

Chapter 10

Media-Centered Perspectives

We talked about the pervasive nature of music in Chapter 8 and of visuals in Chapter 9. Perhaps even more dramatic, however, is the far-reaching way in which old and new media technology seems to permeate our very existence today. Although one could argue that media have been doing so since the 1960s, it has become increasingly true with the birth of each newly conceived and modified technology tool and application (e.g., Dresner, 2006; Finnemann, 2011; Logan, 2010; Meyrowitz, 1985, 2005; Postman, 1985, 1992). Thus, what I offer as “new” media technologies in this chapter may well be considered “old” or perhaps even obsolete by the time the book is published. Consequently, this chapter will instead focus more on methods by which to examine the role of media in influencing people and society. In doing so, I hope these ideas will translate in meaningful ways to how media technologies function rhetorically even as they continue to be transformed in the years to come.

As with the perspectives for examining music and visuals, a number of media-centered perspectives have been developed to demonstrate the unique ways in which the medium itself influences people and society. Researchers who study media effects commonly employ these perspectives. **Media effects research** uses social science methods to examine audience responses to media messages. Popular culture critics, however, may also draw upon many of these theories to examine the rhetorical arguments proposed in them.

In this chapter, we focus on several media-centered perspectives that propose how both old and new media function uniquely to influence how we believe and behave. To begin, we discuss what Marshall McLuhan (1964) and McLuhan and Fiore (1967) first conceptualized and then Neil Postman later labeled *media ecology theory* (Postman &

Weingartner, 1969). Then we consider *media logic* as first described by David Altheide and Robert Snow in 1979 followed by *social learning theory* as originally developed by Albert Bandura in 1977. Then we introduce *parasocial relationship theory* as first described by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 and *cultivation theory* as initially conceived by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976. As with each chapter, we close with some published and student sample analyses.

MEDIA ECOLOGY THEORY

Media ecology theory focuses expressly on how media and communication processes affect human perception, understanding, beliefs, and behaviors. Although media theory pioneer Marshall McLuhan (1964) is perhaps best known for coining the phrase *the medium is the message* (a.k.a. message), his ideas about the ways in which media and society interact and influence each other are far more significant than what the catchphrase might imply. Essentially, the theory suggests that media (1) infuse every act and action in society, (2) fix our perceptions and organize our experiences, and (3) tie the world together into a *global village* (McLuhan, 1962).

McLuhan's ideas garnered a good deal of criticism among academics during the 1970s and 1980s. Much of this criticism was actually based on their misinterpretation of the catchphrase to mean he dismissed the importance of message content altogether. What McLuhan, in fact, argued was that message content affects our conscious state and the medium affects our unconscious state. The medium is the message because "the medium's effects remain the same, no matter what the content" (Morrison, 2006, p. 178). The essence of media ecology theory can be explained according to several historical turning points.

Media History

First, during the *preliterate* [tribal] *era*, people communicated in face-to-face settings through storytelling and the spoken word. Then, the introduction of the phonetic alphabet "shattered those bonds of tribal man [sic]" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 173). During this *literate* [print] *era*, writing replaced speaking as the primary mode of communication. People no longer had to be physically present with others and, consequently, people became more individualistic. The invention of the printing press (a.k.a. *Gutenberg era*) intensified these effects of individualism, fragmentation, and isolation. Mass production also made it possible to deliver the same content over and over again. Thus, another effect of the medium was the production of citizens that were similar to one another.

The *electronic era* emerged with the invention of the telegraph, telephone, typewriter, radio, and TV. Since then, electronic and new media have become increasingly dominant forces pervading our lives and allowing us to be connected with others across time and space. In the 1960s, for example, TV allowed us to "see" the Vietnam War as if we were there while sitting in our living rooms. Today, computers, smartphones, the Internet, and wireless technology make doing so even more accessible 24/7. Similarly, telephones made it possible to talk synchronistically with far away others even though we were not physically

present with them. Today, we can do so nearly anytime and anyplace by talking, texting, Facebook chatting, or videoconferencing on smartphones and iPads as well as on laptop and desktop computers. And, records and phonographs made it possible to choose the music we wanted to hear without attending a live performance. Then we could purchase and play albums and CDs comprised of a set of musical numbers performed by a musical artist or group. Today, we often download only certain songs rather than entire albums. Neil Postman (1992) coined the term **technopoly** to describe the endless ways in which technology dominates our thinking and behaviors today. Essentially, we are living examples of McLuhan's predictions regarding the role and effects of electronic and new media on individuals and societies.

QUESTIONING YOUR ETHICS . . .

Today, groups of people with similar interests often join web forums or groups where they can share stories and support one another. Participants of *pro-ana* web forums support one another in claiming that anorexia is a "lifestyle choice" that should be respected by doctors and family. Considering the conflicting issues between freedom of speech and health and safety, do you think such forums are ethical? Explain.

Media Laws

After McLuhan died in 1980, his son published their notion of the **tetrad** as an organizing concept for understanding the impact of technology on society (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988):

(1) What does the medium enhance or amplify in society? For example, the telephone enhanced the face-to-face spoken word, and the cell phone further enhanced its effect. Similarly, checks made it possible to pay for goods without actually having cash in hand. Credit cards, ATM machines, and the Internet amplified these effects.

