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# Introduction to Mass Media

## Introduction

“I am sorry I cannot show you my face. Because if I do, the bad guys will come for me.” Who is that masked man? That man is Anas Aremeyaw Anas, the famous investigative journalist from Ghana who [gave a TED Talk](https://openstax.org/r/gaveaTEDTalk) about how he “names, shames, and jails” those “bad guys” (Anas 2013). Using controversial undercover methods, Anas has posed as a street hawker, a priest, a patient in a mental facility, a janitor in a brothel, and a boulder. His investigations have revealed widespread corruption in the Ghanaian judiciary, police service, electric company, Ministry of Youth and Sports, and passport office as well as a Ghanaian orphanage. He has exposed cocoa smuggling, rebel invasions, human trafficking, child slavery, torture of Africans in Thai prisons, unsanitary food production, forced prostitution, and abuse of people with mental illness in a hospital.

Anas has become a kind of anti-corruption superhero in Ghana, combining anonymity and celebrity to force social change. While his undercover research is mostly in person, he publishes the reports of his investigations as videos, many of which are available for viewing on his [website](https://openstax.org/r/anasaremeyawanas). He has become famous worldwide through the spread of these videos and the accumulation of interviews and commentary on his work that can be found on the Internet. His intriguing persona illustrates the complexities of identity in the digital era. Though many have attempted to unmask him, his “real” identity remains a mystery.

Anthropologists are keenly interested in questions of identity and social action and the holistic approach leads anthropologists to consider how certain social, cultural, economic, and political conditions give rise to public figures such as Anas. Clearly, the phenomenon of Anas cannot be fully understood without attention to the functions of media at local, national, and global levels. At the local level, investigative journalism functions as a tool of anti-corruption, while global digital media function as a tool of celebrity. Are these two functions compatible or contradictory?

A new field of media anthropology has emerged in the past few decades to address such pressing issues. This chapter explores how social scientists study mass media, including how media functions at local, national, and global levels. It also addresses how social conditions and cultural forces shape a variety of media genres, including news media, photography, radio, television, and the Internet. Just as social scientists bring their unique approach to other fields, the distinctive methods and concepts of social science contribute complex, holistic insights to the study of media.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## What Is Technology?

It is easy to look at the latest virtual reality headset and think technology is a recent addition to our world. But from the steam engine to the most cutting-edge robotic surgery tools, **technology** has described the application of science to address the problems of daily life. We might roll our eyes at enormous and clunky computers of the 1970s that had far less storage than a free thumb drive. But chances are, twenty years from now our skinny laptops and pocket-filling phones will look just as archaic.

If someone asked your instructor what instructional technology they used, your instructor would likely assume the questioner was referring to courseware platforms, classroom response offerings, or presentation software. But if your instructor simply responded with, “pencil and paper,” they’d still be accurately describing technology. Modern paper and writing devices would have been considered fantastical creations in ancient times. And the fact that they endure, even as many other potential replacements have come into play, shows how effective those technologies are.

Just as the availability of digital technology shapes how we live today, the creation of stone tools changed how premodern humans lived and how well they ate. From the first calculator, invented in 2400 BCE Babylon in the form of an abacus, to the predecessor of the modern computer, created in 1882 by Charles Babbage, all of our technological innovations are advancements on previous iterations. And indeed, all aspects of our lives are influenced by technology. In agriculture, the introduction of machines that can till, thresh, plant, and harvest greatly reduced the need for manual labor, which in turn meant there were fewer rural jobs. This led to the urbanization of society, as well as lowered birth rates because there was less need for large families to work the farms. In the criminal justice system, the ability to ascertain innocence through DNA testing has saved the lives of people on death row. The examples are endless: technology plays a role in absolutely every aspect of our lives.[[2]](#footnote-2)

People today live in an era of **technophilia**—that is, an age when people embrace technologies and incorporate them into every part of their lives, particularly their social lives. In contrast to the inert functionality of old-school cameras, watches, radios, and televisions, the new “smart” gadgets interact with their users, learn from them, make suggestions, and contact their friends and family members. Insofar as they facilitate users’ interactions with other people and the world around them, these smart technologies become part of their users, akin to an extra organ for sensation and communication. Insofar as they communicate with users, nudging and prodding them, they become like a friend or family member themselves.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Technology and the media are interwoven, and neither can be separated from contemporary society in most core and semi-peripheral nations. **Media** is a term that refers to all print, digital, and electronic means of communication. From the time the printing press was created (and even before), technology has influenced how and where information is shared. Today, it is impossible to discuss media and the ways societies communicate without addressing the fast-moving pace of technology change. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to share news of your baby’s birth or a job promotion, you phoned or wrote letters. You might tell a handful of people, but you probably wouldn’t call up several hundred, including your old high school chemistry teacher, to let them know. Now, you might join an online community of parents-to-be even before you announce your pregnancy via a staged Instagram picture. The circle of communication is wider than ever, and when we talk about how societies engage with technology, we must take media into account, and vice versa.

Technology creates media. The comic book you bought your daughter is a form of media, as is the movie you streamed for family night, the website you used to order takeout, the billboard you passed on the way to pick up your food, and the newspaper you read while you were waiting for it. Without technology, media would not exist, but remember, technology is more than just the media we are exposed to.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this basic sense, media have always been essential to the development and durability of human culture. Early forms of symbolic communication, such as cave paintings and ancient writing systems, can be considered media, as they provided people with ways of fixing meaning in material objects that could be shared with people in other places and at other times. The scope of these early forms of media was limited, however, by their singularity. People could visit a cave painting, but they could not send a copy of it to their friends. A scholar could inscribe a story on a cuneiform tablet, but that tablet could not be reproduced for a wider audience without the painstaking work of inscribing copies one by one. Up until 1000 CE, scholars in many parts of the world specialized in manually copying books and pamphlets, sometimes using wooden block prints carved out by hand. These methods were so expensive that only the very wealthy could afford to buy written forms of media.

All of this changed with the invention of the printing press, first in China and then in Germany (Frost 2021).[[5]](#footnote-5) The oldest known printed book in the world is the *Diamond Sutra*, a Buddhist text that was printed using fixed wooden blocks in 868 CE. In the 11th century, roughly a thousand years later, Chinese inventor Bi Sheng developed **movable type[[6]](#footnote-6)** that used a set of blocks out of baked clay, each one manually inscribed with a Chinese character. To publish a page of text, he arranged the character blocks on an iron frame that could be pressed against an iron plate to create a print. Around 1440, the German entrepreneur Johannes Gutenberg independently invented a similar system of movable-type printing. Gutenberg also created a set of blocks, each one containing a letter, but his were made of metal. He used his invention to print calendars, pamphlets, and 180 now-famous copies of the Bible. Within decades, the printing press had spread from Germany to France, Italy, Spain, England, and the rest of western Europe.

If manual writing systems are basic forms of media, then mechanically reproduced forms of communication are forms of **mass media**. Whereas forms of basic media operate between one sender and a small number of receivers, forms of mass media operate through a sender, a machine, and a potentially very large number of receivers. Originating in books and pamphlets produced using the movable-type printing press, the category of mass media has expanded over time with the development of new technologies, including photography, radio, television, and the Internet. Mass media are forms of communication facilitated by technology, allowing for broad distribution and reception by large numbers of people.

When considered from this angle, it may seem that technology is the most defining element of mass media. As machines, communication technologies might seem to function much the same in any context. When European printing presses were brought to Africa in the 19th century, they were used to publish newspapers that bore a family resemblance to European ones. If someone enables their mobile phone to function in another country while on vacation, they can use it to call their hotel or hail an Uber in much the same way they would use their phone at home.

Because communication technologies seem to function in uniform ways across contexts, people often assume that mass media are pretty much the same everywhere. Some provide news on current events. Some provide diversion and entertainment. Some allow users to communicate with individuals and groups. In this case, the differences one might see in mass media forms across cultures would be differences in technological sophistication or *penetration*, the word media scholars use to describe how widespread a communication technology is in a certain context.

Have you ever seen a Ghanaian video film? These are low-budget Ghanaian movies shot on video camera, usually completed within a few weeks, and aimed at local audiences. They deal with social themes such as witchcraft and corruption, often combined with Christian redemption. Such video films are frequently criticized (by locals and foreigners alike) for their rudimentary editing and poor production values. When compared to Hollywood blockbuster movies, with their multimillion-dollar budgets and complex technological production processes, African video films may seem like a poor replica of the American form.

But that is not how West Africans view locally made video films. While many Ghanaians enjoy watching American films from time to time, the themes and issues explored in foreign films fail to resonate with their own experiences and concerns. In contrast, local video films engage with the desires and fears of Ghanaians, reinforcing forms of social identity and echoing familiar norms and values. Even as many Ghanaians criticize the rustic editing and uneven sound levels, local video films remain enormously popular among West African audiences.

Anthropologist Tejaswini Ganti (2012) conducted ethnographic research on the film industry in India. She describes how Indian films developed from rustic, homegrown forms of local entertainment to technologically sophisticated spectacles, forming the globalized industry of Bollywood. Ganti situates this transformation in the larger economic shifts of the 1990s and the accompanying neoliberal emphasis on global trade and middle-class consumerism in India. While earlier films focus on themes involving working-class and marginalized peoples, later films more often dramatize the lives of the professional, highly educated, and affluent classes. Thus, Ganti links the themes, technologies, and economic contexts of these films.

While technology may seem to be the defining feature of mass media, it is the immersion of communication technologies in local cultures that produces the total experience of mass media. At heart, mass media are not just technologies but forms of communication—technological vehicles for conveying forms of cultural meaning from senders to receivers. The language, images, symbols, and sounds used to convey meaning are all elements of culture. The thematic content of mass media is also profoundly cultural, shaped by local contexts of production and reception. Ways of consuming and interacting with mass media are also heavily determined by local social norms.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Movable type changed the course of human knowledge and history because it allowed for faster dissemination of information, cheaper printing, and the shareability of printed material. This newfound ability for people to share knowledge challenged traditional authority, and in the 16th century, Pope Alexander VI prohibited unlicensed printing in an attempt to suppress publications that promoted ideas or threatened the orthodox faith. The pope’s actions show that as English writer and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” That is, the ability to spread information freely was an existential threat to traditional power structures. The mass availability of printed material reflects the democratization of knowledge, as education and books were no longer exclusive artifacts of the elite. The media landscape today is very different from when Bi Sheng first created movable type. This section examines the different types of media that exist today as well as recent significant changes in the media environment—and how these changes affect the media’s ability to play the role of gatekeeper and information provider.

## Types of Media and Their History

The media can be categorized into four broad groups: print, radio, television, and the Internet. Print media includes newspapers, magazines, and books. This section will briefly discuss the history and current state of each medium as well as how ownership of these industries affects the political world.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This mysterious invention, where sounds seemed to magically travel through the air, captured the world’s imagination. Early radio was used for military communication, but soon the technology entered the home. The radio mania that swept the country inspired hundreds of applications for broadcasting licenses, some from newspapers and other news outlets, while other radio station operators included retail stores, schools, and even cities. In the 1920s, large media networks—including the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS)—were launched, and they soon began to dominate the airwaves. In 1926, they owned 6.4 percent of U.S. broadcasting stations; by 1931, that number had risen to 30 percent.

