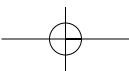
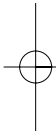
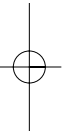


PART III

The Power of the Media



Producing Identities

8

People have always needed a sense of who they are and a place to ground that sense of their identity in one or more of the institutions or activities of their lives: the Church (and their soul or some core values), their work (and their labor or skills), their families (and their sense of a generational past and future), and, increasingly in the twentieth century, their leisure and consumption activities. (Thus it seems reasonable to work at an unrewarding job so that one can afford to enjoy the weekends.) Moreover, every person can be described as and has a sense of himself or herself as both an individual and a member of various social groups (which can range from the very broad, such as Black or White or male or female, to the very narrow, such as a graduate of a particular university or a member of a particular club). That sense of individuality, whether grounded in the religious spirit or simply in some personal essence, involves some sense of transcendence, some sense that we are not only the sum of the various social roles that we play, the various social groups to which we belong.

By the 1950s, the issue of identity had become not only politically and culturally but also psychologically dominant in American culture, especially among youth. In fact, a new psychological “disorder” was “discovered” among college students, some of whom began to feel

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anxious about who they were. They apparently worried that their individuality, that which made them unique, was nothing more than the sum of the various social groups to which they belonged and the images they took on. In fact, many of the most powerful images from 1950s popular culture—James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, Jack Kerouac's novel of the "beat generation," *On the Road*, and even the later parody of a beatnik, Maynard G. Krebs, from the TV show *Dobie Gillis*—revolved around this common search by young people for a stable individual identity. By the 1980s, this anxiety had become a taken-for-granted part of growing up. Calvin Klein could even use it as the theme for his commercial with Brooke Shields: "Is there a real me? Or am I just what you see?"

This identity crisis was often assumed to be linked to the growing power of the media (and media images) in the lives of these youths. In fact, there can be little doubt that the strength of the traditional sources of identity—religion, family, and work—has declined in proportion to the growing power of the mass media, leisure activities, and the consumer lifestyles in which media and leisure are bound up even as they define and promote such lifestyles. More than anything, what nearly everyone in America shares, whatever school or church or job they go to, is the mass media. Despite differences in taste and access, there are significant commonalities in our shared experience of the most "mass" of the mass media: television, popular music, and blockbuster movies. At the same time, the sense of unity among people, created by such powerful identities as were defined by religion, nationality, and work, have themselves been increasingly undermined by the powerful representations of difference that have come to define the media's cultural content, even as the media have come to shape social life. Ultimately, the media's ability to produce people's social identities, in terms of both a sense of unity and difference, may be their most powerful and important effect.

In this chapter, we will explore the ways in which the media produce people's sense of who they are and who others are. There are many dimensions on which people have a sense of themselves, a sense of their own identity:

- Politically, people exist as citizens and as members of a public.
- Socially, people exist as exemplars of social roles (fathers, children, teachers, and so on).

- Culturally, people exist as exemplars of social groups (often defined within semiotic systems of differences, such as Black or White, male or female).
- Economically, people exist as consumers and members of an audience.

It is perhaps most common in the American context to conceive of the audience as a market or as consumers, and then to treat them as such. In other contexts, such as the British model of public service broadcasting, the dominant concept of the audience is as a public. We will consider the relation of media to public more fully in Chapter 12.

It would be a mistake to conceive of the concept of the audience as only an economic category, where the audience is understood as the *market* for media (and other) products. Not only is the concept of the audience intricately bound up with the dimensions of social and cultural identity, there is at least one other dimension that has to be accounted for: the audience as *fans* and members of subcultures.

A fan is not simply a person who uses or enjoys the media. Fans identify themselves with a particular media product, star, or style. They may be members of a particular subculture or followers of media fads or fashions. We shall postpone a discussion of the significance of fandom and subcultures until the next chapter.

In this chapter, we shall discuss the remaining dimensions of the audience and identity: the audience as market and as a set of social and cultural identities. We are ignoring the differences between social and cultural identities because we will be treating all of these in relationship to the media, as questions of audiences and representations rather than of social relationships between people per se. That is, we are not going to address the ways in which one's identity is shaped in specific social relationships: You learn that you are a student, and how to be a student, in relation to the activities of teachers and other students in a classroom; you learn that you are a girl and how to be female in relating to boys and other girls and observing how they relate to each other. But you also learn that you are a student or a girl and what that means through the variety of cultural and media texts that represent such identities and place or interpellate you in specific relations to those representations.

Thus we are concerned with how notions of the audience and of identity actually involve an image of the entire process of communication. Talking about the audience in a particular way already makes

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assumptions about why certain media products are produced, what those products do, and how audiences are affected by them. Media products produced as a service to the public can be quite different from those produced to sell advertising, for example. The two dimensions of audience and identity discussed here—market and cultural identity—are all used by most of the groups involved in communication, including media producers, economic institutions, and the people who use media. At various moments, audience members may think of themselves as markets and as having specific cultural identities.

CONSTRUCTING THE AUDIENCE AS MARKET

The *audience* as such does not actually exist except as an idealization. That is, the audience is itself constructed by people who use the term for a particular purpose. The chief executive officer of a television network may claim that he or she is simply supplying the audience with what it wants, even though only a fraction of the potential viewing population is watching (and even fewer claim that what they get is what they actually want). Nielsen Media Research claims, on the basis of an extraordinarily small sample, to know what the audience is watching; but audience meters cannot know what is actually taking place in front of the television set. Advertisers are trying not only to reach the audience, but to adjust their messages to fit the audience. *TV Guide* claims to speak for the audience, as do the talk show hosts who claim that “our viewers want to know . . .” Various political advocates from the political right and left make all sorts of claims about the viewing habits and desires of something called *the audience*. Different notions of the audience are the creations of different economic, political, and cultural groups. There are different audiences for different media and cultural forms.

The concept of the audience is a social construction, a concept that can mean and be made to do many different things. Yes, there are real people out there watching a television program, or reading a newspaper, or buying an album, who can be said to be *in the audience* for a particular media product. However, the idea of an audience is never merely an innocent description of the sum total of individuals. The fact of the matter is that the audience does not exist out there in reality apart from the way in which it is defined by different groups for different purposes. How the concept of the audience is constructed determines

how it can function and how the relationship between the media and their audiences can be described, measured, and evaluated.

The Audience as Market: Consumers

The most common conception of the audience within the media industries is as a conglomeration of potential and potentially overlapping markets. *A market identifies a subset of the population as potential consumers of a particular identifiable product or set of products.* Markets may vary according to their size (the market for techno-dance is smaller than that for mainstream rock; the market for NSH speakers is smaller than that for all-in-one stereo systems), although, often, the general population has little sense of the size of various markets (for collectible cards, comic books, or *bhangra*—a mix of Indian film music and disco). For example, in July 2003, an Indian film, *Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon*, playing for select audiences of primarily Indian Americans and Indian expatriates in the United States had the sixteenth highest grosses of the week according to *Entertainment Weekly* and made more money per screen in each of the 60 theaters where it was showing than the big blockbuster released that week (*Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, in just under 3,500 theaters). The market for Indian films in the United States, though obviously no direct competition with the Hollywood studios, is still larger than one might think, but only recently has that market begun to be measured. Markets may also vary according to their duration (the market for the latest hit film or album is quite fleeting compared to the market for films or albums in general) and to their stability and flexibility (the market for television is probably more stable and flexible than that for network television in particular). Markets can also have “identities” attached or articulated to them. In this sense, the market for heavy metal music is generally thought of as primarily composed of adolescent boys; the market for Saturday morning cartoons as preschool and grade school children; and the market for soap operas as adult women.

Increasingly, programmers seeking niche audiences (because advertisers want to focus their messages where they think they'll be maximally effective) will look for content they believe will keep certain potential viewers *out* of the audience. Joseph Turow (1997) noted that MTV specifically expected *Beavis and Butthead* to be offensive to older viewers to keep them from watching: Advertisers wanted to focus on young people.

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There are two basic ways in which audiences are constructed and function as markets: as consumers and as commodities. The most common way that those involved in the media industries think of the audience is as made up of consumers: To sell a book, a film, a record, a videotape, or any media product, or even to get people to watch, listen, or read something, a media producer has in mind the type of person who will purchase or tune in to that product. That idea of the media consumer is what is referred to as a *market type*. As we described in Chapter 3, the media industries spend a great deal of time and money in the search for more and more information about media consumers and the appropriate appeals to make to convince media consumers to buy a particular media product. The people who purchase and enjoy the products of the media often think of themselves as consumers as well. And insofar as they are successfully constructed by the media as an audience for the media, as a particular market type, people will often think of themselves in these terms. That is, by linking individuals together within the category of a market, at least a part of their identity is defined by their participation in this market.

It is not enough for the industries to simply be able to describe specific market types; they have also attempted to develop better ways of understanding what is going on in such consumer groups and better ways of describing and categorizing the various types of such groups. The three most common and persistent ways of describing market types are through demographics, taste cultures, and lifestyle clusters.

Demographics is the quantitative description of a population according to a set of social or sociological variables. The American population can be described by counting the number of people who fit into a set of demographic categories such as age, race, gender, income level, education level, employment category (professional, sales, blue-collar, pink-collar), place of residence (urban, suburban, rural), geographic region (Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, Northwest, and West) and type of residence (home owner, home renter, condo owner, apartment dweller).

Assumptions about consumers underlie marketing categories. Media corporations invest a great deal of money in market research to identify the likely market for their product. This information helps them determine marketing strategies and advertising styles. The Disney Channel is more likely to be marketed to families with children (say, through an ad in *Parent's* magazine or an ad during *SpongeBob*

SquarePants) than to single individuals. And TV commercials for herbicides used in farming are more likely to be found in less populous areas of the Midwest than in the cities of the Northeast.

A second way of understanding a market type is as a *taste culture*. In this case, the demographic identity of the audience members is less important than the continuing commitment of a group of people to some type of product. For example, science fiction producers want to appeal to the science fiction fans out there who are always seeking a new book or film to indulge their taste for this genre. Similarly, among music consumers, there are clear taste cultures that are not always easy to define demographically; yet, clearly, the market for classical music is different from that for country western or The Darkness or Ashlee Simpson. In fact, among even a fairly homogeneous group of people—at least in demographic terms—a wide range of musical taste cultures is probably represented.

Whereas some taste cultures correspond to generic categories (the taste culture of science fiction fans), others are characterized by either multiple genres or by selective choices made from different genres. For example, radio programmers think of different formats as appealing to different taste cultures. Contemporary hits radio, one of the more popular formats, comprises some pop-punk (Good Charlotte and Green Day, but not the Strokes), some Latin-dance music (Shakira and Ricky Martin, but not the Buena Vista Social Club), most pop music (Justin Timberlake and Avril Lavigne, but not Fountains of Wayne), some rap (50 Cent and Jay-Z, but not The Roots), and so on. Producers operating with an understanding of the audience as taste cultures construct media products according to their understanding of the features of the product that hold the taste culture together, rather than according to their image of a particular demographic group of consumers.

The most recent way developed to describe market types has been used extensively by advertisers: *Lifestyle clusters* can be understood as a mixture of demographic categories and consumption habits or tastes. A lifestyle cluster represents a segment of the population that tends to purchase and use certain kinds of products or to make certain kinds of decisions, including voting. The best-known example of a lifestyle cluster is the *yuppie*. What's a yuppie? Originally, it referred to a small market segment of young urban professionals (y-u-p) with a great deal of disposable income who tended to display their wealth through the purchase of particular brands of consumer goods. For example,

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Newsweek defined a yuppie as someone with five different kinds of mustard in the refrigerator.

A lifestyle cluster creates groups in the population whose members have several characteristics in common. Most important, the members of a particular group tend to spend their money and time in similar ways. The entire population of the country can be displayed as a number of lifestyle groups according to systems of consumption patterns and values. The most powerful of such descriptions takes the project one step further by attempting to correlate lifestyle clusters with geographic location (for example, as described by zip codes of home residences). Advertisers and media producers can then target a particular lifestyle cluster for their products: Sometimes, this takes the form of producing different versions of the same magazine with different advertisements directed at different lifestyle markets. Direct mail advertisers often now tailor their mailings according to zip codes and even specific block addresses.

Implicit in the very notion of the audience as consumers operating in a market is the need to continually make people think of themselves as consumers. Many historians and media scholars have observed that this is one of the major effects of the media in the twentieth century: to help construct a consumer society by encouraging people to locate their identity in their leisure tastes and consumer practices rather than in other roles, such as jobs and church membership. The ideological message is that what we buy says more about who we are than other facts, including where we get the money. Media programs and advertising are all about this redefinition of self-identity. The media are both a part of any lifestyle and one of the ways such lifestyles are produced and promoted. The media reinforce the power of the market over identity, even as they themselves produce the very identities that locate people in the market as consumers.

In most countries of the advanced industrial world, people take the existence of a consumer society for granted. It appears natural that everyone in these societies is part of a national market and that people's lives are defined and measured by, if not devoted to, the consumption of various goods and services. But, in fact, the notion of a consumer society is a very recent invention, and it took a great deal of work—not only economic, but political and cultural work as well—to establish it.

The origins of the American consumer society can be found in the social changes that were the product of economic developments between

1880 and 1920. In fact, many of the basic features of contemporary society came into existence in this period. Society was changing as economic, political, and cultural questions were increasingly transformed into bureaucratic decisions for experts. Mass production came into being as a result of the assembly line—using expensive single-purpose machinery with cheap, quickly trained single-purpose workers to inexpensively produce a large number of the same item—and Taylorism, a system for time studies that enabled any production line to be broken down into identifiable movements that could be performed in certain specifiable times.

An immediate and significant consequence of these changes was the new glut of cheaper products had to be sold; thus new and larger markets had to be discovered or opened up. As Henry Ford made more cars and made them more cheaply, he also had to find people who had the money to buy them and who wanted or believed they needed to buy an automobile. In one sense, the solution was obvious: Henry Ford is often quoted as having said, "If I could get my workers to all buy cars, I could make a fortune." And that is basically what happened. Higher wages allowed workers to become consumers of the goods they were mass-producing, and shorter hours allowed them the time and freedom to use their newly purchased goods. But higher wages alone were insufficient. Workers were often reluctant to spend their money on what seemed to be frivolous luxuries. The culture of many of those in the working class emphasized saving for a rainy day rather than spending. Moreover, it was not enough to convince workers and their families to spend their money. They had to spend it in predictable and controllable ways. It would do no good if all of Ford's workers decided they wanted Cadillacs when there were lots of Model Ts waiting to be sold. It is in this context that both advertising and marketing research were introduced as ways to maximize and rationalize the consumer habits of these new consumers who were apparently reaping the benefits of mass production. It is in the same context that department stores and national glossy magazines arose.

Advertising not only had to define the particular desires and needs of these new consumers, it had to make *them* think of themselves as consumers as well. People who for generations had lived on the edge of poverty, and whose identity was almost entirely built around their family and their work, had now to think of themselves as consumers rather than producers, as individuals with their own desires rather

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than as families. Work had to become less a source of identity and pride and more a means by which people could fulfill their desires through consumption.

But this new consumer society, and the communicative and cultural changes that helped to produce it, was responding as well to other serious changes and problems confronting the United States between 1880 and 1920: There was a sharp rise in labor protests, often aimed at the systems of industrial production and wage “slavery” themselves. New waves of immigration, especially from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, challenged the apparent homogeneity of the society, creating the need to find ways of integrating these new populations into the American way of life. And, finally, in the early twentieth century, there were a series of “Red scares” motivated by the fears of a domestic communist movement based in immigrant and labor populations.

