiences also have a role in creating the meanings of media texts, and for at least a generation, **ethnographic** audience reception research has focused on this dimension. By observing and talking with lay consumers of media texts—as opposed to professional critics—researchers have learned a great deal about how we interpret, make sense of, understand, and use such texts within our everyday social and private lives. These studies have played an important role in complicating the older view of media audiences as passive, or even brainwashed, recipients of prepackaged meanings. Clearly, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, political beliefs, age, religion, ability, and other important factors can help explain the different meanings that various audiences appear to take away from an advertisement, movie, video game, blog, social media post, meme, or television show. Studies of **fans**—those dedicated consumers of media texts who build community around their experiences of consumption—go even further in exploring how consumers of media texts can produce meanings quite different from those intended by the original text producers. With the advent of new media aided by the internet, the debate over audience exploitation versus empowerment has only intensified.

However we conceptualize the media audience in the age of the internet, it is still vital to study all three components of media representations—production, texts, and consumption—to understand how such texts can and do strengthen—or perhaps in some ways undermine—our dominant systems and ideologies of gender and sexuality, race, and class inequality.

In this sixth edition, we have maintained our thematic focus on gender and sexuality, race, and class because we believe that media studies needs to address the issues of social inequality that continue to plague our society and undermine its democratic potential, perhaps even more now than when the first edition of this anthology appeared. Many of the readings in this book employ an **intersectional** analysis—that is, one that complicates each of these social categories by examining how they interact with one another. Whenever possible, we have selected articles that give voice to the multiple levels of analysis needed to make media studies a truly **multicultural** endeavor. We acknowledge the ever-intensifying interrelationships among media cultures globally while continuing to focus mostly, but not entirely, on the North American examples of media texts that we see as most likely to be familiar to instructors and students working with this book.

For the sixth edition, we again located, read, and discussed many new journal articles and book chapters. We reached out to colleagues who do media research and teach media courses, and we listened to students to learn what they found compelling in former editions. Nineteen chapters in this edition are either new or substantially updated since the fifth edition. This reflects both the rapid evolution of the field and our desire to provide analysis of relatively recent media texts likely to be familiar to students. Several "classic" readings (such as Janice Radway's **ethnography** of women who are voracious readers of romance novels), which first appeared in earlier editions, still offer important and clearly articulated historical and theoretical insights into media analysis.

We've grouped our selections into thematic sections that highlight some of the important changes that have taken place in the worlds of popular culture and emerging media over the past several years and that also reflect our experience of student interests. As in previous editions, we include an index of individual reading topics, which will allow instructors to create alternative groupings of readings to suit their own course designs. We hope that instructors and students will find the themes and genres represented in this collection provocative; stimulating; and an invitation to engage in further thinking, research, and perhaps even media activism.

In condensing previously published journal articles and book chapters, we have often had to omit quite a lot of detail from the originals, while preserving central arguments and challenging ideas. The omissions are carefully noted with the use of ellipses (…). By judiciously cutting the overall length, we have aimed to make cutting-edge scholarship as accessible as possible for undergraduate and graduate students alike. Our brief introductory essays to each section highlight key concepts and identify some interesting connections among the readings in that section. We continue to welcome comments from users of this book about our selections, about what worked well in the classroom and what did not. We especially invite suggested articles for future editions.

At the end of the book, we have provided some supplementary resources, including a glossary of terms and a selective list of the many media literacy and activist organizations easily located on the internet. We hope these resources will be useful for those who, inspired by the progressive ideals espoused by many of the writers in this collection, would like to explore this kind of grassroots consumer and citizens' activism on behalf of a more democratic media culture in the future.

Throughout our book, key concepts important for students to discuss and digest appear in boldface. These are defined in more detail in the Glossary at the end of the volume. Some instructors have found it useful to assign the Glossary itself as a reading early in a course, for the benefit of students new to media theory and critical cultural studies.

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We are immensely grateful to the colleagues and students who have contributed over the years to all of our thinking about the issues and questions raised in this book. They are far too many to be mentioned individually, but they include faculty and students at Sacred Heart University, the University of Massachusetts Boston, and Wheelock College, as well as colleagues and associates with whom we have worked in multiple other locations.

Many writers contributed original essays and edited articles that have been included in the six editions thus far. This anthology could obviously not exist without their scholarship and their willingness to allow us to edit and include their work.

We would also like to thank those involved in this project at SAGE Publications, for their belief in the ongoing need for this book and their careful work in bringing the sixth edition into print.

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PART

I

A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH TO MEDIA

Theory

In this book, we offer a selection of critical examinations of popular culture and **emergent media** to exemplify a powerful method of analysis you will be able to apply on your own to other media examples. In this way, we hope to promote and support critical **media literacy**. While there are many ways to think about media literacy, for the purposes of this book, we argue that in a postindustrial society, dominated by corporate media and commercial messages, media literacy can be one tool to help limit the **discursive** power of media in our lives. While a sophisticated level of media literacy cannot replace other efforts to democratize our society's economic and cultural resources, in our view, it does give audiences the skills necessary to analyze and question the ideologies that often work at a subtextual level within media narratives and images.

We begin with media theory because we think students will find it useful to have a good grasp of several central concepts, illustrated in an introductory way here, before going on to tackle later readings in which an understanding of these concepts is often presumed. In this section, we especially highlight the central concepts and terms of the field of cultural studies as applied to **media culture**. As in all the other sections of this book, the chapters in this section are in dialogue with one another in many ways. In these opening comments, we give only one possible reading of the ways their main themes connect.

We open with "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture," by Douglas Kellner (I.1). This essay, which has been newly updated for this edition, sets out the three-part approach to cultural studies (political economy/production, textual analysis, and **audience** reception/consumption) that characterizes this field. Like Kellner, we believe that to understand a media artifact such as a TV show, advertisement, social media site, or online game, one must be able to understand the socioeconomic context in which it is created (political economy/production); analyze its constructed meaning(s) through careful attention to its particular visual/verbal/auditory languages or **codes** (textual analysis); and determine its actual impact on individuals and groups and how these audiences contribute to the meaning-making process, and even to the production and distribution of cultural products (audience consumption/production). In addition, Kellner points to the importance of intersectional considerations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and other identifiers as categories of difference and social analysis in a cultural studies approach to media.

In "The Meaning of Memory" (I.2), an important historical background piece that sheds light on how and why corporations came to dominate media culture so

heavily in the United States, George Lipsitz shows how the needs of the national economy in the post-World War II period facilitated the development of mass television production. He explores how the increase in the sale of televisions and the development of a group of situation comedies were used to transform a traditional, ethnic immigrant ideology that stressed values of community, thrift, and commitment to labor unions into a commodified **American Dream ideology** that stresses **individualism**, **consumerism**, and suburban domesticity—values consistent with the demands of the expanding postwar **capitalist** economy.

In subsequent decades, media industries have changed dramatically as a result of technological and economic developments. Commercial entertainment today is a highly profit-oriented business, controlled for the most part by a small number of giant corporations. In a newly updated version of "The Economics of the Media Industry" (I.3), David P. Croteau and William D. Hoynes focus on corporate control of media products (content), platforms (what we use to access content), and pipes (conduits that bring us content), showing why this commercial domination of all facets of media production, distribution, and consumption is a problem for purportedly democratic societies.

Giant media **conglomerates** are able to "assemble a portfolio that spans across film, television, books, record labels, video games, and so on to promote one another's operations," (a process called "horizontal integration"). They also use "vertical integration"—"the process by which one owner acquires all aspects of production and distribution of a single type of media product"—to gain further control over the market. As the authors point out:

> In this era of integrated media conglomerates, media companies are capable of pursuing elaborate cross-media strategies in which company-owned media products can be packaged, sold, and promoted across the full range of media platforms. Feature films, their accompanying soundtracks and streaming/On-Demand/DVD/Blu-Ray releases, spin-off television programs, and books, along with magazine cover stories and plenty of licensed merchandise, can all be produced and distributed by different divisions of the same conglomerate—with each piece serving to promote the broader franchise.

In these ways, corporate media giants benefit economically from conglomeration and integration and, arguably, make it "more difficult for smaller media firms to compete," but even more worrisome is the potential for such conglomerates to translate media ownership into political power. Offering international examples from the United States (Michael Bloomberg), Europe (Italy's Silvio Berlusconi), and the United Kingdom and Australia (Rupert Murdoch), the authors warn that "owners can systematically exclude certain ideas from their media products." Building on political economist Herb Schiller's concept of "the corporate voice," they ask us to consider whether "'the corporate voice' has been generalized so successfully that most of us do not even think of it as a specifically corporate voice. That is, the corporate view has become 'our' view, the 'American' view, even though the interests of the corporate entities that own **mass media** are far from universal."

One way of thinking about how the corporate view becomes woven into dominant ways of thinking about the world is the theory of **hegemony** that James Lull explores in his chapter (I.4). While Karl Marx was one of the first major social thinkers to explore how the ideologies of the ruling class become the mainstream ideas of the time, theorists such as Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Stuart

Hall helped develop the more nuanced concept of hegemony that Lull defines as "the power or dominance that one social group holds over others." Lull points out,

> Owners and managers of media industries can produce and reproduce the content, inflections, and tones of ideas favorable to them far more easily than other social groups because they manage key socializing institutions, thereby guaranteeing that their points of view are constantly and attractively cast into the public arena.

Though many critical studies of corporate media use the concept of hegemony, at first it seems more difficult to apply this notion to the internet, which has been seen as a kind of "public sphere" in which many voices are heard. Indeed, somewhat grandiose and utopian claims were made in some circles about the new era of free expression and democratic cultural production the internet would bring with it. Nevertheless, there are often obscured, profit-oriented entities in control of production and distribution of online content. So as John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney remind us in "The Internet's Unholy Marriage to Capitalism" (I.5), there is a need to think more critically about the relationship between the internet and capitalism. They argue that "there was—and remains—extraordinary democratic and revolutionary promise in this communication revolution. But technologies do not ride roughshod over history, regardless of their immense powers. They are developed in a social, political, and economic context."

The authors provide an account of the internet's origins and an extensive analysis of the ways its development has been shaped by market forces. They conclude:

> In a world in which private riches grow at the expense of public wealth, it should not surprise us that what seemed at first the enormous potential of the Internet—representing a whole new realm of public wealth, analogous to the discovery of a whole new continent, and pointing to the possibility of a vast new democratic sphere of unrestricted communication—has vaporized in a couple of decades.

Like the internet, television was also considered by many as a medium that could help spread knowledge, debate, and diverse perspectives around the globe. However, as Michael Morgan and James Shanahan's chapter on television and the **cultivation** of **authoritarianism** (I.6) demonstrates, television narratives are no less ideological than other forms of media storytelling in their contributions to our perceptions and attitudes about the world and our place in it. Morgan and Shanahan's contribution to this volume is based in the important media theory of cultivation first advanced by the late media scholar George Gerbner. Gerbner posited that in the television age much of our sense of reality came to us through the screens that dominated our living rooms. As Morgan and Shanahan explain,

> Gerbner and his colleagues argued that heavy viewers of television drama tended, over time, to absorb images and lessons from the consistent messages of television's story system. Noting that television messages often tend toward a formulaic demonstration of power that includes the frequent use of violence, Gerbner et al. showed that heavy television exposure cultivates a sense of fear, anxiety, and mistrust, with worrisome implications.

Morgan and Shanahan's chapter focuses on the 2016 election season and the rise of Donald Trump as they ask, "might television viewing … contribute to the level

of support for the candidacy of Donald Trump?" Operating out of the assumption that stories matter and that television is more than "just entertainment," cultivation researchers argue that television, like all media and popular culture, conveys ideological messages that influence the worldviews of its audiences.

Analysis of the ideological dimensions of popular images and narratives is thus an important component in understanding how media texts work, especially when linked with background knowledge about the producers' political and economic interests; however, as suggested by the Morgan and Shanahan chapter, there is another element that students of media culture need to take into account. Cultivation research is based on a comparison of the content of television messages to the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of heavy viewers of those messages. Thus, these researchers go beyond analysis of content to examine the impact of that content on audiences. And, irrespective of whether any media text appears to encode dominant or subversive cultural ideas, Kellner's cultural studies approach also reminds us that we cannot simply assume that we know how consumers of media texts actually read or **decode** them (constructing meaning from texts for themselves). For that piece of the equation, we must turn to studies of audience reception—how particular media consumers understand and use media texts.

Scholars widely agree that consumers of the media should not be conceptualized as passive pawns of media imagery, completely controlled by the dominant culture, but there are several different ways of understanding audience activity. First, according to the influential concept of **oppositional readings**, initiated by Stuart Hall (and also discussed by Kellner in I.1), the meaning of media texts cannot be established by only one critic's decoding of the text—no matter how subtle and full—because all texts are to some degree "open" (**polysemic**, or capable of multiple meanings). Therefore, we must also seek to know how audiences, both as individuals and as members of various communities, bring different experiences and complex identities to the processes of reading/viewing/listening, experiences and identities that inevitably influence how these audiences actually feel about, think about, and understand these texts.