The reach of radio also further helped forge an American culture. The medium was able to downplay regional differences and encourage a unified sense of the American lifestyle—a lifestyle that was increasingly driven and defined by consumer purchases. “Americans in the 1920s were the first to wear ready-made, exact-size clothing…to play electric phonographs, to use electric vacuum cleaners, to listen to commercial radio broadcasts, and to drink fresh orange juice year round.” [4] This boom in consumerism put its stamp on the 1920s, and, ironically, helped contribute to the Great Depression of the 1930s.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The first black-and-white television was introduced at the 1939 World’s Fair,[46](https://openstax.org/books/introduction-political-science/pages/references#rf-0001763) and in 1941, the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)**, the US government commission that currently oversees radio, television, wire, and now the Internet, authorized commercial broadcasting in the United States. The introduction of color television quickly followed in the early 1950s, and by the 1980s, around 90 percent of American households had a television. This era is what Queensland University of Technology professor Amanda D. Lotz terms “the network era,” when three major television networks had a fixed schedule and provided the majority of media content. During this era, most homes had one television, and television was a means of “bring[ing] the outside world into the home.” Coaxial cable television was first developed in the 1930s to provide television to rural areas that could not receive broadcast signals. Cable television became more widespread starting in the 1950s and culminating in the 1970s with the introduction of Home Box Office (HBO), which fought with the FCC to be allowed to provide for-fee television content through a cable network. Steady growth of the industry peaked in the early 2000s, and by 2010, more than 105 million Americans—or about 90 percent of homes—paid for cable television services.  Yet the number of Americans who said they watched television via cable or satellite plunged from 76 percent in 2015 to 56 percent in 2021, while a recent Deloitte consulting study found that 82 percent of respondents subscribed to a streaming service.[53](https://openstax.org/books/introduction-political-science/pages/references#rf-0002463) The trend of moving from traditional television to streaming or mobile services can be seen elsewhere in the world, though it is progressing at a slower pace. In India in 2018, 197 million households had televisions, while only a fraction of that number (60 million) utilized the country’s most popular on-demand media programming.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Television, which consists of an image being converted to electrical impulses, transmitted through wires or radio waves, and then reconverted into images, existed before World War II (by the 1920s, Hollywood had already created its first stars, most notably Charlie Chaplin. By the end of the 1930s, Americans were watching color films with full sound, including *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*) but really began to take off in the 1950s. In 1947, there were 178,000 television sets made in the United States; five years later, there were 15 million. Radio, cinema, and live theater all saw a decline in the face of this new medium that allowed viewers to be entertained with sound and moving pictures without having to leave their homes. How was this powerful new medium going to be operated? After much debate, the United States opted for the market. Competing commercial stations (including the radio powerhouses of CBS and NBC) owned stations and sold advertising and commercial-driven programming dominated. Britain took another track with its government-managed British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Funding was driven by licensing fees instead of advertisements. In contrast to the American system, the BBC strictly regulated the length and character of commercials that could be aired. U.S. television, propelled by prosperity, advertising and increasingly powerful networks, flourished. By the beginning of 1955, there were 36 million television sets in the United States, and 4.8 million in all of Europe. Important national events, broadcast live for the first time, were an impetus for consumers to buy sets and participate in the spectacle—both England and Japan saw a boom in sales before important royal weddings in the 1950s.

The post-World War II era in the United States was marked by prosperity, and by the introduction of a seductive new form of mass communication: television. In 1946, there were about 17,000 televisions in the entire United States. Within seven years, two-thirds of American households owned at least one set. As the United States’ gross national product (GNP) doubled in the 1950s, and again in the 1960s, the American home became firmly ensconced as a consumer unit. Along with a television, the typical U.S. family owned a car and a house in the suburbs, all of which contributed to the nation’s thriving consumer-based economy.

Broadcast television was the dominant form of mass media. There were just three major networks, and they controlled over 90 percent of the news programs, live events, and sitcoms viewed by Americans. On some nights, close to half the nation watched the same show! Some social critics argued that television was fostering a homogenous, conformist culture by reinforcing ideas about what “normal” American life looked like. But television also contributed to the counterculture of the 1960s. The Vietnam War was the nation’s first televised military conflict, and nightly images of war footage and war protestors helped intensify the nation’s internal conflicts.

Broadcast technology, including radio and television, had such a hold of the American imagination that newspapers and other print media found themselves having to adapt to the new media landscape. Print media was more durable and easily archived and allowed users more flexibility in terms of time—once a person had purchased a magazine, he could read it whenever and wherever he’d like. Broadcast media, in contrast, usually aired programs on a fixed schedule, which allowed it to both provide a sense of immediacy but also impermanence—until the advent of digital video recorders in the 21st century, it was impossible to pause and rewind a television broadcast.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Radio programming obviously preceded television, but both shaped people’s lives in much the same way. In both cases, information (and entertainment) could be enjoyed at home, with a kind of immediacy and community that newspapers could not offer. For instance, many people in the United States might remember when they saw on television or heard on the radio that the Twin Towers in New York City had been attacked in 2001. Even though people were in their own homes, media allowed them to share these moments in real time. This same kind of separate-but-communal approach occurred with entertainment too. School-aged children and office workers gathered to discuss the previous night’s installment of a serial television or radio show.

Right up through the 1970s, U.S. television was dominated by three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) that competed for ratings and advertising dollars. The networks also exerted a lot of control over what people watched. Public television, in contrast, offered an educational nonprofit alternative to the sensationalization of news spurred by the network competition for viewers and advertising dollars. Those sources—PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), the BBC (British Broadcasting Company), and CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company)—garnered a worldwide reputation for high-quality programming and a global perspective. Al Jazeera, the Arabic independent news station, has joined this group as a similar media force that broadcasts to people worldwide.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The media world faced drastic changes once again in the 1980s and 1990s with the spread of cable television. During the early decades of television, viewers had a limited number of channels from which to choose. In 1975, the three major networks accounted for 93 percent of all television viewing. By 2004, however, this share had dropped to 28.4 percent of total viewing, thanks to the spread of cable television. Cable providers allowed viewers a wide menu of choices, including channels specifically tailored to people who wanted to watch only golf, weather, classic films, sermons, or videos of sharks. Still, until the mid-1990s, television was dominated by the three large networks. The Telecommunications Act of 1996, an attempt to foster competition by deregulating the industry, actually resulted in many mergers and buyouts of small companies by large companies. The broadcast spectrum in many places was in the hands of a few large corporations. In 2003, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) loosened regulation even further, allowing a single company to own 45 percent of a single market (up from 25 percent in 1982)[[13]](#footnote-13)

The impact of television on U.S. society is hard to overstate. By the late 1990s, 98 percent of U.S. homes had at least one television set, and the average person watched between two and a half and five hours of television daily. All this television has a powerful socializing effect, providing reference groups while reinforcing social norms, values, and beliefs.

#### Film

The film industry took off in the 1930s, when color and sound were first integrated into feature films. Like television, early films were unifying for society: as people gathered in theaters to watch new releases, they would laugh, cry, and be scared together. Movies also act as time capsules or cultural touchstones for society. From Westerns starring the tough-talking Clint Eastwood to the biopic of Facebook founder and Harvard dropout Mark Zuckerberg, movies illustrate society’s dreams, fears, and experiences. While many consider Hollywood the epicenter of moviemaking, India’s Bollywood actually produces more films per year, speaking to the cultural aspirations and norms of Indian society. The film industry, like other media formats, has gone through substantial change as a result of streaming services, online privacy, and the new competition for people's entertainment dollars. Because the mainstream movie industry has been so reliant on ticket sales at live theaters, the COVID-19 pandemic affected it more dramatically than most other media categories. Highly anticipated movies slated for 2020 and 2021 releases were delayed or shifted to streaming distribution, reducing revenue. And some companies made lasting decisions regarding their future offerings.[[14]](#footnote-14)

*Computers*

For the last stage in this fast history of media technology, how’s this for a prediction? In 1969, management consultant Peter Drucker predicted that the next major technological innovation after television would be an “electronic appliance” that would be “capable of being plugged in wherever there is electricity and giving immediate access to all the information needed for school work from first grade through college.” He said it would be the equivalent of Edison’s light bulb in its ability to revolutionize how we live. He had, in effect, predicted the computer. He was prescient about the effect that computers and the Internet would have on education, social relationships, and the culture at large. The inventions of random access memory (RAM) chips and microprocessors in the 1970s were important steps along the way to the Internet age. As Briggs and Burke note, these advances meant that “hundreds of thousands of components could be carried on a microprocessor.” The reduction of many different kinds of content to digitally stored information meant that “print, film, recording, radio and television and all forms of telecommunications [were] now being thought of increasingly as part of one complex.” This process, also known as convergence, will be discussed in later chapters and is a force that’s shaping the face of media today.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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# Media and Culture[[16]](#footnote-16)

## Introduction

Media and culture are so much a part of our days that sometimes it is difficult to step back and appreciate and apprehend their great impact on our lives. The book’s title, and the book itself, begin with a focus squarely on media. Think of your typical day. If you are like many people, you wake to a digital alarm clock or perhaps your cell phone. Soon after waking, you likely have a routine that involves some media. Some people immediately check their cell phone messages. Others will turn on the computer and check social media, email, or websites. Some people read the newspaper. Others listen to digital music or turn on the television and watch a weather channel, cable news, or sport. Heading to work or class, you may chat or listen to music on a cell. Your classes likely employ various types of media from course management software to slideshow presentations to digital or streaming movies and videos. You may return home and relax with video games, television, movies, more social media, or music. You connect with friends on campus and beyond with messages or social media. And your day may end as you fall asleep to digital music. Media for most of us are entwined with almost every aspect of life and work. Understanding media will not only help you appreciate the role of media in your life but also help you be a more informed citizen, a more savvy consumer, and a more successful worker. Media influence all those aspects of life as well.

In the book *Understanding Media*, by the social theorist and critic, Marshall McLuhan, the author offered some provocative thoughts. He said that the media themselves were far more important than any content they carried. Indeed, he said, each medium, such as print or broadcast, physically affects the human central nervous system in a certain way. Media influence the way the brain works and how it processes information. They create new patterns of thought and behavior. Looking back over time, McLuhan found that people and societies were shaped by the dominant media of their time. For example, McLuhan argued, people and societies of the printing press era were shaped by that medium. And, he said, people and societies were being shaped in new ways by electronic media. Summing up, in one of his well-known phrases, he said, “The medium is the message.”

McLuhan well understood how media shape culture. However, one weakness in McLuhan’s work, especially his early work, is that he did not fully account for how culture shapes media. Culture can be a vague and empty term. Sometimes culture is defined in a very narrow sense as “the arts” or some sort of fashionable refinement. Another definition of culture is much more expansive, however. In this broader sense, culture is a particular way of life and how that life is acted out each day in works, practices, and activities. Thus, we can talk about Italian culture, Javanese culture, or the culture of the ancient Greeks. Another communication theorist, James Carey, elegantly captures this expansive view of culture. In “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” Carey wrote the following:

“We create, express, and convey our knowledge of and attitudes toward reality through the construction of a variety of symbol systems: art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, mythology. How do we do this? What are the differences between these forms? What are the historical and comparative variations in them? How do changes in communication technology influence what we can concretely create and apprehend? How do groups in society struggle over the definition of what is real?”

## Intersection of American Media and Culture

We use all kinds of terms to talk about media and it will be especially important to distinguish between mass communication and mass media. We spoke about the media, mass media, and culture above. It is also important to attempt a working definition of culture

Mass communication over mass media takes place among people in a particular time and place. Those people share ideas about reality and the world and themselves. They act out those ideas daily in their lives, work, and creative expressions, and they do so in ways that are different from other people in other places and other times. We can use *culture* to refer to the acting out of these shared ideas.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz offered this definition. He said, culture is “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” (1973, 89). That’s difficult language, but you can get the idea—culture is historically transmitted knowledge and attitudes toward life expressed in symbolic form. Culture is the expressed and shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a social group, organization, or institution. It is OK if that still seems broad and fluid. Scholars also wrestle with the term because it must capture so much. Culture should not be easy to define.

## Why Media? What Do Media Do for Us?

Even a brief history of media can leave one breathless. The speed, reach, and power of the technology are humbling. The evolution can seem almost natural and inevitable, but it is important to stop and ask a basic question: Why? Why do media seem to play such an important role in our lives and our culture?

