

CHAPTER I

Media and the Social World

The media surround us. Our everyday lives are saturated by radio, television, newspapers, books, the Internet, movies, recorded music, magazines, and more. In the twenty-first century, we navigate through a vast mass media environment unprecedented in human history. Yet our intimate familiarity with the media often allows us to take them for granted. They are like the air we breathe, ever present yet rarely considered.

This book invites you to step back and seriously consider the mass media and the issues they raise. It asks you to put your everyday media activities into a broader social, political, and economic context to better understand them.

Let's take the simple act of watching television. Nothing could be easier. Sit yourself down and "click," it's on. Click, change the channel. Click, click, click. . . . Most of us do it almost every day without thinking much about it. But what if we stepped back to look at television in a broader context? What would we find?

Or take the Internet. The buzz and hype have been almost deafening. "Revolutionary," "explosion," "a new era in communication"—this is the sort of language that has surrounded the Internet's growth. But again, what happens if we pause and take a look with a more critical eye? What do we see?

One thing we see is change. The "old" television networks are losing their share of the audience. New broadcast networks are springing up, along with dozens of cable channels and satellite options. Television is going digital, and soon viewers will routinely have hundreds of channels to choose from. The Internet is changing even faster. The technology bringing audio, video, and text is getting more sophisticated as the

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Internet is becoming accessible to more and more people. The Internet has gone commercial too, with e-commerce now well established—despite its ups and downs—and advertising proliferating. More Web sites, more channels, more choices, more media.

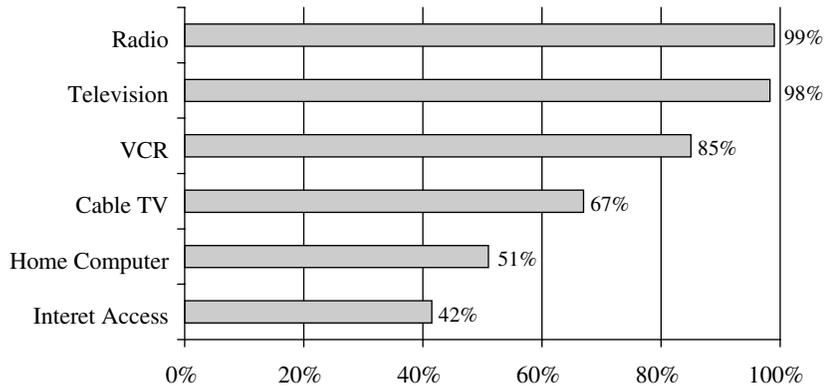
But if we focus only on change and growth, we risk missing the forest for the trees. That's because, surprisingly, when we step outside of our routine media habits and move away from all the media hype, we also find that some enduring questions and issues face all types of mass media. From the printed page you are reading, to the television set you watch, to the virtual world of cyberspace, we can examine all of these by asking some fundamental questions:

- Who owns the media—and why does this matter?
- How are media products created?
- What should be government's relation to regulating the media?
- Why are some images and ideas so prevalent in the mass media, while others are marginalized?
- How has growth in mass media influenced the political process?
- What impact are mass media having on our society and on our world?
- How do people use and interpret the mass media?
- How do new media technologies develop, and what is the effect of technological change?
- What is the significance of the increasing globalization of mass media?

These questions and others like them are not simple to answer. Indeed, one of the arguments in this book is that popular answers to such questions often overlook the more complicated dynamics that characterize the media process. But these tough questions raise important issues with which we need to grapple if we are to understand the mass media and their increasingly important place in our society.

The Importance of Media

The equipment that provides access to electronic media is everywhere (see Exhibit 1.1). Consider this: The U.S. Census Bureau (2000a) reported that in 1998, 99 percent of American households had a radio and each household had an average of 5.6 radios. In that year, 98 percent of households had a television, with an average of 2.4 sets per household. Also, 85 percent of TV households had at least one videocassette

EXHIBIT 1.1 *Percentage of US Households with Select Media*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000a, 2000b).

recorder (VCR), and 67 percent received some form of cable television. Data about rapidly expanding computer ownership and Internet usage have been more difficult to pinpoint. But by 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that more than half of U.S. households had a home computer, and more than 40% of U.S. households had Internet access. Many more Americans have Internet access at school or work.

Americans spend an enormous amount of time watching, listening to, or reading these various forms of media. The increase in media options in recent years has even led to an increase in "multitasking"—using more than one form of media at a time. Americans have about 7 hours of "leisure" time per day, and about two-thirds of that time—more than 4½ hours—is spent with mass media. Of this media time, about two-thirds—or about 3 hours—is spent watching television (PR Newswire Association, 2000). Over the course of a year, 3 hours a day adds up to 45 days of TV viewing! Imagine someone sitting in front of a television set 24 hours a day for a month and a half! Every year, that's how much TV the typical American watches. Of course, this accounts only for television viewing. If you add the time we spend listening to the radio, playing CDs, reading, surfing the Net, and using other media, it is easy to see that near-constant exposure to media is a fundamental part of contemporary life. Indeed, some argue that the media have become the dominant social institution in contemporary society, supplanting the influence of older institutions such as the educational system and religion.

One way to recognize the importance of the media in our lives is to imagine life *without* the media. Imagine that you wake up tomorrow in a

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sort of “Twilight Zone” parallel society where everything is the same except that media do not exist: no television, no movies, no radio, no recorded music, no computers, no Internet, no books or magazines or newspapers.

If the media were eliminated, *nothing* else would be the same. Our entertainment would be different. We would not follow sports teams in the newspaper, watch TV, or go to a movie for fun. We would not listen to recorded music at parties or for relaxation. Our understanding of politics and the world around us would be different because we would not have newspapers, television, magazines, and books to explain what is happening in our communities and beyond. Even our perceptions of ourselves would probably be different, since we would not have television characters and advertising images to compare ourselves against. For example, we might not concern ourselves so much with the latest fashions, music, or cars if ads did not imply that we *should* be concerned with such things.

With no television, no recorded music, no movies, no radio, and no Internet, we would have a great deal of time on our hands. We would probably spend much of it interacting with other people. We might entertain ourselves by playing music or playing games. We might attend meetings and lectures or hold discussions on politics and current events to learn what was going on. We might take up hobbies or learn new skills to pass the time. Our social life—how we interact with other people—would also change in the absence of media.