(2) What does the medium make obsolete? Some argue, for example, that the Internet is gradually making the traditional postal service obsolete, mobile phones are making landlines obsolete, and e-books and newspapers are making libraries and print journalism (i.e., printed copies of newspapers) obsolete. Similarly, computers have rendered typewriters pretty much obsolete.

(3) What does the medium retrieve from the past? Today, the Internet allows us to retrieve TV programs and commercials that aired in the 1950s and 1960s. We can also retrieve information on websites that have been retired via programs like the Way Back Machine (<http://web.archive.org>).

(4) What does the medium flip into when pushed to its limits? Many argue the Internet has immeasurably transformed how we think and behave. Many board games, for example,

morphed into video arcade games, then into computer games, and now into multiplayer online games. Writing and sending letters and greeting cards has morphed into e-mail, e-cards, Tweets, and Facebook posts.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

How do you feel when your mobile phone battery is dead, you have no bars, or you can't get Internet access? If you feel anxious, then you understand something of what McLuhan meant by "the medium is the message."

MEDIA LOGIC

Media logic focuses on the degree to which users tend to take the medium and its social uses for granted and, thus, fail to realize how it influences us to believe and behave about what is normal, good, desirable, and so forth. In their book *Media Logic*, David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979) argued that TV was the dominant medium in our culture. Since the publication of their book, however, new media technology has exploded far beyond TV. Some scholars have introduced the term **mediatization** to account for the "logic" of this new media and these new areas of application. As we mentioned earlier, many people today own personal computers, laptops, mobile and smartphones, iPads, iPods, and GPS navigation devices or apps. We own high-definition flat screen digital TVs with access to multiple network, cable, and satellite stations. We own digital recording and streaming devices that allow us to record and watch programs at our convenience. And many of us are regular users of any number of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Thus, media logic is probably even more prominent in shaping our beliefs and behaviors today than it was when Altheide and Snow first conceptualized the theory.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

How often do you do a quick Google search to find an answer to a question? Where and when? Do you consciously think about doing so, or is it second nature? The latter is an example of media logic.

Closely related to media ecology, media logic focuses specifically on the ways in which the medium and its social uses influence us about how to live. Last weekend, for example, I watched the Golden Globe Awards. I was doing laundry at the time, so I paused the program whenever I went to fold another load of clothes. If I missed something, I hit the reverse button so I could catch it again. I ended up going to bed before the program was over, so I hit the record button and watched the rest the next morning. It didn't take long, however, because I fast-forwarded through all the commercials. I didn't think twice about doing any of these things. This is an example of media logic.

I also become frustrated when I attempt to Google something or someone and fail to get the information I want quickly or when I want to get a quick overview of a concept on Wikipedia and the entry is underdeveloped. While watching the Golden Globes last weekend, for example, I wondered how old actress Helen Hunt was. A quick Google search provided the answer while I watched. Similarly, the other day my spouse and I were driving to pick up some groceries, and he asked me what the actual meaning of fondue was. A quick search online via my iPhone again provided the answer before we even got to the store. I expect instant access to information from the Internet and don't think twice about it unless my attempts to do so fail me in some way. This is also an example of media logic.

Each person in my family has a smartphone. I've become accustomed to having instant access to them 24/7. Even if I'm in a meeting, they can text me, and I can step out of the room to see what's up. When I was growing up, my parents didn't have the luxury of instant access to me as I do with my own children. My smartphone is also synched to both my e-mail and appointment calendar. It also synchs to my car so I can play music and answer calls without taking my hands off the steering wheel. I don't own a camera or iPod anymore because I use the apps on my phone to take pictures and listen to music. I take my smartphone for granted in these ways. Media logic is interesting to the rhetorical critic because various media and their social uses shape our perceptions of what is normal or abnormal, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, and so on.

Media logic manifests itself in our taken-for-granted social uses of media, but it also does so in the actual programs we watch. Consider a TV program or film from the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. Do you notice the outdated computers, telephones, radios, and televisions touted in them as state-of-the-art? The fact that such outdated media are so noticeable is also a reflection of media logic. Now consider a current TV program or film set in the present day. Do you notice the technology being used in them? The fact that we don't notice them because they are normal also reflects media logic. Moreover, when someone in a contemporary TV program or film uses what we consider to be outdated media, we usually interpret it as odd or even comical. One funny scene in *A Night at the Roxbury*, for example, occurs when Steve's (played by Will Ferrell) and Doug's (played by Chris Kattan) mother (played by Loni Anderson) provides them with enormous, out-of-date cell phones so they can contact her if necessary.