Advertising, the mass media, and ultimately the new consumer society were placed into this crisis as a new source of social control and harmony. By giving all the people the sense that they had access to commodities that would improve their lifestyle and their social status, the new consumer society sought to undermine the conditions that led to social unrest. By bringing people’s desires and needs under the control of the new culture of mass media, and hence under the control of science and industry, the new consumer society sought to “rationalize” people’s everyday lives. It was thought that the new culture could shape people’s consciousness, leading them away from real social dissatisfactions toward individual desires, away from issues of class and inequality and toward questions of prestige, style, and status. In the new consumer society, apparently, all social problems could be solved by working on your “self.”

In a sense, at least part of the function of modern mass media has been to change the way people have thought of themselves: to make people think of and even experience themselves as consumers. And it still remains part of the very effects of the media on audiences—to remind us that the value and purpose of our lives is defined by our existence as consumers, by what we buy and what we own. It is no accident that so much of the content of the media is directed to our consumer life, that the stage of the media’s messages is always cluttered with products.

Notice that conceiving of the audience as consumers does not mean that people are entirely passive; on the contrary, the audience as consumer is very active. People must make decisions about which

media to expose themselves to and which products to buy, and then to buy products, use them up, and buy more. A goal of the media is to constantly reproduce—and, along the way, influence—this activity of desiring and buying, not only of media products but of other products as well. The audience as a market is constantly working, gathering information on what products exist, deciding what is best for them to buy, and, eventually, going out and buying them. The audience need not always be consciously involved in such activity—except insofar as they choose to consume particular media messages rather than others—but they are always being reminded of their role as consumers and as potential markets for specific products and services.

At the same time, it is important to realize the limits of the claim that a part of people's identity is defined by their investment in consumption. People are aware of themselves as consumers, but there is far more to their self-conscious sense of their own identity. In addition, not every individual act of consumption necessarily defines one's identity. What we are describing is a general, culturally constructed sense of an economic identity, not a specific sense of lifestyle cluster or taste culture. For some people, the particular brand of jeans they buy and wear may be a part of their identity, whereas for others, it is a relatively minor issue in their lives. What we buy may reflect either our group identifications or our individual taste. Someone who refused to consume or who opposed consumption in American society would seem like an outsider, if not a crackpot.

The Audience as Market: Commodity

The media not only created a consumer society by constructing the audience for its messages as a market, but it also constructed the audience as a commodity. Remember that a *commodity* is an object produced in order to be sold for a profit. It may seem odd to think of an audience as something that is produced and sold, something from which someone can make a profit. But think about how media work in their relation to advertising: The media produce an audience for their own media products, and then deliver that audience to another media producer, namely an advertiser. When people watch their favorite TV program, they are also watching the ads embedded in the show. Some people may enjoy watching ads for their own sake: For example, in Italy in the 1970s, the most popular prime-time show was a half-hour of

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commercials. In the United States, it is not uncommon for advertisers to advertise forthcoming advertisements or to give advertisements a story line. The former is especially true of commercials aired during the Super Bowl each year. There is always prior speculation as to the nature and quality (and cost) of the commercials, and some tune in to the game simply for the commercials.

However, ads work only when their audience moves on to become the consumers of the product being advertised. Think about the discussion of advertising support for television in Chapter 4. Few people choose to watch TV programs for the advertising, and yet viewers are inevitably an audience for the ads. As we said, this is why ratings are so important in the relationship between the television networks and advertisers. Each wants to know the size of the audience as a potential market so that it knows how much to charge or pay for this particular commodity. In fact, networks program a particular series precisely to attract a specific market type so that it can sell that audience as a highly priced commodity to an advertiser. And, increasingly, advertisers (as well as other media producers) attempt to link their products to specific, highly desirable social groups and identities (consider, for example, the marketing campaigns of Pepsi, Toyota, or Levi's).

Media producers have to think about whom they want to attract as an audience for their shows because this is the audience they are selling to advertisers. A television network may decide to leave a program on the air even though it has a relatively small audience if it is a particularly attractive audience to advertisers. A radio station may decide to change formats to one already overrepresented in the local market because, again, its demographics are the most desirable to the local advertisers. On the other hand, a program that has a relatively large audience may be taken off the air if the particular market it attracts is decidedly unattractive to advertisers. Programs such as *Gunsmoke* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, although both were still relatively successful in the early 1970s, were nevertheless canceled because their audiences were primarily rural and old, not particularly attractive audiences to TV advertisers. One of the major reasons that popular musical styles such as heavy metal and rap are so underrepresented on radio is that their audiences are not particularly attractive to advertisers. The long-term underrepresentation in the media of certain social groups, such as Blacks and Latinos, might similarly be partly explained by advertisers' assumptions about the desirability of such audiences.

As these groups' desirability changes, their representations on television and in the other media will change—witness the increased presence of Latinos on television in the early 2000s (and see Box 4.2).

Advertisements attempt to transform the audience for a particular program or media product into the potential market for the advertiser's product. For example, a television network or radio station sells the audience for each program to advertisers. It delivers this audience as a commodity to the advertisers so that the advertisers can get their message—"Consume this product"—to the audience. Advertisers are purchasing what they hope is the attention, the visual labor of watching and the labor of listening, of the audience. If the audience is not actually watching or listening and paying some minimal attention to the ad, then the advertiser has wasted money.

Television and radio are only the most obvious places where the audience is commodified. In the music industry, for example, the sale of actual musical commodities (records, tapes, CDs) accounts for a decreasing percentage of profits. Instead, music is increasingly used to deliver audiences to the sellers of other products and media, such as clothing with rock star insignia, and to films (where soundtracks are important). Also, music is used in advertising to sell other products. The identification of particular products with classic or contemporary music stars (for example recent car ads featuring music by Led Zeppelin or Celine Dion) has become very explicit in the 2000s: In 2002, Volkswagen was even selling a CD compilation of songs that had been used in their commercials. In short, even in those industries that we think of as not relying on "advertiser support," the audience is commodified indirectly.

Part of the reason audiences can be so easily commodified is because of audience loyalty to certain media celebrities and media products. Stars can supply their fans with a wide range of merchandise in addition to their albums; if an advertiser wants to reach a certain segment of the market, he or she might reasonably decide to hire a particular recording artist who has already proven to be attractive to the particular segment to provide the musical soundtrack for or even appear in its commercial.

Technology has created serious problems for advertisers and the media. Consider television: Advertisers cannot be confident that the audience of a program is actually the audience for the commercials embedded in the program. With the remote control, audience members

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can move (“graze”) from program to program and avoid all commercials while they watch parts of several programs at a time. Moreover, recent audience research demonstrates that audience members who don’t graze turn off the sound during commercials. And by videotaping programs, people can avoid watching all commercials as they fast-forward (“zap”) past them. New technologies such as TiVo digitally record television programs and can automatically delete the ads. In response, advertisers try to devise means to keep the audience’s attention (making commercials as short as 15 or 20 seconds, or making them more entertaining, more like mini-programs or mini-music videos).

CULTURAL IDENTITIES

In addition to characterizing the audience as market and commodity, we can think of the audience as *cultural identities* represented in the media. The audience is composed of individuals who are each members of one or more social groups that define their identity. A part of your identity might be defined by the fact that you are a college student; but this identity is already quite complex, and the way it is lived may vary depending on your age, background, income, and so forth. Nevertheless, you are part of an entire generation of college students, both past (all college graduates) and present (the particular graduating class). You are also part of the population of a particular university or college; your affiliation may be expressed in any number of ways (wearing school colors or clothes, sporting the school insignia, supporting the athletic teams). You may also be a member of various groups on and off campus (“Greeks” or independents, commuters or dorm residents, different majors and classes).

Consequently, even something as apparently simple as your identity as a college student is itself the product of your particular position in a variety of social groups and social differences. In addition, everyone brings many affiliations with them to campus: religious, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities, particular regional and economic origins (Midwest farming, Northeast working class, or Southwestern suburban middle class) as well as particular interests (for example, sports and musical tastes). One of the things that every university tries to accomplish is to bind students together into a common identity with common loyalties. Recent events have made this task even

more difficult, as many universities and colleges have experienced an increasing sense of fracture among various gender, racial, and ethnic groups, each of which is likely to have its own associations on campus.

In fact, many of the major social and political problems facing the contemporary world involve the relationships between and among different social groups: among religious groups, racial groups (Black and White, brown, red, and yellow, as they are so crudely described), gender and sexual groups (men and women, straight and gay), age groups (children, youth, adults, and the aging), economic groups (working, middle, or upper classes), ethnic and national groups (whether Bosnian or Bosnian American), and so on.

The problems that these relations impose on the contemporary world cannot begin to be solved unless one first begins to understand the relationship between an individual and the social group or groups to which he or she belongs. This relationship defines the problem of *social identity*. In fact, social identity is a very complex notion that involves at least three different questions: First, exactly where do such categories of identity come from and what do they signify? Second, what does it mean to belong to or be a member of a particular social group? In other words, how is such membership determined? Is one biologically assigned, socially positioned, or culturally interpellated or perhaps a little bit of each? And third, what is the content or meaning of the categories and how are these meanings themselves determined? Implicit in all of these questions is the issue of the role of the media (and culture more generally) in the construction of people's social identities. What is the relationship between the images (visual and verbal) of the various categories of identity made available in the media and the ways in which people take up and live their own identities and relate to those inhabiting other identities? For example, images of Arabic men on television in connection with the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks made everyday life in America very difficult for men and women of Arabic descent, for Muslims in general, and even for those who looked generally like them (Sikhs from India, for example).

There are two major schools of thought that respond to these questions, two major theories of identity, and each has distinctly different views of the role of the media in the politics of identity and of the relationship between media images and social identities. The first assumes that the categories of identity are natural, necessary, and universal. This *essentialist* view assumes that every category exists naturally, in

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and of itself; Blackness exists whether or not any other racial category or group exists. And the meaning of the category is always intrinsic to the category itself, determined ahead of time. That meaning, and hence anyone's membership in the category, might be determined by genes, or by the anatomy and physiology of the body, or by some determining history (common roots in Africa or the common experience of a history of slavery). According to this theory, representation is a matter of accuracy versus stereotyping. The question, then, is how to contest negative images with positive ones, and how to discover and re-present the authentic and original content of the identity. Basically, the struggle over representation here takes the form of offering one fully constituted, separate, and distinct identity in place of another.

The second theory of identity completely rejects the assumptions of the first. There is no single physical trait or genetic marker that can be used to separate the human population into what we call "races." There are even greater genetic differences within races than between them. While many people still think along the lines of the first theory of identity, it has no basis in science. This does not mean that the discourse of the essentialist theory of identity doesn't have very real consequences for individuals. The second theory of identity therefore emphasizes the impossibility of such fully constituted, separate, and distinct identities. It denies the existence of authentic identities based in a universally shared origin or experience. Instead, it argues that the categories of identity are culturally constructed and can be understood only relationally. Consequently, they are always in process and incomplete. According to such an *anti-essentialist* view, the very existence of such categories, as well as the specific ways they function, the specific differences they mark, and the specific meanings they carry, are all culturally constructed. Identity is always an unstable and temporary effect of relations that define identities by marking differences. The theory recognizes that there are differences between people, but insists that which differences become important and visible (skin color rather than foot size), where the line is drawn (between Black and White, or male and female, or young and old), and the meanings of each category are the products of the communicative codes of a society.

There is no single, universal, or essential content to a category and, consequently, the question of whether any specific person belongs to a social group must also be the product of cultural processes. Moreover, to say that such categories are relational is to say that categories are

only defined by their relations to or differences from other categories. To put it another way, the meaning of the categories of identity is largely the product of the ways that the members of the categories practice their relations to members of both their own category and to the members of other categories as well. The emphasis of the anti-essentialists is on the multiplicities of identities and differences and the interactions among identities. Obviously, representation is no longer a matter of accuracy and distortion but of identities that are produced and taken up in and through practices of representation.

Representation as Stereotypes

The media provide pictures of people, descriptions of different social groups and of their social identities. If someone has never seen any member of a particular group—an Azerbaijani, for instance—then it is likely that what they think such people are like will be the result of what they have seen, heard, or read about them in the media. But what does anyone make of the media's representation of a group of which they are a member? Walter Lippmann (1922) referred to *stereotypes* as "pictures in our heads" of other people or, more accurately, of the identity or nature of other groups of people. Stereotypes can define some people's expectations of how, for example, women or Hispanics or other groups in the society are supposed to behave. In this sense, stereotypes are neither avoidable nor necessarily bad. They are a psychological means of dealing with the diversity of the world by categorizing the world into types and learning how to respond to types rather than how to respond to each individual. In the modern world, the media are obviously a major source of such pictures.

Typically, discussing the process by which the media re-present the various social identities in the world as stereotyping implies that there is some "correct" image of a social group's identity that is somehow distorted in the media's portrayal of that group. Sometimes, stereotyping is a matter of the absence of images of a particular social group; but it is more often a question of how the group is portrayed, of the content of the images themselves. We can take note of the extent to which various ethnic and social groups have been represented negatively in the mass media and how images of various groups have changed over time in accord to that group's changing position in the culture. Media images of women, minorities, New Yorkers, gays and

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lesbians, doctors, the handicapped, Southerners, and so forth are likely to elicit certain expectations about how members of these groups act. How social groups are portrayed in the mass media—particularly in films, on television, and in advertising—has been a long-standing concern of various representatives of those groups who feel they are being misrepresented or stereotyped. (See Box 8.1, “The Celluloid Closet.”)

BOX 8.1

The Celluloid Closet

Hollywood films are directed at mainstream audiences. Their worldview is a heterosexual one and therefore representations of gays and lesbians reflect mainstream stereotypes and sensibilities. Hollywood films instruct the public in what to think about homosexuals and in many ways influence gay and lesbian audiences' own self-images. These audiences, especially in the 1940s through the 1970s, learned to read between the lines, to recognize subtle gestures, glances, or styles by which one might interpret a character or a situation as gay. Some of these were intentionally placed there by writers, actors, and/or directors; others were not. But this way of reframing the film image allows gay and lesbian audiences to affirm their own existence and identity.

Images of homosexuals have been present in cinema since its earliest days. And even in the early silent era, these images were stereotypical ones, for example images of mincing, swishy gay men appeared in cowboy films and even in Charlie Chaplin films. Hollywood films of the 1920s and 1930s became more bold: Marlene Dietrich could dress in male clothes and kiss another woman on the lips in *Morocco* (1930). But the Hays code effectively ended direct references to or appearances of homosexuality, though certain character types were implicitly coded as gay (the sissy, for example). As Hollywood films pushed beyond the Hays code in the 1960s, more direct references to homosexuality were allowed and could be a central plot issue (see *The Children's Hour* [1962]). However, these representations still reflected a mainstream sensibility. Gays and lesbians were presented as tortured, self-hating figures who either committed suicide or were murdered. Either that or they became the villains—lesbian vampires and transvestite murderers stalked the screen, to be killed off in spectacular fashion by the end of the film. Gay characters who actually survived to the end credits were rare until the 1970s. From the 1980s through the 1990s, more positive gay and lesbian

characters and situations were portrayed, though these were also made to be palatable to heterosexual audiences. The scourge of AIDS allowed gay characters to be portrayed sympathetically (for example, in *Longtime Companion* [1990] or *Philadelphia* [1993]) though gays remained tragic figures who died by the end of the film.

Vito Russo (1987), whose groundbreaking history of homosexuality in the movies is the basis of the summary above, wrote,

The history of the portrayal of lesbians and gay men in mainstream cinema is politically indefensible and aesthetically revolting. There may be an abundance of gay characters floating around on various screens these days but *plus ça change*. . . . Gay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It's *how* they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century. . . .

The few times gay characters have worked well in mainstream film have been when filmmakers have had the courage to make no big deal out of them, when they have been implicitly gay in a film that was not about homosexuality.