Of course, changes would reach well beyond our private lives. The behavior of politicians, business executives, and leaders in other fields would change without media. Government would operate differently. Without advertising, business would be fundamentally different. Education, religion, and every other institution would also be different without media, as would social movements and citizens’ organizations.

Given the pervasiveness of the media and their significance in our lives and in society, it’s surprising to realize that the mass media are relatively new phenomena. Most forms of mass media are still in their infancy. Before we go any further in our discussion, we should take a brief look at the history and meaning of “mass media.”

The Rise of Mass Media

The word *media* is the plural of *medium*. It is derived from the Latin word *medius*, which means “middle.” The communication media are the

different technological processes that facilitate communication between (and are in the “middle” of) the sender of a message and the receiver of that message. In this book, we will sometimes use the term *reader* rather than *receiver* or *audience* because we want to highlight the active role of audiences in interpreting the messages they receive. In this sense, people “read” the sound and pictures of media messages just as they read the words of a written media message. Reading implies actively interpreting media messages. The same media product might mean very different things to two different people. For example, an MTV video of a hot new Rap artist may elicit very different responses from a 15-year-old fan of the band and a parent concerned about stereotypically sexist images that might be present in such videos. The media product—the video—is the same, but different “readers” interpret it in very different ways. In studying media, then, it’s important to consider readers because they do not simply swallow the messages presented in the media.

Sociologists call the process of actively creating meaning in this way the “social construction of reality.” This means that, while reality exists, we must negotiate the meaning of that reality. A student who sports a series of prominent tattoos is an objective reality. However, different people will interpret such body art in different ways. Is it a sign of conformity to a fad? A rebellious political statement? A playful snubbing of mainstream norms? A disgusting mutilation of the body? Or is it just an act of personal expression? The meaning of the tattoos must be constructed by those observing them. The same is true for the meaning of media messages. That is why the audience or “readers” are such an important part of the media process.

Our primary concern in this book is mass media, that is, media that reach a relatively large audience of usually anonymous readers. Writing a letter, sending a telegram, or placing a telephone call involves the use of different communication media, but scholars generally do not consider these to be mass media because messages in such media have a single, intended, known recipient. You know the individual who will receive your letter or answer your phone call. Mass media producers, though, have no way of knowing exactly who—or how many people—will read their book, watch their television program, buy their CD, or “hit” their Internet home page. The difference between mass media and other forms of communication is sometimes not simple or clear-cut. The distinctions have become even more blurred with the introduction of new technologies. Our primary concern in this book is the generally recognized mass media of print, film, radio, television, sound recordings, and the Internet.

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EXHIBIT 1.2 *Timeline of Media Development*

Year	Media-Related Event
100	Papermaking develops in China and spreads through Asia and Arab world by the year 600
700	Arabs carry Chinese techniques for papermaking to the West
1000	Moveable type made of clay used in China
1400	Moveable metal type developed in Asia
1450	1456 Gutenberg perfects moveable metal type and hand press in Germany; the Bible is printed
1600	First "newspapers" appear in Germany, France, and Belgium
1700	1702 London's <i>Daily Courant</i> is first daily newspaper
1800	1833 Mass-circulation media begin with the first "penny press" newspaper, the <i>New York Sun</i>
	1837 Telegraph is first demonstrated
	1839 A practical method of photography is developed by Daguerre
1850	1876 First telephone message sent by Alexander Graham Bell
	1879 Edison patents the electric light
	1884 Eastman perfects the roll film
	1894 Motion pictures are invented and the first films are shown to the public
	1895 Radio messages transmitted by Marconi
1900	1920 First regularly scheduled radio broadcasting, by KDKA in Pittsburgh
	1927 <i>The Jazz Singer</i> is first feature-length film with synchronized speech
	1933 TV is demonstrated by RCA
	1937 First digital computer created from telephone parts
	1941 First commercial TV is broadcast
	1946 The first mainframe computer is invented at the University of Pennsylvania
	1949 Network TV begins in the United States
1950	1956 Videotape recording (VTR) is invented
	1957 <i>Sputnik</i> , world's first communication satellite, is launched by USSR
	1961 San Diego cable operator is first to import television signals from another city (Los Angeles) for distribution to subscribers
	1969 First nodes of the computer Internet are created in Pentagon plan to establish a decentralized communications system that can withstand nuclear attack
	1970 Early (and expensive) videocassette recorders (VCR) introduced
	1971 Invention of the microprocessor
	1975 The first microcomputer is marketed
	Fiber-optics transmission begins
	HBO begins transmitting programming to cable TV systems by satellite

(Continued)

EXHIBIT 1.2 (continued)

Year	Media-Related Event
1977	Qube, the first interactive cable system, begins in Columbus, Ohio
	200,000 VCRs sold; more affordable machines enter the market and sales boom
1982	Audio compact disk (CD) introduced
1990	World Wide Web (WWW) started as simple user interface for wide variety of data types
1994	First cyberstations (radio stations on the Internet) appear
1997	Digital video disks (DVD) first introduced
1998	Digital television broadcasting begins
1999	MP3 makes music downloads more practical
	Computer viruses are increasingly commonplace
2000	Napster makes free downloading of music simple and popular
2001	Satellite-based digital audio radio services begin to grow

Source: Crowley and Heyer (1991), Rogers (1986), and Jost (1994a).