Commodification

Two particularly compelling aspects of media logic are commodification and amplification and reduction. **Commodification** has to do with advertisements blending with programming. Initially, commodification had to do with commercials certain products aired intermittently throughout a program. While such advertisements do still occur, our ability to channel surf during commercials or fast-forward through them on our DVRs has led to more advertising of products during the actual programs themselves. To clarify, TV programs in the 1950s and 1960s could not show a brand name of a soda pop or beer. The first film to show a brand name of a product was *ET: The Extraterrestrial* in the 1980s, where the characters ate Reese's Pieces. Today, doing so is a common practice. It is so common, in fact, that the fictional Duff beer Homer drinks on *The Simpsons* is used for comic effect. You may recall the 1990s film *The Truman Show*, which was filled with commodification. Truman's wife would often stop while in mid-conversation with Truman to advertise the coffee beans or some other product she was using.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Consider a favorite TV program. What brand-name products do characters use on the show? What might this be telling viewers about the product and why?

Another interesting shift in terms of TV commercials is the time allotted for each one. Again, in the 1950s and 1960s, a commercial often ran for a full minute. Today, commercials are usually no more than 10 to 15 seconds long and interrupt the program more frequently. Moreover, a program might show the same commercial several times during the 30-minute or 60-minute time slot. Why? Because media logic suggests viewers will likely only catch it once if at all.

Finally, TV commercials are sometimes more compelling than the programs they are aired with. Interestingly, sometimes the commercials are compelling, but viewers fail to even realize what product they're selling. At any rate, this notion of ads blending with programming has become practically seamless on TV today. Consequently, viewers may be led to believe certain apparel, products, and even hairstyles are normal and desirable based on what they see worn and used by the characters on their favorite programs.

Commodification occurs on the Internet as well. I like to show YouTube clips as examples when I teach. Unfortunately, sometimes I have to allow an advertisement to play (or at least a part of it) in order to get to the clip I'm trying to show. Remixes are another form of commodification that occurs on the Internet. Advertisers will remix a popular song, program, film, or image to sell their product. The "He Went to Jared" visual of Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in Chapter 9 is an example.

QUESTIONING YOUR ETHICS . . .

- How does commodification differ from subliminal advertising? Why might commodification be deemed appropriate by producers when subliminal advertising is deemed unethical? Where do you stand on the issue and why?

Amplification and Reduction

Amplification and reduction has to do with what is shown and not shown on a TV program, film, Internet website, or video game. For example, TV news programs are market driven, and as such, program directors must make choices about what to air partly based on ratings. Hence, what is shown on TV news may not be a complete story at all. What is not being told may be as important to the rhetorical critic as what is being told. Viewers of TV news in April 2003, for instance, watched as President Bush "declared victory in Iraq." Not until months later did the news programs begin to air stories that revealed the fighting was far from over. The rhetorical critic seeks to deconstruct what is and is not being told as normal, right, and good on TV news as well as on other programs.

TV's influential power with regard to amplification and reduction has decreased somewhat thanks to our easy access to the Internet today. When we question something we see on TV news, for example, we are likely to conduct some personal fact-checking by going to multiple online news websites or to social network posts for clarification. Sometimes, however, breaking news stories that appear first on Internet websites are based on incomplete or even incorrect information. Following the December 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook elementary school, for example, officials actually warned that, if caught, people posting misinformation on Twitter could be prosecuted.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Albert Bandura (b. 1925), a cognitive psychologist at Stanford University, is credited with conceptualizing *social learning theory*. **Social learning theory** focuses on how we learn to believe and behave based on observation, imitation, and modeling. Essentially, Bandura (1977) argues that most human behavior is not learned from the effects of our own actions but by observing others who model certain behaviors and the consequences they experience as a result. Then, we imitate behaviors based on the consequences we observe. In other words, the actions and consequences we observe lead us to imitate the behavior of those we aspire to be like and to avoid enacting the behaviors of those we do not want to be like.

We learn how we ought to and ought not to believe and behave from **live models** (actual people demonstrating a behavior) and **symbolic models** (people demonstrating a behavior through a medium such as TV, film, video games, and so forth). Bandura (1977) suggests that social learning occurs when four conditions are met. First, we must pay attention to the model demonstrating the behavior. In other words, if a TV program happens to be on, but no one is actually watching it, social learning cannot occur from it. We must be able to remember the behavior we observed. To continue with the TV example, if several of the programs I watch portray people drinking alcohol and having fun without negative consequences (e.g., vomiting, driving drunk, having a hangover, destroying relationships), I'm likely to remember it's fun to drink alcohol. We must be able to replicate the behavior. If I am a recovering alcoholic or a minor, I probably should not replicate the behavior, however, I might be influenced to try to do so because of my memory of observing others having fun. Finally, we must be motivated to imitate the behavior we observed. We are motivated to learn to imitate behaviors based on how we interpret the consequences of others who enact them. If the TV programs I watch show people drinking alcohol followed by negative consequences, I might not be motivated to imitate the behavior.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Consider a favorite TV program. Can you identify the good guys and the bad guys in terms of whose behaviors viewers are likely to imitate. Why? Explain what actions and consequences occur to lead you to this conclusion.