So, no more films about homosexuality. Instead, more films that explore people who happen to be gay in America and how their lives intersect with the dominant culture. (pp. 325–326)

Television presented a similar set of images to film throughout its history. Gays were the subject of humor, pity, and fear. Protests by gay activists in the mid-1970s led to more positive representations—for a while. But the 1980s saw a major anti-gay backlash. Throughout the 1990s until today, the numbers of representations of gay characters on television have been rising, and the representations themselves have been more positive. In particular, programming aimed at teenage and young adult audiences has more successfully integrated continuing gay and lesbian characters (as opposed to one-time guest appearances on “Very Special Episodes” of a series). *My So-Called Life* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are but two examples here. By the late 1990s, *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* featured lesbian and gay characters in prime-time sitcoms, and today such shows as *The L-Word*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Six Feet Under* regularly present much more nuanced and explicit representations of gay and lesbian lifestyles. But, are these representations of gays and lesbians on television, or even in contemporary cinema, ones that Russo would have said “worked well”? Or are they still representations of homosexuality framed for the comfort (or titillation) of mainstream heterosexual audiences?

(Continued)

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(Continued)

Suggested Reading

- Capsuto, S. (2000). *Alternate channels: The uncensored story of gay and lesbian images on radio and television*. New York: Ballantine.
- Dyer, R. (with Pidduck, J.). (2003). *Now you see it: Studies on lesbian and gay film* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Russo, V. (1987). *The celluloid closet: Homosexuality in the movies* (Rev. ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Tropiano, S. (2002). *The prime time closet: A history of gays and lesbians on TV*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.

Suggested Viewing

- Epstein, R., & Friedman, J. (Prod. & Dir.). (1996). *The celluloid closet*. HBO/Sony Pictures Classics.

In this sense, stereotyping is the process of distorting the portrayal of some social group in a media image. That media contribute to stereotypes (and even create stereotypes of groups) is assumed to be the result of systematic biases in the portrayals of social groups. One major research project in the United States, the Cultural Indicators Project at the University of Pennsylvania, has been systematically comparing the demographic profile of those who appear on prime-time television (via *content analysis*; see Chapter 6) to national demographics as shown in the U.S. Census since the late 1970s. Over time, the research has demonstrated that the world of television has been dominated by White males in traditionally powerful and adventurous occupations. Women, the old, children, and minority groups are systematically underrepresented (at least in terms of their numbers in the population) in the world of television (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). George Gerbner, a leader of the project, argues that who is represented on television reflects the producers' wish for a particular audience (generally, white males of a certain age and income).

Perhaps the best example to provide here is the changing images of Blacks in the film industry and on television. In the very earliest days of film, Blacks were portrayed in a blatantly racist manner, perhaps

best exemplified by the 1913 film *Birth of a Nation*. In the 1920s and 1930s, a few stereotypical Black roles appeared, such as Stepin Fetchit's "Black fool" and the "mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*. However, the majority of American films simply ignored and excluded the Black population. Similarly, the Hollywood studios ignored the work of a number of pioneering Black filmmakers (such as Oscar Micheaux), who produced all-Black films that have remained unknown to White audiences and often to Black audiences as well. A number of Black film production companies were set up in the 1910s and 1920s to make films more reflective of the Black experience. Alternative networks of film distribution and exhibition were also needed to avoid segregation laws in order to reach Black audiences, since the mainstream film industry would not handle such films. In the 1930s, Hollywood discovered the Black film market and made a few all-Black films, but such films generally fell back into the broad racist stereotypes that the Black producers had been trying to correct.

By the 1950s and 1960s, a few Black actors, such as Lena Horne, became Hollywood stars. Sidney Poitier, who won an Academy Award in 1963 for *Lilies of the Field*, opened the door to other actors, such as Bill Cosby, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, James Earl Jones, and Morgan Freeman. More important, as these actors became successful, they were able to demand less demeaning roles and less stereotypical images. Even in this period, however, Black actors did not fare particularly well: There were still few Black stars in the overwhelmingly White film industry, and the roles were still limited and racist. Even at the height of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, "blaxploitation films" (such as *Shaft* with Richard Roundtree), although they created Black stars, were overtly racist and stereotypical.

By the late 1980s, the emergence of major Black filmmakers, such as Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*), Mario Von Peebles (*New Jack City*), John Singleton (*Boyz 'n the Hood*), Matty Rich (*Straight out of Brooklyn*), and lesser-known filmmakers such as Charles Burnett (*To Sleep With Anger*) and Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*) provided a vibrant and challenging alternative portrait of Black life in America and the racist currents of American culture. These filmmakers have opened the door, not only to new generations of Black actors, but also to Black participation in the various aspects of film production.

This shift from an absence of Black people in film and overwhelmingly stereotypical images of Blacks to the production of films about

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Black life and racial themes by Black producers, writers, and directors has taken most of the twentieth century. The year 2002 proved a landmark year in this regard when Halle Berry and Denzel Washington both won Academy Awards for Acting in Lead Roles.

Television, too, has shifted in its portrayals of Blacks and has followed a somewhat similar course. In the early days of television, with the exception of *Amos 'n' Andy's* stereotypical representation of happy-go-lucky hucksters, Black people were absent from prime-time drama. However, Black entertainers such as Pearl Bailey, Louis Armstrong, Johnny Mathis, and Nat King Cole did appear on variety shows in the 1950s. It wasn't, however, until 1965, when Bill Cosby was paired with Robert Culp in the series *I Spy*, that a Black actor emerged as the star of a network drama series. The 1970s saw the rise of a number of situation comedies featuring Black family life, shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times*. And Black stars such as Bill Cosby, James Earl Jones, Arsenio Hall, Keenen Ivory Wayans, and Oprah Winfrey—often with creative and financial control (and, in some cases, their own independent production companies)—continue to increase the participation of Blacks in a wide variety of television genres.

These shifts in portrayals of Blacks in American media cannot be understood outside of the real struggles over civil rights in American society and the changes that have resulted. Not until the rise of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s did stereotypes begin to change in the media. At the same time, part of the success of the civil rights movement was that footage of peaceful marches as well as racist violence in the South was shown on television. The images of Blacks on television news in the 1960s stood in stark contrast with the images (and lack of images) of Blacks on the prime-time television entertainment shows that followed the news. As well, pressure groups began to confront racist images and demand more positive representation in television and in film. Last, and most strikingly in recent years, Black professionals have moved into creative and economic control as producers, writers, and directors in the film industry, as well as owners of radio, TV, and media properties. The fact that larger numbers of Blacks have moved into higher economic strata has helped to create a Black market for advertisers and media programmers. Moreover, youth of all races have become a significant market for Black cultural products across many media and genres. All of these factors have contributed to changing the stereotyping of Blacks in mass media.

This doesn't mean that stereotyping no longer exists. Some people have criticized many contemporary Black films on the grounds that the emphasis on urban gangs and crime continues many of the stereotypes of Black people. Other ethnic groups, such as Hispanics, Arab Americans, Italian Americans, Asian Americans, and others, have complained over the years about their representation in the media (such as Italians as mobsters on *The Sopranos* or Arabic men as terrorists post-September 11). The rise of the feminist movement since the 1960s has made us increasingly aware of the stereotyping of women in media images. And the horrors of the AIDS epidemic has made questions about the stereotypical representations of gay men and lesbians an important social concern. In each of these instances, fighting media's stereotypical representations has become a crucial part of the group's struggle for social equality.

For the fact is that stereotypes, even if they are only images, do have real and important consequences. They can affect the self-esteem of those being stereotyped, and they can often come close to determining the way some people think of and behave toward members of the groups being stereotyped. And, sometimes, if they are repeated often enough, people forget entirely that they are dealing with images; the images become the reality that determines the ways people, institutions, and even governments act in the world (for example, toward Muslims).

A good example of the potentially pernicious effects of stereotypes might be the representation of AIDS and of people with AIDS (PWAs). These images affect how many people think about this disease and those who suffer its consequences. Critics have documented the effects of such stereotypes on issues of education, funding, legislation, and even research and treatment. Remember the startling power of the image of the late Princess Diana holding hands with PWAs in a London hospital. AIDS activists have often complained about the way the disease is represented in the mass media. Thus the disease is often represented primarily in its association with homosexuality, concealing other equally pertinent facts: for example, that the majority of AIDS cases in New York City are among people of color, with a rising percentage among women. This misrepresentation perpetuates itself in that it affects the patterns of counseling and diagnosis. Moreover, they argue, the representation of PWAs as lonely victims passively awaiting death distorts the facts of the disease and how it is lived. It also distorts the

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fact that PWAs are also suffering from government inaction, insurance companies' and corporate employers' greed, the unavailability of adequate health care, and institutionalized racism and homophobia.

Thinking of people in terms of stereotypes only enables us to ask whether a stereotype is an accurate portrayal of a particular group. But to ask this question already assumes that this grouping of people is inevitable and natural, that its identity is singular and stable and exists independently of how it is represented in cultural codes and the media. For example, to ask whether the image of Blacks on television is an accurate one assumes that all "Blacks" have the same identity, which can be compared to what is presented on television. But what happens if all Blacks do not have the same identity? Do we really want to assume that conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Bill Cosby, Tiger Woods, P. Diddy, and a young urban unemployed Black man are really essentially and basically the same by virtue of being Black, that they are all representatives of the same identity? And what if Blacks' identity changes, as when, to use a simple example, heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali? What if some Blacks do seem to fit the stereotype? For instance, what if there *are* kids out there who want to be like the stereotypical character J. J. from *Good Times* or the violent and sexist "gangstas" of the music group NWA? Does that make these kids somehow less real for how they behave?

Some critics have even argued that by continuously focusing on the question of race and stereotypes, other critics are reinforcing the tendency of our society to divide everyone into Black or White. After all, is it necessary that the world be divided up that way? Most people don't worry about stereotypes of people with big feet, and they don't assume that such people have some identity of their own or that they are suffering from the ways they are represented. Also, the tendency to see the race question as one of Black and White erases all other minorities (from Native Americans to Asian Americans to Latinos/as). Finally, as long as one is talking about stereotypes, it is too easy for some people to ignore that, for some people out there, the media are representing who they are; or, to put it in other terms, the stereotype is not of someone else but of *themselves*. This raises one of the most important questions about the role of the media in people's lives, for it deals with how people come to understand who and what they are, to view their identities and identifications, the positions that they occupy in society.

Representation as Cultural Construction

By seeing media representations as actively involved in the ongoing construction of identities, one can begin to appreciate the complexity of the processes by which people's identities are produced by the culture they live in: How is a category of identity established? How are individuals assigned to it? How is its meaning determined?

Consider where the categories of identity come from. Aren't most distinctions found in nature? For example, people normally assume that racial and sexual distinctions are genetically based, but that is simply false. People do not somehow see through the body into the genetic code. What is being read as sex or race are signs on the surface of the body. Genetic diversity is much more complex and plural than our simple categories allow. Even physiology and anatomy cannot explain the systems of relations that define people's identities. Are all women capable of bearing children? If someone is not, is she then not a woman? Do all Black people have dark skin? Then how does one account for the history of "passing"?

To take one category, aren't all people born either male or female? Yes and no. Biologists used to believe that sex was determined by a simple combination of two chromosomes, creating only two possibilities. But they have discovered that there are more chromosomes and more possibilities involved; what remains true is that for purposes of biological reproduction, sexes can be functionally divided into two large groups. But biological reproduction among humans requires certain social relationships as well. People have to occupy certain social roles and practice certain behaviors. These roles and behaviors define what is called *gender identity*. Again, our common sense makes it seem reasonably easy to divide the world into two major gender groups—masculine and feminine—although many critics have argued that such classifications are too crude. In fact, much of feminist theory addresses the question of how certain characteristics, behaviors, and styles come to be thought of as either masculine or feminine.

The categories of identity are the products of cultural codes, which select some aspects of the body and make them significant (into signifiers) whereas others remain "mere anatomy." Such codes, as we described in Chapter 5, organize signifiers according to relations of difference, so that any signifier of identity is only significant insofar as its difference from other signifiers is provided by the code itself. Culture

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selects the relevant dimensions that will constitute people's identities and organizes them into relations of difference. It is not merely that to be White is to be not-Black; it is also that being not-Black is itself part of the very meaning of being White. And, by the same token, being Black always includes being not-White. The two categories are bound together, each always implicated in the very existence and meaning of the other. This means that more than a set of biological characteristics determines who is included within each category—an Asian woman may suddenly find herself placed in the position of a Black person by the cultural codes of race in contemporary America.

At the same time, one term is always dominant within the culture; one term defines the norm. The norm is not only positively valued, it is treated as if it were neutral. It does not appear to be an identity at all. It does not need to be named; it remains *ex-nominated*. For example, although we think of Black as a race with its own characteristics, it is usually measured against an assumed neutral Whiteness that is rarely marked as a race. The same argument can be made for most of the other major dimensions of people's identity, including sex, gender, class, and ethnicity. We talk about Polish Americans and African Americans but rarely about Anglo Americans.

Everyone occupies some positions in these various codes of difference. What is the process by which individuals are given identities by being placed into one of a binary pair, by becoming identified with one term? This process of being placed is called *interpellation*. Recall the discussion in Chapter 7 (and the two experiments we proposed). The process of interpellation occurs when individuals are placed into (and take up) particular (social) positions by and within cultural codes. Who we are, in one sense, is answered by where we are. I am the person standing here, the one who can see you looking at me but can't see me looking at you. *Subjectivity* is a useful term to capture this sense of the relationship between who and where we are. Subjectivity is the sense of existing both at the center of and apart from any particular experience. Subjectivity lets people reflect on their experience and their place in the world; it lets us carry on a conversation with ourselves about ourselves, as it were. It is what lets people use language creatively to say new things and to express their experiences. That is, part of what you are, your subjectivity, is defined by the fact that you occupy the center of your own field of vision and experience. You are always at the center of your experiential field. Because you are the subject of your

experiences, because they are in fact *your* experiences, they seem quite natural and obviously true.

But what about someone whose experiences of the world are not legitimated, someone who is forced to see the world through someone else's eyes? What happens to someone for whom the world seems to deny their experience of who they are, their subjectivity? Consider the way many women who were raped were treated in our society (we can hope that this is now only rarely the case): Often, their own experience of having been violated, abused, victimized, was denied and the woman was treated as the cause of her own violation. She was not viewed by the society as the victim of violence (reinforced by systematic and structural sexism), but as the aggressor who—by how she dressed (“seductively”) and by how she interacted with the man (“willingly”)—asked for it. That is, her experience is recoded into the dominant codes of male experience. After all, if you are placed in the position of the subject through certain codes, then you can also be placed in the position of the object.

People occupy a variety of positions in language and social relationships depending upon how they are addressed and interpellated. A teacher says, “You have to . . .” A friend says, “We feel like going . . .” An older brother says, “Do I have to take it along . . .?” Think about all the different ways people are addressed, even in the media, ways that may include them in or exclude them from certain identities. This same process works not only to produce people's sense of themselves as human subjects (capable of creativity and autonomy) but also to place people in the various culturally constructed categories of identity.

How is it that society interpellates people into these systems of cultural differences, guaranteeing that it reproduces the basic structures of its organization of power? Some media critics draw upon Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, which tried to explain how children grow up as social subjects, reproducing the sexual and gender roles of their parents. According to Freud, this is accomplished by the child's renunciation and repression of specific desires, which results in the formation of an unconscious. People become subjects because they reject part of who they are (boys defer their desire for their mother by trying to become their father; girls renounce their desire for their father by bonding with their mother). There are enormously powerful social processes at work interpellating individuals into their “proper” places

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as “normal” members of society. Some feminist film theorists argue that the basic plot structure of Hollywood cinema reenacts the process by which people are interpellated into and accede to their appropriate gender and sexual identities. Different media continually address differently gendered and sexed audiences (for example, Lifetime, the channel for women; various women’s magazines; soap operas).