With reflection, we can see that media fulfill several basic roles. One obvious role is *entertainment*. Media can act as a springboard for our imaginations, a source of fantasy, and an outlet for escapism. In the 19th century, Victorian readers, disillusioned by the grimness of the Industrial Revolution, found themselves drawn into books that offered fantastic worlds of fairies and other unreal beings. In the first decade of the 21st century, American television viewers could relax at the end of a day by watching singers, both wonderful and terrible, compete to be idols or watch two football teams do battle. Media entertain and distract us in the midst of busy and hard lives. Media can also provide *information* and *education*. Information can come in many forms, and often blurs the line with entertainment. Today, newspapers and news-oriented television and radio programs make available stories from across the globe, allowing readers or viewers in London to have access to voices and videos from Baghdad, Tokyo, or Buenos Aires. Books and magazines provide a more in-depth look at a wide range of subjects. Online encyclopedias have articles on topics from presidential nicknames to child prodigies to tongue-twisters in various languages. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has posted free lecture notes, exams, and audio and video recordings of classes on its website, allowing anyone with an Internet connection access to world-class professors. Another useful aspect of media is its ability to act as a public forum for the discussion of important issues. In newspapers or other periodicals, letters to the editor allow readers to respond to journalists, or voice their opinions on the issues of the day. These letters have been an important part of U.S. newspapers even when the nation was a British colony, and they have served as a means of public discourse ever since. Blogs, discussion boards, and online comments are modern forums. Indeed, the Internet can be seen as a fundamentally democratic medium that allows people who can get online the ability to put their voices out there—though whether anyone will hear is another question.

Media can also serve to *monitor government, business, and other institutions*. Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel *The Jungle* exposed the miserable conditions in the turn-of-the-century meatpacking industry. In the early 1970s, *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered evidence of the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, which eventually led to the resignation of then-president Richard Nixon. Online journalists today try to uphold the “watchdog” role of the media.

Thinking more deeply, we can recognize that certain media are better at certain roles. Media have characteristics that influence how we use them. While some forms of mass media are better suited to entertainment, others make more sense as a venue for spreading information. For example, in terms of print media, books are durable and able to contain lots of information, but are relatively slow and expensive to produce. In contrast, newspapers are comparatively cheaper and quicker to create, making them a better medium for the quick turnover of daily news. Television provides vastly more visual information than radio, and is more dynamic than a static printed page; it can also be used to broadcast live events to a nationwide audience, as in the annual State of the Union addresses given by the U.S. president. However, it is also a one-way medium—that is, it allows for very little direct person-to-person communication. In contrast, the Internet encourages public discussion of issues and allows nearly everyone who wants a voice to have one. However, the Internet is also largely unmoderated and uncurated. Users may have to wade through thousands of inane comments or misinformed amateur opinions in order to find quality information.

1960s media theorist Marshall McLuhan took these ideas one step further, with the phrase “the medium is the message.” McLuhan emphasized that each medium delivers information in a different way and that content is fundamentally shaped by that medium. For example, although television news has the advantage of offering video and live coverage, making a story come vividly alive, it is also a faster-paced medium. That means stories get reported in different ways than print. A story told on television will often be more visual, have less information, and be able to offer less history and context than the same story covered in a monthly magazine. This feature of media technology leads to interesting arguments. For example, some people claim that television presents “dumbed down” information. Others disagree. In an essay about television’s effects on contemporary fiction, writer David Foster Wallace scoffed at the “reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes…Treating television as evil is just as reductive and silly as treating it like a toaster with pictures.” [10]

We do not have to cast value judgments but can affirm: People who get the majority of their news from a particular medium will have a particular view of the world shaped not just by the *content* of what they watch but also by its *medium*. Or, as computer scientist Alan Kay put it, “Each medium has a special way of representing ideas that emphasize particular ways of thinking and de-emphasize others.” [11] The Internet has made this discussion even richer because it seems to hold all other media within it—print, radio, film, television and more. If indeed the medium is the message, the Internet provides us with an extremely interesting message to consider.

**How Did We Get Here? The Evolution of Culture**

Scholars often speak of *historical eras.* Can we speak of *cultural eras*? It can actually be a useful concept. There are many ways to divide time into cultural eras. But for our purposes, a cultural period is a time marked by a particular way of understanding the world through culture and technology. Changes in cultural periods are marked by fundamental changes in the way we perceive and understand the world. For example, you may have had readings about the “Middle Ages,” a marker for European history from the 5th to 15th Century. In that era, technology and communication were in the hands of authorities like the king and church who could dictate what was “true.” The Renaissance, the era that followed the Middle Ages, turned to the scientific method as a means of reaching truth through reason. This change in cultural period was galvanized by the printing press. (In 2008, *Wired* magazine’s editor-in-chief proclaimed that the application of Internet technology through Google was about to render the scientific method obsolete.) In each of these cultural eras, the nature of truth had not changed. What had changed was the way that humans used available technology to make sense of the world.

Using technology to make sense of the world? You likely can anticipate that for the purpose of studying culture and mass media, the modern and postmodern ages are some of the most exciting and relevant ones to explore, eras in which culture and technology have intersected like never before.

*The Modern Age—Modernity*

The Modern Age is the post-Medieval era, beginning roughly after the 14th century, a wide span of time marked in part by technological innovations, urbanization, scientific discoveries, and globalization. The Modern Age is generally split into two parts: the early and the late modern periods. Scholars often talk of the Modern Age as modernity.

The *early modern period* began with Gutenberg’s invention of the movable type printing press in the late 15th century and ended in the late 18th century. Thanks to Gutenberg’s press, the European population of the early modern period saw rising literacy rates, which led to educational reform. As noted earlier, Gutenberg’s machine also greatly enabled the spread of knowledge, and in turn spurred the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. During the early modern period, transportation improved, politics became more secularized, capitalism spread, nation-states grew more powerful, and information became more widely accessible. Enlightenment ideals of reason, rationalism, and faith in scientific inquiry slowly began to replace the previously dominant authority of king and church.

Huge political, social, and economic changes marked the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the *late modern period*. The Industrial Revolution, which began in England around 1750, combined with the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, indicated that the world was undergoing massive changes. The Industrial Revolution had far-reaching consequences. It did not merely change the way goods were produced—it also fundamentally changed the economic, social, and cultural framework of its time.

The Industrial Revolution doesn’t have clear start or end dates. However, during the 19th century, several crucial inventions—the internal combustion engine, steam-powered ships, and railways, among others—led to other innovations across various industries. Suddenly, steam power and machine tools meant that production increased dramatically. But some of the biggest changes coming out of the Industrial Revolution were social in character. An economy based on manufacturing instead of agriculture meant that more people moved to cities, where techniques of mass production led to an emphasis on efficiency both in and out of the factory. Newly urbanized factory laborers no longer had the skill or time to produce their own food, clothing, or supplies and instead turned to consumer goods. Increased production led to increases in wealth, though income inequalities between classes also started to grow as well. Increased wealth and nonrural lifestyles led to the development of entertainment industries. Life changed rapidly.

It is no coincidence that the French and American Revolutions happened in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. The huge social changes created changes in political systems and thinking. In both France and America, the revolutions were inspired by a rejection of a monarchy in favor of national sovereignty and representative democracy. Both revolutions also heralded the rise of secular society, as opposed to church-based authority systems. Democracy was well-suited to the so-called Age of Reason, with its ideals of individual rights and its belief in progress.

Media were central to these revolutions. As we have seen, the fusing of steam power and the printing press enabled the explosive expansion of books and newspapers. Literacy rates rose, as did support for public participation in politics. More and more people lived in the city, had an education, got their news from the newspaper, spent their wages on consumer goods, and identified themselves as citizens of an industrialized nation. Urbanization, mass literacy, and new forms of mass media contributed to a sense of mass culture that united people across regional, social, and cultural boundaries.

A last note on the terminology for the cultural era of the Modern Age or modernity: A similar term—modernism—also has come into use. However, modernism is a term for an artistic, cultural movement, rather than era. Modernism refers to the artistic movement of late-19th and early-20th centuries that arose out of the widespread changes that swept the world during that period. Most notably, modernism questioned the limitations of “traditional” forms of art and culture. Modernist art was in part a reaction against the Enlightenment’s certainty of progress and rationality. It celebrated subjectivity through abstraction, experimentalism, surrealism, and sometimes pessimism or even nihilism. Prominent examples of modernist works include James Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness novels, cubist paintings by Picasso, atonal compositions by Debussy, and absurdist plays by Pirandello. It’s not too confusing—modernism was an artistic movement taking place during the modern age.

*The Postmodern Age*

If you go on to graduate study in almost any field in the humanities or social sciences, you will eventually encounter texts debating the *postmodern era*. While the exact definition and dates of the postmodern era are still debated by cultural theorists and philosophers, the general consensus is that the postmodern era began during the second half of the 20th century, and was marked by skepticism, self-consciousness, the celebration of difference, and the reappraisal of modern conventions. Modernity—the Modern Age—took for granted scientific rationalism, the autonomous self, and the inevitability of progress. The postmodern age questioned or dismissed many of these assumptions. If the modern age valued order, reason, stability, and absolute truth, the postmodern age reveled in contingency, fragmentation, and instability. The aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the digitization of culture, the rise of the Internet, and numerous other factors fed into the skepticism and self-consciousness of the postmodern era.

Modernity’s belief in objective truth is one of the major assumptions turned on its head in the postmodern era. Postmodernists instead took their cues from Schrödinger, the quantum physicist who famously devised a thought experiment in which a cat is placed inside a sealed box with a small amount of radiation that may or may not kill it. (Remember, this is a thought experiment, and is not real.) While the box remains sealed, Schrödinger proclaimed, the cat exists simultaneously in both states, dead *and* alive. Both potential states are equally true. Although the thought experiment was devised to explore issues in quantum physics, it appealed to postmodernists in its assertion of radical uncertainty. What is reality? Rather than being an absolute objective truth, accessible by rational procedures and experimentation, the status of reality was contingent and depended on the observer.

“The postmodern” affected fields from philosophy to political science to literature. Novelists and poets, for example, embraced this new approach to reality. While Victorian novelists took pains to make their books seem more “real,” postmodern narratives distrusted professions of “reality” and constantly reminded readers of the artificial nature of the story they were reading. The emphasis was not on the all-knowing author but instead on the reader. For the postmodernists, meaning was not injected into a work by its creator but depended on the reader’s subjective experience of the work.

Another way postmodernity differed from modernity was in its rejection of what philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard deemed “grand narratives.” The Modern Age was marked by different large-scale theories that attempted to explain the totality of human experience, including theories of capitalism, Marxism, rationalism, Freudianism, Darwinism, fascism, and so on. But the postmodern era called into question the sorts of theories that claimed to explain everything at once. Such thinking, postmodernists warned, led to 20th-century totalitarian regimes, such as Hitler’s Third Reich and the USSR under Stalin.

The postmodern age, Lyotard theorized, was one of micro-narratives instead of grand narratives a multiplicity of small, localized understandings of the world, none of which can claim an ultimate or absolute truth. The diversity of human experience also was a marked feature of the postmodern world. As Lyotard noted, “eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture; one listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games.”

Postmodernists even mistrusted the idea of originality—the supposed arrogance of thinking one had a “new thought”—and freely borrowed across cultures and genres. William S. Burroughs gleefully proclaimed a sort of call-to-arms for his postmodern generation of writers in 1985: “Out of the closets and into the museums, libraries, architectural monuments, concert halls, bookstores, recording studios and film studios of the world. Everything belongs to the inspired and dedicated thief.…Words, colors, light, sounds, stone, wood, bronze belong to the living artist. They belong to anyone who can use them. Loot the Louvre! *A bas l’originalité* (down with originality), the sterile and assertive ego that imprisons us as it creates. *Vive le sol* (long live the sun)-pure, shameless, total. We are not responsible. Steal anything in sight.” Burroughs’s words embodied the mixed skepticism and glee that marked the postmodern era. As the new millennium began, Bob Dylan’s album, “Love and Theft,” carried on Burroughs’s tradition. Its title and many of its lyrics are taken from numerous sources across cultures, eras, and fields.

## Media Mix: Convergence

Each cultural era is marked by changes in technology. What happens to the “old” technology? When radio was invented, people predicted the end of newspapers. When television was invented, people predicted the end of radio and film. It’s important to keep in mind that the implementation of new technologies does not mean that the old ones simply vanish into dusty museums. Today’s media consumers still read newspapers, listen to radio, watch television, and get immersed in movies. The difference is that it’s now possible to do all those things and do all those things through one device—be it a personal computer or a smartphone—and through the medium of the Internet. Such actions are enabled by media convergence, the process by which previously distinct technologies come to share content, tasks, and resources. A cell phone that also takes pictures and video is an example of the convergence of digital photography, digital video, and cellular telephone technologies. A news story that originally appeared in a newspaper and now is published on a website or pushed on a mobile phone is another example of convergence.