According to Hall's paradigm, audience members may do one of three things in relation to the intended or **preferred** meanings encoded in the text: (1) accept them uncritically and read the text as its producers intended, (2) produce a **negotiated reading** (partially **resisting** the encoded meaning), or (3) create an **oppositional** reading of their own, completely rejecting the preferred meaning of the text.

Janice Radway's classic ethnographic research into audience reception of romance novels was an early and influential study of how specific readers actually engage with a mass media text. In "Women Read the Romance" (I.7), Radway looks closely at how a group of white women in the 1970s and 1980s negotiated with the genre of the romance novel, in terms of both the books they selected and the ways they actually read the text and appropriated and changed its meanings. Radway acknowledges that "[r]omance reading … can function as a kind of training for the all-too-common task of reinterpreting a spouse's unsettling actions as the signs of passion, devotion, and love." Yet she sees, in these women's selection of certain books as favorites and their rejection of others, an active tendency to critique certain **patriarchal** masculine behaviors, substituting an ideal of the "nurturing" male that might have been missing in their own family lives. Through the act of reading itself, she argues, this group of women romance readers escaped temporarily from familial demands on their time, and Radway interprets this action as potential **resistance** to, or refusal to accept completely, the patriarchal restrictions on their lives. While encouraging respect for women's own experiences as cultural consumers, however, Radway warns that we

should not confuse modes of resistance that reside in textual consumption with more active and politically engaged modes of resistance (such as organized protest against the patriarchal abuses women experience in social life).

Radway's work helped establish the field of media audience studies, which has since developed into a rich body of research and interpretation. At the same time, over the past two decades or so, a distinct subfield of audience study has emerged, devoted to one particularly active kind of text consumer—the fan. In an early and influential essay, "*Star Trek* Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching" (I.8), Henry Jenkins draws our attention to "a largely unexplored terrain of cultural activity, a subterranean network of readers and writers who remake [media texts] in their own image." For Jenkins and many who have been influenced by his work,

> "Fandom" is a vehicle for marginalized subterranean groups (women, the young, gays, etc.) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; it is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests, a way of transforming mass culture into popular culture.

Drawing on the theories of Michel de Certeau and his own studies of fans of the long-running science fiction television series about space exploration by a team of diverse characters, Jenkins brought to light a fascinating body of fan fiction, written for the most part by female fans, whom he conceptualized as

> reluctant poachers who steal only those things that they truly love, who seize televisual property only to protect it against abuse by those who created it and who have claimed ownership over it. In embracing popular texts, the fans claim those works as their own, remaking them in their own image. . . . Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture.

Following Jenkins's lead, contemporary **fandom studies** foreground the **agency** and creativity of culture consumers who go on to produce their own cultural materials, often through such "poaching" of ideas and materials from the original mass-produced texts. Emergent digital technologies have clearly added to the opportunities available to do-it-yourself cultural producers. Moreover, many individuals and groups have taken advantage of **social networking** platforms to facilitate not only fandom but also political activism.

Some critical media theorists, however, have warned (as Kellner does) of the dangers of overemphasizing the power of media audiences to resist or effectively challenge the dominant ideologies that normalize social and economic inequities, simply through their activities as consumers—even if they become devoted fans. After all, as Morgan and Shanahan's chapter reminds us, it is the heaviest users of media content who are most likely to accept the ideological tendencies of the content they love, without even being consciously aware that they are being influenced.

In this opening section of the anthology, these notions of both media power and resistance to that power frequently surface, as they will throughout the rest of the book. bell hooks offers more insights into these issues in our final chapter of the section, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (I.9). We have chosen to close this section with this classic essay because it is a highly influential piece that embodies the intersectional approach to media and culture that our anthology employs. hooks writes about the blind spots of twentieth-century feminist film

criticism and theory, which did not take issues of race into account when analyzing cinematic portrayals of gender. She considers both the power of those portrayals in shaping our consciousness, as well as audience resistance to those portrayals. As she points out,

> Film theory as a critical "turf" in the United States has been and continues to be influenced by and reflective of white racial domination. Since feminist film criticism was initially rooted in a women's liberation movement informed by racist practices, it did not open up the discursive terrain and make it more inclusive.

Drawing on experiences from her own childhood, conversations with family members and Black female moviegoers, and critical film scholarship, hooks addresses that absence through her insightful reflections on how Black female spectators may be simultaneously enraptured by *and* resistant to media constructions of race and gender.

We have aimed in this book to contribute to the multicultural project of critical media analysis that the scholars in this section exemplify. We invite readers to engage in critical reflection on their own media consumption, exploring how they, like bell hooks, may sometimes resist media constructions but also unwittingly internalize dominant ideologies, weaving them into their unconscious ways of seeing the world.

1 CULTURAL STUDIES, MULTICULTURALISM, AND MEDIA CULTURE

Douglas Kellner

Radio, television, film, popular music, the internet, social media, and other forms and products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, including our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our conception of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and our division of the world into categories of "us" and "them." Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the **appropriation** of which we insert ourselves into this culture. Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed.

We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages. The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us about how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy that teach us how to be men and women. They show us how to dress, look, and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions. Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment. Learning how to read, criticize, and resist sociocultural manipulation can help empower people in relation to dominant forms of media and culture. It can enhance individual sovereignty vis-à-vis media culture and give us more power over our cultural environment.

In this chapter, I will discuss the potential contributions of a cultural studies perspective to media critique and literacy. From the 1980s to the present, cultural studies has emerged as a set of approaches to the study of culture, society, and politics. The project was inaugurated by the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which developed a variety of critical methods for the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts. Through a set of internal debates, and responding to social struggles and movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Birmingham group came to focus on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, including media culture. Its scholars were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, advertising, and other popular cultural forms on audiences. They also focused on how various audiences interpreted and used media culture differently, analyzing the factors that made different audiences respond in contrasting ways to various media texts and make use of media in their personal and social lives in a multiplicity of ways.[1]

Through studies of youth subcultures, British cultural studies demonstrated how culture came

This piece is an original essay that was commissioned for this volume. It has been updated from an earlier version that appeared in the fifth edition.

to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership for young people. In the view of cultural studies, media culture provides the materials for constructing views of the world, behavior, and even identities. Those who uncritically follow the dictates of media culture tend to "mainstream" themselves, conforming to the dominant fashion, values, and behavior. Yet cultural studies is also interested in how subcultural groups and individuals resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities. Those who obey ruling dress and fashion codes, behavior, and political ideologies thus produce their identities as members of specific social groupings within contemporary U.S. culture, such as White, middle-class, conservative American men who go to work in suits and ties and thus produce identities as corporate male members of the business class. Persons who identify with subcultures, such as punk culture or African American or Latino/a subcultures, look and act differently from those in the mainstream and thus create oppositional identities, defining themselves against standard conservative models.

Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed and that, consequently, the study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. Cultural studies shows how media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era. It conceives of U.S. culture and society as a contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance (Kellner, 1995, 2010, 2020). Television, film, music, and other popular cultural forms are thus often liberal or conservative or occasionally express more radical or oppositional views—and can be contradictory and ambiguous as well in their meanings and messages.

Cultural studies is valuable because it provides some tools that enable individuals to read and interpret culture critically. It also subverts distinctions between "high" and "low" culture by considering a wide continuum of cultural artifacts, ranging from opera and novels to soap operas and TV wrestling, while refusing to erect any specific elite cultural hierarchies or canons. Earlier mainstream academic approaches to culture tended to be primarily literary and elitist, dismissing media culture as banal, trashy, and not worthy of serious attention. The project of cultural studies, by contrast, avoids cutting the field of culture into high and low or pitting the popular against the elite. Such distinctions are difficult to maintain and generally serve as a front for normative aesthetic valuations and, often, a political program (i.e., either dismissing mass culture for high culture and art or celebrating what is deemed "popular" while scorning "elitist" high culture).

Cultural studies allows us to examine and scrutinize critically the whole range of culture without prior prejudices toward one or another sort of cultural text, institution, or practice. It also opens the way toward more differentiated political, rather than aesthetic, valuations of cultural artifacts in which one attempts to distinguish critical and oppositional from conformist and conservative moments in a cultural artifact. For instance, studies of Hollywood film show how key 1960s films promoted the views of radicals and the counterculture and how film in the 1970s was a battleground between liberal and conservative positions; late 1970s films, however, tended toward conservative positions that helped elect Ronald Reagan as president (see Kellner & Ryan, 1988). During the Bush/Cheney era, there were many oppositional films, such as the work of Michael Moore, and liberal films that featured black heroes and anticipated the election of Barack Obama (Kellner, 2009, 2010). For instance, African American actor Will Smith was the top-grossing U.S. actor during the Bush/Cheney era, Denzel Washington won two Academy Awards and played a wide range of characters, while Morgan Freeman played a president, corporate executive, crime figure, and even God, attesting that U.S. publics were ready to see African Americans in major positions in all arenas of society. This is not to say that Hollywood "caused" Obama's surprising victory in 2008 but that U.S. media culture anticipated a black president.

There is an intrinsically critical and political dimension to the project of cultural studies that distinguishes it from objectivist and apolitical academic approaches to the study of culture and society. British cultural studies, for example, analyzed culture historically in the context of its societal origins and effects. It situated culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, specifying the ways that cultural forms

served either to further social domination or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination. It analyzed society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata. Employing the Italian sociologist Antonio Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony (1971), it sought to analyze "hegemonic," or ruling, social and cultural forces of domination and to seek "counterhegemonic" forces of resistance and struggle. The project was aimed at social transformation and attempted to specify forces of domination and resistance in order to aid the process of political struggle and emancipation from oppression and domination.

For cultural studies, the concept of ideology is of central importance, for dominant ideologies serve to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination.[2] Ideologies of class, for instance, celebrate upper-class life and denigrate the working class. Ideologies of gender promote sexist representations of women, oppressive ideologies of sexuality promote homophobia, and ideologies of race use racist representations of people of color and various minority groups. Ideologies make inequalities and subordination appear natural and just and thus induce consent to relations of domination. Contemporary societies are structured by opposing groups that have different political ideologies (liberal, conservative, radical, etc.), and cultural studies specifies what, if any, ideologies are operative in a given cultural artifact (which could involve, of course, the specification of ambiguities and ideological contradictions). In the course of this study, I will provide some examples of how different ideologies are operative in media cultural texts and will accordingly provide examples of ideological analysis and critique.

Because of its focus on representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class and its critique of ideologies that promote various forms of oppression, cultural studies lends itself to a multiculturalist program that demonstrates how culture reproduces certain forms of **racism**, sexism, and biases against members of subordinate classes, social groups, or alternative lifestyles. Multiculturalism affirms the worth of different types of culture and cultural groups, claiming, for instance, that Black, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ); and other oppressed and marginal voices have their own validity and importance. An insurgent multiculturalism attempts to show how various people's voices and experiences are silenced and omitted from mainstream culture, and struggles to aid in the articulation of diverse views, experiences, and cultural forms arising from groups excluded from the mainstream. This makes it a target of conservative forces that wish to preserve the existing canons of White, male, Eurocentric privilege, forces that have thus attacked multiculturalism in cultural wars raging from the 1960s to the present over education, the arts, and the limits of free expression.

Cultural studies thus promotes a critical multiculturalist politics and media pedagogy that aims to make people sensitive to how relations of power and domination are "encoded" in cultural texts, such as those of television or film, or how newer technologies such as the internet and social media can be used for oppositional pedagogical or political purposes (Kahn & Kellner, 2008; Kellner & Share, 2019). A critical cultural studies approach also specifies how people can resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical and alternative readings and media artifacts, as well as new identities and social relations. Cultural studies can show how media culture manipulates and indoctrinates us and thus can empower individuals to resist the dominant meanings in media cultural products and to produce their own meanings. It can also point to moments of resistance and criticism within media culture and thus help promote development of more critical consciousness.

Critical cultural studies—embodied in many of the articles collected in this reader—thus develops concepts and analyses that will enable readers to dissect the artifacts of contemporary media culture analytically and to gain power over their cultural environment. By exposing the entire field of culture and media technology to knowledgeable scrutiny, critical cultural studies provides a broad, comprehensive framework to undertake studies of culture, politics, and society for the purposes of individual empowerment and social and political struggle and transformation. In the following pages, I will therefore indicate some of the chief components of the type of critical cultural studies that I find most useful for understanding contemporary U.S. society, culture, and politics.