In the media, women seem to be largely defined or placed as the object of male pleasure—both visual and physical. Many classic Hollywood films, television programs, and even commercials feature rather gratuitous shots of women in various stages of undress, as if they were placed there only for the viewer’s pleasure in looking. This coding of pleasure means that the camera’s position defines and embodies a male perspective on the world. The camera is masculine. Similarly, in most narratives—at least until recently—it is the male characters who define the action of the story, although it is often the woman who, as an object of desire, makes the story move. The hero sets out to win, to rescue the woman, or to find some object required to win or save the woman. The woman is rarely allowed to speak. If a strong woman character threatens to disrupt the masculine universe of the story, she will almost inevitably be subdued in the end, by either death or marriage. Similar processes are at work in all of the cultural processes of identity including, for example, race. People are interpellated by other people’s language and behavior, as well as by the media texts that address them.

However, the actual people receiving this message are not necessarily as passive as this makes them sound. Interpellation can define someone into a subordinate position, but the person has to accede to that interpellation. He or she has to take up the position. People can struggle against specific interpellations, struggle to reject the experience, or try to find alternative positions within the text. Consider the following rather simple example: Someone tells a racist joke to a group of people. Everyone in that group is interpellated as White, and, insofar as they remain silent, they accept that interpellation. But what if one person were to suddenly say, “You only told that joke because you assumed that I am White.” What would that do to the normally assumed processes of interpellation?

Cultural codes, and especially the media in the contemporary world, also articulate the meanings of the various positions people occupy. In this way, we can think of the media as actively constructing

the meanings and expectations that are associated with, or linked to, particular social identities. For instance, the meaning of "young Black man" as an identity in America is often linked to a host of threatening associations: juvenile delinquent, drug user/dealer, potential mugger. The result is that people in the United States are often more nervous near a young Black man than near a young White man; even the police follow more closely the behavior of young Black men on the streets. The civil rights movement can be seen in part as an attempt to challenge the meanings that the dominant cultural codes articulated to Blackness, meanings that were almost entirely negative, and to construct new articulations: "Black is beautiful."

For example, consider what meanings have been linked to the identity of woman in American culture. Women have been seen as weak, emotional, nonassertive, and illogical. But there is nothing inherent in the position of women that makes them less aggressive, more emotional, or even weaker than men. The fact that women have different hormones cannot provide a sufficient explanation of these meanings. These meanings are not necessary. There is nothing inherent in women that determines these connotations of the identity of being a woman. These meanings can and do change. But they are also powerfully effective in society. The fact that the articulations have been made has a strong influence over the way people, both men and women, think about women and behave toward women. If people believe that women are weaker than men and that they are supposed to be less aggressive, this will certainly influence the way parents differentially treat boys and girls. The results will make the articulation even stronger, make it appear even more obvious, seemingly natural, and commonsensical. Because women "are" weaker, parents tend to discourage their little girls from roughhousing and playing in contact sports (although this is apparently changing). And because boys "are" tougher, parents are (often too) quick to discourage little boys from crying and to encourage their aggressive play in team sports. Parents encourage different cultural tastes, which reproduce certain articulations (and which also produce different interpellations). But these meanings are open to challenge; articulations can be disarticulated, and new links, new articulations, can be made.

Moreover, the links are never made in either simple terms or in isolation from other identities. For example, Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze* created a furor by opening up a debate about color differences,

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and the resulting racisms, within Blackness and among Black people. Identities are never simply Black or female, just as people never live their identities simply as Black or female. Real people are—they live their identities as—Black *and* female *and* middle-class *and* American *and* urban, and so forth. So the articulations that give depth to the categories of identities are always more specific, fragmented, and contradictory than theories of stereotypes assume. Sometimes, these different identities interact in a variety of ways to produce the particular, concrete identities that define who people are. Sometimes, these identities even conflict and produce competing demands on people. For example, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* opened up a public debate within the Black community about the relationship between Black men and Black women, and among Black women.

The notion of articulation frees the struggle over representation from some stable and true external referent against which all meanings are measured. Rather, it makes the mutually determining conjunction of social reality and cultural representation the only game in town. The history of media representations is not a progression from stereotypes to truth, but a struggle to constantly articulate the meanings of people's identities and the ways they can live those cultural categories. There is no single narrative that can be told. There are always competing meanings and articulations struggling to win dominance or at least acceptance.

The history of representations of women on network television shows a complex and contested play of meanings circulating around the category of woman. During the 1950s, the common history argues that women occupied a subservient role to men, that women were almost always little more than window dressing or support for strong father figures on such family programs as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver*. Of course, women could sometimes be zany and incompetent, as was Lucille Ball's character in *I Love Lucy*. When women appeared in nonhousewife roles, they were still subservient to the men they served as secretaries or nurses or saloon girls.

And yet other critics have pointed out how much more complex this field of representations was: The comedian Lucille Ball was not zany and incompetent; she was assertive and brilliant (and, it turned out, astute in business). Sitcom mothers often turned out to be the real strength in the families. And working-class women, such as Alice Kramden in *The Honeymooners*, were important predecessors

for contemporary images like Roseanne's. Not all the women of the 1950s were seductively attractive (*Our Miss Brooks*), and not all the men were competent ideal mates (Jackie Gleason or Milton Berle).

In the 1960s and 1970s, as the women's movement gained national attention, women's roles began to change on television as well. During the 1970s, women began to occupy more positions outside the home, as police officers (Angie Dickinson in *Police Woman*), as TV news producers, and more frequently on television news as correspondents and reporters. Yet women were still young, attractive, and secondary to more powerful male figures. Mary Tyler Moore's role in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* represented a significant advance over her earlier role as the at-home housewife and mom on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (and certainly a very significant advance over her appearance in *Richard Diamond*, a detective show in which only her legs were shown and her voice heard). It was the first network program to focus on an unmarried working woman. Yet the program continued to reaffirm many of the most common meanings of "single women" in our society. Mary was constantly looking for a husband, or at least a good date, and despite her growing power in the office where she worked, she always seemed subservient to Lou Grant in ways that the men in the office were not. (For instance, only Mary called her boss "Mr. Grant.") But such a typical narrative ignores the fact that there were many moments that outlived the 1950s, and even some moments that foreshadowed the decades yet to come.

By the 1980s and 1990s, however, women's roles on television had changed, and with new roles have come new images of the possibilities of what it means to be a woman in American society. It is impossible to answer the question of whether these new images reflected or brought about changes in society; the only possible answer is both. For instance, the success of the over-60 Jessica Fletcher character in *Murder, She Wrote* and of the *Golden Girls* validated new images of being older and female. Yet Jessica is a highly traditional woman in many ways, devoted to the memory of her dead husband and to sexual abstinence. Also, the development of the aggressive newscaster Murphy Brown, and the less-than-perfect housewife and mother Roseanne have broken many of the old stereotypes of both women in work and women at home. Yet Murphy Brown pays a price in sometimes being less than likable, and she still has to play male/female games, even as a single mother. And it is the case that, for each of these steps forward, one can

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point to programs that seem to have taken two steps back. Sure, Ellen came out as a lesbian, but there is more than enough homophobia on television. And what does one make of the success of programs such as *Married With Children*?

Identities never proceed in some linear and coherent story from falsity to truth, or from truth to falsity. The codes of identity are always complex and contradictory, defining a field in which different meanings battle to become the dominant articulations. The field is never entirely open, and it is often quite constrained, but it is also often contested. Sometimes, the story is one of an expanding field of competing meanings; other times, the story is one of shrinking possibilities. Ideology is always a matter of struggle rather than simple domination. Victories are sometimes won and new meanings become dominant; sometimes, victories are won when new meanings are simply allowed into the field. Just as women have advanced into new roles and occupations in American life over the past several decades, the cultural codes associated with the identity of woman in the media have developed, broadened, and become more complex. These changes are not simply the result or reflection of changes taking place in the "real world," for they are in part responsible for these very changes. As we have been suggesting throughout this book, the relationship between communication and reality is too complex to be described either as simply production or reflection.

We cannot talk about the image of women in television as if television were itself a simple homogeneous message. For example, do *60 Minutes*, *American Idol*, *The Bachelorette*, *Eve*, *Friends*, *The Gilmore Girls*, and *Judging Amy* all have the same message about women? Also, we cannot talk as if the image of women in television were somehow isolatable from other media. For the ideological struggle over the representations of woman takes place across all of the different cultural media, which have to be taken then as complex interactive systems of messages. The question of identity is not simply that of struggling with what is presented in the mainstream media. As in the case of Black films in the 1910s and 1920s, media makers can begin to produce their own media products to counter stereotypical images by presenting more nuanced alternatives. With cheap video recorders and, now, more powerful home computers and fast Internet connections, it has become more possible for people to produce images and texts that better represent their own experience of the world—potentially at least. Let us give

you an example: Inexpensive digital cameras connected to the Internet (called *Webcams*) allow individuals to either display aspects of their everyday lives or environment or to create performances that can be viewed by others online. At times, these Webcams can challenge dominant stereotypes, as does performance artist Anna Voog's Webcam site, which seeks to rework notions of what it means to be female in contemporary society (see Snyder, 2000). But, more often than not, such Webcam sites that feature women simply reproduce and reinforce dominant stereotypes of how women should appear and behave.

The struggle over the ideology of woman cannot be limited to images of women per se and the roles they play, for the meaning of woman cannot be separated from a complex array of other social roles and practices. Thus the struggle over the meaning of woman can also take place in representations of the family and of domestic spaces (the household) and of the variety of practices that take place there. The ads on television in the 1950s, ads for new consumer goods usually marketed as labor-saving and convenience devices for the household, were all about "being a woman." But so were ads and programs about television itself. A number of media historians, most notably Lynn Spigel (1992), have argued that families had to be taught how to watch TV, just as much as they had to be taught, as did architects and builders, about how to redesign domestic spaces to accommodate the new medium into the family living space. Thus the ideological field of woman involves representations of issues as diverse as domesticity and domestic spaces, suburbia and the reorganization of urban spaces, the changing nature of labor in and out of the home, family relations and consumption, and the place and use of the new media such as television. But these are more than representations. Hence ideological articulations always involve realities that are not merely cultural; they also involve social and material practices (like the actual spatial organizations of houses and the material design of television sets), which may themselves be the object of other ideological struggles.

CONCLUSION

In recent times, and partly as a result of the increasing importance of the media in constructing people's identities, people seem to have developed a much more fragmented and fluid sense of their own identities.

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Some identities even become so contaminated by other identities that it is difficult to tell what they refer to. For example, when the British Commonwealth sponsored a photography exhibit asking amateur photographers to document their sense of national identity within the "British commonwealth," the results were baffling to say the least. People's sense of their national identity was composed of fragments of tradition, of American commercial culture, of British symbolism, and of the media. There was no pure identity, only the articulations of the variety of identifications that people made in their lives (Goldman & Hall, 1987). In fact, there has been a long history (which has only increased with time) of debate about what it means to be "American," about whether schools and the media should present a coherent (traditional) view of Americans and American history, or whether they should open the door to multicultural views of how various groups have come to be part of American life. People's identities are less stable and unified than they were in previous generations, and people tend to have less commitment to any single identity than did previous generations. Debates about multiculturalism may partly reflect the fact that the very nature of people's identities is changing as a result of the growing power of popular culture and the mass media.

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Consuming the Media

9

In the early 1970s, the novelist Jerzy Kosinski (1970) created one of the most telling and powerful images of the omnipotence of television in our everyday lives: Chance, the gardener in *Being There*, lives through the television screen. Television is not measured against reality; his reality is measured against television. All that he knows is what he observes on television—who he is and what the world is like. But, even more startling, how Chance lives his life, how he reacts to and with other people, how he feels, his pleasures and desires, and even his moods place him inside a television world:

Chance went inside and turned on the TV. . . . By changing the channel, he could change himself. He could go through phases, as garden plants went through phases, but he could change as rapidly as he wished by twisting the dial backward and forward. In some cases, he could spread out into the screen without stopping, just as on TV people spread out into the screen. By turning the dial, Chance could bring others inside his eyelids. Thus, he came to believe that it was he, Chance, and no one else, who made himself be. (p. 5)

He did not know how to explain to her that he could not touch better or more fully with his hands than he could with his eyes. Seeing encompassed all at once; a touch was limited to one spot at a time.

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She should no more have wanted to be touched by him than should the TV screen have wanted it. . . .

"I know, I know," she cried. "I don't excite you!" Chance did not know what she meant. . . .

He turned and looked at her. "I like to watch you," he said. (pp. 94-95)

There are two ways of reading Kosinski's parable of modern life. Perhaps Kosinski is arguing that television defines reality in modern life. This interpretation raises crucial questions about the relationship between media and reality. Or perhaps Kosinski's parable is a description of the extent to which television—and by extension other media—increasingly occupy a central place in our everyday lives.

We have argued thus far that the media produce commodities (and money) and cultural products (meanings, ideologies, and identities). But the circuit of communication cannot end there. People have to purchase or acquire these commodities and then use (and eventually use up) such commodities. Media industries depend on the fact that people use up their products so that they will continue to buy new products. Similarly, meanings, ideologies, and identities can only be effective if they are interpreted and taken up by the audience members. In this chapter, we discuss the ways in which people make use of media products; that is, the ways they select them and attend to them, and especially the ways they locate them in different places and relations in everyday life. Understanding how we consume media in our everyday lives requires us to explore people's relationship to media and cultural products. Why do people choose to use certain media products, under what conditions do they use them, how do they use them, and what are the consequences of these choices and conditions of use?

Raymond Williams's (1965) image of the "long revolution" describes the enormous and significant changes that have produced the advanced industrial democracies. Williams traces these changes—economic, political, and cultural—to the moment when Europe was transformed by the emergence of capitalism, democracy, and mass literacy in the 1600s. In fact, each of these social forces fueled the others so that, Williams argues, developments in media, such as the advent of the printing press, are a crucial part of the emergence of modern society and modern life. It would be a mistake, however, not to recognize, as

Jerzy Kosinski does, that these social forces, including the media, affected not only the broader structures of society but also the more mundane and immediate ways people lived from day to day, from moment to moment.

Williams's argument has enormous implications for how we think about the media and their effects on us. Common sense may lead us to link, in a direct and simple line, the media or specific media products with the visible or identifiable results that they produce: For instance, we talk about television's effects on violent behavior or the effect of pornographic material on sexual attitudes or the influence of journalistic practices on election behavior. (We will discuss such matters in the next chapter.) But Williams would argue that this simple linkage is a mistake. Any attempt to understand the power of the media or specific media products requires us first to understand how these products are located and operate within people's everyday lives: That is, the effects of the media depend on or are *mediated* by where, why, and how people use or consume them.

For instance, research has demonstrated the different effects on children of television viewing depending on whom they are watching it with: Preschoolers who watch *Sesame Street* with an adult tend to learn more from the program than those who watch the program alone (Lesser, 1974). Or you may have had the experience of associating a certain song with an old girlfriend or boyfriend or perhaps a particularly emotional time of your life. Every time you hear this song now, your response to it is colored by that emotional association. Or just think of the difference between watching music videos in your home and in a dance club. All of these are examples of the ways everyday life, the context and psychology of media use, influence the effects of the media.