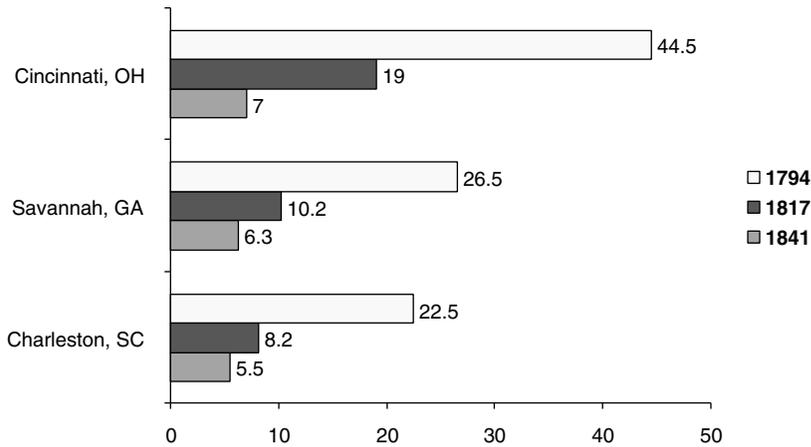
The Print Medium

When American revolutionaries founded the United States, there was only one form of mass media: print. (See Cassata and Asante, 1979; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989; and McQuail, 1987, for summaries of the rise of mass media.) The technology for printing dated back to the beginning of the fifteenth century, when inventors in Korea first created the cast metal type that made printing possible. In 1450, Johannes Gutenberg made printing more practicable by converting a winepress into the first printing press with movable type. While the technology evolved, media content changed little. Reflecting the power of the Church in Europe at the time, the Bible, which scribes had previously hand-copied, was the book most often produced by early printers. Thus, as was true for later changes, social forces other than technology determined the direction of media development (see Exhibit 1.2).

For several centuries, print media—in the form of books, newspapers, and pamphlets—served as the only means for reaching a wide audience from a distance. However, the need for physical distribution limited print media products (unlike later electronic media). News, for example, traveled only as fast and as far as a horse, train, or ship could carry it. It routinely took four to eight weeks for information to travel from Europe to the United States. Even distances that we now perceive to be

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EXHIBIT 1.3 *Time (in days) Required for News to Travel From New York to Select Cities, 1794–1841*



Source: Pred (1973).

quite short—from New York to Washington, for example—were separated by a vast communication gulf. The only way to communicate across such distances was for messages to travel physically between the two locations. While improved transportation technology increased the speed of communication throughout the nineteenth century, in the years immediately preceding the development of the telegraph, it still took several days for news to travel from one city to the next (see Exhibit 1.3). Both routine and extraordinary information, from holiday greetings to news of the outbreak of war, traveled at a slow speed difficult to imagine today.

Not until the 1840s did the technological innovation of the telegraph allow for near instantaneous communication over long distances that were physically wired together. For the first time, there was a separation between transportation and long-distance communication. Since it did not reach a large audience, the telegraph was not a mass medium, but it did speed up the dissemination of information through newspapers. Reporters could send news stories instantaneously over a long distance to newspapers that would then print and distribute the story locally. The invention of the telephone in 1876 opened the way for more widely accessible personal long-distance communication as well as facilitating the work of reporters.

Sound Recording and the Film Medium

In 1877, Thomas Edison developed the phonograph, which marked the beginning of the first new mass medium since print. In 1887, phonograph records were introduced and, later, other forms of sound recording proliferated. In 1948, the long-playing (LP) 33-1/3 rpm record was launched by Columbia Records and became the recording industry standard for more than 30 years. Magnetic tape originated in the 1920s and became most popular in its easy-to-use cassette form, introduced in the 1960s. In the early 1980s, sound recording went digital, and the compact disk (CD) emerged as the dominant recording format. By the late 1990s, newer digital file formats such as MP3 were allowing increasing amounts of data to be stored on single CDs and music to be more speedily distributed via the Internet.

In 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière invented the cinematograph, which subsequently led to "moving pictures." While the need to assemble a viewing audience in a particular location limited the reach of this new medium, movies proved to be enormously popular. By 1912, 5 million Americans a day were attending the cinema. Fifteen years later, the introduction of the first "talking picture" made moviegoing even more accessible and popular. By the late 1970s, videocassette recorders (VCRs) allowed people to purchase or rent movies to watch in their own homes. They also enabled users to record television broadcasts and to film their own "home videos." In 1997, the digital video disk (DVD) was introduced, marking the shift of film to digital formats.

Broadcast Media

In the first decade of the twentieth century, innovations leading to the rise of radio presented new opportunities for communication. Radio was the first broadcast medium, and it introduced a new element to the media equation. No longer did media producers have to physically distribute their products (for example, to newsstands, bookstores, or movie theaters). Nor did the public have to travel physically to these locations to have access to mass media. Now, communicators could use the airwaves to transmit a media product directly to anyone who owned a radio receiver. Communicators could now cast media messages broadly.

Broadcasting made another advance with the introduction of television. When the Pioneer Corporation introduced the first television sets to the United States in the 1940s, their advertising boasted, "We bring the revolution home" (Tichi, 1991, p. 12). They were not exaggerating. In the span of less than 10 years, between 1946 and 1955, television sets

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made their way into 65 percent of American households (Spigel, 1992). In 1998, with television in nearly all American homes, the first digital television broadcasting began. This marked yet another medium making the shift to the universal digital format.

The development of broadcasting fundamentally altered patterns of media consumption by creating the possibility of a largely privatized and individualized media experience. Consuming media or other forms of entertainment were often social activities, such as attending movies or going to concerts. These public activities have been replaced, or at least supplemented, by television, video and DVD rentals, and recorded music, which people usually experience in the privacy of their own homes.

“New” Media

In more recent years, technological innovation has again changed the face of mass media. Cable television, satellites, fiber-optic technologies, and especially computers have helped create an explosion in media products and formats. Ironically, much of this change has resulted in a move away from the mass broadcast audience toward smaller, more specialized niche populations—a process called “narrowcasting.” With computer technology, users combine the specialization of media products with interactivity to make choices, provide responses, and customize media products. This interactive technology promises to bring new changes to tomorrow’s media. Developers are beginning to fuse telephone, television, fax, stereo, digital video, and computer into a single media center. As with the introduction of television a half century ago, the emergence of new technologies holds out the possibility of significant social change. But it is important to reiterate that changes in technology do not determine the evolution of media. Instead, as we will see, technology is only one of a number of interacting factors that shape the development and uses of media.

The rise of the Internet is a case in point. Changes in computer technology were a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of the Internet. It took government financing and regulation to help organize and launch the Internet system, primarily out of universities. The Internet was originally conceived as a decentralized communications network capable of functioning after a nuclear attack on central locations such as Washington, D.C. Much of the funding to develop the Internet, therefore, came from public tax dollars through the Pentagon budget. This is a clear example of an external social institution directly influencing the development of technology. As this technology is used more and more for private commercial applications, there is growing debate

about the character and direction of the “information superhighway.” It appears that, rather than transporting information, the Internet has become a “virtual mall,” with corporations trying new ways to sell us all sorts of products. Perhaps here, too, interaction at home with electronic media will replace the social experience of going shopping. The point is that, throughout the history of media, technology by itself has never led unambiguously in a specific direction; rather, broader social forces have channeled the development and application of technological capabilities.