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP THEORY

Parasocial relationship theory describes one-sided relationships where one party knows a great deal about the other party, but not vice versa. Parasocial relationships often occur between celebrities and fans as well as between TV characters and viewers (Brooks, 1997). For example, I sometimes say “I grew up with Jodie Foster.” She and I are the same age, and I’ve watched many of her movies and interviews over the years while both of us were kids, teens, and adults. So I will admit I cheered for her when she won the Cecil B. DeMille Golden Globe award for lifetime achievement in 2013. Obviously, my “friend” Jodie and I didn’t actually grow up together, and she certainly doesn’t know me. But I have followed her career for decades, and I know quite a bit about her as a result.

Parasocial relationships emerge by establishing a bond of intimacy. A **bond of intimacy** is created when a viewer begins to feel he or she really knows the celebrity or character even though the celebrity or character does not know the viewer. For example, while the popular TV program *Friends* was in production, viewers often referred to Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Ross, and Joey as though they were real people rather than as characters being portrayed on a sitcom. And I would argue that my mom has established a bond of intimacy with Matt Lauer from NBC’s *Today* show. She often talks to me about Mr. Lauer as though she knows him personally. She will say things like, “Oh, that Matt is so ‘dishy’” and “I just love Matt.” Of course, my mom never met Matt Lauer. Yet, she talks of him as though they are on a first-name basis. Two factors that contribute to the bond of intimacy are realism and privacy.

Realism refers to how believable the characters and their encounters are perceived to be. Again, the characters and their encounters on *Friends* seemed believable to viewers. They experienced the kinds of fun, arguments, setbacks, and so forth viewers thought to be normal for 20-somethings trying to make it in the city. Today, *Modern Family* attempts to create a similar sense of realism. Also, programs like *Justified* seem believable because the action takes place in real cities and counties in Kentucky and the plots are about real-life issues currently in the Kentucky news. And programs like *Newsroom* seem real because the action takes place in what looks very much like a real newsroom and the plots and stories are based on contemporary stories and issues. Some people argue that films and video games go too far in depicting realism. This objection usually focuses on graphic violence in films like *Django Unchained* or *Zero Dark Thirty* and video games like *MadWorld*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Postal 2*. We often hear from proponents of this position after mass shootings like the ones at Columbine, Aurora, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook.

Privacy refers to how viewers often get to know characters personally as they watch them privately in the comfort of their own homes. Showing small, personal encounters and experiences of characters may make the characters seem more like friends and enemies than actors. The TV series *Downton Abbey* is good example of showing personal encounters and experiences that encourage viewers to believe they “know” the characters.

Strategies that enhance privacy include seeing things through the eyes (perspective) of the characters and hearing their inner thoughts. The TV series *How I Met Your Mother* uses voice-over techniques as a way to hear Ted’s thoughts as he recounts the past to his kids. As the TV and film industries become more sophisticated in their ability to depict realism and intimacy, so will the potential implications of parasocial relationships increase.

A good deal of ongoing debate has emerged surrounding how and where to draw the line on privacy sharing on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Some of it focuses on making choices about what we share about ourselves, and some of it focuses on how to manage the phenomenon of others posting information and images about us without our consent. For example, Alec Baldwin and Charlie Sheen both seemed to cross a line regarding what they posted in ways that hurt their public images. Thus, many celebrities, public figures, and corporations today actually hire people to maintain their online presence in ways that share private details that will not damage their image.

APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED . . .

Consider a TV series about a family that has been on air for at least three years. To what extent does watching the children as they grow up and experience the rituals of growing up make the program seem like an example of everyday real life? To what extent do the characters take on lives of their own in terms of perceiving them as real people and *a real family*?

CULTIVATION THEORY

Former Communication professor, George Gerbner (1919–2005) and American screenwriter and producer Larry Gross are credited with conceptualizing *cultivation theory*. **Cultivation theory** (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) suggests that cumulative exposure to violent behaviors on TV, the Internet, and video games leads to significant long-term effects regarding what the everyday real world is like. In other words, continual exposure to a consistent message about what the real world is like can shape a user's attitude about the world. Their original work focuses on how repeated showings of violence on TV influence viewers to believe the world is a mean and scary place. Of course, media don't create or cause beliefs or behaviors but merely maintain and propagate them. Moreover, TV typically serves to reinforce rather than counter conventional beliefs and behaviors. Thus, people who watch a lot of TV are more likely to be influenced via cultivation effects than people who don't.

An argument about cultivation effects is often made about TV, film, and video game violence. Conclusions of numerous studies have been contradictory. Still it remains a fervent field of study. The concept of cultivation theory has been extended to consider repeated and consistent exposure to other types of messages as well. For example, some have argued that the thinning of Hollywood phenomenon (where the most popular female characters are noticeably thin) serves to cultivate a perception that women ought to be pencil thin. A similar correlation has been drawn regarding soap operas where casual sexual relationships with multiple partners are depicted as normal and perhaps even desirable. What these extensions of cultivation theory suggest is that repetition of a similar argument conveyed over and over again eventually leads users to believe the message to be in some way true in the real world.

Ultimately, electronic and new media function uniquely to shape viewers' beliefs and behaviors. Media ecology, media logic, social learning, and cultivation theory help reveal how they do so.