*Kinds of Convergence*

Convergence isn’t just limited to technology. Media theorist Henry Jenkins has devoted a lot of time to think about convergence. He argues that convergence isn’t an end result but instead *a process* that changes how media is both consumed and produced. Jenkins breaks convergence down into five categories:

1. *Economic convergence* is the horizontal and vertical integration of the entertainment industry, in which a single company has interests across and within many kinds of media. For example, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation owns numerous newspapers (*The New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*) but is also involved in book publishing (HarperCollins), sports (the Colorado Rockies), television (FoxNews), Internet (Facebook), and many others.
2. *Organic convergence* is what happens when someone is watching television while chatting online and also listening to music—such multitasking seems like a natural outcome in a diverse media world.
3. *Cultural convergence* has several different aspects. One important component is stories flowing across several kinds of media platforms—for example, novels that become television series (*Dexter* or *Friday Night Lights*); radio dramas that become comic strips (*The Shadow*); even amusement park rides that become film franchises (*Pirates of the Caribbean*). The character Harry Potter exists in books, films, toys, amusement park rides, and candy bars. Another aspect of cultural convergence is participatory culture—that is, the way media consumers are able to annotate, comment on, remix, and otherwise talk back to culture in unprecedented ways.
4. *Global convergence* is the process of geographically distant cultures influencing one another despite the oceans and mountains that may physically separate them. Nigeria’s “Nollywood” cinema takes its cues from India’s Bollywood, which of course stemmed from Hollywood; old *Tom and Jerry* cartoons and newer Oprah shows are popular on Arab satellite television channels; successful American horror movies like *The Ring* and *The Grudge* are remakes of Japanese hits; the hit television show, “American Idol” was a remake of a British show. The advantage of global convergence is worldwide access to a wealth of cultural influence. Its downside, some critics posit, is the threat of cultural imperialism, defined by Herbert Schiller as the way that developing countries are “attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system.” That is, less powerful nations lose their cultural traditions as more powerful nations spread their culture through their media and other forms. Cultural imperialism can be a formal policy or can happen more subtly, as with the spread of outside influence through television, movies, and other cultural projects.
5. *Technological convergence* is the merging of technologies. When more and more different kinds of media are transformed into digital content, as Jenkins notes, “we expand the potential relationships between them and enable them to flow across platforms.”

*Effects of Convergence*

Jenkins’ concept of “organic convergence”—particularly, multitasking—is perhaps most evident in your own lives. To many who grew up in a world dominated by so-called old media, there is nothing organic about today’s mediated world. As a *New York Times* editorial sniffed, “Few objects on the planet are farther removed from nature—less, say, like a rock or an insect—than a glass and stainless steel smartphone.” But modern American culture is plugged in as never before, and many students today have never known a world where the Internet didn’t exist. Such a cultural sea change causes a significant generation gap between those who grew up with new media and those who didn’t.

A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that Americans aged 8 to 18 spend more than 7.5 hours with electronic devices each day—and, thanks to multitasking, they’re able to pack an average of 11 hours of media content into that 7.5 hours. These statistics highlight some of the aspects of the new digital model of media consumption: participation and multitasking. Today’s teenagers aren’t passively sitting in front of screens, quietly absorbing information. Instead, they are sending text messages to friends, linking news articles on Facebook, commenting on YouTube videos, writing reviews of television episodes to post online, and generally engaging with the culture they consume. Convergence has also made multitasking much easier, as many devices allow users to surf the Internet, listen to music, watch videos, play games, and reply to emails and texts on the same machine.

However, this multitasking is still quite new and we do not know how media convergence and immersion are shaping culture, people, and individual brains. In his 2005 book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson argues that today’s television and video games are mentally stimulating, in that they pose a cognitive challenge and invite active engagement and problem-solving. Poking fun at alarmists who see every new technology as making children more stupid, Johnson jokingly cautions readers against the dangers of book reading: it “chronically under stimulates the senses” and is “tragically isolating.” Even worse, books “follow a fixed linear path. You can’t control their narratives in any fashion—you simply sit back and have the story dictated to you.…This risks instilling a general passivity in our children, making them feel as though they’re powerless to change their circumstances. Reading is not an active, participatory process; it’s a submissive one.” [4]

A 2010 book by Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* is more pessimistic. Carr worries that the vast array of interlinked information available through the Internet is eroding attention spans and making contemporary minds distracted and less capable of deep, thoughtful engagement with complex ideas and arguments. He mourns the change in his own reading habits. “Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words,” Carr reflects ruefully. “Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.” Carr cites neuroscience studies showing that when people try to do two things at once, they give less attention to each and perform the tasks less carefully. In other words, multitasking makes us do a greater number of things poorly. Whatever the ultimate cognitive, social, or technological results, though, convergence is changing the way we relate to media today.

*Video Killed the Radio Star: Convergence Kills Off Obsolete Technology—Or Does It?*

When was the last time you used a rotary phone? How about a payphone on a street? Or a library’s card catalog? When you need brief, factual information, when was the last time you reached for a handy volume of *Encyclopedia Britannica*? Odds are, it’s been a while. Maybe never. All of these habits, formerly common parts of daily life, have been rendered essentially obsolete through the progression of convergence.

But convergence hasn’t erased old technologies; instead, it may have just altered the way we use them. Take cassette tapes and Polaroid film, for example. The underground music tastemaker Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth recently claimed that he only listens to music on cassette. Polaroid Corporation, creators of the once-popular instant film cameras, was driven out of business by digital photography in 2008, only to be revived two years later—with pop star Lady Gaga as the brand’s creative director. Several iPhone apps promise to apply effects to photos to make them look more like Polaroids.

Cassettes, Polaroids, and other seemingly obsolete technologies have been able to thrive—albeit in niche markets—both despite and because of Internet culture. Instead of being slick and digitized, cassette tapes and Polaroid photos are physical objects that are made more accessible and more human, according to enthusiasts, *because of* their flaws. “I think there’s a group of people—fans and artists alike—out there to whom music is more than just a file on your computer, more than just a folder of mp3s,” says Brad Rose, founder of a Tulsa-based cassette label. The distinctive Polaroid look—caused by uneven color saturation, under- or over-development, or just daily atmospheric effects on the developing photograph—is emphatically analog. In an age of high resolution, portable printers, and camera phones, the Polaroid’s appeal has something to do with ideas of nostalgia and authenticity. Convergence has transformed who uses these media and for what purposes, but it hasn’t run them out of town yet.

## Cultural Values Shape Media; Media Shape Cultural Values

In a 1995 *Wired* magazine article, Jon Katz suggested that the Revolutionary War patriot Thomas Paine should be held up as “the moral father of the Internet.” The Internet, Katz wrote, “offers what Paine and his revolutionary colleagues hoped for—a vast, diverse, passionate, global means of transmitting ideas and opening minds.” In fact, according to Katz, the emerging Internet era is closer in spirit to the 18th-century media world than the 20th-century’s so-called old media (radio, television, print). “The ferociously spirited press of the late 1700s…was dominated by individuals expressing their opinions. The idea that ordinary citizens with no special resources, expertise, or political power—like Paine himself—could sound off, reach wide audiences, even spark revolutions, was brand-new to the world.”

As we continue our introduction to understanding media and culture, Katz’s impassioned defense of Paine’s plucky independence reminds us of how cultural values shape media. Paine’s values led to his books and pamphlets that helped lead to a new nation. In all eras, cultural values shape the way media are created, used, and controlled. Keeping Katz’s words in mind, we can ask ourselves further questions about the role of cultural values in our media today. How do cultural values shape our media and mass communication? And how, in turn, do media and mass communication shape our values? We’ll start with a key American cultural value: free speech.

*Free Speech as Cultural Value*

The value of free speech is central to American mass communication and has been since the nation’s revolutionary founding. The U.S. Constitution’s very first amendment guarantees the freedom of speech and of the press. Thanks to the First Amendment and subsequent statutes, the United States has some of the broadest protections on speech of any industrialized nation. We can see the value that American culture places on free speech. However, speech and the press are not always free—cultural values have placed limits and those limits, like values, have shifted over time.

Obscenity, for example, has not often been tolerated. Indeed, the very definition of obscenity has shifted over time with the nation’s changing social attitudes. James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, ranked by the Modern Library as the best English-language novel of the 20th century, was illegal to publish in the United States between 1922 and 1934. The 1954 Supreme Court case, *Roth v. The United States*, tried to lessen restrictions and defined obscenity more narrowly. It allowed for differences depending on “community standards.” Obscenity became even more of an issue during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Cultural changes of that era made it even more difficult to pin down just what was obscene and what was meant by “community standards.” Today, obscenity continues its tug-of-war with cultural values. Sexually explicit magazines, such as *Playboy*, are available in nearly every U.S. airport, but pornography on the Internet is still a subject of concern.

Copyright law also puts limits on free speech. Here we see a conflict between cultural values of free speech and the right to protect your creative rights. Intellectual property law was originally intended to protect just that—the proprietary rights, both economic and intellectual, of the originator of a creative work. Works under copyright can’t be reproduced without the authorization of the creator, nor can anyone else use them to make a profit. Inventions, novels, musical tunes, and even phrases can all be covered by copyright law. The first copyright statute in the United States set 14 years as the maximum term for copyright protection. This number has risen exponentially in the 20th century; some works are now copyright protected for up to 120 years. In recent years, an Internet culture that enables file sharing, mixing, mash-ups, and YouTube parodies has raised questions about copyright. Can you refer to a copyrighted work? What is *fair use* of a copyrighted work? The exact line between what expressions are protected or prohibited by law are still being set by courts; and as the changing values of the U.S. public evolve, copyright law—like obscenity law—will continue to change as well.

*Persuasion and Cultural Values*

Cultural values also shape mass media messages when producers of media content have vested interests in particular social goals. The producers offer media content that promotes or refutes particular viewpoints. Governments, corporations, nonprofits, colleges, indeed most organizations, all try to shape media content to promote themselves and their values. In its most heavy-handed form, at the level of government, this type of media influence can become propaganda, communication that intentionally attempts to persuade its audience for ideological, political, or commercial purposes. Propaganda often (but not always) distorts the truth, selectively presents facts, or uses emotional appeals. In wartime, propaganda often includes caricatures of the enemy.

During World War I, for example, the U.S. government created the Creel Commission to act as a sort of public relations agency for the American entry into the war. The commission used radio, movies, posters, and in-person speakers to present a positive slant on the American war effort and demonize the opposing Germans. George Creel, chairman of the commission, acknowledged the committee’s attempt at influencing the public, but he shied away from calling its work propaganda:

In no degree was the committee an agency of censorship, a machinery of concealment or repression…In all things, from first to last, without halt or change, it was a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world’s greatest adventures in advertising…We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was educational and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of the facts. [2]

Of course, the line between the selective (but “straightforward”) presentation of the truth and the manipulation of propaganda is not an obvious or distinct one. (Another of the commission’s members was later deemed “the father of public relations” and authored a book titled *Propaganda*.) Advertisers craft messages so viewers want to buy their products. Some news sources, such as cable news channels or political blogs, have an explicit political slant. For our purposes, we simply want to keep in mind how cultural values shape much media content.

*The Cultural Value of Gatekeepers*

In 1960, journalist A. J. Liebling wryly observed that “freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Although he may not have put it in those terms, Liebling was talking about the role of gatekeepers in the media industry, another way in which cultural values influence mass communication.

Gatekeepers are the people who help determine which stories make it to the public, including reporters who decide what sources to use, and editors who pick what gets published and which stories make it to the front page. Media gatekeepers are part of culture and thus have their own cultural values, whether consciously or unconsciously. In deciding what counts as newsworthy, entertaining, or relevant, gatekeepers use their own values to create and shape what gets presented to the wider public. Conversely, gatekeepers may decide that some events are unimportant or uninteresting to consumers. Those events may never reach the eyes or ears of a larger public.