COMPONENTS OF A CRITICAL CULTURAL STUDIES

As a theoretical apparatus, critical cultural studies contains a threefold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audience reception of those texts and their effects in a concrete sociohistorical context. This comprehensive approach avoids too narrowly focusing on one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others. To avoid such limitations, I propose a multiperspectival approach that (a) discusses production and political economy, (b) engages in textual analysis, and (c) studies the reception and use of cultural texts.[3]

Production and Political Economy

Since cultural production has been neglected in many modes of recent cultural studies, it is important to stress the importance of analyzing cultural texts within their system of production and distribution, often referred to as the political economy of culture.[4] Inserting texts into the system of culture within which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay. Rather than being an antithetical approach to culture, political economy can actually contribute to textual analysis and critique. The system of production often determines, in part, what sort of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be said and shown, and what sort of audience effects the text may generate.

Study of the codes of television, film, or popular music, for instance, is enhanced by studying the formulas and conventions of production, which are shaped by economic and technical, as well as aesthetic and cultural, considerations. Dominant cultural forms are structured by well-defined rules and conventions, and the study of the production of culture can help elucidate the codes actually in play. Because of the demands of the format of radio or music videos, for instance, most popular songs are three to five minutes long, fitting into the format of the distribution system just as YouTube or Twitter content must match the length and technical requirements of those platforms. From the early years of the internet up to the present, there have been legal and political conflicts concerning the file sharing of music and other forms of media culture and information, situating media culture in a force field of political conflict. Because of their control by giant corporations oriented primarily toward profit, film and television production in the United States is dominated by specific genres such as talk and game shows, soap operas, situation comedies, action/adventure series, reality TV, and so on, which are familiar to and popular with audiences. This economic factor explains why there are cycles of certain genres and subgenres, sequelmania in the film industry, crossovers of popular films into television series, and a certain homogeneity in products constituted within systems of production marked by relatively rigid generic codes, formulaic conventions, and well-defined ideological boundaries.

Likewise, study of political economy can help determine the limits and range of political and ideological discourses and effects. My study of television in the United States, for instance, disclosed that the takeover of the television networks by major transnational corporations and communications conglomerates in the 1980s was part of a "right turn" within U.S. society whereby powerful corporate groups won control of the state and the mainstream media (Kellner, 1990). For example, during the 1980s, all three networks were taken over by major corporate conglomerates: ABC was taken over in 1985 by Capital Cities, NBC was taken over by GE, and CBS was taken over by the Tisch Financial Group. Both ABC and NBC sought corporate mergers, and this motivation, along with other benefits derived from Reaganism, might well have influenced them to downplay criticisms of Reagan and generally to support his conservative programs, military adventures, and simulated presidency.

Corporate conglomeratization has intensified further, and today Time Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, Viacom, and other global media conglomerates control ever more domains of the production and distribution of culture (McChesney, 2000, 2007). In this global context, one cannot really analyze the role of the media in the Gulf War, for instance, without analyzing the production and political economy of news and information, as well as the actual Gulf War news reports and their reception by audiences (see Kellner, 1992). Likewise, the ownership by conservative corporations of dominant media

corporations helps explain mainstream media support of the Bush/Cheney administration and their policies, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Kellner, 2003, 2005).

Looking toward entertainment, female pop music stars such as Madonna, Britney Spears, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, or Lady Gaga deploy the tools of the glamour industry and media spectacle to become icons of fashion, beauty, style, and sexuality, as well as purveyors of music. And in appraising the full social impact of pornography, one needs to be aware of the immense profits generated by the sex industry and the potential for harm endemic to the production process of, say, pornographic films and videos and not just dwell on the texts themselves and their effects on audiences.

Furthermore, in an era of **globalization**, one must be aware of the global networks that produce and distribute culture in the interests of profit and corporate hegemony. The internet and new media link the globe and distribute more culture to more people than at any time in history, yet giant media conglomerates and institutions such as the state, which can exert censorship, continue to be major forces of cultural hegemony (see McChesney, 2013). Yet, political economy alone does not hold the key to cultural studies, and important as it is, it has limitations as a single approach. Some political economy analyses reduce the meanings and effects of texts to rather circumscribed and reductive ideological functions, arguing that media culture merely reflects the ideology of the ruling economic elite that controls the culture industries and is nothing more than a vehicle for capitalist ideology. It is true that media culture overwhelmingly supports capitalist values, but it is also a site of intense struggle between different races, classes, genders, and social groups. It is also possible in the age of social media for consumers to become producers and create their own media content and form, including oppositional voices and resistance. Thus, to grasp the nature and effects of media culture fully, one needs to develop methods to analyze the full range of its meanings and effects, methods that are sensitive to the always mutating terrain of media culture and technology.

Textual Analysis

The products of media culture require multidimensional, close textual readings to analyze their various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction, and effects. "Reading" an artifact of media culture involves interpreting the forms and meanings of elements in a music video or television commercial as one might read and interpret books. There have been a wide range of types of textual criticism of media culture, ranging from quantitative content analysis that dissects the number of, say, episodes of violence in a text to qualitative study that examines representations of women, people of color, or other groups, or that applies various critical theories to unpack the meanings of the texts or to explicate how texts function to produce meaning. Traditionally, the qualitative analysis of texts attended to the formal artistic properties of imaginative literature—such as style, verbal imagery, characterization, narrative structure, and point of view. From the 1960s on, however, literary-formalist textual analysis has been enhanced by methods derived from **semiotics**, a system for investigating the creation of meaning not only in written languages but also in nonverbal and other codes, such as the visual and auditory languages of film and TV.

Semiotics analyzes how linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural "signs" form systems of meanings, as when giving someone a rose is interpreted as a sign of love or getting an A on a college paper is a sign of mastery of the rules of the specific assignment. Semiotic analysis can be connected with genre criticism (the study of conventions governing long-established types of cultural forms, such as westerns or soap operas) to reveal how the codes and forms of particular genres construct certain meanings. Situation comedies, for instance, classically follow a conflict resolution model that demonstrates how to solve certain social problems by correct actions and values, thus providing morality tales of proper and improper behavior. Soap operas, by contrast, proliferate problems and provide messages concerning the endurance and suffering needed to get through life's endless miseries, while generating positive and negative models of social behavior. And advertising shows how **commodity** solutions solve problems of popularity, acceptance, success, and the like.

A semiotic and genre analysis of the film *Rambo* (1982), for instance, would show how it follows the conventions of the Hollywood genre of the war film that dramatizes conflicts between

the United States and its "enemies" (see Kellner, 1995). Semiotics describes how the images of the villains are constructed according to the codes of World War II movies and how the resolution of the conflict and happy ending follow the traditional Hollywood classical cinema, which portrays the victory of good over evil. Semiotic analysis would also include study of the strictly cinematic and formal elements of a film such as *Rambo*, dissecting the ways that camera angles present Rambo as a god or slow-motion images of him gliding through the jungle code him as a force of nature. Formal analysis of a film also includes how lighting is used to code characters as "good" or "evil" or how any of the technical features of film production can help to generate meanings.

For example, a semiotic analysis of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) would reveal how the images in the film present an anti-militarist and pro-ecological agenda, although the narrative form celebrates a White male savior, replicating more conservative narratives. *Avatar* also demonstrates how fantasy artifacts can project a wealth of political and ideological meanings, often ambiguous or contradictory. Discussions of *Avatar* have also generated heated debates in the politics of representation concerning how the film has represented gender, sexuality, race, the military, and the environment, as well as other themes and dimensions of the film (see Kellner, 2010).

The textual analysis of cultural studies thus combines formalist analysis with a critique of how cultural meanings convey specific ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation, and other ideological dimensions. Ideologies refer to ideas or images that construct a superiority of one class or group over others (e.g., men over women, Whites over people of color, ruling elites over working-class people) and thus reproduce and legitimate different forms of social domination. Ideological textual analysis should deploy a wide range of methods to explicate fully each dimension of ideological domination across domains of representations of class, race, gender, sexuality, and other forms of domination and subordination, and this form of analysis should also show how specific narratives serve the interests of domination and oppression, contest it, or are ambiguous (as with many examples of media culture). Each critical method focuses on certain features of a text from a specific perspective: The perspective spotlights, or illuminates, some features of a text while ignoring others. Marxist methods tend to focus on class, for instance, while feminist approaches will highlight gender, critical race theory spotlights race and ethnicity, and queer theory explicates sexuality. Yet today, the concept of "intersectionality" is often used, and many feminists, Marxists, critical race scholars, and other forms of cultural studies depict how gender, class, race, sexuality, and other components intersect and co-construct each other in complex cultural ways (see Crenshaw, 1991).

Various critical methods have their own strengths and limitations, their optics and blind spots. Traditionally, Marxian ideology critiques have been strong on class and historical contextualization and weak on formal analysis, while some versions are highly "reductionist," reducing textual analysis to denunciation of ruling-class ideology. Feminism excels in gender analysis and in some versions is formally sophisticated, drawing on such methods as psychoanalysis and semiotics, although some versions are reductive, and early feminism often limited itself to analysis of images of gender. Psychoanalysis, in turn, calls for the interpretation of unconscious contents and meaning, which can articulate latent meanings in a text, as when Alfred Hitchcock's dream sequences project cinematic symbols that illuminate his characters' dilemmas or when the image of the female character in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), framed against the bar of her bed, suggests her sexual frustration, imprisonment in middle-class family life, and need for revolt.

Of course, each reading of a text is only one possible reading from one critic's **subject position**, no matter how multiperspectival, and may or may not be the reading preferred by audiences (which themselves will be significantly different according to their class, race, gender, ethnicity, ideologies, and so on). Because there is a split between textual encoding and audience decoding, there is always the possibility of a multiplicity of readings of any text of media culture (Hall, 1980b). There are limits to the openness or polysemic nature of any text, of course, and textual analysis can explicate the parameters of possible readings and delineate perspectives that aim at illuminating the text and its cultural and ideological effects. Such analysis also provides the materials for criticizing misreadings or readings that are one-sided and incomplete. Yet to further carry through a

cultural studies analysis, one must also examine how diverse audiences actually read media texts and attempt to determine what impact or influence they have on audience thought and behavior.

Audience Reception and Use of Media Culture

All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. Media culture provides materials for individuals and communities to create identities and meanings, and cultural studies work on audiences detects a variety of potentially empowering uses of cultural forms. It is one of the merits of cultural studies to have focused on audience reception and fan appropriation, and this focus provides one of its major contributions, although there are also some limitations and problems with the standard cultural studies approaches to the audience.[5]

Ethnographic research investigates people and their groups and cultures and is frequently used in an attempt to determine how media texts affect specific audiences and shape their beliefs and behavior. Ethnographic cultural studies have indicated some of the various ways that audiences use and appropriate texts, often to empower themselves. For example, teenagers use video games and social media as an escape from the demands of a disciplinary society. Males use sports media events as a terrain of fantasy identification in which they feel empowered as "their" team or star triumphs. Such sports events also generate a form of community that is currently being lost in the privatized media and consumer culture of our time. Indeed, fandoms of all sorts, ranging from *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* fans to devotees of various pop music stars, reality shows, or current highly popular TV series, also form communities that enable people to relate to others who share their interests and hobbies. Some fans, in fact, actively recreate their favorite cultural forms (see examples in Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992; and Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). Other studies have shown that audiences can subvert the intentions of the producers or managers of the cultural industries that supply them, as when astute young media users laugh at obvious attempts to hype certain characters, shows, or products (see de Certeau, 1984, for more examples of audiences constructing meaning and engaging in practices in critical and subversive ways).

The emphasis on active audience reception and appropriation, then, has helped cultural studies overcome the previous one-sided textualist orientations to culture and also has directed focus on the actual political effects that texts may have. By combining quantitative and qualitative research, audience reception and fandom studies, including some of the chapters in this reader, are providing important contributions about how people actually interact with cultural texts.

Yet there are several problems that I see with reception studies as they have been constituted within cultural studies, particularly in the United States. Importantly, there is a danger that class will be downplayed as a significant variable that structures audience decoding and use of cultural texts. Cultural studies scholars in England were particularly sensitive to class differences—as well as subcultural differences—in the use and reception of cultural texts, but I have noted many dissertations, books, and articles in cultural studies in the United States in which attention to class has been downplayed or is missing altogether. This is not surprising as a neglect of class as a constitutive feature of culture and society is an endemic deficiency in the American academy in most disciplines.

There is also the reverse danger, however, of exaggerating the constitutive force of class and downplaying or ignoring other variables such as gender or ethnicity. Staiger (1992) notes that Fiske, building on Hartley, lists seven "subjectivity positions" that are important in cultural reception—"self, gender, age-group, family, class, nation, ethnicity"—and proposes adding sexuality. All of these factors, and no doubt more, interact in shaping how audiences receive and use texts and must be taken into account in studying cultural reception, for audiences decode and use texts according to the specific constituents of their class, race or ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, and so on.