CONDUCTING AN ANALYSIS USING A MEDIA-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE

Although you can conduct an analysis relying on any one of these media-centered perspectives, rhetorical critics typically combine one or more of them with another rhetorical perspective (e.g., neo-Aristotelian, narrative, dramatistic, symbolic convergence, neo-Marxist, feminist, illusion of life, visual pleasure theory). As with the other approaches, once you've selected an artifact to examine as a text and considered the rhetorical situation, you follow the processes of description, interpretation, and evaluation.

Step 1: Selecting an Appropriate Text

Two general considerations guide you in selecting an artifact to examine as a text. First, you might consider the verbal and nonverbal messages (i.e., talk and visual images) as interesting in terms of what they say about how we ought to or ought not to believe or behave. Oftentimes, this is guided by one of the traditional rhetorical perspectives. For example, if you wanted to examine the HBO comedy-drama *Girls* according to the roles and rules it conveys for men and women in society, your analysis would be grounded in a feminist perspective. You might decide to focus on one episode, one season, or several seasons. However, your focus would be on what those episodes are saying from a feminist perspective. Second, if you want to focus on how the TV medium itself works to send those messages via commodification, amplification and reduction, intimacy, realism, or cultivation effects, then your feminist analysis would be framed around those media-centered constructs. In other words, what messages of commodification are being sent that relate to the roles and rules for men and women in society? What messages are being amplified and reduced with regard to the roles and rules for women and men in society? And so on.

Step 2: Examining the Text (Describe and Interpret)

Let's continue with the *Girls* example. You begin by describing the text. You might explain the overt story line as well as the major characters. The primary story line follows the lives of a close group of 20-something young adults living in New York City. The main characters are Hannah (an aspiring writer whose parents cut her off financially), Jessa (world-traveling Bohemian cousin of Shoshanna), Marnie (Hannah's serious and responsible best friend), Shoshanna (bubbly and innocent American cousin of Jessa who loves *Sex and the City*), and Adam (Hannah's aloof lover as well as part-time carpenter and actor). The overt humor stems from what they learn from the mistakes they make trying to navigate their lives in the big city each day.

Once you've described the overt story, you proceed to interpret the text according to media-centered constructs. Your goal, however, remains grounded in what is being said via these constructs related to a feminist perspective. In terms of commodification, you might argue that tattoos like Hannah's and vintage attire are appropriate and normal for 20-something young women. You might mention that women are amplified as subjects with agency. The only male main character is Adam. His story line revolves mostly around

being Hannah's lover. You might discuss when characters text and sext rather than communicate in other ways (media logic). These young adults are portrayed as making mistakes while working in low-end jobs but still aspiring to make it in their dream careers (realism and intimacy). You would again cite some examples. You might ultimately talk about social learning theory (What is the viewer led to model?) and cultivation effects (What is the consistent message sent over time about normal and desirable behaviors for young women and men in society?).

Step 3: Evaluate Potential Implications of the Text

As in any analysis, you end with an answer to the so-what question. What are the potential implications of this argument on viewers? You might talk about positive implications for young adults and perseverance to navigate adulthood successfully or young women as subjects rather than objects. Or you might discuss potentially negative implications of its messages about casual sex. What are the potential implications of doing a media-centered analysis of a television program like this? You might talk about social learning theory in that viewers might decide it's normal to engage in casual sex. Granted, your analysis of the program would be more detailed than what I've described here. I merely offer these suggestions as the kinds of things your media-centered criticism might bring out.

SAMPLE PUBLISHED ESSAYS

(1) Read the article "Critiquing Reality-Based Televisual Black Fatherhood: A Critical Analysis of *Run's House* and *Snoop Dogg's Father Hood*," by Debra Smith (2008) and published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. The analysis compares images of black fatherhood portrayed in these two programs with that of the *The Cosby Show* of the 1980s. As you read, consider how she integrates media-centered constructs of realism and privacy for establishing a bond of intimacy with viewers. What conclusions and implications does she propose regarding these arguments and the audiences who watch the programs? Do you think other reality TV programs develop similar bonds of intimacy? Explain.

(2) Read the article "Examining the Effects of Hegemonic Depictions of Female Bodies on Television: A Call for Theory and Programmatic Research," by Alexandra Hendriks (2002) and published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. The article provides a nice example of an analysis rooted in a feminist perspective but doing so through the media-centered perspectives of cultivation theory and social learning theory. As you read, consider contemporary televised examples of her claims. Do you think television has changed much since her article was published? Explain.

(3) Read the article "What Good Is the 'You' in YouTube? Cyberspectacle and Subjectivity" by Elizabeth Clark (2008) and published in *Gnovis*. Although not a textual analysis of one artifact, she proposes interesting food for thought regarding the "pseudo-reality" we live in today as we interact with new media like YouTube. She argues that YouTube is a powerful example of new media functioning to distract and entertain passive viewers. Moreover, although the platform does allow space for marginalized voices to be heard, it also has

limitations. In her words, is it “liberatory or repressive, spectacle or subversion?” (Clark, 2008). Given the ways you interact with YouTube, do you agree with Clark? Why or why not?