But there is an additional complication that Williams's argument forces us to recognize: The long revolution itself is responsible for shaping and changing people's everyday lives. To put it another way, the sociology and social psychology of media use are themselves historically influenced by the media whose effects they mediate. An obvious example of this interdependence comes from studies of how Americans spend their time. As sociologist John Robinson (1996) has pointed out, the advent of television has "colonized" leisure time in America, so much so that every additional minute of leisure (time not spent working or caring for family and household or sleeping) that

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Americans gained between the 1960s and the 1980s was spent watching television. Newer media technologies, from portable media such as the Walkman, cellular phones, handheld TVs, and wireless portable computers, make it possible to carry media into places and spaces of everyday life hitherto closed to media and culture. Moreover, it is obvious that the Internet—the shorthand term we use to describe our increasingly computer-interlinked culture—is fundamentally changing our interactions in everyday life, as well as the context and psychology of media use and thus how the media affect us all. For example, the question of whether Internet use is more likely to bring us closer together, to create “social capital” by and through which people can shape their own lives, or, conversely, to turn us into social isolates has become a social concern. Early research (Kraut et al., 1998) suggested that Internet use led to social isolation and feelings of depression, but more recent research by the same researchers and many others (see DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Howard & Jones, 2004; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002) suggests that, although it’s complex, for most people, Internet use makes us a bit *more* social.

The introduction of almost every new media technology in this century has immediately given rise to considerable concern and widespread public discussion about who is using it, how often, and under what conditions. That is, before people have worried about the effects of movies or radio or television on their audiences, they first take notice of the size, shape, and character of the consuming public.

Oddly enough, the process of consumption has received little attention in economic theories, although it is generally acknowledged that consumption is the necessary completion of the process of exchange on which all economic relations are based. The production of anything, from a widget to a television program, makes no sense unless someone consumes it—that is, buys it and uses it up. Every product is designed and made on the basis of certain assumptions about how it is to be used, under what conditions, and for how long. Cars, for example, are produced with a certain life expectancy as well as with certain assumptions about the uses to which they will be put; most cars are not designed to be driven in races or demolition derbies. But, as we shall see, manufacturers cannot accurately predict how consumers will use their products.

As students of the media and culture, we need to ask to what degree the intended use of a product determines its actual use and effects; to put it the other way around, what is the contribution of the consumer in determining the actual use and effects of media products? This problem is often referred to as the question of the relative activity or passivity of media audiences. We also must consider the different functions that the consumption of media products serves for their users. What are the conditions under which people are able or unable to consume particular media products? Who can engage in particular acts of media consumption?

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

It is obvious that, in some ways, consumption is an active process, even in the most apparently passive situations of media use. Consider a person—the stereotypical “couch potato”—vegging out in front of the TV screen, eyes glazed, shoes off, reclining on the couch with a bag of potato chips in hand and a drink on the coffee table. The person looks passive. Yet that person had to decide to watch television at this particular time, had to put the television on, had to get the bag of chips and the drink; maybe our couch potato read *TV Guide* to find out what was on or surfed through the channels to decide what to watch. And there’s more.

A great deal of cognitive activity goes on. *Cognition* is the act of attending to and making sense of the world; it is the application of consciousness to the world. Even the couch potato is cognitively engaged with the television set: Couch potatoes have to focus attention on the screen, process the dots on the TV set into recognizable images, interpret those images as representations of some reality, fill in the blanks in the narratives presented by the television screen, and make sense of the messages coming from the screen. There is evidence that different people expend different amounts of mental effort to make sense of different programs. Nonetheless, this act of watching television can be said to be an active process because minds are engaged. The question is often raised whether the activity of watching television is as active, relatively speaking, as doing other things, such as reading a book, watching a live play, or writing a letter. (See Box 9.1, “Children and the Activity of Television Viewing.”)

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BOX 9.1

Children and the Activity of Television Viewing

Researchers who watch children watching television in laboratory studies or in home observations find that children seem to be very actively involved in attending to the set: The children move in and out of attention, monitoring the set until something comes on that they want to watch. Indeed, the one programming style researchers have found that seems to elicit a “transfixed” gaze among children is cartoon shows. Moreover, there is considerable evidence (from postviewing interviews, as well as observational studies of children playing) that children have to actively work to make sense of television messages. This, too, suggests that television watching is an active process for children.

According to communication researchers George Comstock and Haejung Paik (1991),

The television experience cannot be described as either active or passive without reference to what each term is intended to denote. There is justification for both labels; no good rationale can be offered for giving either term precedence; and the appropriate term depends on what aspect of the experience is being described or emphasized. [Television watching] is typically passive in regard to involvement, but inherently active in regard to monitoring. (p. 23)

Another way the audience is active is in bending a medium and its messages to the audience’s own purposes. In almost every instance, the producer of a media product has in mind some idea of about how the audience will understand and use the particular product. That is, the producer (which may be a corporation or an individual) intends for the product to have an effect. Indeed, researchers have to beware of what’s called the *intentional fallacy*, the notion that what the creator of a message intended it to mean (its *encoded meaning*) is what the audience takes it to mean (its *decoded meaning*)—that what the author intended is the “real” meaning of the text (see Chapter 6). Research on audiences and what they do with the media they consume clearly demonstrates that people are very creative—they have their own interpretations of media products, and they will often do very surprising and unpredictable things with them. Let’s consider a range of different examples.

Think about the intentions of those who produce a newspaper. The newspaper's reporters and editors prepare newspaper stories to be read, to provoke thought, and perhaps even to persuade their readers to act in a particular way or to change their minds. But the purchasers may not act as expected. A study by Barnhurst and Wartella (1992) had college students write autobiographical essays about their memories of using the newspaper from childhood to adulthood. The authors found that

the newspaper played a role in a variety of activities—art projects, family, housework, do-it-yourself projects, and entertainment pastimes. Most of the uses mentioned for newspapers were predictable: hitting the dog with it, putting it in shoes that had holes, and the like. Few were at all unusual, but some students, like a White female frequent reader, implied that using the newspaper for anything other than reading was odd: "My parents have always found bizarre uses for the newspaper as well. My mother, a sincere plant lover, likes to spread newspaper over our countertops to shield them from soil when she repots her plants." Students reported making early use of newspapers as an implement (in 70 essays), an art medium (in 56 essays), and a protective covering (in 47 essays). These uses introduced a first frustration with newspapers: the ink rubs off. (p. 199)

A more consequential instance of the multiple and often unpredictable uses of the media can be found in many technological innovations. Industries introduce new technologies for a number of purposes, such as expanding their current markets or opening up new markets. As we have argued, in each instance, such new technologies are introduced to increase profit for the owners. However, in many cases, audiences use technologies in unintended ways, ways that had not been imagined and that often subvert the intentions of the producers. For example, audiocassettes have allowed people to make multiple copies for personal use and have allowed less scrupulous people to pirate recordings. Cheap recordable CDs and MP3s have done the same thing but without the same degradation in quality that one gets from dubbed tapes, making them even more an issue for the industry. Such practices have cut into the profit margins of the record companies.

Perhaps the most important dimension of the audience's activity, at least as far as audience researchers are concerned, is the extent to which audiences make meanings for the media products they consume. In a

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study by Australian communication researchers Bob Hodge and David Tripp (1986) of children's use of television, they report a particularly striking example. One of the most popular programs among Australian grade school children in the 1980s was a program called *The Prisoner in Cell-Block H*, a minimalist, black-and-white, half-hour dramatization of everyday life in a woman's prison. This is not a program one would expect young children to embrace, and Hodge and Tripp wondered why it was so popular with children. They suggest that the children used the specific relationships and dramatic situations of the program to describe their own feelings about school and their everyday life. The program became a kind of secret code with which the children could talk to each other about particular teachers and classes, and about the experience of school, without fear of being understood by adult authorities. Although this example may seem extreme, audience researchers argue that television audiences give their own meanings to the programs they watch in order to fit the programs into their everyday life.

Think about your own experiences: When you listen to a song on the radio or read a romance novel or a comic book, when you go to a movie on a date or watch a videotape in your room, or when you roam the Web on your computer, you help to determine or shape the meaning and significance of the particular media product. Your interpretation of a song does not necessarily match someone else's interpretation. Audience researchers argue that the meaning of a media text resides in the audiences, not in the messages. However, it is not always easy to sort out and distinguish the contributions of the producer, the message itself, and the audience to the meaning of any given text.

Much of this audience research is based on Stuart Hall's (1980) distinction between encoding and decoding. Hall argued that the production and the reception of media messages were two relatively autonomous or independent processes within the larger *circuit of communication*. Thus there was no basis for assuming that how a particular audience or audience member interpreted a text would correspond to the meaning that the producer of the message intended or hoped to communicate. Of course, this encoded meaning did define a *preferred meaning* and, presumably, at least some of the elements of the text would push the audience in the direction of the preferred meaning. But this cannot guarantee that this process will be successful. Decoding is not a matter of misunderstanding but of the nature of communication as a struggle, from different social positions, over the meaning of the text. How a

particular audience interprets a text is determined in complex ways by its social position, by the interests and resources it brings to the text.

Hall's original work was directed toward the study of network public affairs programming; consequently, he assumed that the encoded meaning of these texts would support the dominant ideology of the society on the particular issues that defined the topic of the text. He then identified three broad possibilities for decoding. An audience's decoding can assent or correspond to the encoded or preferred meaning. Or a decoding can explicitly oppose the dominant ideology encoded into the text, at least on the particular topic of the text. Or a decoding can negotiate a position somewhere between assent and opposition, bending the text to the experiences and values of the audience. It is important to remember that these categories of decoded meaning—*preferred*, *oppositional*, and *negotiated*—were developed to talk about texts where politics was a central and visible aspect of a message. These categories are less useful if one is talking about an audience's decoding of texts where such explicit political commitments are more difficult to identify.

The significance of media products in everyday life includes a broader range of uses and effects than just questions of the material use of a medium (such as using newspapers to wrap fish) and the meanings of particular messages. Consider the Britney "wannabes" (or Avril Lavigne, Lindsey Lohan, or Hillary Duff wannabes) who construct elaborate images of themselves and a sense of their own identity (who they are, who they want to be, and how they want to be seen by others) through media products. In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), a new student in the high school remarks that another student looks exactly like Sheena Easton. Her friend points to a number of different groups of students, both male and female, who seem to have taken on the identity of their favorite rock star or actor. Researchers are beginning to look at the ways in which the media provide the resources with which audiences construct their sense of their own identity. This surely is a media effect, but it is one that requires the active involvement and investment of the audience in the process.

Another example opens up yet another dimension of media effects and uses: soap operas. For real soap fans, just watching a favorite soap is not enough. They want to talk to other fans about the trials and tribulations of the TV characters, they want to actively be involved in predicting the characters' futures, and they often refer to the experiences of these characters to make sense of their own lives. Internet researcher

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Nancy Baym (2000) has documented how some soap fans turn to the Internet to find communities of other soap fans and to discuss and debate the happenings on their favorite soaps. Television critics have long attempted to understand this powerful relationship. But it is very common for people to be fans of particular genres of television, movies, books, or music. People derive very real and complex pleasures and emotional experiences from media consumption. It is the emotional relationship to soaps that seems to dominate the fan's experience; it is the pleasure derived from particular media tastes that provides the foundation for other effects of media. All consumers derive some kinds of pleasure and emotional satisfaction from their media use; and, like the meanings we give to media products, the pleasures and emotions we experience as consumers are often quite unpredictable. They vary not only individually but also, as we shall see, across different social groups of consumers.

We have introduced here several of the major perspectives employed by audience researchers in understanding the place of the media in everyday life. In the rest of this chapter, we will elaborate each of these perspectives. First, we will consider one of the oldest and most commonsensical research perspectives, which looks at the social and psychological functions that media use serves for their audiences. This approach has been called *functionalism* or the *uses-and-gratifications perspective*. Second, we will investigate the *affective* or emotional experience of media audiences. Third, we will look at the *social context* of media use.

FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDIA

Perhaps the most commonsensical way to think about the mass media is to ask what functions they serve. For individuals, the functions of media can be thought of as the satisfaction or gratification of individual needs. For the society as a whole, the functions of media can be thought of as the purposes served by media in the society. A function can refer to a purpose, a consequence, a requirement, or an expectation. Denis McQuail (1987) gives the following example: "The term 'information function' can refer to three quite separate things: that media try to inform people (purpose); that people learn from media (consequence); that media are supposed to inform people (requirement or expectation)" (p. 69).

It is important to separate a requirement from an expectation: For example, although we might expect and hope that the media inform the audience, as contemporary presidential campaigns have demonstrated, this is not a requirement for the continued existence of the society. Another distinction is that some media functions are manifest, visible on the surface and easily recognizable, and others are latent, hidden deep below the surface of everyday life and difficult to identify. For example, news broadcasts inform the public about presidential candidates; that is a manifest function. But the character of the news coverage may also more subtly shape people's attitudes and assumptions about the nature of the political process itself (M. Robinson, 1976). That is a latent function of news coverage. Similarly, the manifest function of listening to music may be to relax us, to give us something to dance or exercise to, and the like. But music may also serve a latent function: It may shape our expectations about romance and it may increase our tolerance for noise.

Functionalism is a perspective that assumes the existence of a closed system, whether a society or an individual or even an ecosystem, which has requirements for its continued survival. Media functionalism looks at the uses the media serve in the systems of society and individual lives.

Social Functions

One of the earliest typologies of the social functions of the media was offered by Harold Lasswell (1948). He wrote that the mass media served three major functions for the society:

- *Surveillance* of the environment: providing information about events and conditions in society and the world
- *Correlation* of the various parts of society: explaining, interpreting, and commenting on the meaning of events and information; coordinating separate activities; socializing
- *Transmission* of the social heritage from one generation to the next.

In the 1950s, sociologist Charles Wright (1960) added *entertainment* as a social function of media. Denis McQuail (2000) added a fifth category, which he called *mobilization*, or the ability of the mass media to bring people into particular processes of change and development.

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It's clear that these social functions of media are not always realized when any given media product is considered. There is no simple and direct relationship between specific acts of media consumption and any predictable function. Moreover, many acts of consumption involve multiple and sometimes even competing functions. For example, many of the television programs that are, on the surface, "mere" entertainment may entail other social functions as well. One could learn of current events through a joke in Jon Stewart's monologue, for example. Also, one could be entertained by programs designed to be informative or interpretive, like watching the McLaughlin Group debate for the personality clashes in addition to simply the opinions presented.

Individual Functions

For individuals, the functions of media can be thought of as the motives or reasons why individuals use the media products they do and the sorts of satisfactions they receive from the use of these products. One of the earliest studies of the functions of media for individuals was conducted in the early 1940s by Herta Hertzog (1944), a sociologist at Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research. She studied the motivations and gratifications of radio soap opera listeners. Her interest was to try to understand why women became such ardent fans of the radio soaps, serialized dramas about the trials and tribulations of people's relationships. The goal of the study was to determine what satisfactions listeners said they derived coupled with a psychological evaluation of these listeners' claims: The functional approach sought to account for why audiences attended to particular content on the assumption that the act of attending served some function for the individual. Hertzog found that such programs served two overarching functions for these women: They provided *emotional release* from the women's everyday lives, and they served as a *source of advice* concerning real-life problems. What sort of lessons did soap operas provide? Hertzog found that the lessons of the soaps often applied in unlikely situations. For example, one woman reported going to the doctor before she started her diet because someone on the soaps had done so. The chief lesson Hertzog identified was that if one remains calm and does nothing, everything will somehow come out all right in the end—perhaps a useful lesson.

In 1959, Elihu Katz, one of the founding figures of communication research and still one of the most active and influential figures in the field, relabeled the approach *uses and gratifications*. For Katz, uses-and-gratifications research would empirically test some of the critiques of popular culture that had been made in the 1950s: Were audience tastes being debased? Were audiences being entertained? What did people do with the media? What uses and gratifications did people find in mass-produced news and entertainment?

The assumptions of the uses-and-gratifications model as proposed by Katz and expanded in work with Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) are the following:

1. The audience is active, hence use of media is goal-directed.
2. Audience members have expectations of what certain kinds of content have to offer them and these expectations help shape their selections. That is, particular audience members can take the initiative in linking their needs to the ability of particular media products to gratify those needs.
3. The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction (such as talking with friends, taking a walk, sleeping). The needs potentially satisfied by the mass media are only part of a wider range of human needs.
4. People are sufficiently aware of their needs, media choices, and the gratifications they receive from media use to be able to tell researchers what motivates their media behavior.