Furthermore, I would warn against a tendency to romanticize the "active audience" by claiming that all audiences produce their own meanings

and denying that media culture may have powerful manipulative effects. There is a tendency within the cultural studies tradition of reception research to dichotomize between dominant and oppositional readings (Hall, 1980b). "Dominant" readings are those in which audiences appropriate texts in line with the interests of the dominant culture and the ideological intentions of a text, as when audiences feel pleasure in the restoration of male power, law and order, and social stability at the end of a film such as *Die Hard*, after the hero and representatives of authority eliminate the terrorists who had taken over a high-rise corporate headquarters. An "oppositional" reading, by contrast, celebrates the resistance to this reading in audience appropriation of a text. For example, Fiske (1993) observes (and implicitly approves) resistance to dominant readings when homeless individuals in a shelter cheered the violent destruction of police and authority figures during repeated viewings of *Die Hard*.

Fiske's study illustrates a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance per se without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance (a similar problem resides with indiscriminate celebration of audience pleasure in certain reception studies). For example, some would argue that the violent resistance to social authority valorized in this reading of *Die Hard* glamorizes brutal **masculinist** behavior and the use of physical violence to solve social problems. It is true that theorists of revolution including Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, have argued that violence can be either emancipatory, when directed at forces of oppression, or reactionary, when directed at popular forces struggling against oppression. Many feminists, by contrast, or those in the Gandhian tradition see all violence against others as forms of brute masculinist behavior, and many people see it as a problematic form of conflict resolution. Thus, audience pleasure in violent resistance cannot therefore be valorized per se as progressive elements of the appropriation of cultural texts. Instead, difficult discriminations must be made as to whether the resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience should be understood as progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive.

Thus, while emphasis on the audience and reception was an excellent correction to the one-sidedness of purely textual analysis, I believe that in recent years, cultural studies has overemphasized reception and textual analysis while underemphasizing the production of culture and its political economy. This type of cultural studies fetishizes audience reception studies and neglects both production and textual analysis, thereby producing populist celebrations of both the text and an audience's pleasure in its use of cultural artifacts. This approach, taken to an extreme, would lose its critical perspective and would lead to a positive gloss on audience experience regardless of what is being studied. Such studies also might lose sight of the manipulative and conservative effects of certain types of media culture and thus serve the interests of the cultural industries as they are presently constituted.

No doubt, media effects are complex and controversial, and it is the merit of cultural studies to make their study an important part of its agenda. Previous studies of the audience and of the reception of media privileged ethnographic studies that selected slices of the vast media audiences, usually from the site where researchers themselves lived. Such studies are invariably limited, and broader effects research can indicate how the most popular artifacts of media culture have a wide range of effects. One new way to research media effects is to use Google, or databases that collect media texts, to trace certain effects of media artifacts through analysis of references to them in the journalistic media. Likewise, there is a new terrain of internet audience research that studies how fans act on social media or sites devoted to their favorite artifacts of media culture. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media sites produce forums for more active audiences, as well as new sites for audience research. As audiences critically discuss or celebrate their preferred artifacts of media culture and, in some cases, produce their own versions, disseminated to audiences throughout the internet and digital technologies, media culture expands its reach and power while audiences can feel that they are part of their preferred cultural sites and phenomena. Studies are proliferating in this field, investigating how Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms are used by individuals and groups in diverse ways ranging from sharing pictures and media content to social networking, political expression, activism, organizing, and pedagogy (Kellner & Kim, 2010).

TOWARD A CULTURAL STUDIES THAT IS CRITICAL, MULTICULTURAL, AND MULTIPERSPECTIVAL

To avoid the one-sidedness of textual analysis approaches or audience and reception studies, I propose that cultural studies itself be multiperspectival, getting at culture from the perspectives of political economy, textual analysis, and audience reception, as outlined above. Textual analysis should use a multiplicity of perspectives and critical methods, and audience reception studies should delineate the wide range of subject positions, or perspectives, through which audiences appropriate culture. This requires a multicultural approach that sees the importance of analyzing the dimensions of class, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality within the texts of media culture, while also studying their impact on how audiences read and interpret media culture.

In addition, a critical cultural studies attacks sexism, **heterosexism**, racism, or bias against specific social groups (e.g., gays, intellectuals, seniors) and criticizes texts that promote any kind of domination or oppression. As an example of how considerations of production, textual analysis, and audience readings can fruitfully intersect in cultural studies, let us reflect on the Madonna phenomenon. Madonna first appeared in the moment of Reaganism and embodied the materialistic and consumer-oriented ethos of the 1980s ("Material Girl"). She also appeared in a time of dramatic image proliferation, associated with MTV, fashion fever, and intense marketing of products. Madonna was one of the first MTV music video superstars who consciously crafted images to attract a mass audience. Her early music videos were aimed at teenage girls (the Madonna wannabes), but she soon incorporated Black, Hispanic, and minority audiences with her images of interracial sex and multicultural "family" in her concerts. She also appealed to gay and lesbian audiences, as well as to feminist and academic audiences, as her videos became more complex and political (e.g., "Like a Prayer," "Express Yourself," "Vogue").

Thus, Madonna's popularity was in large part a function of her marketing strategies and her production of music videos and images that appealed to diverse audiences. To conceptualize the meanings in and effects of her music, films, concerts, and public relations stunts requires that her artifacts be interpreted within the context of their production and reception, which involves discussion of MTV, the music industry, concerts, marketing, and the production of images (see Kellner, 1995). Understanding Madonna's popularity also requires focus on audiences, not just as individuals but as members of specific groups, such as teenage girls, who were empowered in their struggles for individual identity by Madonna, or gays, who were also empowered by her incorporation of alternative images of sexuality within popular mainstream cultural artifacts. Yet appraising the politics and effects of Madonna also requires analysis of how her work might merely reproduce a consumer culture that defines identity in terms of images and consumption. It would make an interesting project to examine how former Madonna fans view the evolution and recent incarnations of the superstar, such as her many relationships and marriages and ongoing world tours, perhaps comparing these views to how contemporary fans see Madonna in an age that embraces pop singers such as Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga.

Likewise, Michael Jackson's initial popularity derived from carefully managed media spectacles, first with the Jackson Five and then in his own career. Michael Jackson achieved his superstar status, as had Madonna, from MTV-disseminated music videos and spectacular concert performances, in which promotion, image management, and his publicity apparatus made him the "King of Pop." Like Madonna, Jackson established a frequent tabloid and media presence, which helped promote his career, although media spectacle and tabloids also derailed it, as he was charged with child abuse in well-publicized cases. After his death in 2009, however, MJ had a remarkable surge of popularity as his works were disseminated through the media, including emerging social media.

CULTURAL STUDIES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

As discussed above, a cultural studies that is critical and multicultural provides comprehensive approaches to culture that can be applied to a wide variety of media artifacts, from advertising and pornography to Beyoncé and *Black Panther*, from reality TV and Minecraft to Barbie and Disney's

Frozen franchise. Its comprehensive perspectives encompass political economy, textual analysis, and audience research and provide critical and political perspectives that enable individuals to dissect the meanings, messages, and effects of dominant cultural forms. Cultural studies is thus part of a critical media pedagogy that enables individuals to resist media manipulation and to increase their freedom and individuality. It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and to be able to struggle for alternative cultures and political change. Cultural studies is thus not just another academic fad but can be part of a struggle for a better society and a better life.

NOTES

1. For more information on British cultural studies, see Hall (1980b); Johnson (1986–1987); Fiske (1986); O'Connor (1989); Turner (1990); Grossberg (1989); Agger (1992); the articles collected in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992); During (1992, 1998); Kellner (1995, 2020); and Durham and Kellner (2012). I might note that the Frankfurt school also provided much material for a critical cultural studies in its works on mass culture from the 1930s through the present; on the relation between the Frankfurt school and British cultural studies, see Kellner (1997).

2. On the concept of ideology, see Kellner (1978, 1979); the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1980); Kellner and Ryan (1988); and Thompson (1990).

3. This model was adumbrated in Hall (1980a) and Johnson (1986–1987) and guided much of the early Birmingham work. Around the mid-1980s, however, some in the Birmingham group began to increasingly neglect the production and political economy of culture and focused largely on audience studies.

4. The term *political economy* calls attention to the fact that the production and distribution of culture take place within a specific economic system, constituted by relations between the state and economy. For instance, in the United States, a capitalist economy dictates that cultural production is governed by laws of the market, but the democratic imperatives of the system mean that there is some regulation of culture by the state. There are often tensions within a given society concerning how many activities should be governed by the imperatives of the market, or economics, alone and how much state regulation or intervention is desirable—to ensure a wider diversity of broadcast programming, for instance, or the prohibition of phenomena agreed to be harmful, such as cigarette advertising or pornography (see Kellner, 1990; McChesney, 2007).

5. Influential cultural studies that have focused on audience reception include Brunsdon and Morley (1978); Radway (1983); Ang (1985, 1996); Morley (1986); Fiske (1989a, 1989b); Jenkins (1992); and Lewis (1992). On "fandom," see Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007).

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2 THE MEANING OF MEMORY

Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs

George Lipsitz

THE MEANING OF MEMORY

. . . In the midst of extraordinary social change, television became the most important discursive medium in American culture. As such, it was charged with special responsibilities for making new economic and social relations credible and legitimate to audiences haunted by ghosts from the past. Urban ethnic working-class situation comedies provided one means of addressing the anxieties and contradictions emanating from the clash between the consumer present of the 1950s and collective social memory about the 1930s and 1940s.

The consumer consciousness emerging from economic and social change in postwar America conflicted with the lessons of historical experience for many middle- and working-class American families. The Great Depression of the 1930s had not only damaged the economy, it also undercut the political and cultural legitimacy of American capitalism. Herbert Hoover had been a national hero in the 1920s, with his credo of "rugged individualism" forming the basis for a widely shared cultural ideal. But the depression discredited Hoover's philosophy and made him a symbol of yesterday's blasted hopes to millions of Americans. In the 1930s, cultural ideals based on mutuality and collectivity eclipsed the previous decade's "rugged individualism" and helped propel massive union organizing drives, anti-eviction movements, and general strikes. President Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to harness and co-opt that grass roots mass activity in an attempt to restore social order and recapture credibility and legitimacy for the capitalist system (Romasco 1965). The social welfare legislation of the "Second New Deal" in 1935 went far beyond any measures previously favored by Roosevelt and most of his advisors, but radical action proved necessary for the Administration to contain the upsurge of activism that characterized the decade. Even in the private sector, industrial corporations made more concessions to workers than naked power realities necessitated because they feared the political consequences of mass disillusionment with the system (Berger 1982).

World War II ended the depression and brought prosperity, but it did so on a basis even more collective than the New Deal of the 1930s. Government intervention in the wartime economy reached unprecedented levels, bringing material reward and shared purpose to a generation raised on the deprivation and sacrifice of the depression. In the postwar years, the largest and most disruptive strike wave in American history won major improvements in the standard of living for the average worker, both through wage increases and through government commitments to insure full employment, decent housing, and expanded educational opportunities. Grass roots militancy and working-class direct action wrested concessions from a reluctant government and business elite—mostly because the public at large viewed workers' demands as more legitimate than the desires of capital (Lipsitz 1981).

Yet the collective nature of working-class mass activity in the postwar era posed severe problems for capital. In sympathy strikes and secondary boycotts, workers placed the interests of their class ahead of their own individual material aspirations. Strikes over safety and job

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control far outnumbered wage strikes, revealing aspirations to control the process of production that conflicted with capitalist labor-management relations. Mass demonstrations demanding government employment and housing programs indicated a collective political response to problems previously adjudicated on a personal level. Radical challenges to the authority of capital (like the 1946 United Auto Workers' strike demand that wage increases come out of corporate profits rather than from price hikes passed on to consumers), demonstrated a social responsibility and a commitment toward redistributing wealth, rare in the history of American labor (Lipsitz 1981:47–50).

Capital attempted to regain the initiative in the postwar years by making qualified concessions to working-class pressures for redistribution of wealth and power. Rather than paying wage increases out of corporate profits, business leaders instead worked to expand the economy through increases in government spending, foreign trade, and consumer debt. Such expansion could meet the demands of workers and consumers without undermining capital's dominant role in the economy. On the presumption that "a rising tide lifts all boats," business leaders sought to connect working-class aspirations for a better life to policies that insured a commensurate rise in corporate profits, thereby leaving the distribution of wealth unaffected. Federal defense spending, highway construction programs, and home loan policies expanded the economy at home in a manner conducive to the interests of capital, while the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan provided models for enhanced access to foreign markets and raw materials for American corporations. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 banned the class-conscious collective activities most threatening to capital (mass strikes, sympathy strikes, secondary boycotts); the leaders of labor, government, and business accepted as necessity the practice of paying wage hikes for organized workers out of the pockets of consumers and unorganized workers, in the form of higher prices (Lipsitz 1981).