Media and Society

Because media are such an integral part of our lives, they generate a great deal of popular interest and debate. Does television have too much sex and violence? Are the news media biased? Have TV talk shows gone too far with their sensationalized topics? Should the content of the Internet be regulated? To address such questions, we need a better understanding of the mass media and their role in contemporary social life.

A sociological perspective, which underlies this book, can help us understand the media. For both students of mass media and citizens in the twenty-first century, sociology provides a set of tools to help make sense of the dizzying array of media-related issues. A sociological perspective asks us to consider the role of media in our individual lives (the micro level) in the context of social forces such as the economy, politics, and technological development (the macro level). Most of all, sociology suggests that if we want to understand the media and their impact on our society, we must consider the relationships (both micro and macro) between media and the social world.

Mass Media in Socialization

One way in which individuals are connected to the larger social world is through socialization. Socialization is the process whereby we learn and internalize the values, beliefs, and norms of our culture and, in so doing, develop a sense of self. Americans might, for example, learn as children that the United States is a democracy whose citizens have fought valiantly in the name of freedom and have excelled in science, business, entertainment, and the arts. Such information, coupled with socializing rituals such as Fourth of July parades, Labor Day, pledging allegiance to the flag in school, and playing the national anthem at sporting events, encourages people to take pride in being an “American,” thus helping to form one aspect of their identity.

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Through the socialization process, we also learn to perform our social roles as friend, student, worker, citizen, and so forth. The process of socialization continues throughout life, but it is especially influential for children and adolescents. If socialization proceeds smoothly, we hardly notice it. The dominant values, beliefs, and norms of our society become “our” values and norms. The internalization of the lessons of socialization means that our culture becomes taken for granted. We learn to hold “appropriate” values and beliefs. We learn to behave in socially acceptable ways.

We realize the learned, taken-for-granted nature of our beliefs and values only when someone calls them into question or contradicts them. A diverse society such as the United States incorporates many different cultures, and, consequently, different groups of people are sometimes socialized into adopting distinctly different norms, beliefs, and values. These cultures can sometimes clash. It can be startling to learn, for example, that the civics book version of U.S. history that socialized proud Americans often glosses over the less noble incidents in that complex history.

We also can become aware of the learned nature of our beliefs when we travel abroad and experience a different culture or hear about other people’s travels. The idea of experiencing “culture shock” suggests that we are not equipped—we were not socialized—in the ways and norms of a particular culture.

Part of the explicit responsibility of some social institutions, such as the family and schools, is to promote socialization. We expect families to pass on core values, a sense of responsibility, an appropriate work ethic, and so forth. Traditional educators often gear schools toward teaching children the necessity of submitting to authority, of being punctual and orderly, and of following instructions—skills and orientations that help produce a reliable, compliant worker for future employers.

Other socializing agents, such as adolescent peers, usually have a less intentional, though just as powerful, socializing influence. Often, however, these unofficial socializing agents can promote messages that contradict the ones being espoused by the “powers that be.” When parents chastise their teenage kids for hanging around with “the wrong crowd,” they are implicitly aware that the potential socializing influence of peers can work to counter parental influence. Parents and teachers might be promoting hard work and study as important values, while peers may be suggesting that partying is a more interesting way to spend one’s time.

In contemporary society, the mass media serve as a powerful socializing agent. By the time an average American student graduates from high school, she or he will have spent more time in front of the television than in the classroom (Graber, 1997). Viewers learn and internalize

some of the values, beliefs, and norms presented in media products. Take the example of crime. Although beginning in 1991 the FBI reported declines in violent crime each year for a decade, the number of crime stories on news broadcasts increased dramatically during that period, especially during the first half of the 1990s. At the same time, there has been a considerable increase in the degree to which American citizens fear violent crime. Do media reports of crime heighten the fears of citizens?

Some researchers say it does. They argue that we “learn” about crime even while we are watching entertainment television. For example, watching a lot of police crime shows seems to cultivate two beliefs. First, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to see their community as a dangerous, violent place where they are likely to become crime victims. Second, heavy viewers of crime shows tend to develop empathy for the police—even when television police are clearly violating someone’s civil rights. The result of such media exposure seems to be an increased likelihood that viewers will adopt a tough law-and-order attitude supportive of authority figures such as the police (Carlson, 1985, 1995).

Of course, the more controversial discussions of media as a socializing agent usually involve media products that seem to challenge convention and authority; music videos, rap lyrics, and pornography immediately come to mind. We will explore those issues later. Media influence on socialization is not direct and unambiguous, and we will also explore some of the debates in this area of research. For now it’s enough to note that the media play a role, however qualified, in socializing us into our culture.

Mass Media in Social Relations

From a sociological perspective, the media play a crucial role in almost all aspects of daily life. However, their influence is not limited to what we know. The sociological significance of media extends beyond the content of media messages. Media also affect *how* we learn about our world and interact with one another. That is, mass media are bound up with the *process* of social relations.

This impact is most obvious when we look at the ways in which the mass media literally mediate our relationships with various social institutions. For example, we base most of our knowledge of government on news accounts rather than experience. Not only are we dependent on the media, then, for *what* we know, but the media’s connection to politics also affects *how* we relate to the world of politics. Before mass media, political debates usually took place in a public forum where a crowd was physically present. Today, instead of attending a political event, we are

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more likely to read or watch the news of a political debate—followed by instant analysis and commentary—in the isolation of our home. Rather than take part in community action, we might satisfy a desire to participate in political life by calling a radio talk show. In turn, politicians rely heavily on the media to communicate their message. Gone are the days when candidates and their campaign workers pounded the pavement and knocked on doors to talk with voters. When such practices take place today, they are likely to be staged by politicians for the benefit of the media. We see similar dynamics at work with televised sports, televangelist preachers, and other “mediated” aspects of social life.