The major work on uses-and-gratifications research for the past 25 years has been to catalog the various uses and gratifications that audience members report obtaining from their media consumption. These include the following:

- *Information*: finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society, and the world; seeking advice; satisfying curiosity; learning
- *Personal identity*: finding reinforcement for personal values; finding models of behavior; identifying with valued others (in the media); gaining insight into one's self
- *Integration and social interaction*: gaining insight into circumstances of others; identifying with others; finding a basis for

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conversation and social interaction; having a substitute for real life companionship (*parasocial* relations)

- *Entertainment*: escaping from problems; relaxing; filling time; emotional release; getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment.

The Critique of Functionalism

Although uses-and-gratifications research has provided useful empirical evidence about audiences' consumption of the media, there have been serious criticisms of its theoretical assumptions and research programs. First, this approach ignores the social dimensions of media consumption and reduces media use to an individual psychological relationship. Yet we know that media consumption is very often socially *situated*; that is, it is something engaged in with others. In fact, uses-and-gratifications research offers no way of understanding the connection between individual psychological needs and social structures and processes. At best, the individual is conceptualized in terms of specific social roles, which apparently carry their own socially induced needs and tensions.

Second, the key term—*function*—of this approach remains ambiguous. Functional activities have many different meanings in the literature: as a useful activity, as an appropriate or normal activity, as a necessary activity, and as a valuable activity. Nor is it clear how to determine whether an activity is useful, normal, necessary, or valuable. And for whom? How do we define the “society” within which such decisions are to be made?

Third, uses-and-gratifications research offers no account for the origin of needs or the relations among them. Instead, it often slips into deterministic accounts that are inconsistent with the notion of an active audience. Finally, uses-and-gratifications theory suffers from two more general problems facing any functionalist theory: It is circular and conservative. It is circular because the only way to tell that a need is being gratified is to assume that the gratification provides evidence for the existence of the need. That is, if watching television distracts me from my problems, I must need such distraction. This perspective is thought to be conservative, because the system of needs assumes that the existing society is capable of satisfying any individual's needs—in this way, the status quo becomes the definition of the normal and only structure of society.¹ In short,

uses-and-gratifications research allows no possibility for social criticism or social change.

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

If uses-and-gratifications research fails to adequately describe the psychological relationship between a media product and its audience, perhaps looking more directly at the psychological state of the audience would be more helpful. Here, we are going to consider some of the dimensions of an individual's psychological state, recognizing that such states are always in part the product of social conditions and relationships. In particular, we are concerned here with the *affective dimensions* of a person's psychology. Every affective state, such as feeling happy or being blue, varies in intensity and differs in character; thus you can be happy rather than sad, satisfied rather than desirous. You can also be more or less happy, more or less sad, more or less satisfied. We will consider three affective or noncognitive dimensions—emotions, moods, and pleasures—and their relationship to media use briefly.

Emotions

First, let's consider emotions. Media products try both to manipulate our emotions and to use emotions to produce some other effect (such as when advertisers use emotional appeals to try to get us to buy a product). Audiences, in turn, clearly use the media to produce emotional experiences for themselves. Many of us seem to enjoy going to movies that make us cry or cringe in fear or laugh at other people's foibles.

Interestingly, audiences do not seem to tire of such emotional uses of media products, even of the same product. People will watch a movie over and over, each time experiencing the same emotions, no matter how prepared they may be for the particularly moving scenes. Audiences cry at all the same times, every time, while watching *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, and, even after 30 years, it takes only two musical notes in a darkened room for an audience to recognize and react to *Jaws*.

In fact, audiences sometimes seem to use the media to learn about their emotional lives or to produce certain emotional states. Simon Frith (1981), the leading writer on popular music in England, has argued, for example, that the narratives of popular songs provide ways for fans to make private experiences public through a musical

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language of emotions. We learn how to feel about romance or the breakup of a romance by listening to a shared set of musical texts.

Think about your own use of music: When you are in love, there are particular songs that you play that capture and interpret your intense feelings. Conversely, many music fans create a "hate tape," which is full of songs expressing and making sense of the anger and rage they feel at another person when that person has deserted them. Country music is particularly overt in its constant narration of emotions and love stories.

Sometimes the emotional dimension is itself used for other purposes. For example, the popularity of horror films as a dating activity among adolescents and young adults is partially the result of a boy's desire to impress his date by demonstrating his ability to withstand the shock and horror of the film. He has to assume that females are the weaker sex, and thus unable to cope with the grotesque and shocking horror of such movies (and perhaps then more likely to cuddle close to him for "protection"). Ien Ang (1985), a Dutch media researcher now working in Australia, performed a study of Dutch female viewers of *Dallas*, attempting to see how these viewers (economically and politically at odds with the characters of the TV show) made sense of and enjoyed the show. She coined the term *emotional realism* to explain the ways in which, even if audiences couldn't identify with either the material circumstances of the show (the wealthy) or the particulars of the plot (adultery, shady business dealings, and so on), they could identify with the emotions expressed (anger, sadness, desire, and so on). At the same time, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) found that *Dallas*, despite becoming the first global TV hit program, failed in Japan. It did so, they argued, because Japanese viewers could not identify emotionally with the main characters; the program was emotionally unrealistic to them, since, their Japanese informants argued, younger people could *never* treat their elders with such disrespect.

Mood

The second affective state is mood. One of the most successful media products of the past couple of decades has been MTV. When Robert Pitman first conceived of a 24-hour music video channel, he described it as a "mood enhancer." What does this mean? What is a mood? Did you ever wake up on the wrong side of the bed? Conversely, have you ever awakened feeling wonderful? In both cases, the cause of

your mood is likely to be entirely unknown, but what is clear is that your entire day, and everything that happens to you during the day, is colored by that state of feeling, that mood. Things that might have made you happy yesterday now only make you angry, or vice versa. Here, again, we can use music as an example, for as many critics have commented, music is one of the most powerful means of affecting people's moods. The omnipresence of background music testifies to the power of music. One psychologist described the affective dimension of music listening this way:

Why, when I first saw the Grand Canyon and the Piazza San Marco and the Alps, did I feel that things had all been more moving in Cinerama? Why? Because both God and Man forgot to put in the music . . . in one sense, it's no surprise that music grabs us—it's supposed to. But once you look at the process, it seems quite miraculous that people can bowl one another over just by jiggling sound waves. (Rosenfeld, 1985, p. 48)

Think about the power of music in your life: Think about the lullabies that parents sing to their children or the ritual music that every society has (Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, played at almost every graduation, or Mendelssohn's *Wedding March* or the hymns of religious services). Recall the enormous power that you feel in a rock club or concert. Think of how you sing to yourself in the shower, on the street, while you are working, when you feel lonely or happy or afraid. In fact, many writers on popular music would agree with Robert Pitman's assumptions about music use: Music fans are, in fact, highly sophisticated in their ability to choose different music in order to manipulate their moods. You can use music to get yourself out of a bad mood, to work off negative energy, or to wallow in your misery.

Music can construct socially shared moods that enhance people's commitment to action. The civil rights movement is perhaps the best-known instance of this use of music in recent generations. Protesters in the 1950s and early 1960s would sing songs, not only to gird themselves for protest marches and the upcoming battles, but also to cope with their fears and to spread an affective blanket over the group. In many cases, this intensity brought new recruits into the community of civil rights protesters. "We Shall Overcome" is emblematic of this movement, just as "Solidarity Forever" was emblematic of an early twentieth-century union movement. Of course, this has been true

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for ages and applied as well to war songs and to both the suffragette and the abolition movement.

Pleasure

Finally, let us turn our attention to the question of pleasure. If you ask most people why they watch particular television programs, read particular novels, or listen to particular musical genres, they are likely to answer that they enjoy them, that they get some pleasure out of them. Pleasure is a deceptively simple notion; but it is, in fact, a very complex phenomenon, and we actually know very little about the mechanisms of the production of pleasure. The term *pleasure* covers a number of different relationships. The various ways in which pleasure is derived from media use signals the complexity of people's affective relationship to the media. Consider some of the different meanings of pleasure and the different ways pleasure is accomplished. There is, for example, the comfort of escaping from or forgetting negative situations, the sense of reinforcement that comes with identifying with a particular character, the thrill of sharing another person's emotional life, the stature of expertise and collecting, the euphoria of vegging out, the release that comes from relaxation and putting aside troubles and stress, the fun of breaking rules, the satisfaction of doing what you are supposed to, the fulfillment of desires and needs, the exhilaration of shocking others through "rebellion," and the relief of catharsis.

All of these are involved in the normal and common relationship to media products. People engage with specific products because, in some way and form, they are entertaining, they provide a certain measure of enjoyment, they are pleasurable. Think about your own pleasures in media use. Do you derive some pleasure out of every encounter with media? Are they always the same pleasures? Are there particular media products that regularly elicit the same kinds of pleasure?

One of the most heated debates about media today concerns the political implications of media pleasures. There are several positions on this issue. At one extreme are the critics who would morally police media use and excise pleasurable material they find objectionable. These people argue that particular pleasures are both evil and politically dangerous. These kinds of attacks have been made against popular culture throughout its history. The constant attacks on rock and roll since its inception—attacking the sexual energy of the music and often

identifying it as “Black” music—provides one of the clearest examples. (See Box 9.2, “Attacks on Rock and Roll.”)

BOX 9.2

Attacks on Rock and Roll

As soon as rock became a national hit in the mid-1950s, ministers, politicians, and educators launched campaigns to have it banned. Its sexuality, its association with Black music and culture, its supposed violence, its volume, its lack of quality, its appeal to youth, all became the subject of attacks. Many cities banned rock-and-roll concerts in the 1950s, and newspapers printed editorials attacking its lyrics, its sexual rhythms, and the violence it seemed to stimulate. Rock was blamed for juvenile delinquency, it was linked with the devil and the communist threat, and it was accused of trying to turn “America’s children” into animals, which in the racist language of the time, often meant that it made White kids act like Black kids.

All of this came to a head in a series of congressional “payola” hearings held in 1958 and 1959 in front of the Special Committee on Legislative Oversight. The subtext of this hearing was a battle between ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) and BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated). These two organizations controlled music publishing and song licensing. ASCAP represented the traditional music publishing industry and had largely closed its doors to the new sounds of rhythm and blues and rock and roll, which BMI had welcomed. So, the hearings were, at one level, a battle between competing economic interests in the music industry. The explicit topic of the hearings was *payola*: a practice widely practiced (and still practiced) throughout the music and radio industries by which a record company or representative would pay a radio station or disc jockey to play its record on the air. Because radio exposure was quite important to the marketing of records—and had become even more important since the 1950s—and because there were more records than could be played, the practice was considered normal and acceptable. ASCAP accused BMI of subverting “good music” by using payola to promote the horrible sounds of rock and roll. The interesting thing about the hearings was that the vast majority of the testimony was given over to attacks on rock-and-roll music.

The result of the so-called payola hearings was not an end to the practice of payola but a large-scale dismantling of the radio system that

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had grown up around rock and roll. Many of the best rock disc jockeys (Alan Freed was only the most famous) lost their jobs; many radio stations changed their format and either gave up rock and roll or started to separate the choice of music to be played (programming) from those who were playing it (and who knew and loved it).

The attacks on rock and roll all but disappeared in the 1960s and 1970s, surfacing as a major issue only occasionally, such as when then Vice President Spiro Agnew called upon radio stations to stop playing rock music as it advocated drugs and revolution. Some religious leaders continued to attack the music, and fundamentalist Christians accused rock and roll (as well as rock-and-roll musicians) of advocating and participating in Satan worship and using backmasking (the practice of recording a message backward on a record) and subliminal messages to influence listeners against their will.

However, in the mid-1980s, the attacks on rock took on a new seriousness and visibility, and legitimate spokespeople took up the cause. In 1986, Allan Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago, published *The Closing of the American Mind*, a bestseller that seems to lay the blame for America's problems at the doorstep of rock music.

Also in 1985, four women who were married to key figures in the government, including Tipper Gore and Susan Baker, formed the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), which advocated the voluntary labeling of records and videos. The PMRC did not attack all rock music, only music produced since 1970, and its leaders advocated giving parents more information and authority to decide what records their children could purchase and listen to. In September of that year, the Senate Commerce Committee held hearings on the problem of pornography in rock lyrics. Although no official consequences resulted, the music industry responded to the pressure by adopting a voluntary labeling program, which has not proven very successful.

At the same time, local and federal officials have been involved in a number of court cases that have charged rock groups (and record sellers) under obscenity laws. Local cities are increasingly trying to regulate the appearance of rock groups, and even the American Medical Association has recommended that doctors monitor children's tastes in music as a sign of psychological problems. For a fuller description of these attacks, see Martin and Segrave's *Anti-Rock* (1988) and *You Got a Right to Rock* (Rock and Roll Confidential, 1991).

Sources: Grossberg (1992), Martin and Segrave (1988), and Rock and Roll Confidential (1991).

At the other extreme, some critics argue that pleasure itself is a form of political resistance to the pressures of the dominant institutions and values of modern society. John Fiske (1989), a contemporary media critic, argues that the very fact that pleasure is derived from popular culture makes popular culture threatening to the status quo of the cultural mainstream. Fiske assumes that pleasure is always disruptive of social structures and cannot be controlled or regulated by them. Therefore, it is quite understandable why popular culture would always be the object of serious attack. And those attacks further prove that taking pleasure in popular culture is itself an act of resistance.

In between these two extremes are a number of positions that we need to briefly consider. Some people, especially feminist critics such as Janice Radway (1984), argue that women who consume serial narratives, such as soap operas and romance novels, are able to derive particular pleasures from texts that are in many ways oppressive to them. For example, the narrative of romance novels may reinforce images of weak women dominated by strong and powerful men. Radway's research demonstrates that pleasure goes beyond this dominating narrative. Radway found that regular readers of romance novels often interpret the narrative to give the woman more power in the relationship, and thus they construct a more pleasurable image for themselves of the role of women in contemporary life. She also found that for many of these women, the act of reading romance novels (sometimes more than a dozen novels a week) provided them with the only occasion for their own time, time when they were not responsible to other members of their family and to various domestic demands. In fact, Radway interprets this as a kind of resistance to the fact that women who do not work outside the home are constantly subject to the demands of others. By maintaining their right to enjoy romance reading, they refuse to define themselves as the object of other people's demands.

Another position argues that the political implications of pleasures can be understood only indirectly. Pleasure has to be judged in context. Consider Lawrence Grossberg's (1992, 1997) argument about the historical significance of the pleasures of rock-and-roll music. Grossberg argues that the pleasures of listening to rock-and-roll music are "empowering," that is, that they energize audience members and provide them with a sense that they can act in the world and accomplish something. To use a very specific example, Grossberg points to the apparent

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paradox of dancing to rock music. The more you dance, the more exhausted you become, the more you feel like dancing, and the more you can dance. The music actually generates an energy that keeps its audience going. These pleasures, this empowerment, however, have no direct political implications. What one does with the energy, with the feeling that some action is now possible, will be defined by the social context. Thus Grossberg argues that precisely because rock music is energizing, it can be used by conservative political forces as easily as by liberal political forces. Both Lee Atwater, head of the elder George Bush's first campaign for president and ex-chairman of the Republican National Party, and Bill Clinton, when he ran for president in 1992, mobilized the power of rock and roll to attempt to involve people in their political campaigns.²

THE SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

Consumption is a social activity; that is, it involves people doing a certain kind of work (buying and using media) in particular places, often with other people. Consequently, consumption is implicated in many different relations of power with others and with institutions. In this section, we will consider some of the contexts and consequences of the social nature of the activity of consuming media.