Commercial network television played an important role in this emerging economy, functioning as a significant object of consumer purchasers as well as an important marketing medium. Sales of sets jumped from three million during the entire decade of the 1940s to over five million a *year* during the 1950s (*TV Facts* 1980:141). But television's most important economic function came from its role as an instrument of legitimation for transformations in values initiated by the new economic imperatives of postwar America. For Americans to accept the new world of 1950s' consumerism, they had to make a break with the past. The depression years had helped generate fears about installment buying and excessive materialism, while the New Deal and wartime mobilization had provoked suspicions about individual acquisitiveness and upward mobility. Depression era and war time scarcities of consumer goods had led workers to internalize discipline and frugality while nurturing networks of mutual support through family, ethnic, and class associations. Government policies after the war encouraged an atomized acquisitive consumerism at odds with the lessons of the past. At the same time, federal home loan policies stimulated migrations to the suburbs from traditional, urban ethnic working-class neighborhoods. The entry of television into the American home disrupted previous patterns of family life and encouraged fragmentation of the family into separate segments of the consumer market.[1] The priority of consumerism in the economy at large and on television may have seemed organic and unplanned, but conscious policy decisions by officials from both private and public sectors shaped the contours of the consumer economy and television's role within it.

COMMERCIAL TELEVISION AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Government policies during and after World War II shaped the basic contours of home television as an advertising medium. Government-sponsored research and development during the war perfected the technology of home television while federal tax policies solidified its economic base. The government allowed corporations to deduct the cost of advertising from their taxable incomes during the war, despite the fact that rationing and defense production left business with few products to market. Consequently, manufacturers kept the names of their products before the public while lowering their tax obligations on high wartime profits. Their advertising expenditures supplied radio networks and advertising agencies with the capital reserves and business infrastructure that

enabled them to dominate the television industry in the postwar era. After the war, federal antitrust action against the motion picture studios broke up the "network" system in movies, while the FCC sanctioned the network system in television. In addition, FCC decisions to allocate stations on the narrow VHF band, to grant the networks ownership and operation rights over stations in prime markets, and to place a freeze on the licensing of new stations during the important years between 1948 and 1952 all combined to guarantee that advertising-oriented programming based on the model of radio would triumph over theater TV, educational TV, or any other form (Boddy 1985; Allen 1983). Government decisions, not market forces, established the dominance of commercial television, but these decisions reflected a view of the American economy and its needs which had become so well accepted at the top levels of business and government that it had virtually become the official state economic policy.

Fearing both renewed depression and awakened militancy among workers, influential corporate and business leaders considered increases in consumer spending—increases of 30% to 50%—to be necessary to perpetuate prosperity in the postwar era (Lipsitz 1981:46, 120–121). Defense spending for the Cold War and Korean Conflict had complemented an aggressive trade policy to improve the state of the economy, but it appeared that the key to an expanding economy rested in increased consumer spending fueled by an expansion of credit (Moore and Klein 1967; Jezer 1982). Here too, government policies led the way, especially with regard to stimulating credit purchases of homes and automobiles. During World War II, the marginal tax rate for most wage earners jumped from 4% to 25%, making the home ownership deduction more desirable. Federal housing loan policies favored construction of new single family detached suburban housing over renovation or construction of central city multifamily units. Debt-encumbered home ownership in accord with these policies stimulated construction of 30 million new housing units in just twenty years, bringing the percentage of home-owning Americans from below 40% in 1940 to more than 60% by 1960. Mortgage policies encouraging long term debt and low down payments freed capital for other consumer purchases, while government highway building policies undermined mass transit systems and contributed to increased demand for automobiles (Hartman 1982:165–168). Partly as a result of these policies, consumer spending on private cars averaged $7.5 billion per year in the 1930s and 1940s, but grew to $22 billion per year in 1950 and almost $30 billion by 1955 (Mollenkopf 1983:111).

For the first time in U.S. history, middle-class and working-class families could routinely expect to own homes or buy new cars every few years. Between 1946 and 1965 residential mortgage debt rose three times as fast as the gross national product and disposable income. Mortgage debt accounted for just under 18% of disposable income in 1946, but it grew to almost 55% by 1965 (Stone 1983:122). In order to insure eventual payment of current debts, the economy had to generate tremendous expansion and growth, further stimulating the need to increase consumer spending. Manufacturers had to find new ways of motivating consumers to buy ever increasing amounts of commodities, and television provided an important means of accomplishing that end.

Television advertised individual products, but it also provided a relentless flow of information and persuasion that placed acts of consumption at the core of everyday life. The physical fragmentation of suburban growth and declines in motion picture attendance created an audience more likely to stay at home and receive entertainment there than ever before. But television also provided a locus redefining American ethnic, class, and family identities into consumer identities. In order to accomplish this task effectively, television programs had to address some of the psychic, moral, and political obstacles to consumption among the public at large.

The television and advertising industries knew that they had to overcome these obstacles. Marketing expert and motivational specialist Ernest Dichter stated that "one of the basic problems of this prosperity is to give people that sanction and justification to enjoy it and to demonstrate that the hedonistic approach to life is a moral one, not an immoral one" (Jezer 1982:127). Dichter went on to note the many barriers that inhibited consumer acceptance of unrestrained hedonism, and he called on advertisers "to train the average citizen to accept growth of his country and its economy as *his* growth rather than as a strange and frightening event" (Dichter 1960:210). One method of

encouraging that acceptance, according to Dichter, consisted of identifying new products and styles of consumption with traditional, historically sanctioned practices and behavior. He noted that such an approach held particular relevance in addressing consumers who had only recently acquired the means to spend freely and who might harbor a lingering conservatism based on their previous experiences (Dichter 1960:209). . . .

FAMILY FORMATION AND THE ECONOMY—THE TELEVISION VIEW

Advertisers incorporated their messages into urban ethnic working-class comedies through indirect and direct means. Tensions developed in the programs often found indirect resolution in commercials. Thus Jeannie MacClennan's search for an American sweetheart in one episode of *Hey Jeannie* set up commercials proclaiming the abilities of Drene shampoo to keep one prepared to accept last minute dates and of Crest toothpaste to produce an attractive smile (*Hey Jeannie:* "The Rock and Roll Kid"). Conversations about shopping for new furniture in an episode of *The Goldbergs* directed viewers' attention to furnishings in the Goldberg home provided for the show by Macy's department store in exchange for a commercial acknowledgment (*The Goldbergs:* "The In-laws").

But the content of the shows themselves offered even more direct emphasis on consumer spending. In one episode of *The Goldbergs,* Molly expresses disapproval of her future daughter-in-law's plan to buy a washing machine on the installment plan. "I know Papa and me never bought anything unless we had the money to pay for it," she intones with logic familiar to a generation with memories of the Great Depression. Her son, Sammy, confronts this "deviance" by saying, "Listen, Ma, almost everybody in this country lives above their means—and everybody enjoys it." Doubtful at first, Molly eventually learns from her children and announces her conversion to the legitimacy of installment buying by proposing that the family buy two cars so as to "live above our means—the American way" (*The Goldbergs:* "The In-laws"). In a subsequent episode, Molly's daughter, Rosalie, assumes the role of ideological tutor to her mother. When planning a move out of their Bronx apartment to a new house in the suburbs, Molly ruminates about where to place her furniture in the new home. "You don't mean we're going to take all this junk with us into a brand new house?" asks an exasperated Rosalie. With traditionalist sentiment Molly answers, "Junk? My furniture's junk? My furniture that I lived with and loved for twenty years is junk?" But in the end she accepts Rosalie's argument—even selling off all her old furniture to help meet the down payment on the new house, and deciding to buy new furniture on the installment plan (*The Goldbergs:* "Moving Day").

Chester A. Riley confronts similar choices about family and commodities in *The Life of Riley.* His wife complains that he only takes her out to the neighborhood bowling alley and restaurant, not to "interesting places." Riley searches for ways to impress her and discovers from a friend that a waiter at the fancy Club Morambo will let them eat first and pay later, at a dollar a week plus ten percent interest. "Ain't that dishonest?" asks Riley. "No, it's usury," his friend replies. Riley does not borrow the money, but he impresses his wife anyway by taking the family out to dinner on the proceeds of a prize that he received for being the one-thousandth customer in a local flower shop. Though we eventually learn that Peg Riley only wanted attention, not an expensive meal, the happy ending of the episode hinges totally on Riley's prestige, restored when he demonstrates his ability to provide a luxury outing for the family (*Life of Riley:* R228).

The same episode of *The Life of Riley* reveals another consumerist element common to this subgenre. When Riley protests that he lacks the money needed to fulfill Peg's desires, she answers that he would have plenty if he didn't spend so much on "needless gadgets." His shortage of cash becomes a personal failing caused by incompetent behavior as a consumer. Nowhere do we hear about the size of his paycheck, relations between his union and his employer, or, for that matter, the relationship between the value of his labor and the wages paid to him by the Stevenson Aircraft Company. Like Uncle David in *The Goldbergs*—who buys a statue of Hamlet shaking hands with Shakespeare and an elk's tooth with the Gettysburg address carved on it—Riley's comic character stems in part from a flaw which in theory could be attributed to the entire consumer economy: a preoccupation with "needless gadgets." By contrast, Peg Riley's desire for an evening out is portrayed as reasonable and modest—as reparation due her

for the inevitable tedium of housework. The solution to her unhappiness, of course, comes from an evening out rather than from a change in her own work circumstances. Even within the home, television elevates consumption over production; production is assumed to be a constant—only consumption can be varied. But more than enjoyment is at stake: unless Riley can provide her with the desired night on the town, he will fail in his obligations as a husband (*Life of Riley:* R228; *The Goldbergs:* "Bad Companions"). . . .

"Mama's Birthday," broadcast in 1954, delineated the tensions between family loyalty and consumer desire endemic to modern capitalist society. The show begins with Mama teaching Katrin to make Norwegian potato balls, the kind she used long ago to "catch" Papa. Unimpressed by this accomplishment, Katrin changes the subject and asks Mama what she wants for her upcoming birthday. In an answer that locates Mama within the gender roles of the 1950s, she replies, "Well, I think a fine new job for your Papa. You and Dagmar to marry nice young men and have a lot of wonderful children—just like I have. And Nels, well, Nels to become president of the United States" (Meehan and Ropes 1954). In one sentence Mama has summed up the dominant culture's version of legitimate female expectations: success at work for her husband, marriage and childrearing for her daughters, the presidency for her son—and nothing for herself.

But we learn that Mama does have some needs, although we do not hear it from her lips. Her sister, Jenny, asks Mama to attend a fashion show, but Mama cannot leave the house because she has to cook a roast for a guest whom Papa has invited to dinner. Jenny comments that Mama never seems to get out of the kitchen, adding that "it's a disgrace when a woman can't call her soul her own," and "it's a shame that a married woman can't have some time to herself." The complaint is a valid one, and we can imagine how it might have resonated for women in the 1950s. The increased availability of household appliances and the use of synthetic fibers and commercially processed food should have decreased the amount of time women spent in housework, but surveys showed that home-makers spent the same number of hours per week (51 to 56) doing housework as they had done in the 1920s. Advertising and marketing strategies undermined the potential of technological changes by upgrading standards for cleanliness in the home and expanding desires for more varied wardrobes and menus for the average family (Hartmann 1982:168). In that context, Aunt Jenny would have been justified in launching into a tirade about the division of labor within the Hansen household or about the possibilities for cooperative housework, but network television specializes in a less social and more commodified dialogue about problems like housework: Aunt Jenny suggests that her sister's family buy her a "fireless cooker"—a cast iron stove—for her birthday. "They're wonderful," she tells them in language borrowed from the rhetoric of advertising. "You just put your dinner inside them, close 'em up, and go where you please. When you come back your dinner is all cooked" (Meehan and Ropes 1954). Papa protests that Mama likes to cook on her woodburning stove, but Jenny dismisses that objection with an insinuation about his motive, when she replies, "Well, I suppose it *would* cost a little more than you could afford, Hansen" (Meehan and Ropes 1954). By identifying a commodity as the solution to Mama's problem, Aunt Jenny unites the inner voice of Mama with the outer voice of the sponsors of television programs. . . .

Prodded by their aunt, the Hansen children go shopping and purchase the fireless cooker from a storekeeper who calls the product "the new Emancipation Proclamation—setting housewives free from their old kitchen range" (Meehan and Ropes 1954). Our exposure to advertising hyperbole should not lead us to miss the analogy here: housework is compared to slavery, and the commercial product takes on the aura of Abraham Lincoln. The shopkeeper's appeal convinces the children to pool their resources and buy the stove for Mama. But we soon learn that Papa plans to make a fireless cooker for Mama with his tools. When Mama discovers Papa's intentions she persuades the children to buy her another gift. Even Papa admits that his stove will not be as efficient as the one made in a factory, but Mama nobly affirms that she will like his better because he made it himself. The children use their money to buy dishes for Mama, and Katrin remembers the episode as Mama's happiest birthday ever (Meehan and Ropes 1954).