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Holly Strandberg wrote “*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets: Why It Works*” for a final class project. As you read the essay, consider how realism and intimacy are used to make the story believable and compelling. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets: Why It Works

Holly Strandberg

Muggles, hippogriffs, floo powder, and an exciting game of Quidditch mean nothing to the few people in the world who have yet to become engulfed in the frenzy that is Harry Potter. To followers, however, these once-insignificant terms have taken on meaning all their own. In J. K. Rowling’s works, an entire world has been developed of wizards, witchcraft, mystery, and intrigue. The books, now enhanced by the cinema, have gained popularity that reaches beyond age and beyond literary maturity.

In the movie based on Rowling’s second Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the audience journeys with Harry and his friends. Harry, now in his second year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, finds himself—yet again—saving the day against his nemesis, Lord Voldemort (the most evil wizard who has ever been). When Harry was a baby, Lord Voldemort killed his parents and also tried to kill Harry. Unsuccessful in his attempts, Harry’s triumph over this evil wizard grew legendary amongst the other wizards. Lord Voldemort’s power was reduced to almost nothing, and he, on most counts, disappeared. Within the movies,

however, Harry and his friends see where Lord Voldemort’s power still prevails and work toward ridding the world of his continued evil. While doing so, however, they find themselves in very precarious situations.

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry and his friends are faced with the struggle of discovering what the “chamber of secrets” really is and what powers lie within it. They face peril in the midst of a forest of spiders as well as fight a basilisk (a really big, ugly snake) to save the day. Within this text, even one of their own faces the terrible fate of being petrified while attempting to uncover Lord Voldemort’s evil plot. Even our charmed Harry faces ridicule as he is suspected of being the heir who has opened the chamber and, in doing so, has unleashed the horror terrorizing Hogwarts.

In the end, however, through the strength of his friendship and the confidence he finds within himself, Harry is able to save the day and, one more time, stop Lord Voldemort’s evil plan from being carried out. While doing so, he also clears a good friend’s name (Hagrid) and helps the headmaster (Dumbledore) to regain

control of the school. He also tricks another evil wizard, Lucius Malfoy, into freeing his house-elf (Dobby), and all of his good works are rewarded within the school setting when exams are cancelled for the entire student population. It's all in a day's work for Harry Potter.

The significance of studying the impact of the Harry Potter phenomenon is pretty obvious. Surveys suggest, for example, that almost 60 percent of U.S. children ages 6 to 17 have read at least one Harry Potter book (Race, 2001). Millions of children and adults have read the books, "making Harry Potter and his adventures a topic of household conversation" (Black & Eisenwine, 2001, p. 32).

In an article by Cole and Brooke Nelson, Cole (age 11) describes why he's crazy about Potter: "With the wand you could heal cuts without band-aids. The flying broom you could use so there would be no more pollution, and the Quidditch game is just so cool. It involves balls, goals, and players, but it's really neat because it's played 50 feet up in the air. It seems like it would be a little more challenging than our basketball. . . . If I could pick one to have of my own from the Harry Potter book, it would have to be a wand. My wand would be made of beech wood with a phoenix tail feather inside it, just like Harry's wand, but I don't know what size it would need to be. I guess I'd have to go get measured" (Nelson & Nelson, 2002, p. 20).

The Harry Potter phenomenon is not limited to youth. Consider, for instance, the testimony of New York City Board of Education Administrative Assistant Superintendent Winifred Radigan (2001): "The truth is, I love Harry Potter, and Hermione and Ron, and the world Rowling has

created. . . . What speaks to me is how the books console that inner child who still longs for her magic to be discovered and nurtured" (p. 694). The audience of the Potter frenzy is not limited to adolescents but to an entire world of Potter potentials. Some of the Harry Potter honors include "The British Book Awards Children's Book of the Year and the Smarties Prize," according to the Scholastic/Harry Potter website. In addition, book rights have been sold to England, France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Greece, Finland, Denmark, Spain, and Sweden. The books and, by association, the movies are as far-reaching as the literary world can take you. "The Potter series has already been translated into more than two dozen languages. In just two years, after being refused by at least two major publishers, J. K. Rowling is now the hottest property in children's literature and a serial prize-winner to boot" (Tucker, 1999, p. 221). Fandango, the nation's largest online ticketing company, claimed that, "*Chamber of Secrets*" sold nearly twice the amount of advance tickets the first film had sold by this time last year" (Goodale, 2002, p. 2).

In short, there is a Potter mania sweeping the world. Who cares? Why does it matter that schools are changing their curriculum to include Harry and his friends? Why should it matter that people of all ages, races, and backgrounds are reading Rowling's books and standing in line to see the Potter movies? Do the movies "celebrate the notion of a different and exclusive form of education for a privileged few" (Tucker, 1999, p. 223), or do they help students "see themselves in [Harry]" (Gibbs, 2003, p. 61)? What secrets does the "chamber of secrets" really unlock about the reality of the world we're living in?

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My overall purpose in this analysis is to demonstrate not that the Harry Potter phenomenon is a way in which to justify rebellion within adolescents today but that it in fact empowers a typically powerless group of individuals to make difficult choices. In the end of the movie, Albus Dumbledore (the headmaster of Hogwarts) tells Harry, "It is not our abilities that show who we really are. It is our choices" (Rowling, 1999). My amended version of this quote is that "it is not what we have that shows who we really are. It is the choices we make with what we've got."