In more subtle ways, media are often part of our most routine relations with our families and close friends. Couples talk over the radio at breakfast as they read the morning newspaper. Families often watch television together, huddled around the “electronic hearth” (see Exhibit 1.4). Friends sit attentively and listen to music together, and groups of young people go to the movies or rent a video. Time-strapped parents sometimes use the TV as a surrogate baby-sitter, allowing their children to watch hours of television at one sitting. In all these cases, media products are connected to the ways we interact with other people on a daily basis. Media products provide a diversion, a source of conflict, or a unifying force.

The impact of media—both in content and in process—on all areas of society is undeniable. Talking about social life without including a discussion of the role of mass media risks missing an important element of contemporary society.

A Sociology of Media

Sociologists are not the only ones who study the mass media. Political scientists are sometimes interested in the media’s role in politics. Literary scholars might examine the media as cultural texts. Some psychologists are interested in the effect of media exposure on individual behavior. Most important, mass communication scholars explore a wide range of media issues that often emphasize the structure and practice of media institutions.

The lines between the different approaches to the media are rarely clear. Instead, the differences tend to be ones of relative emphasis. It is common to see references to sociological theories and concepts in the mass communication literature. In fact, some mass communications scholars were trained as sociologists before turning their attention exclusively to the media. In turn, sociologists draw on the work of mass communications scholars. But although they can overlap, there is a difference between the disciplines of mass communication and sociology. The field of mass communications is defined by a particular

EXHIBIT 1.4 *The Electronic Hearth*

THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW



The television set occupies a central place in many American households, providing a mass-mediated window on the world. What might it be teaching us?

Source: Tom Tomorrow © 1991.

substantive area of interest, while sociology is a perspective that is applied to a wide range of substantive areas, including the media. Not all sociologists study the media, and not all mass communications researchers use a sociological perspective.

One of the best-known articulations of the sociological perspective came from C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist. Mills (1959) once argued that a sociological perspective—what he called the “sociological imagination”—enables us to see the connections between “private troubles” and “public issues.” Such a perspective suggests that we can understand the condition of the individual only by situating that person in the larger context of society.

For example, students make very personal and individualized decisions about why they want to attend college. However, if you step back a moment, you can see that the individual, private choice of attending college makes sense only in the larger public context of society. We can understand this “individual” choice in the broader context of an economy in which a college education is now required for more and more occupations, or we can understand some students’ choice in light of a larger culture that highly values formal education, as evidenced by their parents’ (key socializing agents) pressure on them to attend school. Thus, social structure inextricably links the private lives of college students to the public world of economics (jobs), politics (public universities, government loans), and culture (the value of learning).

In contemporary society, it is media that most often act as the bridge between people’s private lives and their relation to the public world. That is, people often learn about their place in larger society through mass media. The lessons media products might be teaching and the experience of participating in a mass-mediated society, therefore, are of crucial interest to anyone who wants to understand how society functions.

Throughout this text, we will note examples of media research that implicitly or explicitly employ a sociological perspective. A sociological perspective also informs our organization of this text. This book is not a historical overview of the evolution of media, nor is it a mass communications account of how the media industry functions. Such works are important, but what we highlight in this text is a sociological approach that emphasizes social relations, especially in the form of the tension between structure and agency, which we explain below.

The Importance of Social Relations

Sociologists believe that the individual is, to varying degrees, a product of social relations. The language we use, the education we receive,

and the norms and values we are taught are all part of a socialization process through which we develop and embrace a sense of self. We become who we are largely through our social relations with others. At its most basic level, this means that our sense of identity and individuality emerges from our social interaction with others.

For example, we develop an identity by routinely imagining how others see us. Imagine a self-conscious interaction such as an important job interview. We dress up for the part of “serious” applicant and play the role we think the employer wants to see. We might feel very nervous because we are trying to sense how the employer views us. We ask ourselves questions: “Am I dressed appropriately?” “Did I answer that question well?” “Did the employer like me?” and so on. We put ourselves in the shoes of the employer and imagine how we must appear to him or her. We then imagine the employer’s judgment of us, and we experience a feeling—such as pride or embarrassment—as a result of this imagined judgment. One sociologist (Cooley, 1902/1964) called this the “looking glass self.” In social interactions, we try to see ourselves as if we were looking in a mirror. Our behavior is often affected by what we think others expect from us. Usually, our social interactions are not as tension filled as a job interview, but the process still applies to a wide range of our daily interactions.

Furthermore, our daily activities usually take place within the context of larger groups and institutions. (The job interview mentioned above might take place in the context of a corporation, which, in turn, exists in the context of a larger economy, and so on.) Family, friendship circles, school, team, work, community—these are the collective contexts in which we develop our roles and identities as daughters or sons, friends, students, athletes, employees, citizens, and so forth. Each role brings with it a set of expectations about our actions; being a “good” student, employee, or friend usually involves conforming to those expectations. Sociology teaches us, therefore, that if you want to understand people’s actions, you must consider the larger social context in which they occur.

Understanding the importance of social relations lies at the heart of thinking sociologically. Sociologists often try to look at the “big picture” to see the interplay between parts of social systems. In considering the mass media, we will emphasize three types of social relations:

- Relationships *between institutions*—for example, the interactions between the media industry and the government
- Relationships *within an institution*, which involve the interaction of individuals occupying their institutional roles and positions—for example, the relationship between a screenwriter and the head of a motion picture studio

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- Relationships *between institutions and individuals*, who are always part of larger social groups—for example, the use of media products by audiences or readers

Seeing the operation of social relations on different levels is also important to recognizing some of the different roles the media play in our society. One reason why the media are often controversial is that different groups expect the media to play different—and often incompatible—roles. For audiences, the media can serve as entertainment and diversion and as sources of information about the world beyond direct experience. For media workers, the media industry offers a job, with resulting income, prestige, and satisfaction, as well as a place for the development of a professional identity. For media owners, the media are a source of profit and, perhaps, a source of political power. For society at large, the media can be a way to transmit information and values (socialization) and can serve as a check on the abuse of political and economic power. Many of the debates about the media relate to the relative prominence of each of these divergent roles.