The stated resolution of "Mama's Birthday" favors traditional values. Mama prefers to protect Papa's feelings rather than having a better stove, and the product built by a family member has

more value than one sold as a commodity. Yet the entire development of the plot leads in the opposite direction. The "fireless cooker" is the star of the episode, setting in motion all the other characters, and it has unquestioned value even in the face of Jenny's meddlesome brashness, Papa's insensitivity, and Mama's old-fashioned ideals. Buying a product is unchallenged as the true means of changing the unpleasant realities or low status of women's work in the home.

This resolution of the conflict between consumer desires and family roles reflected television's social role as mediator between the family and the economy. Surveys of set ownership showed no pronounced stratification by class, but a clear correlation between family size and television purchases: households with three to five people were most likely to own television sets, while those with only one person were least likely to own them (Swanson and Jones 1951). The television industry recognized and promoted its privileged place within families in advertisements like the one in the *New York Times* in 1950 that proclaimed, "Youngsters today need television for their morale as much as they need fresh air and sunshine for their health" (Wolfenstein 1951). Like previous communications media, television sets occupied honored places in family living rooms, and helped structure family time; unlike other previous communications media, they displayed available commodities in a way that transformed all their entertainment into a glorified shopping catalogue. . . .

NOTE

1. Nielsen ratings demonstrate television's view of the family as separate market segments to be addressed independently. For an analysis of the industry's view of children as a special market, see Patricia J. Bence (1985), "Analysis and History of Typology and Forms of Children's Network Programming From 1950 to 1980."

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3 THE ECONOMICS OF THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

David R. Croteau and William D. Hoynes

In June 2018, the Walt Disney Company announced an agreement to outbid rival Comcast and purchase most of 21st Century Fox, one of Disney's longtime rivals in the media and entertainment industry, for more than $71 billion. . . . Disney will obtain the 20th Century Fox movie and television production company (including the rights to Fox's popular franchises such as *Avatar*, *X-Men*, *The Simpsons*, and *Modern Family*), several major domestic and international cable television networks (including FX, National Geographic, and popular networks in India and Latin America), Fox's 22 regional sports networks, and 30 percent of Hulu, which will give Disney a majority share of the streaming service.

[This is] . . . the second-largest media merger in history, combining the production, distribution, and promotional power of two of the most prominent global media companies. The merger means, for example, that the *X-Men* join Marvel's cinematic universe and that Disney owns the entire *Star Wars* film franchise. What does this merger suggest about the rapidly changing economic dynamics within media? Why did Disney buy Fox? What impact will an even bigger Disney have on contemporary culture and society? And what does this latest round of media mergers tell us about the role of media in our digital world?

. . . Whereas social media, much of which emphasizes commentary, photos, and video from people in our social networks, occupies a significant portion of daily media use, a great deal of the media content we consume is still produced by media companies, and most mass media in the United States and other Western democracies are for-profit businesses. Like all businesses, they are influenced by issues such as profitability, cost containment, and evolving ownership patterns. To fully understand the media, then, we must have some sense of the economic dimension of the media industry. . . .

Contemporary media companies perform three key tasks; they provide the following:

1. **Products**—the media content that we watch, read, and listen to, such as movies, original journalism, or music recordings.
2. **Platforms**—the sites and services that host, display, and find media content, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Google. In addition, streaming services—such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon for video content and Spotify, Apple Music, and Pandora for music—offer subscribers medium-specific platforms for accessing traditional mass media content.
3. **Pipes**—the conduits by which we access media content and platforms, such as wireless, cable, DSL, and fiber optics that are the arena of telephone (Verizon and AT&T), cable (Comcast and Charter Communications), and satellite companies (DirecTV, owned by AT&T, and Dish Network).

Although it is useful to disentangle these functions to better understand how the media industry works, in reality these elements overlap. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary media companies is that they are often involved in all three industry sectors: products, platforms, and pipes. The internet has changed

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how these companies operate . . . but they still dominate the media landscape. . . .

CHANGING PATTERNS OF OWNERSHIP

. . . Even as the media landscape changes, a long-standing question about the economic organization of media remains as pertinent as ever: Who owns the media? The assumption behind the question is that owners of the media influence the content and form of media products by their decisions to hire and fire certain personnel, to fund certain projects, to serve as a platform for certain content, and to develop or support certain technologies. In its least subtle version, such questions might imply a kind of conspiracy theory in which a small group of powerful owners uses the media to control the thoughts of the rest of us. With its Orwellian connotations of mind control, this extreme version of the ownership question is too simplistic and therefore not particularly illuminating. However, a substantial body of research has explored this topic in a more subtle—and helpful—way.

Concentration of Ownership

One of the primary questions about media ownership is the degree to which ownership of major media is concentrated, that is, owned and operated by a small number of large firms. Beginning in 1983, journalism scholar Ben Bagdikian (1920–2016) chronicled the growing concentration of media ownership over two decades in a series of editions of his classic book, *The Media Monopoly*. By the publication of the last edition of the book in 2004, now *The New Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian argued that only five global firms dominated the U.S. media industry, operating like a cartel. He identified the five dominant companies as Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, Viacom, News Corporation, and Bertelsmann, all multimedia entertainment conglomerates that produced and distributed newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books, and movies.

However, in the years since the 2004 publication of *The New Media Monopoly*, the media landscape has changed considerably. First, several of the traditional media giants Bagdikian identified have been transformed, and by 2018 only Disney and Bertelsmann remained intact. The other companies had become smaller, selling parts of their multimedia conglomerates to focus their businesses more narrowly. . . .

The second major development during this period was the spectacular growth of new tech giants, especially Google and Facebook. Facebook was founded in 2004—the same year *The New Media Monopoly* was published—and although not traditional media companies, firms like Facebook and Google emerged as new media giants in their own right by dominating online advertising revenue. As we will see, the maturing internet had helped change the media landscape, enabling the growth of new competitors.

In the late 2010s, however, as the older media giants scrambled to compete in the new media landscape, they turned again to consolidation as a business strategy. Among the most significant developments were Disney's plan to buy Fox, AT&T's merger with Time Warner, and Verizon's 2017 purchase of Yahoo.

So even in the face of continuing change in the media industry, media ownership is highly concentrated heading into the 2020s. Within each sector of the media industry, a few large companies tower above their smaller competitors. Internet and telecommunications firms, especially, dominate their sectors, but to varying degrees, products, platforms, and pipes alike are led by a few firms.

Products

The major media companies own vast portfolios of products, spanning the range of media formats and delivery systems. Because most products carry a distinct name, rather than the label of the corporate owner, most media users are unaware that a large number of media outlets are actually owned by a single corporation. . . .

Movies. The global motion picture industry is dominated by seven companies that account for about 90 percent of box office receipts—Comcast's Universal Pictures, Viacom's Paramount Pictures, Time Warner's Warner Bros., Walt Disney Studios, Fox Entertainment Group's 20th Century Fox, Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Lionsgate. In 2016, Disney led the way with more than 26 percent of worldwide box office revenues, a total of more than $7 billion, with more than half of its ticket sale revenue (60%) coming from *outside* of

North America. Disney had all top five films at the worldwide box office in 2016, including *Captain America: Civil War, Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, and *Finding Dory*, each of which earned more than $1 billion. After it completes its likely acquisition of Fox, Disney will be, far and away, the dominant player in the movie industry, accounting for about 40 percent of domestic box office receipts. Warner Bros. was a distant second at the global box office, with $4.7 billion in 2016 ticket sales, led by *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* ($873 million). In addition, some of the leading "independent" film companies are actually owned by the industry giants—Focus Features (Comcast), Fox Searchlight (Fox Entertainment, soon to be Disney), Sony Pictures Classics (Sony), Paramount Vantage (Paramount), and New Line (Time Warner).

Recorded Music. Only three companies are responsible for the vast majority of U.S. music sales. Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group accounted for more than 68 percent of total global recorded music sales in 2016 (Music Business Worldwide 2017). Each of the big three controls a number of smaller labels and local subsidiaries. . . .

Book Publishing. The U.S. book market is dominated by the "Big Five" publishers—Penguin Random House (owned by Bertelsmann), HarperCollins (owned by News Corp.), Simon & Schuster (owned by CBS Corp.), Hachette Book Group, and Macmillan. Estimates in 2016 indicate that the Big Five account for about 80 percent of trade book sales in the United States. With electronic books gaining market share (via, e.g., Amazon and Apple's iBooks), some analysts believe that additional consolidation of the book industry is on the horizon (McIlroy 2016).

U.S. Magazines. Time Inc. towers above its competitors in the magazine sector. Its 19 major U.S. magazines (led by *People, Time*, and *Sports Illustrated*) have a print circulation of more than 30 million, with total revenue of more than $2.5 billion—about double the revenue of Hearst, its closest competitor (Spyglass Intelligence 2018). When online and mobile readers are included, the company estimates that almost half of U.S. adults read a Time Inc. magazine. When Meredith Corp., the number four U.S. magazine publisher, completes its acquisition of Time, which was originally announced in 2017, the combined Meredith/Time will be an even more dominant force in the magazine industry.

Television Production. With the emergence of a variety of new television streaming viewing options, along with original programming on Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and older premium services such as HBO and Showtime, the 2010s were widely regarded as a new "golden age" of television. In this context, competition to acquire quality programming is more intense than ever. While viewer options of where and what to watch have grown in recent years, television program production remains concentrated. According to industry analysts, the four largest television program producers accounted for about two-thirds of domestic revenue in 2017 (IBISWorld 2017). These major production companies—21st Century Fox, NBC Universal, Time Warner, and Disney—also own some of the most well-known broadcast and cable television networks (platforms) and, in some cases, own the cable and fiber-optic lines that deliver content into our homes (pipes).

Platforms

The platforms for the distribution of media have been changing, but they still remain heavily concentrated, with a small number of companies maintaining disproportionate market share in each industry segment.

Radio. In 2018, iHeartMedia (formerly Clear Channel Communications) has more than 850 radio stations in 150 different markets and is the dominant player in the U.S. radio industry. iHeartMedia's radio stations and online and mobile applications reach more than 250 million listeners in the United States each month (iHeartMedia 2018).

Music. In 2016, for the first time, revenue from streaming services generated more than half of all revenue in the U.S. music industry. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA 2017), 51 percent of music revenue came from streaming, 24 percent from digital downloads and ringtones, and 22 percent came from the sale of physical products (CDs and vinyl). The three leading streaming services accounted for more than 60 percent of the more than 160

million global streaming subscribers: Spotify 36 percent, Apple 17 percent, Amazon 10 percent (MIDIA Research 2017).

Television. Unlike other media sectors, television has become somewhat less concentrated over the past few decades in large part due to the variety of platforms that now exist. First, more broadcast networks appeared. FOX joined ABC, CBS, and NBC to expand the number of major broadcast networks to four back in 1986. Then, in 2006, Warner Bros. and CBS partnered to launch the CW Network after the two partners shut down their separate fledgling networks WB and UPN. Second, cable television channels proliferated, although most of the major cable channels are owned by a small number of major media companies:

- Time Warner (owned by AT&T) owns: CNN, HBO, TBS, TNT, Cartoon Network, truTV, Turner Classic Movies, and Cinemax.
- Disney owns: ABC, ESPN, Disney Channels Worldwide, ABC Family, and SOAPnet Networks and is part-owner of A&E, Lifetime Television, the History Channel, Vice Media, and other channels.
- Comcast owns: NBC, MSNBC, CNBC, Telemundo, Oxygen, USA Network, and Bravo, among others. . . .

Finally, streaming has radically changed the television landscape, opening it up to new competitors. Netflix, Hulu (owned jointly by the major television producers Disney, Fox, Time Warner, and Comcast), and Amazon, among others, stream a library of older television content and, increasingly, produce their own original programming, including popular shows such as Netflix's *Narcos*, Amazon's *The Tick*, and Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Other streaming services, like Sling (owned by the Dish Network) and DirecTV Now (owned by AT&T), focus on live television streaming. The growth of these streaming services, which allow us to watch "television" on a laptop, tablet, or mobile phone, has changed what the term "television" means. Streaming television services—sometimes with built-in DVR capacity—enable viewers to watch when they want. . . .

Pipes

Building the infrastructure for the high-speed networks that carry media into our homes is so capital intensive that it is no surprise that this media sector is highly concentrated.

- The cable television industry, which also provides the infrastructure for more than 60 percent of U.S. broadband internet subscribers, is dominated by two companies: Comcast and Charter Communications (Spectrum).
- High-speed internet connections via phone lines is also an industry with a handful of major players, led by AT&T and Verizon.
- The satellite television/internet industry has two companies, Dish Network and AT&T's DirecTV, that are industry leaders in both market share and brand name recognition.
- Even the U.S. mobile network is a two-company industry, led by Verizon and AT&T, whose networks account for almost 70 percent of U.S. mobile subscriptions (Dano 2017).