In one striking example of how cultural values shape gatekeeping, journalist Allan Thompson points to the news media’s sluggishness in covering the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Almost one million people were killed in ferocious attacks in just 100 days. Yet, as Thompson notes, few foreign correspondents were in Africa, and the world was slow to learn of the atrocities in Rwanda. Instead, the nightly news was preoccupied by the O. J. Simpson murder trial, Tonya Harding’s attack on a fellow figure skater, or the less-bloody conflict in Bosnia (a European country, where more reporters were stationed). Thompson argues that the lack of international media attention allowed politicians to remain complacent. With little media coverage, there was little outrage about the Rwandan atrocities, which contributed to a lack of political will to invest time and troops in a faraway conflict. Richard Dowden, Africa Editor for the British newspaper *The Independent* during the Rwandan genocide, bluntly explained the news media’s larger reluctance to focus on African issues: “Africa was simply not important. It didn’t sell newspapers. Newspapers have to make profits. So it wasn’t important. Cultural values by gatekeepers on the individual and institutional level downplayed the genocide at a time of great crisis, and potentially contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.” [3]

Gatekeepers had an especially strong influence in old media, in which space and time were limited. A news broadcast could only last for its allotted half hour, 22 minutes with commercials, while a newspaper had a set number of pages to print. The Internet, in contrast, has room for infinite news reports. The interactive nature of the medium also minimizes the gatekeeper function of the media by allowing media consumers to have a voice as well. News aggregators like Digg.com allow readers to decide what makes it on to the front page. That is not to say that the wisdom or cultural values of the crowd is always wise—recent top stories on Digg have featured headlines like “Top 5 Hot Girls Playing Video Games” and “girl who must eat every 15 minutes to stay alive.” Media expert Mark Glaser noted that the digital age hasn’t eliminated gatekeepers; it’s just shifted who they are: “the editors who pick featured artists and apps at the Apple iTunes store, who choose videos to spotlight on YouTube, and who highlight Suggested Users on Twitter,” among others. And unlike traditional media, these new gatekeepers rarely have public bylines, making it difficult to figure out who makes such decisions and on what basis. Observing how distinct cultures and subcultures present the same story can be indicative of those cultures’ various cultural values. Another way to look critically at today’s media messages is to examine how the media has functioned in the world and in the United States during different cultural periods.

# Popular Culture and Media Literacy

## Mass Media and Popular Culture

In 1850, an epidemic swept America—but instead of leaving victims sick with fever or flu, this was a rabid craze for the music of Swedish soprano Jenny Lind. American showman P. T. Barnum (who would later go on to found the circus we now know as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus), a shrewd marketer and self-made millionaire, is credited with spreading “Lindomania” through a series of astute show-business moves. Barnum promised Lind an unprecedented thousand-dollar-a night fee (the equivalent of close to $30,000 in today’s dollars) for her entire 93-performance tour of the United States. Ever the savvy self-promoter, Barnum turned this huge investment to his advantage, using it to drum up publicity—and it paid off. When the Swedish soprano’s ship docked on U.S. shores, she was greeted by 40,000 ardent fans; another 20,000 swarmed her hotel. Congress was adjourned during Lind’s visit to Washington, DC, where the National Theater had to be enlarged in order to accommodate her audiences. A town in California and an island in Canada were named in her honor. Enthusiasts could purchase Jenny Lind hats, chairs, boots, opera glasses, and even pianos.

A little more than a century later, a new craze transformed American teenagers into screaming, fainting Beatle-maniacs. When the British foursome touched down at Kennedy Airport in 1964, they were met by more than 3,000 frenzied fans. Their performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* was seen by 73 million people, or 40 percent of the U.S. population. The crime rate that night dropped to its lowest level in 50 years. Beatlemania was at such a fever pitch that *Life* magazine cautioned that “A Beatle who ventures out unguarded into the streets runs the very real peril of being dismembered or crushed to death by his fans.” [1] The BBC helpfully pointed out that there was plenty of paraphernalia for true fans to spend their money on: “T-shirts, sweatshirts, turtle-neck sweaters, tight-legged trousers, nightshirts, scarves, and jewelry inspired by the Beatles” were all available, as were Beatles-style mmop-topwigs. In the 21st century, rabid fans could actually help decide the next pop stars through the reality television program *American Idol*. Derived from a British show, *American Idol* hit the airwaves in 2002 and became the only television program ever to earn the top spot in the Neilsen ratings for six seasons in a row, often averaging more than 30 million nightly viewers. Rival television networks quaked in fear, deeming the pop behemoth “the ultimate schoolyard bully,” “the Death Star,” or even “the most impactful show in the history of television.” Newspapers put developments on the show on their front pages. New cell phone technologies allowed viewers to have a direct role in the program’s star-making enterprise through casting votes. Fans also could sign up for text alerts or play trivia games on their phones. In 2009, AT&T estimated that *Idol*-related text traffic amounted to 178 million messages.

An important consideration in any discussion of media and culture is the concept of *popular culture*. If culture is the expressed and shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a social group, organization, or institution, then what is popular culture? Popular culture is the media, products, and attitudes considered to be part of the mainstream of a given culture and the everyday life of common people. It is often distinct from more formal conceptions of culture that take into account moral, social, religious beliefs and values, such as our earlier definition of culture. It is also distinct from what some consider elite or high culture. For some people, *American Idol* is pop culture and opera is culture.

Pop culture and American media are inextricably linked—it’s no coincidence that Jenny Lind, the Beatles, and *American Idol* were each promoted using a then-new technology—photography for Lind; television for the Beatles; the Internet and text messaging for *American Idol*. For as long as mass media have existed in the United States, they have helped to create and fuel mass crazes, skyrocketing celebrities, and pop culture manias of all kinds. Whether through newspaper advertisements, live television broadcasts, or integrated Internet marketing, media industry “tastemakers” help to shape what we care about. Even in our era of seemingly limitless entertainment options, mass hits like *American Idol* still have the ability to dominate the public’s attention.

*“The Tastemakers”*

Historically, popular culture has been closely associated with mass media that introduce and encourage the adoption of certain trends. We can see these media as “tastemakers”—people or institutions that shape the way others think, eat, listen, drink, dress and more. Similar in some ways to the media gatekeepers discussed above, tastemakers can have huge influence. For example, *The New York Times’* restaurant and theater reviews used to be able to make or break a restaurant or show with their opinions. Another example is Ed Sullivan’s variety show, which ran from 1948 to 1971, and is most famous for hosting the first U.S. appearance of the Beatles—a television event that was at the time the most-watched television program ever. Sullivan hosted musical acts, comedians, actors, and dancers, and had the reputation of being able to turn an unknown performer into a full-fledged star. Comedian Jackie Mason compared being on *The Ed Sullivan Show* to “an opera singer being at the Met. Or if a guy is an architect that makes the Empire State Building.…This was the biggest.” [3]Sullivan was a classic example of an influential tastemaker of his time. *American Idol*’s Simon Cowell had a similar influence as his show helped turn unknown local performers into international stars. Television hosts and comic Stephen Colbert can be understood as a tastemaker of progressive national politics.

Along with encouraging a mass audience to keep an eye out for (or skip) certain movies, television shows, video games, books, or fashion trends, taste-making is also used to create demand for new products. Companies often turn to advertising firms to help create a public hunger for an object that may have not even existed six months previously. In the 1880s, when George Eastman developed the Kodak camera for personal use, photography was the realm of professionals. Ordinary people simply did not think about taking photographs. “Though the Kodak was relatively cheap and easy to use, most Americans didn’t see the need for a camera; they had no sense that there was any value in visually documenting their lives,” noted *New Yorker* writer James Surowiecki. George Eastman’s advertising introduced the very idea of photography to everyday Americans. Kodak became a wildly successful company not because Eastman was good at selling cameras, but because he understood that what he really had to sell was photography.

Tastemakers can help keep culture vital by introducing the public to new ideas, music, programs, or products. But the ability to sway or influence the tastes of consumers can be worth millions of dollars. In the traditional media model, media companies set aside large advertising budgets to promote their most promising projects. Tastemakers are encouraged to buzz about “the next big thing.” In untraditional models, bribery and backroom deals also have helped promote performers or projects. For example, the Payola Scandal of the 1950s involved record companies paying the disc jockeys of radio stations to play certain records so those records would become hits. *Payola* is a combination of the words “pay” and “Victrola,” a record player. Companies today sometimes pay bloggers to promote their products.

*A Changing System for the Internet Age*

In retrospect, the 20th century was a tastemaker’s dream. Media choices were limited. Many cities and towns had just three television channels, one or two newspapers, and one or two dominant radio stations. Advertisers, critics, and other cultural influencers had access to huge audiences through a small number of mass communication platforms. However, by the end of the century, the rise of cable television and the Internet had begun to make taste-making a much more complicated enterprise. While *The Ed Sullivan Show* regularly reached 50 million people in the 1960s, the most popular television series of 2009—*American Idol*—averaged around 25.5 million viewers per night, despite the fact that the 21st century United States could claim more people and more television sets than ever before. The proliferation of television channels and other, competing forms of entertainment meant that no one program or channel could dominate the attention of the American public as in Sullivan’s day.

The very concept of a “tastemaker” is undergoing a transformation. While the *American Idol* season five finale was reaching 36 million viewers, a low-tech home recording of a little boy acting loopy after a visit to the dentist (“David After Dentist”) garnered more than 37 million YouTube viewings in 2009 alone. The Internet appears to be eroding some of the taste-making power of the traditional media outlets. No longer are the traditional mass media the only dominant forces in creating and promoting trends. Instead, information can spread across the globe without any involvement of traditional media. Websites made by nonprofessionals can reach more people daily than a major newspaper. Music review sites such as Pitchfork.com keep their eyes out for the next big thing, whereas review aggregators like RottenTomatoes.com allow readers to read hundreds of reviews by amateurs and professionals alike. Mobile applications like Yelp allow consumers to get individual reviews of a restaurant while they are standing outside it. Blogs make it possible for anyone with Internet access to potentially reach an audience of millions. Some popular bloggers transitioned from the traditional media world to the digital world, but others became well known without formal institutional support. The celebrity gossip chronicler Perez Hilton had no formal training in journalism when he started his blog, PerezHilton.com, in 2005; within a few years, he was reaching millions of readers a month.

Email and text messages allow for the near-instant transmission of messages across vast geographic expanses. Although personal communications continue to dominate, email and text messages are increasingly used to directly transmit information about important news events. When Barack Obama wanted to announce his selection of Joe Biden as his vice-presidential running mate in the 2008 election, he bypassed the traditional televised press conference and instead sent the news to his supporters directly via text message—2.9 million text messages, to be exact. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, and microblogging services, such as Twitter, are another source of late-breaking information. When Michael Jackson died of cardiac arrest in 2009, “RIP Michael Jackson” was a top trending topic on Twitter *before* mainstream media first reported the news.

Thanks to these and other digital-age media, the Internet has become a pop culture force, both a source of amateur talent and a source of amateur promotion. However, traditional media outlets still maintain a large amount of control and influence over U.S. pop culture. One key indicator is the fact that many singers or writers who first make their mark on the Internet quickly transition to more traditional media—YouTube star Justin Bieber was snapped up by a mainstream record company, and blogger Perez Hilton is regularly featured on MTV and VH1. New media stars are quickly absorbed into the old media landscape.

*Getting Around the Gatekeepers*

Not only does the Internet allow little known individuals to potentially reach a huge audience with their art or opinions, but it also allows content-creators to reach fans directly. Projects that may have not succeeded as part of the established pop culture/mass media machine may get a chance in the digital world. For example, the media establishment has been surprised by the success of some self-published books: First-time author Daniel Suarez had his novel manuscript rejected by dozens of literary agents before he decided to self-publish in 2006. Through savvy self-promotion via influential bloggers, Suarez garnered enough attention to land a contract with a major publishing house.

Suarez’s story, though certainly exceptional, points to some of the questions facing creators and consumers of pop culture in the Internet age. Without the influence of an agent, editor, or public relations firm, self-published content may be able to remain closer to the creator’s intention. However, how then does the content reach the public? Does every artist have to have the public relations and marketing skills of Suarez? And with so many self-published, self-promoted works uploaded to the Internet every day, how will any work—even great work—get noticed?