Rhetorical Perspective and Method

In this essay, I use a media-centered approach to reveal messages that *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* sends about empowerment and disempowerment. As such, my analysis focuses on hegemony, which draws from a neo-Marxist perspective. Within this film (and, of course, the book as well), there is a constant and serious struggle over power, and the "powerful" and "powerless" characters are constantly changing.

By definition, neo-Marxist criticism is an "approach concerned with ideology, with class, and with the distribution of power in society" (Brummett, 1994, p. 111). The greatest overarching principle is that of power and, specifically, "the way material affects power" (p. 113). Moreover, "all forms of power have symbolic dimensions: Material and financial resources are associated not only with economics but with social status or domination. . . . That is where the ideology comes in" (Sillars & Gronbeck,

2001, p. 173). An ideology, according to Marx, is a false consciousness set forth by the ruling class and accepted by the lower classes even though accepting it also means accepting disempowerment. As such, the lower classes are "victims of the capitalistic ideology" (p. 261). By analyzing *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* from this perspective, we begin to see how the struggle between who ought to and ought not to have power is worked out in seemingly unimportant everyday actions and experiences.

Within a neo-Marxist perspective, we must consider whether the messages offered via economic metaphors (small signs and meanings associated with them) reinforce the status quo (a preferred reading) or whether they oppose it (oppositional). This analysis examines these issues of empowerment and disempowerment using several media-centered constructs. More specifically, what strategies of *commodification* (advertisements blending with programming) are offered as they relate to issues of power? Also, how is *realism* (what is seen and heard becomes "real" to viewers) employed? Finally, with regard to *intimacy*, in what ways are viewers encouraged to get to know the characters (including their thoughts and feelings) and essentially become "friends" with them?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue I focus on throughout this essay is that of children feeling empowered to be happy with who they are. Youth, particularly during adolescence, are faced with more problems today than ever before. Historically, youth have

struggled to be accepted within their schools and amongst their friends. However, children today are trying to figure out how to be accepted even within their own families. They struggle with divorce, blended families, death of loved ones, not fitting in, not knowing where to fit in, peer pressure, and so on.

Many studies have been published regarding the development of youth and the impact of life experiences on them. With an ever-increasing divorce rate in the United States alone, children are no longer confident about the stability of their family units. Add to that chaos guns in schools, drug addiction, and peer pressure, and the youth of today need to be able to stand up with confidence in what they believe knowing that it will not always be the most preferred or accepted idea, particularly amidst their friends.

Within the reviews of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, there are a number of opinions as to the real message the film delivers. From devil worshipping to changing spirituality, from justifying rebellion to demonstrating how youth can depend on those around them, the film (and the series, for that matter) is a hotbed of conversion. Rowling herself answered these questions when she said, "I admire bravery above almost every other characteristic. . . . Bravery is a very glamorous virtue, but I'm talking about bravery in all sorts of places" (Gibbs, 2003, p. 62). In the same article, Gibbs writes how Rowling created an e-mail friendship with a young girl—Catie—who was battling cancer. Rowling explains how Catie's battle is one of the reasons she writes. "Hang on to hope, or surrender to fear. [Rowling] addresses children as though they know as much or more than she

does about the things that matter. Kids like the characters she has created, Harry above all, not because he is fantastic, but because he is familiar" (p. 63).

In an "adult" world, children are far too often disregarded as not having feelings, although they deal with the same grown-up issues without as many grown-up experiences. Battling a terminal illness, dealing with a financial difficulty, and trying to be accepted in a vicious world are only a few of the challenges many of them face on a daily basis.

ANALYSIS

In considering the issues of empowerment and disempowerment, many of the subject position relationships are visible in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. First, it's easily visible to the audience that Harry is helplessly disempowered in his aunt and uncle's home. He is treated horribly, and only in his escape to school is he saved from the reality of Privet Drive. In a similar fashion, the house-elf (Dobby) is a slave in his master's home. He punishes himself repeatedly for speaking ill of his housemaster, although he is treated worse than can be imagined. Both of these characters, however, commit their lives to trying to help other people around them and, in the end, find rewards by doing just that.

With regard to materialism, the audience easily recognizes that the Weasley family is poor. All of the children are dressed in worn-out wizard robes and use less than state-of-the-art supplies and books throughout school. Their red, tussled hair and dirty clothes are

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the mark of a family not well-to-do in materialism but well-to-do in love. In contrast, the Malfoy family has everything, including the money to buy the rest of the members of the Slytherin Quidditch team the latest in flying brooms. Although they have money, however, they certainly do not have love. Viewers are led to dislike them as anti-models who should not be empowered.

Hermione, one of Harry's good friends, is not noticeably well-off or poor. However, Hermione is muggle-born and, therefore, not the "pure-blood" wizard some feel should be allowed into Hogwarts. Although brilliant and resourceful, Hermione finds herself battling the stereotypes of her non-pure wizard heritage.