Importantly, two of the companies that are the major owners of the digital media infrastructure—Comcast and AT&T—are also among the leading owners of media products and platforms, giving them some competitive advantages.

Conglomeration and Integration

Concentrated media ownership means that a small number of large corporations own a significant percentage of media production, platforms, and pipes. These large companies are conglomerates; they are made up of a number of different companies, all owned by the same corporate parent. . . . Much as in other industries, the largest media companies grow in size and reach as they purchase or merge with their competitors. With their substantial profits and high visibility, media—in both news and entertainment forms—are among the most attractive properties to both potential investors and buyers.

Media conglomerates are integrated firms. Economic analysts have long used the terms

horizontal integration and *vertical integration* to describe two types of integration in any industry. In the media industry, vertical integration refers to the process by which one owner acquires all aspects of production and distribution of a single type of media product. For example, a movie company might integrate vertically by acquiring talent agencies to acquire scripts and sign actors, production studios to create films, and various venues to show the movies, such as theater chains, premium cable channels, broadcast television networks, and internet-based streaming services. The company could then better control the entire process of creating, producing, marketing, and distributing movies, giving it leverage in the marketplace. Similarly, a book publisher might integrate vertically by acquiring paper mills, printing facilities, book binderies, trucking firms, and internet booksellers. To prevent unfair competitive practices, some regulations exist to prevent extreme vertical integration.

Horizontal integration refers to the process by which one company buys different kinds of media, concentrating ownership across differing media types rather than up and down through one industry. In horizontal integration, a media conglomerate might assemble a portfolio that spans across film, television, books, record labels, video games, and so on to promote one another's operations.

In a clear example of horizontal integration, Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe produces new content that spans the whole range of Disney products: more than a dozen Avengers-themed films, including multiple Iron Man and Captain America movies; several television programs, including *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*; a steady stream of Marvel comic books; film and television soundtracks released by Marvel Music; video games with the Marvel characters; live-action Marvel entertainment at Disney's theme parks; and a wide variety of Marvel-themed merchandise, including clothing, toys, and collectibles. The more recent Marvel films, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018), have taken advantage of newer promotional channels, such as blogs, smartphone apps, and social media sites, generating substantial promotional buzz even before the films were released.

In another example, Disney turned its sports cable franchise ESPN into a multimedia cross-promotional vehicle, developing ESPN2, ESPN Classic, ESPNEWS, ESPN Deportes, ESPNU, espnW, the ESPN Radio Network, *ESPN: The Magazine*, FiveThirtyEight.com, the Watch ESPN streaming service, an ESPN mobile app, and ESPN Consumer Products, all working together to promote Disney's highly visible group of ESPN products. Such cross-media promotion can be a very powerful strategy. One experimental study found that a coordinated television and print ad campaign for a television program was far more effective than single-media campaigns; cross-media campaigns "resulted in higher attention from audiences, improved memory, greater perceived message credibility . . . and higher viewing intent compared to using repetitive single-source promotions" (Tang, Newton, and Wang 2007: 132). This kind of opportunity for cross-promotion is one of the driving forces behind the growth of horizontally integrated media companies.

Strategy in a New Media Economy

Several things can be learned from the conglomeration and integration of the media industry in the last couple of decades. First, traditional conglomeration by itself can fail in the new media economy; simply getting bigger is no guarantee of success. Second, despite setbacks, traditional media companies are highly resilient and are responding to the changing media landscape in a variety of ways—some of which involve new types of conglomeration and integration. Third, changes in technology—especially the maturation of the internet and the growth of wireless and mobile devices—have spurred innovative competitors that are not traditional media companies but that are now playing a central role in the new media economy.

The setbacks that led to the split of some major conglomerates . . . have been followed by new efforts to reposition companies in the evolving media landscape. One recurring debate about how best to do this has been assessing the relative importance of owning products—information and entertainment—versus owning "pipes"—the infrastructure to deliver these products. In 1996, then-Microsoft CEO Bill Gates published an essay popularizing the phrase "content is king." In it he argued, "Content is where I expect much of the real money will be made on the Internet, just as it was in broadcasting." That's because "anyone with

a PC and a modem can publish whatever content they can create" (Gates 1996). Thus, enthusiasm for the early internet's potential helped fuel the idea that "content is king," suggesting the creation of a broad range of content through horizontal integration is the key to success. Companies such as Disney bet on their popular content as their primary path to success. However, there has always been a less glamorous argument that owning the pipes that deliver content—regardless of who creates it—is the key to steady industry success. In part, that's because content comes and goes with no guarantee of popularity. In part, it's because the maturation of the internet has shown that telecom and cable providers, such as Comcast and Verizon, control a key chokehold in the media system.

But the primary media strategy in the new media economy has not been content *or* pipes; it has been content *and* pipes—along with newer *platforms*. The media giants have been pursuing a strategy of vertical integration, building media companies that connect production and distribution. The evolution of Comcast and AT&T exemplifies one major change on the media landscape: Once traditional telecom companies are now integrated media companies. Comcast, the largest provider of cable and internet service in the United States (which means the largest network of pipes entering U.S. households) is now also the owner of content leader NBC Universal (film, television, and music) but failed to outbid Disney to buy 21st Century Fox. AT&T has long been a major owner of media pipes: DirecTV, the largest satellite television provider in the United States, high-speed fiber-optic internet connections in dozens of major metropolitan areas, and one of the two large national mobile networks in the United States. In buying Time Warner, AT&T is seeking valuable new content assets—including film, television, and music from Warner Bros., as well as HBO, Cinemax, and CNN. Owning Time Warner allows AT&T to leverage popular content assets in the competition for media consumers, whereas having guaranteed access to AT&T's pipes will ensure broad exposure for Time Warner content. For example, if you get your internet access through AT&T, you might also be offered a discount on, or higher-speed access to, HBO or perhaps access to early releases of new episodes of the latest hit series.

As telecom companies become media firms, traditional media firms are acquiring more pipes and platforms. In buying Fox, Disney is seeking new platforms to distribute its vast, and growing, collection of media products in the internet age; owning broadcast and cable networks such as ABC and ESPN is no longer enough. In addition to acquiring a controlling interest in Hulu . . . Disney plans to develop two new streaming services—one focused on entertainment and one on sports—to reduce its reliance on platforms owned by competitors.

The newest developments are a sign of how the economic dynamics in the media industry are changing as digitization and convergence have largely erased the boundaries among media sectors. In the contemporary media landscape in which users have seemingly unlimited media options, the major industry players have been scrambling to maintain and rebuild media companies that can be profitable amidst media abundance. That's why we continue to see consolidation in the media industry, with just a handful of major companies in media production, media platforms, and media pipes.

The Power of Platforms: Facebook and Google as New Media Giants

Early enthusiasts often believed that the internet would help decentralize media ownership by offering easy access for new competitors. The new companies came, but ironically, as the internet matured it consolidated even more than traditional media. As one analyst of media ownership concluded, "Generally, the more electronic and 'digital' a media subsector is, the more highly it seems to be concentrated." In fact, there has been "consolidation for the Internet itself as well as for many of its major applications. This pours cold water over the hope that the Internet will solve the media concentration problem" (Noam 2009: 5).

Such analysis reflects the reality created by the newest media giants: Google and Facebook. . . . Google and Facebook (and other similar platforms like Twitter and Google-owned YouTube) are not traditional media companies. Neither hires journalists or other media producers, and therefore they don't produce media content. Until recently, their own executives preferred to call themselves technology companies. Industry analysts, however, now recognize just how powerful Facebook and Google's high-traffic platforms are within the media industry. Recently,

the culture secretary in the United Kingdom has suggested that the UK officially change the legal status of Facebook and Google to recognize them as media companies (Ruddick 2017).

In fact, Google and Facebook *are* media companies because their platforms host a vast population of media users, have a powerful impact on media content, and take in a huge percentage of media advertising dollars. These companies have even ventured into areas traditionally controlled by telecommunications companies.

Users

More than just platforms for people to connect with friends and search the web, Facebook and Google are entry points to a wide range of media content. For example, the Pew Research Center (2017) found that 45 percent of U.S. adults get news from Facebook and 18 percent of adults get news from Google's YouTube. Although more than three-quarters of adults under the age of 50 turn to these platforms for news, Pew notes that 2017 was the first time "more than half (55%) of Americans ages 50 or older report getting news on social media sites" (p. 2). And Facebook is now the "top source of political news for millennials" (Griffith 2017).

Google and Facebook deliver personalized content via proprietary algorithms to grow the size, engagement, and time commitment of users. Facebook offers a customized News Feed, mixing posts from friends and family along with mainstream media content and viral videos. Google is the go-to site for finding out just about anything, including the latest news via Google News search results. These sites also frequently tinker with ways to deliver video content to attract and hold users' attention. . . .

Media Content

Media producers have worked hard to connect to the massive number of users attracted to Facebook and Google. The simplest approach is to develop content specifically designed for Facebook and YouTube. To reach these users, media companies post a fresh stream of articles, videos, and other media on their company Facebook pages or YouTube channels, in the hopes that they will be noticed and shared. This is not a content-neutral activity. To reach audiences on social media, producers are creating content that fits the style of social media, particularly content that is mobile friendly and easy to share: short videos, top-10 lists, provocative celebrity photos, eye-catching slide shows, sensational headlines, and other attention-grabbing products. The omnipresence of such "click bait" all over the internet is the result of producers creating provocative content aimed at attracting the attention of social media users (Wu 2016).

Even traditional national news organizations in search of the large audiences on social media platforms are creating news that caters to the routines and expectations of social media users. A recent study of online journalism found that social media platforms have a significant influence on news content: "Publishers are making micro-adjustments on every story to achieve a better fit or better performance on each social outlet. This inevitably changes the presentation and tone of the journalism itself" (Bell and Owen 2017: 39). As a result, more and more news is now published directly on social media platforms rather than as links back to the news organization's home page. This kind of "native" social media news may get lots of clicks and eyeballs, but it changes the nature of the content because it is designed precisely to be clicked on and shared quickly before some competing content finds its way onto users' screens. Becoming "shareworthy" is a prominent goal for producers of all kinds of media content, including journalism (Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher 2017). . . .

Advertising

The media industry is, in large part, an advertising-funded business. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television have long been organized as commercial industries whose primary source of revenue is advertising. After the broad failure of paywalls, online media have largely adopted a similar approach, providing content that is paid for by advertisers seeking the attention of users who can access the content for free. Advertising dollars chase attractive audiences—young and well-off users are typically the most desirable media targets—leading content producers to create or acquire media that are aimed at that target audience. Advertising, then, does more than just fund media; advertisers' preferences influence what media are produced and how they are distributed.

In 2016, online advertising overtook television as the world's largest advertising medium (Zenith 2017). Google and Facebook dominate this lucrative market. . . . In 2017, Google and Facebook together received more than 60 percent of all digital advertising spending in the United States (eMarketer 2017). This effectively makes digital advertising a "duopoly," dominated by just two companies, and makes control of online advertising more concentrated than any other media sector. More broadly, Google and Facebook account for about 20 percent of *all* advertising dollars—across all media worldwide. Dominance in the internet sector has catapulted these relative newcomers to the top of the list for all media advertising revenue. Google generated $79.4 billion in ad revenue in 2016, and Facebook earned $26.9 billion. Comcast was a distant third with $12.9 billion (Zenith 2017). This dominance is likely to continue. As the amount of money advertisers spend on digital media continues to grow, industry analysts note that virtually all of this growth—99 percent of the 2016 growth by one estimate—went to Google and Facebook (Ingram 2017). As a result, these two platforms are powerful media companies, bringing in users to sell to advertisers while influencing the nature of media content to attract users. Any successful company in the world of digital media will have to work, in some capacity, with these two new digital media giants. . . .

CONSEQUENCES OF CONGLOMERATION AND INTEGRATION

Although the trends in media ownership may be of interest in themselves, our prime concern is with the relationship between ownership and the media product. What are the consequences of integration, conglomeration, and concentration of ownership?

Integration and Self-Promotion

The economic factors propelling both vertical and horizontal integration are clear: Owners perceive such arrangements as both efficient and profitable. The cultural consequences are more ambiguous. However, an institutional approach suggests that such ownership patterns are likely to affect the types of media products created. In particular, integrated media conglomerates seeking the benefits of "synergy" are likely to favor products that can best be exploited by other components of the conglomerate. (Synergy refers to the dynamic . . . [in which] components of a company work together to produce benefits that would be impossible for either of them to generate if they were separately owned.) For example, horizontal integration may well encourage the publication of books that can be made into movies and discourage the publication of those that cannot. Or it might encourage the creation of TV talent search programs because they can generate new musical acts who are contractually obligated to record for the company's music label, featured in the company's magazines, played on the company's radio stations, and showcased on their websites. More generally, promotion and marketing are likely to dominate the decision-making process within a horizontally integrated media industry.