It’s not impossible. Critic Laura Miller spells out some of the ways in which writers in particular are able to take control of their own publishing: Writers can upload their works to services run by Amazon, Apple, and Barnes & Noble, she notes, “transforming them into e-books that are instantly available in high profile online stores. Or they can post them on services like Urbis.com, Quillp.com, or CompletelyNovel.com and coax reviews from other hopeful users.” Miller also points out that many of these companies can produce hard copies of books as well. While such a system may be a boon for writers who haven’t had success with the traditional media establishment, Miller notes that it may not be the best option for readers, who “rarely complain that there isn’t enough of a selection on Amazon or in their local superstore; they’re more likely to ask for help in narrowing down their choices.”

The commingling of the Internet and popular culture poses many intriguing questions for our future: Will the Internet era be marked by a huge and diffuse pop culture, where the power of traditional mass media declines and, along with it, the power of the universalizing blockbuster hit? Or will the Internet create a new set of tastemakers—influential bloggers or Tweeters? Or will the Internet serve as a platform for the old tastemakers to take on new forms? Or will the tastemakers become everyone?

*More Reviewers=More Accurate Reviews…Right?*

In 1993, *The New York Times* restaurant critic Ruth Reichl visited one of Manhattan’s snootiest restaurants, Le Cirque, first as herself, a fashionable New Yorker, and then, one week later, in the guise of a frumpy Midwesterner. In her shocking review, the critic lambasted the restaurant’s rude treatment of “Midwestern Molly”—an early battle in the fight for democratic reviews. Part of the point of Reichl’s experiment was to find out how ordinary people were treated in restaurants. Now ordinary people can tell their own tales. The Internet, which has turned everyone with the time and interest into a potential reviewer, allows those ordinary people to have their voices heard. In the mid-2000s, websites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor boasted hundreds of reviews of restaurants, hotels, and salons provided by users. Amazon allowed users to review any product it sells, from textbooks to fertilizer to bathing suits. The era of the democratized review was upon us, and taste-making was now everyone’s job. By crowd-sourcing the review process, the idea was, these sites would arrive at a more accurate description of the service in choice. One powerful reviewer would no longer be able to wield disproportionate power. Instead, the wisdom of the crowd would make or break restaurants, movies, and everything else. Anyone who felt treated badly or scammed now had recourse to tell the world about it. By 2008, Yelp boasted four million reviews.

However, mass taste-making isn’t as perfect as some people had promised. One determined reviewer can overly influence a product’s overall rating by contributing multiple votes. One study found that a handful of Amazon users were casting hundreds of votes, while most rarely wrote reviews at all. Online reviews also tend to skew to extremes—more reviews are written by the ecstatic and the furious, while the moderately pleased aren’t riled up enough to post online about their experiences. And while traditional critics are supposed to uphold ethics, there’s no such standard for online reviews. Savvy authors or restaurant owners have been known to slyly insert positive reviews of themselves, or have attempted to skew ratings systems. In order to get an accurate picture, potential buyers may find themselves wading through 20 or 30 online reviews, most of them from non-professionals. Consider these Amazon user reviews of William Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”: “There is really no point and it’s really long,” “I really didn’t enjoy reading this book and I wish that our English teacher wouldn’t force my class to read this play,” and “don’t know what Willy Shakespeare was thinking when he wrote this one play tragedy, but I thought this sure was boring! Hamlet does too much talking and not enough stuff.” Such unhelpful reviews have begun to remind people of the point of having reviews in the first place—that it’s an advantage to have certain places, products, or ideas examined and critiqued by a trusted source. In an article about Yelp, *The New York Times* noted that one of the site’s elite reviewers had racked up more than 300 reviews in 3 years, then snidely pointed out that “By contrast, a *The New York Times* restaurant critic might take six years to amass 300 reviews. The critic visits a restaurant several times, strives for anonymity, and tries to sample every dish on the menu.” Whatever your vantage point, it’s clear that old-style taste-making is still around and still valuable—but the democratic review is here to stay.

## Harry Potter and the Media Bogeyman

J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books about a young boy’s education as a wizard caused many parents—at least initially—to be somewhat wary. When they received an email warning them about the content of books, some of these parents had their fears justified. It seemed Rowling, the author of the books, was a Satan worshiper! According to the email, Rowling said the following:

“I think it’s absolute rubbish to protest children’s books on the grounds that they are luring children to Satan,” Rowling told a London *Times* reporter in a July 17 interview. “People should be praising them for that! These books guide children to an understanding that the weak, idiotic Son Of God is a living hoax who will be humiliated when the rain of fire comes … while we, his faithful servants, laugh and cavort in victory.”

Web publication *WorldNetDaily* posted an article at about the same time that used similar quotes, provoking a number of concerned letters and emails to the London *Times*. Both outlets, however, had quoted from the same source: the satirical newspaper *The Onion*. The original article was an intentionally over-the-top satire of the Harry Potter phenomenon. In typical *Onion* fashion, the article included absurd, fake quotes from 6-year-old Satanists reported in a straightforward style. Unbelievably, both the email and the *WorldNetDaily* article quoted *The Onion* article apparently without realizing the article was a parody.

This example of a rumor gone wild is a remarkable, if bizarre, example of how people worry about media effects. On the surface, the email typifies some people’s fears of the media’s influence on children. This fear reflects the ways some parents process new-media information and react to the media’s influence on the lives of children and teens. The concerns about one medium did not, however, stop the author of the email from using another medium to spread a false rumor. The concerned parents who believed the email trusted it because it was a form of media that validated their own preconceptions.

Ironically enough, *The Onion* article itself addressed such overblown fears. By satirizing the sometimes hysterical concerns of parents in such a convincing reporting style, the article positioned itself as knowledgeable and comfortable within the framework of competing media claims. The article was, in essence, predicated on the idea that the readers of *The Onion* are savvy enough to understand media messages and that they have no reason to fear the media because they understand it.

Yet the rumor also validates concerns about media’s effects on culture. By quoting from an unsourced article that was read without regard for its context, the emailer and the *WorldNetDaily* writer presented the kind of woeful scholarship that online media has enabled. The email and its underlying narrative illustrate the fear that new forms of media can be used more readily than traditional media as tools for unfounded propaganda and biased punditry.

The story provides an intriguing introduction to the various ways media messages are created and consumed and the widespread concern over media effects. As a constant presence in modern life, media serve numerous functions and send seemingly unlimited messages. Studying the possible effects of media provides a crucial perspective on modern culture.

## Mass Media and Its Messages

When media consumers think of media messages, they may think of televised public service announcements or political advertisements. These obvious examples provide a venue for the transfer of a message through a medium, whether that message is a plea for fire safety or the statement of a political position. But what about more abstract political advertisements that simply show the logo of a candidate and a few simple words? Media messages can range from overt statements to vague expressions of cultural values.

Disagreements over the content of media messages certainly exist. Consider the common allegations of political bias against various news organizations. Accusations of hidden messages or agenda-driven content have always been an issue in the media, but as the presence of media grows, the debate concerning media messages increases. This dialogue is an important one; after all, mass media have long been used to persuade. Many modern persuasive techniques stem from the use of media as a propaganda tool. The role of propaganda and persuasion in the mass media is a good place to start when considering various types of media effects.

*Propaganda and Persuasion*

*Encyclopedia Britannica* defines propaganda simply as the “manipulation of information to influence public opinion.” This definition works well for this discussion because the study and use of propaganda has had an enormous influence on the role of persuasion in modern mass media. In his book *The Creation of the Media*, Paul Starr argues that the United States, as a liberal democracy, has favored employing an independent press as a public guardian, thus putting the media in an inherently political position. The United States—in contrast to other nations where media are held in check—has encouraged an independent commercial press and thus given the powers of propaganda and persuasion to the public.

Like any type of communication, propaganda is not inherently good or bad. Whether propaganda has a positive or negative effect on society and culture depends on the motivations of those who use it and the understandings of those who receive it. People promoting movements as wide-ranging as Christianity, the American Revolution, and the communist revolutions of the 20th century have all used propaganda to disseminate their messages. Newspapers and pamphlets that glorified the sacrifices at Lexington and Concord and trumpeted the victories of George Washington’s army greatly aided the American Revolution. For example, Benjamin Franklin’s famous illustration of a severed snake with the caption

“Join or Die” serves as an early testament to the power and use of print propaganda. The penny press made newspapers accessible to a mass audience and became a force for social cohesion during the 1830s. Magazines adopted a similar format later in the 19th century, and print media’s political and social power rose. In an infamous example of the power of even print media, some newspapers encouraged the Spanish-American War of 1898 by fabricating stories of Spanish atrocities and sabotage. For example, after the USS *Maine* sunk off the coast of Havana, Cuba, some newspapers blamed the Spanish—even though there was no evidence—fueling the public’s desire for war with Spain.

The present-day, pejorative connotation of propaganda recalls the utilization of mass media by World War I–era governments to motivate the citizenry of many countries to go to war. Some media outlets characterized that war as a global fight between Anglo civilization and Prussian barbarianism. Although some of those fighting the war had little understanding of the political motivations behind it, wartime propaganda convinced them to enlist. World War I legitimized the advertising profession in the minds of government and corporate leaders because its techniques were useful in patriotic propaganda campaigns. Corporations quickly adapted to this development and created an advertising boom in the 1920s by using World War I propaganda techniques to sell products.

In modern society, the persuasive power of the mass media is well known. In the years after 9/11, there were multiple reports of the death of Osama bin Laden; people desperately wanted to believe he was killed. In reality, he was killed in 2011. Governments, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and political campaigns rely on both new and old media to create messages and to send them to the general public.

During and since the 2008 Presidential election, there was constant scrutiny over Barack Obama’s birthplace and citizenship; the reports are discredited, but the questions resurface. The comparatively unregulated nature of U.S. media has made, for better or worse, a society in which the tools of public persuasion are available to everyone.

*Media Effects and Behavior*

Although the mass media send messages created specifically for public consumption, they also convey messages that are not properly defined as propaganda or persuasion. Some argue that these messages influence behavior, especially the behavior of young people. Violent, sexual, and compulsive behaviors have been linked to media consumption and thus raise important questions about the effects of media on culture.

*Violence and the Media*

On April 20, 1999, students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their Denver-area high school, Columbine High School, armed with semiautomatic weapons and explosives. Over the next few hours, the pair killed 12 classmates and one faculty member before committing suicide. The tragedy and its aftermath captured national attention, and in the weeks following the Columbine High School shootings, politicians and pundits worked to assign blame. Their targets ranged from the makers of the first-person shooter video game *Doom* to the Hollywood studios responsible for *The Matrix*.

However, in the years since the massacre, research has revealed that the perpetrators were actually attempting a terrorist bombing rather than a first-person shooter-style rampage. But did violent video games so desensitize the two teenagers to violence that they could contemplate such a plan? Did movies that glorify violent solutions create a culture that would encourage people to consider such methods? Because modern culture is so immersed in media, the issue becomes a particularly complex one, and it can be difficult to understand the types of effects that violent media produce.

A number of studies have verified certain connections between violent video games and violent behavior in young people. For example, studies have found that some young people who play violent video games reported angry thoughts and aggressive feelings immediately after playing. Other studies, such as one conducted by Dr. Chris A. Anderson and colleagues point to correlations between the amount of time spent playing violent video games and increased incidence of aggression. However, these studies do not prove that video games cause violence. Video game defenders argue that violent people can be drawn to violent games, and they point to lower overall incidence of youth violence in recent years compared to past decades. Other researchers admit that individuals prone to violent acts are indeed drawn to violent media; however, they claim that by keeping these individuals in a movie theater or at home, violent media have actually contributed to a reduction in violent social acts.

Whether violent media actually cause violence remains unknown, but unquestionably these forms of media send an emotional message to which individuals respond. Media messages are not limited to overt statements; they can also use emotions, such as fear, love, happiness, and depression. These emotional reactions partially account for the intense power of media in our culture.