Even with regard to the teachers at Hogwarts, there is a visible power struggle. Severus Snape, one of the nastiest teachers at Hogwarts, often displays his power over others (particularly Harry and his friends) to feel better about himself. However, even Snape is powerless over the great headmaster, Dumbledore, who seems to have everyone's best interests at heart.

Overall, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* takes an oppositional inflected argument regarding issues of power. Although in contemporary society, most people—youth in particular—come to believe that having more is, in essence, being more, Harry and his friends demonstrate something different. Regardless of the relationships they encounter, even with the annoying bathroom ghost (Moaning Myrtle), Harry demonstrates that—above all else—humility, kindness, friendship, and loyalty are the traits most worthy of being exalted. In this way, the film empowers a group of adolescents who find themselves

powerless in a constant world of upheaval, and it encourages them to make choices that will impact their lives in positive ways.

The obvious materialistic economic metaphors within this film are often defeated. For example, when Malfoy is playing against Harry during the Slytherin–Gryffindor Quidditch match, Malfoy is on a far superior broomstick. Harry is being chased by an out-of-control bludger (ball) and is also dealing with a severely broken arm. In the end, however, Malfoy loses control of his material superiority when he lands on his back in a pile of dirt on the Quidditch field. Harry, however, goes on to win the game. Again, the message reinforced is not that newer is better but that it's the type of person you are and the choices you make that make a difference.

In truth, the most influential rhetorical strategy of the Harry Potter film is how it draws the viewer in through realism and intimacy. As described earlier in this analysis, "Harry and his pals are old friends. I know them well" (Radigan, 2001, p. 694). Their lives and struggles become real for the viewers, as does the setting in which everything takes place. We, as an audience, see for ourselves what it's like to be a part of life at Hogwarts, and we do what we must to enter into the realm of that world for ourselves. In addition, viewers empathize with the problems Harry and his friends face. Although most youth have never likely gone into the Dark Forest to face an army of horrendous spiders, they still find themselves struggling with the monsters of life each day in their own ways, and Harry's experience becomes that much more real for them because of it.

We may not be able to purchase a Nimbus 2000 broom for ourselves, but we understand the societal message of owning “the best.” The youth most influenced by this film, then, may understand what it’s like to be left with hand-me-down clothing, used books, or—if nothing else—not being trendy in the latest styles. Even Hogwarts itself is an example of commodification. It is a private institution accepting only the “chosen” to attend. However, even within all of this materialism, the message of loyalty and friendship prevails.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, SUGGESTIONS

We, as viewers, understand what it’s like not to fit in because we’ve all experienced it at one time or another. Whatever the cause might be (and Harry and his friends cover pretty much everything—being an orphan, being singled out within the school, not being wealthy, being bullied, coming from a different background or race), Harry and his friends are each and every one of us. The reason it is so vital to analyze this film, then, is that it is defining us even as it develops the lives of Harry and his friends.

One of the greatest critic concerns of this film is that it may make us feel our own behaviors (or misbehaviors) are justified as long as they are for the greater good. Some suggest that Harry and his company are being rewarded because they broke the rules rather than in spite of their disobedience. However, this analysis suggests something different. Youth often disregard authority figures and, through the consequences reinforced in this film, know that it’s possible and

sometimes necessary to step outside of the norm. Also, for youth struggling to find normalcy in an otherwise chaotic life—much like Harry and his friends—the “straight and narrow road” may not be nearby or easily traveled.

As stated by Dumbledore within the movie, our choices demonstrate who we are. Sometimes those choices are difficult, and sometimes the situations seems impossible, but coming through those trying times is what helps to define who we are and who we will become. Harry Potter simply helps youth understand that message a little earlier than most of us learned it.

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Summary

This chapter outlined the guidelines by which to conduct an analysis of a mediated popular culture text in ways that consider the persuasive role of the medium through which it is being conveyed. We discussed media ecology and unpacked what is meant by “the medium is the message.” We also discussed media logic as the taken-for-granted ways in which we use media without thinking about how they influence us to believe and behave. We talked about commodification (ads blending with programming) and amplification and reduction (what is and is not included) as they function rhetorically. Then, we talked specifically about social learning theory (observing models and imitating behaviors), parasocial relationship theory (developing one-sided relationships with celebrities or fictional characters), and cultivation theory (repeated messages over time) as each one functions rhetorically.

Challenge

Select a popular TV series. Consider what messages it might be sending in terms of the media-centered perspectives we’ve discussed in this chapter.

1. What program did you select and why?
2. Who are the major characters in the program? Describe each of them.
3. What are some attitudes and behaviors that seem to be rewarded? Punished? What might viewers “learn” about how to believe or behave as a result?
4. How does media logic play out in the stories?
5. What are some examples of commodification? What might these messages be communicating?
6. Who are the good guys we are supposed to imitate and why?
7. What are some examples of intimacy? Realism? How might they impact viewers?
8. Are there any recurring patterns that might lead listeners to experience a cultivation effect? What are they and what might they lead listeners to believe? Why?
9. What could you argue about the value of doing a media-centered criticism as a result of your analysis?

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