Vertical integration becomes especially significant when the company that makes the product also controls its distribution. For example, as Netflix has vastly expanded its original programming, it has prominently featured these "Netflix Originals" while cutting dramatically the number of titles it carries from outside producers.

The possibilities for fully using horizontal and vertical integration are startling. In this era of integrated media conglomerates, media companies are capable of pursuing elaborate cross-media strategies in which company-owned media products can be packaged, sold, and promoted across the full range of media platforms. Feature films, their accompanying soundtracks and streaming/On-Demand/DVD/Blu-Ray releases, spin-off television programs, and books, along with magazine cover stories and plenty of licensed merchandise, can all be produced and distributed by different divisions of the same conglomerate—with each piece serving to promote the broader franchise. One consequence of integration, then, is an increase in media cross-promotion and, perhaps, a decrease in media products that are not suitable for cross-promotion. It also makes it more difficult for smaller media firms to compete with the major corporations that can use their vast and diverse holdings to saturate consumers during their promotional campaigns (often on social media platforms) and ensure prominent exposure on their various media outlets and platforms.

The Impact of Conglomeration

What has the growth of large multimedia firms over the past few decades meant for the news, television, radio, films, music, and books we receive? In other words, to what extent does conglomeration affect the media product? The loudest warnings about the impact of conglomeration have come from within the news industry, in part because some news media had traditionally been sheltered from the full pressure of profit making. For example, for much of television history, respectable television news divisions were understood to represent a necessary public service commitment that lent prestige to the major broadcast networks. They were not expected to turn a substantial profit. However, that changed with the takeover of news operations by major corporate conglomerates during the 1980s.

Ken Auletta's *Three Blind Mice* (1991) paints a vivid picture of the clash that ensued during that time, when new corporate owners took over the major television networks and their news divisions. For those who worked at NBC News, for example, the purchase of the network by General Electric led to conflicts about the meaning and role of television news. In most of these conflicts, the new corporate owners ultimately prevailed. As Auletta tells it, when General Electric took over as the new owners of NBC, they

> emphasized a "boundaryless" company, one without walls between News, Entertainment, Sales, and other divisions. . . . At NBC's annual management retreat in 1990, many of the 160 executives questioned why Sales or Entertainment couldn't have more input into news specials, or why News tended to keep its distance from the rest of the company, as if it were somehow special. (p. 564)

Then-General Electric chair Jack Welch even specified that *Today Show* weather reporter Willard Scott should mention GE lightbulbs on the program. According to former NBC news president Lawrence Grossman, "It was one of the perks of owning a network. . . . You get your lightbulbs mentioned on the air. . . . People want to please the owners" (Husseini 1994: 13).

Since that time, the network news programs have faced stiff competition from 24-hour cable news channels Fox, CNN, and MSNBC and a proliferation of online news. Similar to print journalism, broadcast news has seen advertisers shift their dollars to the internet. Yet despite these changes, they are expected to turn a profit by attracting audiences that owners expect and advertisers demand. One result has been an increased emphasis on entertainment and celebrities on the network news—what former CBS news anchor Dan Rather called "the Hollywoodization of the news" due to the growth of "stupid celebrity stories" (*Brill's Content* 1998: 117). The changes that were seen as a threat to serious broadcast news back in the 1980s and 1990s are now the norm in the industry, with the broadcast networks now routinely incorporating entertainment, celebrities, human interest, and other light fare into their broadcasts.

Conglomeration has affected print journalism as well, where the loss of advertisers and paid subscribers has hit especially hard. Some critics have long argued that corporate takeovers of print media put the emphasis on attracting and entertaining consumers rather than on informing citizens (Squires 1993). In this context, newspapers become increasingly colorful, focus attention on the lives of celebrities, and print sensationalistic stories about dramatic and bizarre happenings. One example is News Corp's Executive Chair Rupert Murdoch—best known as the owner of FOX News—who launched his career by buying up newspapers in Australia and England and converting them into tabloids that specialized in sex, scandal, and celebrities. This was epitomized by his purchase of Britain's *The Sun*, which became notorious—and popular—for its scandalous coverage, even adopting a "Page Three" feature—a daily photo of a topless or nude model (Braid 2004). The 2011 phone-hacking scandal in England, which led to the shutdown of Murdoch's British tabloid *News of the World*, showed how far profit-focused news organizations will go in search of a story. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of phones were hacked by reporters at the newspaper, who sought titillating information about crime victims, their families, and celebrities. In the report on the scandal commissioned by the British government, Lord Justice Leveson concluded that

> there has been a recklessness in prioritising sensational stories, almost irrespective

> of the harm that the stories may cause and the rights of those who would be affected (perhaps in a way that can never be remedied), all the while heedless of the public interest. (Leveson Inquiry 2012: 10)

Finally, for today's multiplatform media companies, news becomes "content" that is increasingly expected to fit with and be usable by the other divisions of the company. Conglomeration, therefore, has led to increased bottom-line pressure, even in areas of the media that used to be partially insulated from such pressure. . . .

Media Control and Political Power

Can concentrated media ownership be translated into undue political influence? . . . [M]ost people recognize the importance of such a question in examining the government's control of media in authoritarian nations. It is clear in such situations that state ownership and exclusive access are likely to affect media products. In the United States, most discussion about the First Amendment and free speech also focuses on the possibility of government censorship. This discussion is generally blind, however, to the impact of corporate ownership.

In addressing this concern, Bagdikian (2004) argued that the United States has a "private ministry of information," metaphorically referring to the type of government-led propaganda system that exists in authoritarian societies. In the case of the contemporary United States, however, private interests, not the government, largely control this information system. Bagdikian suggests that, when a small number of firms with similar interests dominate the media industry, it begins to function in a way similar to a state information system. Although the internet offers easy access to a wide variety of news and opinion, if one seeks them out, it is hard to question the underlying argument that those who own large media conglomerates still have at least the potential to wield a great deal of political power.

How might ownership of media translate into political power? It is possible that those building media empires could use their media outlets to promote a very specific political agenda. Furthermore, when media barons become candidates for major office, their media holdings can be invaluable political resources. Perhaps the starkest example of this in a Western democracy is the case of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, who managed to use ownership of private media to gain public office—which then enabled him to influence public media.

Silvio Berlusconi, a media magnate and the dominant force in Italian broadcasting and publishing, was elected prime minister three times (1994, 2001, and 2008). For Berlusconi, ownership of television and radio clearly had great political value; he owned strategic assets that were unavailable to other political actors. In the 2001 electoral campaign, he was given four times the exposure of his rival candidate on the television networks that he owned. After winning that election, he went on to effectively control 90 percent of Italian television programming (*The Economist* 2001). That's because Italian prime ministers have the right to replace the boards of directors of the three public television channels. . . . The corrosive effect of this arrangement on Italian democracy was so serious that Freedom House, an independent watchdog group that produces annual rankings of freedom and democracy around the world, downgraded Italian freedom of the press from "free" to "partially free" (Freedom House 2004). . . .

Although the U.S. media environment is quite different from Italy's largely because of the vast size of the U.S. media industry, private media ownership can be a huge political asset in the United States too. Media entrepreneur Michael Bloomberg amassed a fortune selling technology and media products to businesses. He drew on the widespread recognition of his brand-name line of Bloomberg business media products—and the enormous profits they have generated for him—in his successful campaign to become New York City mayor in 2001. In the process, he spent $69 million of his own money—more than $92 per vote. Bloomberg won reelection in 2005, then successfully had the term-limit law changed so he could run (and win) again in 2009. There has long been speculation that Bloomberg, one of the 10 wealthiest people in the United States as of 2017 (*Forbes* 2018), will one day launch a presidential bid.

In some cases, owners of media companies have direct control over media products and thus are able to exert political influence by promoting ideas that enhance their interests. For example, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, controlled by the

conservative Sinclair family, owns almost 200 local television stations that reach about 40 percent of all U.S. households. The company requires its stations to run conservative, pro-Trump news segments, including lengthy political commentary by a former Trump campaign official. Sinclair ran 15 interviews with then-candidate Donald Trump in 2016, mostly on stations in swing states in the late stages of the campaign. Noting that the nation's largest owner of television stations broadcasts highly politicized news, former FCC Chair Michael Copps called Sinclair "probably the most dangerous company most people have never heard of" (Graves 2017).

Conservative media magnate Rupert Murdoch has also used a variety of his News Corporation's media holdings to advance his political and economic goals. In 1975, he had his Australian newspapers slant the news so blatantly in favor of his conservative choice for prime minister that Murdoch's own journalists went on strike in protest. His British papers played a crucial role in the 1979 election of British conservative Margaret Thatcher. In 1995, Murdoch financed the multimillion-dollar start-up of the high-profile conservative U.S. magazine *The Weekly Standard*. In 1996, Murdoch's News Corporation initiated a 24-hour news channel, Fox News Channel (founded by Rush Limbaugh's former executive producer and long-time Republican Party political consultant, Roger Ailes), which promotes a consistent conservative pro-Trump agenda (Ackerman 2001; Aday 2010; McDermott 2010). When Murdoch's News Corporation bought Dow Jones in 2007, it took over as owner of *The Wall Street Journal*, one of the most influential—and editorially conservative—newspapers in the country.

In 2017, Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers, who helped support the Tea Party movement and who provide major funding to the conservative movement more broadly, announced that they would invest in the Meredith Corporation's purchase of Time Inc., the largest magazine publisher in the United States. In response to news of the Kochs' investment, John Huey, former editor in chief of Time Inc. highlighted the political value of owning major news: "It's difficult to believe the Kochs would pay a premium to buy into the print media model without the hope that they can harness *Time* and *Fortune* to further their agenda" (Snider 2017). Other billionaires have also recently invested in news, including Amazon owner Jeff Bezos's 2013 purchase of the *Washington Post* and casino magnate Sheldon Adelson's 2015 purchase of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. . . .

The process of using media to promote a political agenda is more complex than simply feeding people ideas and images that they passively accept. Owners can use media sites to disseminate a specific position on a controversial issue or to help legitimize particular institutions or behaviors. Just as important, owners can systematically exclude certain ideas from their media products. Although control of information or images can never be total, owners can tilt the scales in particular directions quite dramatically.

Ownership by major corporations of vast portfolios of media gives us reason to believe that a whole range of ideas and images—those that question fundamental social arrangements, under which media owners are doing quite well—will be visible primarily in less prominent media. This does not mean that all media images and information are uniform. It means that some ideas will be widely available, whereas others will be largely absent. For example, stories critical of gridlock in the federal government are frequent; in contrast, stories critical of capitalism as an economic system that can facilitate inequality are relatively rare. . . .

The political impact of concentrated corporate ownership, however, is both broader and subtler than the exclusion of certain ideas in favor of others. Herbert Schiller (1989) argues that "the corporate voice" has been generalized so successfully that most of us do not even think of it as a specifically corporate voice. That is, the corporate view has become "our" view, the "American" view, even though the interests of the corporate entities that own mass media are far from universal. One example of this is the entire media-generated discourse—in newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and the internet—about the American economy, in which corporate financial success provides the framework for virtually all evaluations of national economic well-being. The relationship between corporate financial health and citizen well-being, however, is rarely discussed explicitly—even in times of serious financial crisis. During the economic crises of 2008–2009, for example, the U.S. news media were remarkably unquestioning of the message from both government and the private sector that a massive and

immediate bailout of banks, Wall Street firms, and other corporate interests was absolutely essential.

A concentrated media sphere can also undermine citizens' capacity to monitor their government's war-making powers. McChesney (2008: 98) argues that

> those in power, those who benefit from war and empire, see the press as arguably the most important front of war, because it is there that consent is manufactured, and dissent is marginalized. For a press system, a war is its moment of truth.

For example, the 2003 U.S.–led invasion of Iraq was justified by the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. The news media reported these WMD charges uncritically, relying on official sources and without in-depth investigation, effectively affirming the Bush administration's rationale for war. According to one study of U.S. news media coverage in the first three weeks of the Iraq war, pro-war U.S. sources outnumbered antiwar sources by 25 to 1, thus making it very difficult for citizens to access critical perspectives on the war (Rendall and Broughel 2003).

The internet offers the possibility for small producers to create professional-looking alternative media—from websites and blogs to mobile apps and streaming video. However, without a means to effectively promote such sites, and without the budget to pay for staff to continuously produce substantive new content that continues to draw users, most online alternative media are limited to relatively small, niche audiences. Television and the major daily newspapers—along with the social media content associated with these major media—are still the main sources of news for most of the population.

In the end, ownership of the means of information becomes part of larger patterns of inequality in contemporary societies, and large media conglomerates can use their capacity to shape media discourse and their substantial financial resources to influence public policy. In this sense, mass media institutions are no different from other social institutions; they are linked to the patterned inequality that exists throughout our society. . . .

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