*Sex and the Media*

In many types of media, sexual content—and its strong emotional message—can be prolific. A recent study by researchers at the University of North Carolina titled “Sexy Media Matter: Exposure to Sexual Content in Music, Movies, Television, and Magazines Predicts Black and White Adolescents’ Sexual Behavior” found that young people with heavy exposure to sexually themed media ranging from music to movies are twice as likely to engage in early sexual behavior as young people with light exposure. Although the study does not prove a conclusive link between sexual behavior and sexually-oriented media, researchers concluded that media acted as an influential source of information about sex for these youth groups. Researcher Jane Brown thinks part of the reason children watch sexual content is related to puberty and their desire to learn about sex. While many parents are hesitant to discuss sex with their children, the media can act like a “super peer,” providing information in movies, television, music, and magazines. Reality series, such as *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant*, are prevalent on the popular MTV station.

*Cultural Messages and the Media*

The media sends messages that reinforce cultural values. These values are perhaps most visible in celebrities and the roles that they adopt. Actors such as Jake Gyllenhaal and Scarlett Johansson have come to represent aspects of masculinity and femininity that have been adopted into mainstream culture in the last 10 years. In recent years, baseball player Derek Jeter appeared in television, film, magazines, and advertising campaigns as a model of athleticism and willpower. Singers such as Bono of U2 have represented a sense of freedom and rebellion against mainstream culture.

Although many consider celebrity culture superficial and a poor reflection of a country’s values, not all celebrities are simply entertainers. Civil rights leaders, social reformers, and other famous public figures have come to represent important cultural accomplishments and advancements through their representations in the media. When images of Abraham Lincoln or Lady Gaga appear in the media, they resonate with cultural and historical themes greatly separated from mere fame.

Celebrities can also reinforce cultural stereotypes that marginalize certain groups. Television and magazines from the mid-20th century often portrayed women in a submissive, domestic role, both reflecting and reinforcing the cultural limitations imposed on women at the time. Advertising icons developed during the early 20th century, such as Aunt Jemima and the Cream of Wheat chef, similarly reflected and reinforced a submissive, domestic servant role for African Americans. Other famous stereotypes—such as the Lone Ranger’s Native American sidekick, Tonto, or Mickey Rooney’s Mr. Yunioshi role in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—also reinforced American preconceptions about ethnic predispositions and capabilities. Whether actual or fictional, celebrities and their assumed roles send a number of different messages about cultural values. They can promote courageous truth telling, hide and prolong social problems, or provide a concrete example of an abstract cultural value.

*New Media and Society*

New media—the Internet and other digital forms of communication[[17]](#footnote-17)—technologies both spring from and cause cultural change. For this reason, it can be difficult to neatly sort the evolution of media into clear causes and effects. Did radio fuel the consumerist boom of the 1920s, or did the radio become wildly popular because it appealed to a society that was already exploring consumerist tendencies? Probably a little bit of both. Technological innovations such as the steam engine, electricity, wireless communication, and the Internet have all had lasting and significant effects on American culture. As media historians Asa Briggs and Peter Burke note, every crucial invention came with “a change in historical perspectives.” Electricity altered the way people thought about time since work and play were no longer dependent on the daily rhythms of sunrise and sunset. Wireless communication collapsed distance. The Internet revolutionized the way we store and retrieve information.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**New media** encompasses all interactive forms of information exchange. These include social networking sites, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and virtual worlds. Many are not "new" in the sense that they were developed in the past few years (some may be older than you), but they are newer than the media mentioned above, and they rely on types of technologies that were not available until about thirty years ago. Many are disruptive to traditional media or to companies that rely on those other formats. Clearly, the list of new media grows almost daily, and you might feel we are missing some. In fact, the immediacy of new media coupled with the lack of oversight means we must be more careful than ever to ensure that we are making good decisions about the accuracy, ethics, and cultural responsiveness of these formats.[[19]](#footnote-19)

New media have had large effects on society. This communication and information revolution has created a great deal of anguish about digital literacy and other issues that inevitably accompany such a social change. In his book on technology and communication, *A Better Pencil*, Dennis Baron discusses this issue:

For Plato, only speech, not writing, can produce the kind of back-and-forth—the dialogue—that’s needed to get at the truth … the text, orphaned by its author once it’s on the page, cannot defend itself against misreading…. These are strong arguments, but even in Plato’s day they had been rendered moot by the success of the written word. Although the literacy rate in classical Greece was well below 10 percent, writing had become an important feature of the culture. People had learned to trust and use certain kinds of writing—legal texts, public inscriptions, business documents, personal letters, and even literature—and as they did so, they realized that writing, on closer examination, turned out to be neither more nor less reliable or ambiguous than the spoken word, and it was just as real.

Baron makes the point that all communication revolutions have created upheavals and have changed the standards of literacy and communication. This historical perspective gives a positive interpretation to some otherwise ominous developments in communication and culture.

*Information*

The Internet has made an incredible amount of new information available to the general public. Both this wealth of information and the ways people process it are having an enormous effect on culture. New perceptions of information have emerged as access to it grows. Older media consumption habits required in-depth processing of information through a particular form of media. For example, consumers read, watched, or viewed a news report in its entirety, typically within the context of a news publication or program. Fiction appeared in book or magazine form.

Today, information is easier to access, thus more likely to traverse several forms of media. An individual may read an article on a news website and then forward part of it to a friend. That person in turn describes it to a coworker without having seen the original context. The ready availability of information through search engines may explain how a clearly satirical *Onion* article on the Harry Potter phenomenon came to be taken as fact. Increasingly, media outlets cater to this habit of searching for specific bits of information devoid of context. Information that will attract the most attention is often featured at the expense of more important stories. At one point on March 11, 2010, for example, *The Washington Post* website’s most popular story was “Maintaining a Sex Life.”

Another important development in the media’s approach to information is its increasing subjectivity. Some analysts have used the term cyberbalkanization to describe the way media consumers filter information. Balkanization is an allusion to the political fragmentation of Eastern Europe’s Balkan states following World War I when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated into a number of ethnic and political fragments. Customized news feeds allow individuals to receive only the kinds of news and information they want and thus block out sources that report unwanted stories or perspectives. Many cultural critics have pointed to this kind of information filtering as the source of increasing political division and the resulting loss of civic discourse. When media consumers hear only the information they want to, the common ground of public discourse that stems from general agreement on certain principles inevitably grows smaller.

*Literacy*

On one hand, the growth of the Internet as the primary information source exposes the public to increased levels of text, thereby increasing overall literacy. Indeed, written text is essential to the Internet:

Web content is overwhelmingly text-based, and successful participation in Internet culture through the use of blogs, forums, or a personal website requires a degree of textual literacy that is not necessary for engagement in television, music, or movies.

Critics of Internet literacy, however, describe the majority of forum and blog posts as subliterate and argue that the Internet has replaced the printed newspapers and books that actually raised the standards of literacy. One nuanced look at the Internet’s effect on the way a culture processes and perceives information states that literacy will not simply increase or decrease but will change qualitatively. Perhaps the standards for literacy will shift to an emphasis on simplicity and directness, for example, rather than on elaborate uses of language.

*News*

Certainly, the Internet has affected the way that cultures consume news. The public expects to receive information quickly, and news outlets respond rapidly to breaking stories. On Monday, June 21, 2010, for example, a spokesperson for *Rolling Stone* magazine first released quotes from a story featuring General Stanley McChrystal publicly criticizing members of the Obama administration on matters of foreign policy. By that evening, the story had become national news despite the fact *Rolling Stone* didn’t even post it to its website until Tuesday morning—sometime after several news outlets had already posted the entire story on their own sites. Later that same day, McChrystal issued a public apology, and on Wednesday flew to Washington where President Barack Obama fired him. The printed *Rolling Stone* issue featuring the article hit newsstands Friday, two days after McChrystal had been replaced.

*Convergence Culture*

As we have seen, the term *convergence* can hold several different meanings. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins offers a useful definition of convergence as it applies to new media: “By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”

A self-produced video on the YouTube website that gains enormous popularity and thus receives the attention of a news outlet is a good example of this migration of both content and audiences. Consider this flow: The video appears and gains notoriety, so a news outlet broadcasts a story about the video, which in turn increases its popularity on YouTube. This migration works in a number of ways. Humorous or poignant excerpts from television or radio broadcasts are often posted on social media sites and blogs, where they gain popularity and are seen by more people than had seen the original broadcast.

Thanks to new media, consumers now view all types of media as participatory. For example, the massively popular talent show *American Idol* combines an older-media format—television—with modern media consumption patterns by allowing the home audience to vote for a favorite contestant. However, *American Idol* segments regularly appear on YouTube and other websites, where people who may never have seen the show comment on and dissect them. Phone companies report a regular increase in phone traffic following the show, presumably caused by viewers calling in to cast their votes or simply to discuss the program with friends and family. As a result, more people are exposed to the themes, principles, and culture of *American Idol* than the number of people who actually watch the show.

New media have encouraged greater personal participation in media as a whole. Although the long-term cultural consequences of this shift cannot yet be assessed, the development is undeniably a novel one. As audiences become more adept at navigating media, this trend will undoubtedly increase.

*Bert Is Evil*

In 2001, high school student Dino Ignacio created a collage of *Sesame Street* character Bert with terrorist Osama bin Laden as part of a series for his website. Called “Bert Is Evil,” the series featured the puppet engaged in a variety of illicit activities. A Bangladesh-based publisher looking for images of bin Laden found the collage on the Internet and used it in an anti-American protest poster, presumably without knowledge of who Bert was. This ended up in a CNN report on anti-American protests, and public outrage over the use of Bert made Ignacio’s original site a much-imitated cult phenomenon.

The voyage of this collage from a high school student’s website to an anti-American protest poster in the Middle East to a cable television news network and finally back to the Internet provides a good illustration of the ways in which content migrates across media platforms in the modern era. As the collage crossed geographic and cultural boundaries, it grew on both corporate and grassroots media. While this is not the norm for media content, the fact that such a phenomenon is possible illustrates the new directions in which media is headed.

## Media Literacy

In the modern era, literacy—the ability to read and write—was a concern not only of educators but also of politicians, social reformers, and philosophers. A literate population, many reasoned, would be able to seek out information, stay informed about the news of the day, communicate with others, and make informed decisions in many spheres of life. Because of this, the reasoning went, literate people made better citizens, parents, and workers. In the 20th century, as literacy rates grew around the globe, there was a new sense that merely being able to read and write was not enough. In a world dominated by media, individuals needed to be able to understand, sort through and analyze the information they were bombarded with every day. In the second half of the 20th century, a name was finally put to this skill of being able to decode and process the messages and symbols transmitted via media: media literacy. According to the nonprofit National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), a person who is media literate is able to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information. Put another way by John Culkin, a pioneering advocate for media literacy education, “the new mass media—film, radio, TV—are new languages, their grammar as yet unknown.” Media literacy seeks to give media consumers the ability to understand this new language.

*Why Be Media Literate?*

Culkin called the pervasiveness of media “the unnoticed fact of our present,” noting that media information was as omnipresent and easy to overlook as the air we breathe (and, he noted, “some would add that it is just as polluted”). Our exposure to media starts early—a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 68 percent of children aged two and younger spend an average of two hours in front of a screen (either computer or television) each day, while children under six spend as much time in front of a screen as they do playing outside. As previously noted, U.S. teenagers are spending an average of 7.5 hours with media daily, nearly as long as they spend in school. Media literacy isn’t merely a skill for young people, however. Today, Americans of all ages get much of their information from various media sources. One crucial role of media literacy education is to enable all of us to skeptically examine the often conflicting media messages we receive every day.

*Advertising*

Many of the hours people spend with media are with commercial-sponsored content. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) estimated that children aged 2 to 11 saw, on average, 25,629 television commercials a year, or more than 10,700 minutes of ads. Adults saw 52,469 ads, or about 15.5 days worth of television advertising. Children (and adults) are bombarded with contradictory messages—newspaper articles about the obesity epidemic are side by side with ads touting soda, candy, and fast food. The American Academy of Pediatrics maintains that advertising directed at children under eight is “inherently deceptive” and exploitative because young children cannot tell the difference between programs and commercials.