The Geography of Media Consumption

Think of all the places you consume the media: in your room, in common spaces like a living room, in your car, in sports bars or music clubs, outdoors on the beach or by the pool or on the streets, in classrooms, as you walk through malls and department stores, at your workplace, in restaurants, in subways, trains, and buses, and in countless other places. Where you consume the media has an important influence on how you consume them, and it might also be said that the media themselves shape the geography of everyday life.

We can make some sense of this broad array of sites of consumption: Media are consumed in public spaces, private spaces, and transitional spaces. Another way of dividing these sites might be to differentiate between those places in which the media are the primary activity (movie theaters, for instance) and those places in which media are background

(Muzak and music videos in stores; see, for example, McCarthy, 2001, on television in public space).

A third aspect of the geography of consumption is whether the presence of a medium brings people together or sends them off into personal spaces. James Carey (1969) and Denis McQuail (2000) have called these differences *centripetal* and *centrifugal*. For example, movies can be thought of as having a centripetal force, because, in viewing a movie, the audience is brought together. The personal stereo has a more centrifugal impact, because it is used alone. The act of reading silently to oneself is always a solitary activity. Even if an entire class is told to read the same page in the textbook at the same time, they all do so individually. We should note that sometimes the force of a medium is largely the result of the technology itself (the personal stereo cannot easily be shared), whereas, at other times, the force is the result of how people use a particular technology (for example, when TV is viewed in a community center or when people read aloud to others).

The most important private space of media consumption is the home. It is in the home, for instance, that children first become introduced to media. Most people's first memories of the newspaper is seeing their parents read it. Television is in nearly every American home. Magazines and books for children are found in their homes. And video brings movies and special children's programs into the home.

The media technologies that first came into the home—the book, the phonograph, the radio, television—were thought to have a centripetal force within the private space of the home. That is, the family gathered around the medium; media use was a shared, communal activity. At one time, middle-class families read or made music together in their sitting room. Similarly, early phonographs and crystal set radios were found in American living rooms. Television, when it came along in the late 1940s and 1950s, replaced the radio as the central focus of family activities in living rooms. Today, "home theaters" are common. There are multiple reasons for these trends. First, the devices often were large and/or expensive, intended for such communal use. Second, such use legitimated the new technologies and helped to allay fears that their use would undercut traditional family relations. For instance, media historian Lynn Spigel (1992) has found the early advertising for television sets (on television and in magazines) often quite self-consciously created the image of the family gathered around the television set in the

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living room in order to encourage families to buy this new technology as a family activity.

In every case, as the technologies have become cheaper, smaller, more mobile, and more personal, their effects became more centrifugal. The transistor radio, for example, enabled teenagers in the 1950s to listen to their radio (and thus to rock and roll) in the privacy of their own bedrooms. And by the 1980s, more than three quarters of American households had more than one television set, so that children often had their own set to use.

It is also interesting to observe how over time, different media have become more or less appropriate to different spaces in the home. Increasingly, middle-class and upper-middle-class American families tend to locate the largest television set in a family room or playroom, which is differentiated from the living room where guests are entertained. But the main music system is likely to remain in the living room; there may be others in the playroom and in bedrooms. This distinction seems to be based on the assumption that music can serve as background, even for socializing, whereas television demands focused attention. As we shall see, this assumption is often false.

It is also important to recognize that the introduction of media technologies into the home has reshaped the geography of domestic space and life as well. Today, the use of large-screen televisions and sophisticated surround-sound stereo systems requires rooms typically larger than those designed for suburban homes. The proliferation of electronic media has resulted in new electrical codes and requirements for wiring houses. The introduction of a home computer usually requires power outlets and phone jacks (or cable connections) in close proximity, but it also raises questions of its proper space (in a quiet home office or bedroom or in a more open space where parents can monitor their children's use; see Cassidy, 2001). And some have speculated that putting small-screen televisions in the kitchen has led to the rebirth of "breakfast nooks" and "eat-in kitchens" in newer homes.³ The availability of headphones for everything from televisions and stereos to electronic keyboards has made it less important to insulate the walls between rooms for sound.

It is surprising that when we think about the context of media consumption, we typically think about individuals consuming media in private places. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that an enormous part of actual media consumption takes place in public spaces. There

are social rules regarding such consumption, which each of us has to learn about. (See Box 9.3, "TV in Public.") Have you ever taken a preschool child to a movie? They don't know the rules about keeping quiet, not standing up, not annoying the people around them. The ongoing debates about the noise levels of music played on car radios or boom boxes suggest that the rules of such public media consumption have not been socially agreed upon yet. Likewise, social rules are still being formed for cell phone use in public as well as public computer use. And now that TVs and DVD players are found in minivans and SUVs (sport utility vehicles), there are issues if content played on those TVs is visible outside the vehicle and if that content is inappropriate for the public context (for example, R-rated or pornographic content).

BOX 9.3

TV in Public

At some time, most of us have watched television in public spaces. Communication researcher Dafna Lemish (1982) conducted a participant observation study of the rules involved in watching television in public areas. She wanted to know what common knowledge people have about "how" to watch television in public: Should you talk to the person sitting next to you in the bar? Who has the right to change the channel? What are the guidelines or expectations about what can be done when watching television in public?

Lemish describes four rules of public viewing. She inferred such rules by observing hundreds of people viewing television in a variety of public places.

1. *A public viewer of television adjusts to the setting.* Clearly, shouting out advice to the football coach while watching a game in a bar was considered acceptable behavior, but it wouldn't be acceptable while watching the TV at a Sears store. Lemish noted that viewers adapted their behavior from public setting to public setting. This was the most obvious of all the rules she observed.
2. *A public viewer of television adjusts to other viewers.* Lemish observed television viewers trying to fit in to the social group watching television in any given setting. Fitting in involved being open for talking if other people in the group were talking about the

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program; keeping a safe and civil distance from other viewers (not encroaching on other people's space); and giving angry looks or even a "shush" to people talking too loudly in a group when the rest of the group was trying to watch the set.

3. *A public viewer adjusts to the television set.* Lemish observed that people walking by the television set would nod toward it or comment on the program; she watched viewers act as though the TV set itself was what she called a "communicative partner and not merely a physical object":

For example, viewers would rarely leave the viewing area in the middle of a segment. While it could be argued simply that viewers were involved in the program or that they were showing respect for other viewers, this observer could not avoid the impression that viewers acted as if leaving in the middle was rude and inconsiderate. (pp. 765–766)

4. *A public viewer of television is open for television-related social interaction.* In fact, the "most observable and consistent aspect of the public context for viewing was the role television served in the initiation and sustaining of social interactions among participants" (p. 767). Indeed, television in public places most often served the function of allowing strangers to find a common topic—the program—to talk about, to initiate conversations that might have seemed awkward or even impossible without the presence of the television. People seem to expect that when watching television in a public place, it is acceptable for other viewers to approach them and talk about the show. In short, the act of watching TV was a public activity.

We can distinguish several different forms of public spaces for media consumption. Some spaces or buildings are designed for media consumption or for activities in which media consumption is an integral part. The best examples are movie theaters, television and music bars, and concert venues. The activities that take place within such spaces often change with new technologies. Large-screen televisions and music videos have invaded bars and dance clubs and changed the ways people act in these spaces. Similarly, the invention of DiamondVision (those huge television screens used in arenas during concerts and sports events) has made possible larger audiences, and changed the ways

people attend to concerts or games watching the screen and the field alternatively (Siegel, 2002).

In some spaces, the media are intentionally provided as background to another sort of activity. The use of Muzak in a variety of public spaces—including workplaces—is a good example. Or consider the multiple television sets in department stores; these are to market the sets themselves, to baby-sit the children of shopping parents, to distract bored shoppers, and to advertise new products or sales. Television has invaded professional spaces: Chris Whittle, the creator of Channel One (a commercial news program for schools), also created first magazines and then video channels for doctors' and dentists' offices; and CNN has a separate Airport News Network, with CNN programming but also with airtime sold to advertisers seeking the largely upscale air travel market. Televisions have also made appearances in McDonald's restaurants and in hotel elevators.

The media also exist in spaces that are between public and private: streets, transportation, parks, and so on. Our favorite: Using the digital readout on gasoline pumps to advertise hotdogs and soft drinks for sale inside the service station. In fact, the presence of the media in such transitional places fundamentally transforms the nature of these spaces. The existence of car radios and transistor radios in the 1940s and 1950s turned street corners and drive-ins into sites for a new type of youth culture that was organized around music. An even more striking example took place in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe, when radios were placed in apartment windows; people gathered in the streets to listen to the constant stream of revolutionary news. A different transformation has been achieved by the personal stereo, which has converted the public nature of transitional spaces into private, isolated bubbles of media consumption.

Indeed, every space and every place of everyday life is now a media space; no place is free of media messages and their complex patterns of consumption. The complexity of media consumption, however, owes much to the multiple forms of social relationships that define and shape media consumption.

Media Consumption and Social Relations

One of the most common observations that people have made about the use of media in everyday life is that the media often function

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in conjunction with other activities and social relationships. Consider what you do when you are consuming media products. Maybe the television is on and you are . . . eating, sleeping, talking, doing homework, reading, exercising, cooking, making out, writing letters, doing chores, or talking on the phone. Or music is playing and you are drinking, dancing, talking, or watching television. Clearly, what you are doing while consuming media products changes how you consume those products. The average viewer is unable to recall more than one or two stories from a newscast as little as a half hour after viewing; this finding is in part explained by the fact that TV watching is usually a secondary activity; that is, when we are watching TV, we are most often doing something else as well (see, for example, Robinson & Levy, 1986).

Our experience of consuming media products depends on whether that consumption is our primary activity or a secondary activity, and it depends as well on what other activities we are engaging in, how invested we are in the different activities, and how much the different activities compete with one another. For example, while we drive, we can pay attention to the music on the radio; while we read, we may not be listening carefully.

Sometimes producers of media products count on our doing several activities at once, and they may attempt to structure the media product in such a way as to enable us to do so. CD players that play multiple disks allow us to listen to music for hours at a time.

Equally important to the context of activities associated with media consumption are the social relationships that surround particular acts of media consumption. Sometimes, we do indeed consume media alone. But most of the time, there are other people present (if not involved) with us. Consider four sets of social relations: familial, peer group, anonymous, and institutional. The first two are easily pictured, although their relationships to media consumption are the most complex. So let's consider first anonymous and institutional social relations and media consumption.

Anonymous Social Relations

As we consider media consumption in the context of anonymous social relations, we mean all of those occasions that involve the presence of strangers, such as viewing television in public places such as

bars, going to concerts or dance clubs, or reading a newspaper on a bus or subway. Typically, there are social rules that govern how we interact with those around us and with the media product. For instance, it is considered rude in our culture, or at least aggressive, to read over another person's shoulder or to get up and change TV channels in a public setting. In some music clubs, the space of each dancing couple has to be respected; at others, that space is intentionally and violently violated. Any music fan knows what is appropriate at a particular kind of concert. The presence of other people is often crucial to defining the setting and hence the activity of media consumption, despite the fact that the relationships are totally impersonal. It's clear, too, that the response of others to the media message may have an impact on how we perceive the message: For example, a comedy movie may be funnier in a theater when everyone is laughing than if we watch it on the VCR at home. Likewise, the cult film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* works much better in a theater with the audience acting out scenes and shouting at the screen than it does if one is alone in one's living room watching it.

Institutional Relationships

Institutional relationships are the contexts of media consumption in which we are aware of the presence of other people who have power over us. Such hierarchical relations can be found at school with the teacher, at work with the boss, at church with the preacher, or in any organization with an official representative present. Such relationships are often quite constrained and uncomfortable: The social relationship makes us self-conscious. Do you giggle at the wrong places? Are you too exuberant in your enjoyment? Are you embarrassed by the sexuality of your own response? We see examples of this when we have occasions to play popular music in our classes. Students are often unsure how to respond. Many will sit through quite danceable tunes not even nodding a head or tapping a foot, looking much like they were trying to be serious and scholarly.

Media in the Family

As we have said, the family is an important media context; it is within the family that tastes about media products and notions of

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appropriate behavior with media are formed. Researchers studying the socializing influences of the media find that adolescent children of parents who are well informed and interested in public affairs are themselves better informed and more interested in public affairs than others of their age (Morley, 1986). This finding should not come as a surprise: These young people have been raised in homes with information-rich media environments (those, for example, with daily newspapers, news magazines, and lots of books), and they likely have modeled their parents' attitudes, values (that keeping up with the world is important), and behaviors (reading and paying attention to news). Furthermore, and also not surprisingly, researchers observing families' use of media in the home, specifically television use, have found that the relationships of *power* within the family are reproduced and structure the social relationships of media consumption in the home. In many households, the father often controls the remote control device. The older siblings in the household probably control what the kids will watch. Typically, the male's choice of program will dominate. (See Box 9.4, "Gender and Power in TV Watching.")

BOX 9.4

Gender and Power in TV Watching

British communication researcher David Morley's (1986) observations of men and women watching television led him to note that *how* they watch says a great deal about power relations in families:

Men and women offer clearly contrasting accounts of their viewing habits—in terms of their differential power to choose what they view, how much they view, their viewing styles, and their choice of particular viewing material. However, I am not suggesting that these empirical differences are attributes of their essential biological characteristics as men and women. Rather, I am trying to argue that these differences are the effects of the particular social roles that these men and women occupy within the home. Moreover, . . . this sample primarily consists of lower middle-class and working-class nuclear families (all of whom are white) and I am not suggesting that the particular pattern of gender relations within the home found here (with all the consequences which that pattern has for viewing behavior) would necessarily be replicated either in nuclear families from a different class or ethnic background, or in households of different types with the same class and ethnic

backgrounds. Rather it is always a case of how gender relations interact with, and are formed differently within, these different contexts.

However, aside from these qualifications, there is one fundamental point which needs to be made concerning the basically different positioning of men and women within the domestic sphere. . . . The essential point here is that the dominant model of gender relations within this society (and certainly within that sub-section of it represented in my sample) is one in which the home is primarily defined for men as a site of leisure—in distinction to the “industrial time” of their employment outside the home—while the home is primarily defined for women as a sphere of work (whether or not they also work outside the home). This simply means that in investigating television viewing in the home, one is by definition investigating something which men are better placed to do wholeheartedly, and which women seem only to be able to do distractedly and guiltily, because of their continuing sense of their domestic responsibilities. Moreover, this differential positioning is given a greater significance as the home becomes increasingly defined as the “proper” sphere of leisure, with the decline of public forms of entertainment and the growth of home-based leisure technologies such as video, etc. . . .

Masculine power is evident in a number of the families as the ultimate determinant on occasions of conflict over viewing choices. . . . More crudely, it is even more apparent in the case of those families who have an automatic control device. None of the women in any of the families use the automatic control device regularly. A number of them complain that their husbands use the control device obsessively, channel flicking across programs when their wives are trying to watch something else. Characteristically, the control device is the symbolic possession of the father (or of the son, in the father’s absence) which sits “on the arm of Daddy’s chair” and is used almost exclusively by him. It is a highly visible symbol of condensed power relations. (pp. 6–8)

Source: Copyright ©1986 from *Gender and Power in TV Watching* by David Morley. Reproduced by permission of Routledge/Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.

Peers and Media Use

Even at home, you may be consuming media with people other than your family. Whether you go to a movie on a date or with friends, whether you watch *Gilmore Girls* with your roommate, whether you watch *American Idol* in a common lounge with fellow students, or whether you bring your best friend into your bedroom to hear the latest music and to learn the latest dance steps, peer relationships among children and young adults provide a major set of social relationships surrounding media consumption.