Structural Constraint and Human Agency

Sociologists often link discussions of social relations to the concepts of structure and agency. In this context, structure suggests constraint on human action, and agency indicates independent action. Each social relationship noted above is characterized by a tension between structure and agency. Because the tension between social structure and human agency is at the heart of this book, these ideas deserve our closer attention.

Structure

Structure is not something physical. In the broadest sense, social structure describes any recurring pattern of social behavior. For example, we can talk about “family structure” as a pattern of behaviors associated with the culturally defined idea of “family.” The “traditional family” is actually a quite recent, historically specific phenomenon (Coontz, 1992). However, during the post–World War II years in Western countries, the “traditional family” usually meant married, heterosexual couples with children. In such relationships, the expected role of the wife was to work at home raising children. The expected role of the husband was to work for a paycheck to cover the household bills.

When sociologists speak of the change in family structure, they are referring to the changes in expected family behavior. Traditional expectations that a “family” include two parents, that the parents be married,

that they be heterosexual, that a woman work only in the home, and so forth have changed dramatically. Single-parent families, blended families, two-income families, unmarried couples, and gay or lesbian couples, to name a few, have supplemented the “traditional” family. The family structure—the pattern of behavior associated with families—has changed.

It’s easy to see from today’s perspective that the traditional family structure was an attractive one for some people. It enabled them to fit neatly into clearly defined roles that brought them significant rewards. Husbands and children were nurtured and cared for. Wives were spared the pressure of holding down a job outside the home, while often enjoying autonomy in the home. However, it is also easy to see that such a structure limited the options of many people. It constrained their behavior by encouraging or coercing them to conform to the accepted standards of family-related behavior. For example, husbands were denied the experience of participating significantly in raising children, while wives were denied the opportunity to use their skills outside the home in paid employment.

A more immediate example of social structure is the complex pattern of institutions that make up the educational system in the United States, within which students, teachers, and administrators fulfill their expected roles. This structure can be enabling to students who successfully navigate through the system and eventually receive diplomas. Schooling often helps these students achieve a better life. However, as all students know, the educational structure can also be very constraining. Required courses, assignments, deadlines, and grades are all part of a structure that limits the actions of students and teachers. It is this constraint feature that is most important when considering structure.

Agency

When sociologists discuss structure, they often pair it with agency. Agency is intentional and undetermined human action. In the education example, the structure of education constrains students, but students also have a great deal of leeway in what they study, how much time and energy they spend on schoolwork, and so forth. Indeed, some students reject the educational structure entirely and drop out. Students in fact have the capacity for independent action in schools—they have agency. However, the regulations and norms of the educational system—the “structural constraint”—limit that agency.

It is important to note that human agency reproduces social structure. The education system or the traditional family structure continued only

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as long as new generations of people accepted the roles they were asked to fill. Daily activities within the family and school help to reproduce social structures, and they can also be a source for changing them. As long as most women saw themselves primarily as mothers and housewives and men accepted the role of primary wage earners, the traditional family structure was able to continue. However, when enough women began to demand the right to choose from a wider set of possible roles, including having a career outside the home, family structure began to change. Thus, while structure constrains agency, it is human agency that both maintains and alters social structures.

Structure and Agency in the Media

With respect to the media, the tension between structure and agency is present on at least three levels, which correspond to the three types of social relations discussed earlier. We can express these three levels of analysis as three pairs of questions about structural constraint and agency.

- *Relationships between institutions.* How do nonmedia social structures, such as government and the economy, affect the media industry? How does the media industry influence nonmedia social structures?
- *Relationships within an institution.* How does the structure of the media industry affect media personnel (and indirectly media products)? How much do media personnel influence the media products (and indirectly the media industry)?
- *Relationships between an institution and the public.* How do the mass media influence the readers (audiences) of media messages? How do readers interpret and use media messages?

These basic social relations underlie our discussion throughout this book.

Relationships Between the Media and Other Social Institutions

First, our broadest level of analysis is the tension between structure and agency produced by different institutions. We cannot adequately understand the media industry without considering the social, economic, and political context in which it exists. Institutions outside the control of media personnel set certain legal and economic limits within which the media must operate. In turn, media have agency in the sense of acting on their own and perhaps influencing other social institutions. A totalitarian regime, for example, is likely to exert extreme constraint on the press in that society. There would be little room for agency by the mainstream

media, although underground media may emerge to challenge the status quo. Labeling a society democratic, on the other hand, includes the suggestion that, at least in theory, the media are free of severe constraint by the government and thus have significant agency. Indeed, media in democratic societies can themselves exert a constraining influence over other institutions.

In the real world, there is always a mixture of structural constraint and independent agency. Media researchers, therefore, examine both how social structures external to the media affect the industry and how the media affect other social structures. This level of analysis includes questions such as the following: Does advertising revenue influence the content of popular magazines? Should music lyrics be "rated" as movies are? How have media affected the organization of political campaigns? Does it matter who owns major publishing houses or newspapers?

Relationships Within the Media Industry

Second, to understand the decisions made by journalists, writers, producers, filmmakers, media executives, and other media personnel, we must understand the context in which they labor. This means that we must be familiar with both the internal workings of mass media organizations and the processes of professional socialization. The sociological emphasis here is on social positions, roles, and practices, not on particular individuals. Relevant issues of concern include the structures of media institutions, who wields power within them, what professional norms and expectations are associated with different positions, and so forth.

Within the media industry, the tension between structure and agency is related primarily to how much autonomy media personnel have in doing their work. The amount of autonomy will vary depending on the position an individual occupies. The questions raised include the following: To what extent do standard journalistic practices shape the process of news reporting or the content of the news? How much do economic considerations enter into the decision-making process of Hollywood moviemaking? How "free" are musicians to create their music? In the language of sociology, structural considerations may significantly affect the individual agency of media personnel. At the same time, the collective agency of those who work in the media has the potential to alter the structures that constrain individual media professionals.