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Research on adolescents (Morley, 1992; Press, 1991) has found that in questions of style—such as what to wear, how to style your hair, what media to watch, read, and listen to—peers are more important than family for most adolescents. In many cases, adolescents define their taste in relation to media, and, on the basis of media preferences, they distinguish their friends or peers from other peer groups. Think back to your high school. Can you remember the different cliques in your school? How did they dress? What music did they listen to? Did they ever socialize with one another? Numerous teenage movies, such as *Mean Girls*, *American Pie*, *Heathers*, or even *Clueless*, are based on these different peer group structures and the role that media consumption and style play in identifying adolescent subcultures.

These differences in social relationships and activities surrounding media consumption are not the same for all people. They vary along a number of dimensions: There are significant differences across the age span from childhood to senior citizenship. Clearly, peer groups are more important to children and adolescents; older people tend to spend more time with the media by themselves or with one other person. These relationships also vary by social class, gender, race, and nationality. According to research by David Morley (1992) in Great Britain and Andrea Press (1991) in the United States, working-class family TV viewing tends to be more hierarchically structured than does middle-class family viewing.

Fans, Fashion, and Subcultures

When some individuals in the audience identify themselves with the media product, a particular media star, or a particular style depicted in the media, they can be thought of as fans or as followers of media fads or fashions. No one is a fan of all the media products they consume, for being a fan entails a different sort of commitment, a different degree of investment in the media product. Fans use particular media products or celebrities to define their own identity. Fandom is a matter of degree: For some, it just means buying every single live Pearl Jam album or buying an album from the Dave Matthews Band as soon it comes on the market, reading articles about these celebrities, and sharing the taste publicly. For others, fandom can become a matter of style, as they imitate the celebrity. For yet others, fandom defines a major part of their identity and a major activity of

their life. The hip-hop subculture, focused on music and clothing style, is one example.

Fandom can bring members of the audience together to celebrate their interest in some media star or product; in this way, fandom relates to a peer group. A whole collection of activities can be involved in being a fan: fan clubs, fanzines, and conventions. Some fan clubs go on long past the death of their celebrity: consider, for example, Elvis Presley fans. Gilbert Rodman (1996) has pointed out that Elvis is far more popular, and is making much more money, dead than he ever did alive.

During the 1940s and 1950s, movie magazines were popular vehicles for indulging fans' interest in stars. Since the 1970s, mainstream magazines such as *People* and *Us* as well as television shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *Extra* have joined in. These media outlets offer opportunities for audiences to follow the lives of their favorite stars. The talk show circuit of morning news shows and the late night talk shows offer opportunities both to create fans for budding stars and to feed the frenzy of fans. In a slightly different way, music magazines are available for the different sorts of fans within popular music.

The growing importance of celebrity and fandom as a part of people's identity is very much the result of media since 1900. In fact, it is only in the twentieth century that people began to find their images of heroes in the media. According to Leo Lowenthal (1961), who studied biographies appearing in American magazines from the 1800s to the 1930s, there was a major shift in the kinds of idols or celebrities in American popular culture, from *idols of production* to *idols of consumption* during this period. In the 1800s and early 1900s, most magazine biographies celebrated famous men of business, such as John D. Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil Company, or Andrew Carnegie of U.S. Steel. By the 1930s, after the rise of the movie and radio industries and the development of public relations experts, there was a shift in the types of people who became celebrities and heroes in popular culture. These new idols of consumption were people involved in various aspects of American entertainment and sports: movie stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford, radio stars such as George Burns and Gracie Allen, bandleaders such as Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, and baseball players such as Babe Ruth. Long before there was Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt, there was Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, whose marriage and divorce riveted the nation. Long before people mourned the deaths of John Lennon or

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Kurt Cobain, Americans cried at the unexpected death of Rudolph Valentino.

The transformation of the hero figures in American culture was not accidental. It depended to a large extent on the development of an industry designed to promote the media and to create fans. The 1930s and 1940s were the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, where stars were under contract with a single studio, such as MGM or Warner Brothers. The studio "made" stars not only by featuring them in films but also by using the studio's publicity agents to assure that the stars appeared in newspaper gossip columns, in magazine feature articles, and on radio shows.

The Hollywood system of today is far different. Stars no longer are under contract with studios, and publicity is handled by stars' own agents. The process of producing the seemingly endless amount of information about media stars and the film and television industry requires an industry of its own; publicists, creative managers, public relations specialists, and a variety of tabloid and other magazines are required to feed fans' interests. Although media producers may not be able to create stars as successfully as they have in the past, they are quick to exploit them when they arise. Most major stars are handled by a small number of major firms, such as Creative Artists Agency (CAA), Music Corporation of America (MCA), and the William Morris Agency.

American presidential politics has followed a similar track in the same period. Until about 1960, the two major parties basically ran presidential campaigns. Since then, candidates have assembled their own campaign teams, complete with publicity agents, marketing and fund-raising experts, and pollsters, to compete in party primaries. Although they still need the party nomination, the campaigns are their own operation, not the party's.

Fans can also be fans of particular objects or styles. For example, over the years, the media promoted such unpredictable successes as coonskin caps, Hula Hoops, and pet rocks. Also, stars' "styles" of dressing and talking have started fashion trends. For example, hip-hop singer/producer/personality Sean "P. Diddy" Combs bootstrapped a music career into clothing design, and his Sean John fashion line now grosses several hundred million dollars a year worldwide.

Although almost all of us have been caught up in various popular fads and been fans of some popular culture, for most of us, that is as far as it goes. But sometimes groups of youths have taken their relationship

to popular culture and style one step further: They use their taste to define and mark their primary and most visible identity. What does this mean? A member of a *subculture* visibly displays his or her identification with the icon of popular culture. This presentation of self defines the fan's identity. Such identities are often disapproved of by parents, teachers, the media, the government, and sometimes even other youth. The punk, skateboard, and biker subcultures are easy to identify because of their relationship to popular culture, for example. (Notice that the yuppies were never a subculture in this sense, because a yuppie is not an identity that people took on for themselves and visibly wore in the face of social ostracism. Similarly, Trekkers are not a subculture, although they may occasionally wear their identity visibly—such as when they dress up in costumes for conventions—because the identity of being a Trekker is not always present for its owner—Trekkers have other lives and take on other social identities.)

Society's response to youth subcultures—whenever they are perceived as a potential threat to mainstream middle-class youth—takes the form of a moral panic. The presence of the subculture becomes seen as a sign of moral decay and as a threat to the stability of the society itself. In the United States, teenage and motorcycle gangs since the 1950s have been the most frequent and troublesome subcultures. Even in the 1990s, the question of gangs, gang membership, and gang colors still evoked powerful and often violent reactions across the country, as movies such as *Colors* and *Boyz 'n the Hood* represent and in some cases provoke.

Presumably, anyone can become a member of a subculture: If you have the right taste, if you look right, if you talk and behave according to the right codes, you too can be a punk or a homeboy or a surfer. But, obviously, not everyone chooses to take on such a visible cultural identity, because it is usually seen not only as an act of rebellion but as an act of delinquency as well.

Sociologists argue that youth who participate in subcultures appropriate cultural products to construct an identity as an attempt to confront the contradictions they feel in their own lives. For example, poor kids might feel a real conflict between the optimistic promise of their youthfulness and the sense of hopelessness in which their economic position places them. Their style, then, becomes a sort of magical solution to the problem: The 1960s "mods" style (which copied Italian "modern" fashion) signaled British working-class youth's desire to be upwardly mobile when that was almost impossible. Similarly,

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according to British cultural critic Dick Hebdige (1980), the late 1970s punk style in Britain and the United States represented youthful attempts to break down the hypocrisy of contemporary society by attacking its cultural codes. (See Box 9.5, "Dick Hebdige on Punks.")

BOX 9.5

Dick Hebdige on Punks

British media sociologist Dick Hebdige (1980) wrote one of the classic interpretations of punk subculture. Here are a few excerpts:

The most unremarkable and inappropriate items—a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon—could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion. Anything within or without reason could be turned into part of what Vivien Westwood called "confrontation dressing" so long as the rupture between "natural" and constructed context was clearly visible.

Objects borrowed from the most sordid of contexts found a place in the punks' ensembles: lavatory chains were draped in graceful arcs across chests encased in plastic bin-liners [garbage bags]. Safety pins were taken out of their domestic "utility" context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lips . . . "Cheap" trashy fabrics (PVC, plastic, lurex, etc.) in vulgar designs (e.g., mock leopard skin) and "nasty" colours, long discarded by the quality end of the fashion industry as obsolete kitsch, were salvaged by the punks and turned into garments . . . which offered self-conscious commentaries of the notions of modernity and taste. Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every women's magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen. . . . The perverse and abnormal were valued intrinsically. In particular, the illicit iconography of sexual fetishism was used to predictable effect. . . .

Of course, punk did more than upset the wardrobe. It undermined every relevant discourse. Thus dancing, usually an involving and expressive medium in British rock and mainstream pop cultures, was turned into a dumb show of bland robotics. . . .

The music was similarly distinguished from mainstream rock and pop. It was uniformly basic and direct in its appeal, whether through intention or lack of expertise. . . . Johnny Rotten succinctly defined punk's position on harmonics: "We're into chaos, not music." (pp. 107–109)

The safety pins and bin liners signified a relative material poverty which was either directly experienced and exaggerated or sympathetically assumed, and which in turn was made to stand for the spiritual paucity of everyday

life. . . . We could go further and say that even if the poverty was being parodied, the wit was undeniably barbed; that beneath the clownish make-up there lurked the unaccepted and disfigured face of capitalism; that beyond the horror circus antics a divided and unequal society was being eloquently condemned. However, if we were to go further still and describe punk music as the “sound of the Westway,” or the pogo as the “high rise leap,” or to talk of bondage as reflecting the narrow options of working-class youth, we would be treading on less certain ground. Such readings are both too literal and too conjectural. They are extrapolations from the subculture’s own prodigious rhetoric, and rhetoric is not self-explanatory; it may say what it means but it does not necessarily “mean” what it “says.” . . .

The punk subculture, like every other youth culture, was constituted in a series of spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc. It was through these adapted forms that certain sections of predominantly working-class youth were able to restate their opposition to dominant values and institutions. However, when we close in on specific items, we immediately encounter problems. What, for instance, was the swastika being used to signify? (pp. 115–116)

The punk ensembles . . . did not so much magically resolve experienced contradictions as *represent* the experience of contradiction itself in the form of visual puns (bondage, the ripped tee-shirt, etc.). (p. 121)

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The Availability of Media Consumption

It is a common myth in U.S. society that media consumption is equally available to all people: Because we have a “free marketplace” of media products, therefore everyone can consume—or so we like to think. This assumption underlies the media institutions’ defense of the current system of media production (“We give the people what they want”); it also underlies the process that makes the act of consumption into a site of resistance. Some feminists have criticized the position that consumption always involves resistance because it ignores the fact that consumption itself is a form of labor; it is something that some people (namely, women) have to do for the family. Moreover, of course, not everyone can afford to consume the products they desire.

There are two ways in which this inequality is structured: by the distribution of economic power or capital and by the distribution of

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cultural capital. Media consumption takes money and time; leisure time is a luxury that is simply not available to the poor, the homeless, or people that have to work more than one job to subsist. In addition, some media are more expensive than others, and they are often outside the practical reach of some significant portions of the population. These sorts of considerations have given rise to policy discussions about the media rich and media poor, both in this country and around the world. These debates have been especially prominent around the Internet: Are we creating a digital divide? As the United States invests more money in ever more expensive media technologies, are we increasing the gap and condemning the media poor to an ever-downward spiraling social position? This gap in the media haves and have-nots often cuts according to economic status (rich, poor), race, and gender. Though by now roughly equal numbers of men and women use the Internet, African Americans are less likely to go online than Whites, even at equivalent income levels (Lenhart, 2003).

The second way in which the inequality of media consumption is structured is by what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has called "the unequal distribution of cultural capital." *Cultural capital* refers to the knowledge and sensibility that enables one to comprehend and appreciate particular cultural products. For example, Bourdieu argues that people may not enjoy high art (such as classical music, art films, avant-garde writing) because they either do not have the knowledge necessary to understand what is going on or because they do not share the aesthetic outlook embodied in such cultural traditions. Even aside from considerations of art, many media products and technologies require specific knowledge or cultural capital. Take, for instance, computers. The computer revolution is occurring with a number of social inequalities that cannot be explained in purely economic terms; for example, women have generally been slower than men to adopt and become expert with computers. Partly this was due to the ways that computers were marketed. As they began to be seen as home appliances (as opposed to office machines), advertising for computers targeted women much more (Cassidy, 2001).

Critics have also pointed out differences in how different populations use the medium. For example, though women and men use the Internet in generally equal numbers, men focus on news and financial information while women tend to use the Internet for social contacts, health or religious information, or games. Leslie Regan Shade (2004)

points out, "There are tensions in gender differences, whereby women are using the Internet to reinforce their private lives and men are using the Internet for engaging in the public sphere" (p. 63). Differences in use are also evident across racial categories, with certain groups more likely to engage in certain activities online than others. For example, African Americans are more likely to seek religious information online or download music than Whites, but less likely to purchase items online or seek financial information (Madden, 2003).

Sometimes cultural capital is not just a question of knowledge or expertise, but a matter of shared assumptions, shared values about the nature and function of cultural consumption. For example, Bourdieu (1984) argues that the middle class, with its formal educational training (in the United States, typically a college education), judges cultural products in terms of aesthetic values (such as enlightening the human condition), whereas the working class tends to demand that culture embody strong moral principles as well as provide entertainment. Responding to the above findings that minorities such as African Americans tend to engage in entertainment activities online rather than informational activities (such as stocks, weather, or retail information), Lisa Nakamura (2004) argues that such a distinction is a particular cultural valuing of these activities and that for minority populations so-called entertainment activities may provide more relevant cultural information for them than any stock report (p. 75).

It is not surprising to find that media consumption follows the patterns of the distribution of economic and cultural capital in the country. Public broadcasting tends to attract richer, more highly educated, and older audiences than do the commercial networks. This is not a judgment about the quality of public broadcasting products or commercial television products. It is a description of the fact that consumption itself is socially determined even as it helps to determine and shape everyday life and our place in the social structure.

This chapter has been a discussion of what we do with the media and theories of what the media do *for* us. Next, we turn to the controversial question of what media do *to* us.

NOTES

1. Communication scholars John Stevens and William Porter (1973, p. 11) once quipped that audience research asking people what they liked to watch or read

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was like asking Chinese villagers if they liked rice. They would of course like rice, since they ate it every day and had little awareness of what other options were available.

2. During the 1992 political campaign, too, many commentators noted that Clinton's appearances on MTV, both with and without his saxophone, were an indication of his sophistication with the media, because they allowed him access to an important bloc of potential voters, unmediated by the sharp questioners he faced on network newscast appearances.

3. Similarly, most college dormitories required rewiring in the 1980s because of increased student power consumption—for music systems, computers, and televisions, which earlier generations of students did not own in such numbers.

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Media and Behavior

10

What do mass media do to us? What effects do they have on how we act? In the spring of 2003, a group of overweight young people sued McDonald's; the company was accused of making the plaintiffs obese. A year later, the American Psychological Association (APA) issues a report saying that advertising and marketing of a variety of super-sized, heavily sugared, and fat-laden products was indeed contributing to an obesity "epidemic" in the United States. Do "the media" make us fat?

As media researcher Joseph Klapper argued as long ago as 1960, the effects of mass media are not so easily provable. Klapper's position, which is often called the *limited effects model* of media influence, suggests that when (and if) media affect behavior, they do so through a web of other influencing factors, such as personality characteristics, social situations, and general climates of opinion and culture. Untangling this web of influence has occupied many researchers for years.

Nowhere is there more debate than in the realm of behavior about the power of the media to influence their audience. Since the beginning of media studies, some analysts have held that media strongly and directly affect the audience's behavior; others have argued for the more limited influence of media on behavior.

In the 1992 presidential campaign, Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the TV program *Murphy Brown* because the title character had