Relationships Between the Media and the Public

A third kind of social relationship occurs when the media deliver messages to readers. Here the issues of interest involve how readers interact

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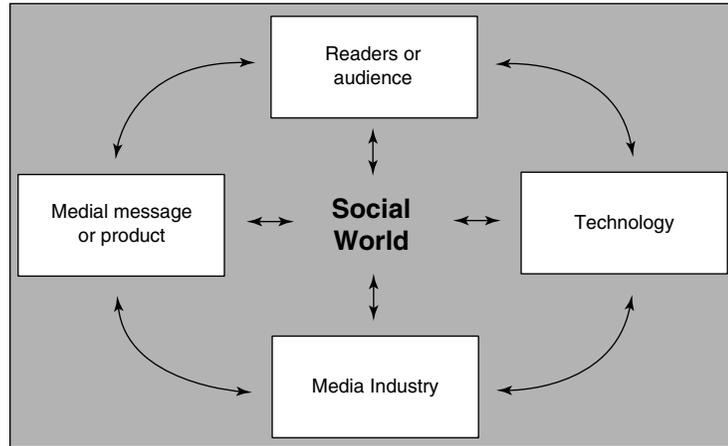
with media products and media technology. Readers are not passive sponges that soak up the many messages they come across in the media. This would imply a one-way relationship, with the media determining the thoughts and behavior of listeners and viewers. Instead, readers of media products must actively interpret media messages.

When we interpret the words of someone speaking with us face to face, we have an excellent resource at hand: the speaker. We interactively construct the conversation. We can elicit more information from the speaker by asking a question ("What do you mean?") or by using appropriate facial expressions to convey our reactions. We can comment on statements and thereby affect the course of the conversation. Such interaction between speakers helps promote mutual understanding about the messages being communicated.

Mass media messages, however, do not allow for the intimate interaction of sender and receiver that characterizes personal communication. We cannot ask a stand-up comedian on television to explain a joke. We either get it or we don't. If a television reporter mentions the National Labor Relations Board and we do not know what she is referring to, we cannot ask for a clarification. Audiences, therefore, must rely on other resources to make sense of media messages.

Relevant resources available to audiences might include knowledge and information gained from personal experience, other people, formal education, or other media products. These resources are neither randomly nor equally distributed. The interpretive skills that people bring with them to their viewing, listening, and reading are shaped by aspects of social structure such as class and education. Thus, in constructing their own individual interpretations of the media, people constantly draw on collective resources and experiences that are shaped by social factors. Although media messages are impersonal and subject to multiple interpretations by audiences, the construction of meaning does not take place in individualized isolation.

Active audience interpretation is important, but we must also realize that the thousands of hours people spend with the media do have some influence on them. Readers are not completely immune to the impact of media content and media technology. The structure and agency framework suggests that we have to explore the dynamic tension between the power of social structure and the (always partial) autonomy of human activity. How powerful are media images in shaping how we think and feel? Do they affect how people are likely to behave? For example, does violent television programming encourage children to be more aggressive? What are the differences in the ways different people respond to these images? How does media technology affect our social relationships?

EXHIBIT 1.5 *Simplified Model of Media and the Social World*

Ultimately, these are complex questions that do not lend themselves to easy answers involving all-encompassing media power or complete individual freedom. The relationship between structure and agency helps illuminate the various levels at which mass media images, whose meanings are neither fixed nor arbitrary, influence but do not determine our understanding of the world.

A Model of Media and the Social World

How can we begin to make sense of the complex relationships we have identified? Exhibit 1.5 provides a graphic representation of these relationships. The model illustrates the fundamentals of a sociological perspective on the media. As noted above, we cannot understand the media without looking at them as one aspect of a larger social world. Our model represents this by showing that all components of the media, as well as the audience, exist within the broader framework of the social world (the shaded area).

Four components, each represented by a separate box in the diagram, make up the core of our model. We must understand that all four elements are simultaneously a part of the social world and surrounded by the social world. We must also remember that the graphic organization of these four elements is arbitrary. There is no "top" or "bottom" to the process; rather, it is a circular, multidimensional process. Arrowheads represent the potential relationships between these components. (Not all relationships will be relevant in all situations.) We will first describe

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the elements represented by the four large boxes (proceeding clockwise from the bottom) and then turn our attention to the unique status of the “social world” (represented by the shading), which is both in the center of the model and simultaneously surrounding it.

The box at the bottom of the model represents the “media industry,” by which we mean the entire organizational structure that makes up the media, including all media personnel. The media industry is affected by changes in “technology” (e.g., the invention of television) but is also instrumental in influencing the direction and application of technology (e.g., the use of computers for film animation).

The “media industry” is the producer of the “media message or product.” For example, a book is written by an author, designed, typeset, printed, distributed by a publisher, and sold in a bookstore. However, the conventions of particular genres of media products also influence the creators of the product. The murder mystery genre, for example, requires the existence of a crime.

“Readers or audiences” may be influenced by the media messages they see (e.g., learning about an impending snowstorm from the weather report), but they must actively interpret and construct meaning from those messages and products (e.g., deciding whether to believe the forecast and whether to act differently as a result).

The direction and development of “technology” is affected by how the “readers or audiences” choose to use it—or not to use it. In the early and mid-1990s, there was relatively little enthusiasm for early experiments in interactive television, but there was a great deal of public interest in the capabilities of the Internet, especially e-mail. In turn, technology has a potential impact on the public. For example, television viewing usually requires close attention because the medium communicates via both sound and images. This contrasts with radio. The technology of radio makes it a very mobile medium that does not demand our full attention. Unlike television, which we must watch in order to fully follow the programs, radio allows us to do other things while still attending to it, such as drive a car, jog, cook dinner, or work. Books demand more attention than television or movies. We can carry on a conversation while watching TV or sitting in a movie theater, although we risk missing a scene or being scolded by another viewer. It is far more difficult to read a book and carry on a conversation at the same time. Each medium, therefore, tends to produce a different experience for the readers. This is one effect of technology.

The middle, and broader context, of the model is the “social world.” We theorize this to be all the social elements not included in the four main boxes. Some of these elements are crucial for an understanding of the workings of the media and thus can be thought of as being at the center of the model. For example, in this book we will examine the role

of government and broader economic forces; these are nonmedia social factors that influence all the elements of our model.

Notice that the top and bottom elements of our model include human agents—real people—while the left and right boxes are human creations. People are the medium through which media messages and technology affect each other. Similarly, the relationship between the media industry and most members of the audience is mediated by media products, technology, and other factors in the social world.

Note, too, that any single component of the model simultaneously relates to other components. For example, the reader of a media message simultaneously experiences the impact of technology (the medium) and other social forces (including things such as race, class, and gender). Thus, readers do not interpret media messages in isolation. Similarly, media products are simultaneously influenced by the media industry that creates them, the readers who interpret them (or choose to ignore them), and other aspects of the social world, such as government regulation.

Our simplified model is meant to identify some of the key components in a sociology of media and to clarify some of the relationships between these components. Like all models, it cannot fully account for the infinite complexities of the “real” social world. However, using the model to analyze the media can help us clarify the workings and social significance of mass media.

Applying the Model: The Civil Rights Movement

To illustrate briefly how the model can alert us to important real-life issues, let us consider the modern U.S. civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (Branch, 1988; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984). We can think of this social movement as a part of the nonmedia “social world” insofar as it exists independent of our four components of the media model. For the moment, then, imagine the civil rights movement as being the element of the social world that occupies the center position in our model.

Using this premise, and moving clockwise around our model, we see that the media industry created media messages about the civil rights movement, while the genre norms of “news” coverage influenced the media personnel reporting the news. Reporters wrote stories about the movement, but because these stories constituted “news,” they were supposed to be a balanced presentation of facts.

The media messages about the civil rights movement affected the viewing and reading audiences, who, in turn, were interpreting the meaning of those messages. Readers are influenced by the words and images about race-related issues that appear in a wide variety of media products, including news reports, television sitcoms, Hollywood movies,

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music, best-selling books, and popular magazines. In our case, some supporters in the North, for example, were moved by media accounts to make financial contributions to movement organizations in the South, while others sympathized with the forces of segregation. The media messages were having an impact, but the readers could interpret the meaning and significance of the messages.

Audiences made use of technology, especially the newly emerging television technology in the 1950s and 1960s, to access media messages. Meanwhile, technology may have indirectly influenced readers, in this case with the immediacy and impact of television pictures of police violence against demonstrators. Technology was also affecting the media industry; lighter handheld cameras allowed reporters more mobility. The industry, in turn, influenced the use of the new technology by applying it to the coverage of demonstrations.

Now let us move to the center of the model. The civil rights movement has clearly had an impact on the media industry (and other social institutions) that, like all major industries, has changed its hiring and promotion practices to comply both with cultural changes and with laws against discrimination. The limited racial diversity that exists today in the media industry would not have come about without the influence of this social movement and the resulting changes in legislation and social norms. This is one example of how the "social world" influences the "media industry."

However, the media industry also had an impact on the civil rights movement. Because social movements are aware of the potential effect the media may have on society at large, they have often crafted strategies that try to take advantage of potential media coverage (Ryan, 1991). (They have also created their own media—from the underground press of the 1960s to the Indy Media Centers of recent years—as an alternative to corporate media.) In modern society, social movement strategies, such as marches and demonstrations, are important as much for the media coverage they generate as for the actual events themselves (see Exhibit 1.6). Many social movements, therefore, have become media conscious in their efforts. Thus, the impact of the media industry—in the form of its personnel and its organizational routines—on such movements is evident even before the media produce any coverage of the group.

"Media messages" affected the civil rights movement as it tried to develop favorable media coverage and, in some cases, altered strategies that generated negative coverage. The movement did not affect media messages directly but instead did so indirectly by influencing the media industry. Thus, changes in the social world can filter through the media industry and affect media products. An industry that employs more people of color in positions of power, for example, is more likely to be sensitive to race issues in its media products.

EXHIBIT 1.6 *Social Movements and the Media*

In part because they do not have regular access to the media, many social movements must adopt dramatic tactics that will attract attention and increase their chances of gaining media exposure. A common strategy is the public demonstration or picket. Here, under the watchful eye of police, demonstrators carry signs with the anticensorship message. Media photographers and videographers (on the right) capture the image for possible transmission to the public.

The demonstrators pictured here were protesting a chain bookstore's 1989 decision to not carry Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie's life was threatened by Islamic fundamentalists who considered the book to be blasphemous. (Photo by Ed Hedemann. Used with permission.)

The civil rights movement has had a direct impact on citizens who are also "readers" of media products. The presence of this movement has meant more social equality and direct material and psychological benefits for many people. At the same time, citizens have acted as social agents creating the social movement in the first place, illustrating the interaction between these two components of the model.

The "technology" of the 1950s that the civil rights movement relied on to communicate its messages may seem ancient by today's standards, but it was an integral part of the ongoing organizing effort. Movement organizers influenced the application of the existing technology by using it for their own ends. For example, if a leaflet announcing a meeting needed to be distributed, stencils might be cut for hand-cranked mimeograph

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machines. Computer desktop publishing, laser printers, high-speed copiers, and fax machines would have seemed like science fiction at the time. Perhaps more important is the indirect manner in which technology—through the media industry—affected the movement. In the 1950s, a new generation of cameras allowed news teams to readily cover social movement events, sometimes producing dramatic images of the clashes between civil rights marchers and police. (In the 1990s, the availability of home video cameras made it possible for the media to broadcast graphic images of brutality inflicted by the Los Angeles police on black motorist Rodney King. The incongruity between these stark images and the initial acquittal of the police officers involved played an important role in the 1992 Los Angeles riot. Also, the introduction of additional channels through cable technology facilitated the rise of programming oriented specifically toward racial minorities—like that on BET, Black Entertainment Television.)

This brief sketch of the civil rights movement illustrates the utility of a sociological approach to understanding how media interact with the social world. This interaction is always multidimensional, and each element of our model will receive closer attention in later chapters.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of media in today's society. From the privacy of our living rooms to the public forums of presidential debates, the media serve as the informational network connecting the many elements of our society. There is no doubt that the media are significant and worth studying. A sociological approach to the media allows us to identify the key questions and reminds us to keep the "big picture" in mind when we discuss media issues.

The remainder of this book is organized into sections on media production, content, and audiences, with a concluding chapter on the future of the media in a global culture. The model of media and the social world presented in Exhibit 1.5 is the underlying framework for the rest of the book. At the most general level, this sociological framework helps us identify questions we should ask when we study the media. In this case, those questions concern the multidirectional relations between components of our model: the social world, the media industry, media products, audiences, and technology. Examining the relationships between these key elements is the first step toward developing a nuanced understanding of the role of mass media in our society.