Advertising raises other issues as well. It often uses techniques of psychological pressure to influence decision-making. Ads might appeal to vanity, insecurity, prejudice, fear, or the desire for adventure. This is not always a negative thing—antismoking public service announcements may rely on disgusting images of blackened lungs to shock viewers. Nonetheless, media literacy attempts to teach people to be informed and guarded consumers and to evaluate claims with a critical eye. Do “four out of five doctors” really endorse the product?

*Bias, Spin, and Misinformation*

Advertisements may have the explicit goal of selling a product or idea, but they’re not the only kind of media message with an agenda. A politician may hope to persuade potential voters that she has their best interests at heart. An ostensibly objective journalist may allow his or her own political leanings to subtly slant articles. Magazine writers might avoid criticizing companies that advertise heavily in their pages. Broadcast news reporters may sensationalize stories in order to boost ratings—and advertising rates. An important part of media literacy is remembering that mass communication messages are created by individuals, each with a set of values, assumptions, and priorities. Accepting media messages at face value could lead to head-spinning confusion, thanks to all the contradictory information that’s out there. For example, in 2010, a highly contested governor’s race in New Mexico led to conflicting ads from both candidates, Diane Denish and Susana Martinez. Each claimed that the other agreed to policies that benefited sex offenders. According to the media watchdog site Factcheck.org, the Denish team’s ad “shows a pre-teen girl—seemingly about 9 years old—going down a playground slide in slow-motion, while ominous music plays in the background and an announcer discusses two sex crime cases. It ends with an empty swing, as the announcer says: ‘Today we don’t know where these sex offenders are lurking, because Susana Martinez didn’t do her job.’” The opposing ad proclaims that “a department in Denish’s cabinet gave sanctuary to criminal illegals [*sic*], like child molester Juan Gonzalez.” Both claims are highly inflammatory, play on fear, and distort the reality behind each situation. Media literacy attempts to give people the skills to look critically at these and other media messages—to sift through various claims, and to make sense of the often-conflicting information we face every day.

*The Center for Media Literacy’s Five Core Concepts*

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

*New Skills for a New World*

In the past, one goal of education was to provide students with the information deemed necessary to successfully engage with the world. Students memorized multiplication tables, state capitals, famous poems, and notable dates. In today’s world, however, vast amounts of information are available at the click of a mouse. Even before the advent of the Internet, noted communications scholar David Berlo foresaw the consequences of expanding information technology: “Most of what we have called formal education has been intended to imprint on the human mind all of the information that we might need for a lifetime.” Changes in technology necessitate changes in how we learn, Berlo noted, and these days “education needs to be geared toward the handling of data rather than the accumulation of data.” [5] Online technology surely has changed how we learn. For example, Wikipedia, a hugely popular Internet encyclopedia, is at the center of a debate on the proper use of online sources. In 2007, Middlebury College banned the use of Wikipedia as a source in history papers and exams. One of the school’s librarians noted that the online encyclopedia “symbolizes the best and worst of the Internet. It’s the best because everyone gets his/her say and can state their views. It’s the worst because people who use it uncritically take for truth what is only opinion.” Or as comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert put it, “any user can change any entry, and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true.” In 2007, CIA computers were used to make edits on the site’s article about the President of Iran. The Vatican allegedly doctored the entry for Irish activist and Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams. A computer registered to the U.S. Democratic Party changed the site’s page for Rush Limbaugh to proclaim that he was “racist” and a “bigot.” Media literacy teaches today’s students how to sort through the Internet’s cloud of data, ferret out reliable sources, and be aware of bias and unreliable sources.

*Individual Accountability and Popular Culture*

Ultimately, media literacy teaches that messages and images are constructed with various aims in mind and that each individual has the responsibility to evaluate and interpret these media messages. Mass communication may be created and disseminated by individuals, businesses, governments, or organizations, but they are always received by an individual, even if that individual is sitting in a crowded theater. Education, life experience, and a host of other factors allow each person to interpret constructed media in different ways; there is no “right answer,” or one way to read the media. But media literacy skills help us to function better in our media-rich environment, enabling us to be better democratic citizens, smarter shoppers, and more skeptical media consumers. As a means to this end, NAMLE has come up with a list of five questions to ask when analyzing media messages:

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently?
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

With these questions as a starting point, we can ensure that we’re staying informed about where our information comes from, and why—important steps in any media literacy education.

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# Media Effects Theories

## Direct Effects

Early media studies focused on the use of mass media in propaganda and persuasion. However, journalists and researchers soon looked to behavioral sciences to help figure out the possible effect of mass media and communications on society. Scholars have developed many different approaches and theories to figure this out. Other scholars challenge whether research can ever untangle the relationship of media and effects. You can refer to these theories as you consider for yourself the media’s effect on individuals and culture.

In one of the earliest formulations of media effects, widespread fear that mass-media messages could outweigh other stabilizing cultural influences, such as family and community, led to what is known as the direct effects model of media studies. This model, prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, assumed that audiences passively accepted media messages and would exhibit predictable reactions in response to those messages. For example, following the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* in 1938 (which was a fictional news report of an alien invasion), some people panicked and believed the story to be true.

*Challenges to the Direct Effects Theory*

The results of the *People’s Choice Study* challenged this model. Conducted in 1940, the study attempted to gauge the effects of political campaigns on voter choice. Researchers found that voters who consumed the most media had generally already decided for which candidate to vote, while undecided voters generally turned to family and community members to help them decide. The study thus discredited the direct effects model and influenced a host of other media theories. These theories do not necessarily give an all-encompassing picture of media effects but rather work to illuminate a particular aspect of media influence.

## Marshall McLuhan’s Influence on Media Studies

As noted in "Media and Culture", during the early 1960s, English professor Marshall McLuhan wrote two books that had an enormous effect on the history of media studies. Published in 1962 and 1964, respectively, the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* both traced the history of media technology and illustrated the ways these innovations had changed both individual behavior and the wider culture. *Understanding Media* introduced the phrase that McLuhan has become known for: “The medium is the message.” This notion represented a novel take on attitudes toward media—that the media themselves are instrumental in shaping human and cultural experience.

His bold statements about media gained McLuhan a great deal of attention as both his supporters and critics responded to his utopian views about the ways media could transform 20th-century life. McLuhan spoke of a media-inspired “global village” at a time when Cold War paranoia was at its peak and the Vietnam War was a hotly debated subject. Although 1960s-era utopians received these statements positively, social realists found them cause for scorn. Despite—or perhaps because of—these controversies, McLuhan became a pop culture icon, mentioned frequently in the television sketch-comedy program *Laugh-In* and appearing as himself in Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall*.

The Internet and its accompanying cultural revolution have made McLuhan’s bold utopian visions seem like prophecies. Indeed, his work has received a great deal of attention in recent years. Analysis of McLuhan’s work has, interestingly, not changed very much since his works were published. His supporters point to the hopes and achievements of digital technology and the utopian state that such innovations promise. The current critique of McLuhan, however, is a bit more revealing of the state of modern media studies. Media scholars are much more numerous now than they were during the 1960s, and many of these scholars criticize McLuhan’s lack of methodology and theoretical framework.

Despite his lack of scholarly diligence, McLuhan had a great deal of influence on media studies. Professors at Fordham University have formed an association of McLuhan-influenced scholars. McLuhan’s other great achievement is the popularization of the concept of media studies. His work, perhaps ironically, brought the idea of media effects into the public arena and created a new way for the public to consider the influence of media on culture.

## Agenda-Setting Theory

In contrast to the extreme views of the direct effects model, the agenda-setting theory of media stated that mass media determine the issues that concern the public rather than the public’s views. Under this theory, the issues that receive the most attention from the media become the issues that the public discusses, debates, and demands action on. This means that the media are determining what issues and stories the public thinks about. Therefore, when the media fail to address a particular issue, it becomes marginalized in the minds of the public.

When critics claim that a particular media outlet has an agenda, they are drawing on this theory. Agendas can range from a perceived liberal bias in the news media to the propagation of cutthroat capitalist ethics in films. For example, the agenda-setting theory explains such phenomena as the rise of public opinion against smoking. Before the mass media began taking an antismoking stance, smoking was considered a personal health issue. By promoting antismoking sentiments through advertisements, public relations campaigns, and a variety of media outlets, the mass media moved smoking into the public arena, making it a public health issue rather than a personal health issue. More recently, coverage of natural disasters has been prominent in the news. However, as news coverage wanes, so does the general public’s interest.

Media scholars who specialize in agenda-setting research study the salience, or relative importance, of an issue and then attempt to understand what causes it to be important. The relative salience of an issue determines its place within the public agenda, which in turn influences public policy creation. Agenda-setting research traces public policy from its roots as an agenda through its promotion in the mass media and finally to its final form as a law or policy.

## Uses and Gratifications Theory

Practitioners of the uses and gratifications theory study the ways the public consumes media. This theory states that consumers use the media to satisfy specific needs or desires. For example, you may enjoy watching a show like *Dancing With the Stars* while simultaneously tweeting about it on Twitter with your friends. Many people use the Internet to seek out entertainment, to find information, to communicate with like-minded individuals, or to pursue self-expression. Each of these uses gratifies a particular need, and the needs determine the way in which media are used. By examining factors of different groups’ media choices, researchers can determine the motivations behind media use.

A typical uses and gratifications study explores the motives for media consumption and the consequences associated with use of that media. By studying how and why people watch *Dancing With the Stars* while using Twitter, scholars suggest people are using the Internet as a way to be entertained and to connect with friends. Researchers have identified a number of common motives for media consumption. These include relaxation, social interaction, entertainment, arousal, escape, and a host of interpersonal and social needs.

By examining the motives behind the consumption of a particular form of media, researchers can better understand both the reasons for that medium’s popularity and the roles that the medium fills in society. A study of the motives behind a given user’s interaction with Facebook, for example, could explain the role Facebook takes in society and the reasons for its appeal.

Uses and gratifications theories of media are often applied to contemporary media issues. The analysis of the relationship between media and violence that you read about in the preceding sections exemplifies this. Researchers employed the uses and gratifications theory in this case to reveal a nuanced set of circumstances surrounding violent media consumption, as individuals with aggressive tendencies were drawn to violent media.[[20]](#footnote-20)

## Symbolic Interactionism

Technology itself may act as a symbol for many. The kind of computer you own, the kind of car you drive, your ability to afford the latest Apple product—these serve as a social indicator of wealth and status. **Neo-Luddites** are people who see technology as symbolizing the coldness and alienation of modern life. But for **technophiles**, technology symbolizes the potential for a brighter future. For those adopting an ideological middle ground, technology might symbolize status (in the form of a massive flat-screen television) or failure (ownership of a basic old mobile phone with no bells or whistles).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Symbolic interactionism states that the self is derived from and develops through human interaction. This means the way you act toward someone or something is based on the meaning you have for a person or thing. To effectively communicate, people use symbols with shared cultural meanings. Symbols can be constructed from just about anything, including material goods, education, or even the way people talk. Consequentially, these symbols are instrumental in the development of the self.

This theory helps media researchers better understand the field because of the important role the media plays in creating and propagating shared symbols. Because of the media’s power, it can construct symbols on its own. By using symbolic interactionist theory, researchers can look at the ways media affects a society’s shared symbols and, in turn, the influence of those symbols on the individual.

One of the ways the media creates and uses cultural symbols to affect an individual’s sense of self is advertising. Advertisers work to give certain products a shared cultural meaning to make them desirable. For example, when you see someone driving a BMW, what do you think about that person? You may assume the person is successful or powerful because of the car he or she is driving. Ownership of luxury automobiles signifies membership in a certain socioeconomic class. Equally, technology company Apple has used advertising and public relations to attempt to become a symbol of innovation and nonconformity. The use of an Apple product, therefore, may have a symbolic meaning and may send a particular message about the product’s owner. Media also propagate other noncommercial symbols. National and state flags, religious images, and celebrities gain shared symbolic meanings through their representation in the media.[[22]](#footnote-22)

#### Social Construction of Reality

Media create and spread symbols that become the basis for our shared understanding of society. Theorists working in the interactionist perspective focus on this social construction of reality, an ongoing process in which people subjectively create and understand reality. Media constructs our reality in a number of ways. For some, the people they watch on a screen can become a primary group, meaning the small informal groups of people who are closest to them. For many others, media becomes a reference group: a group that influences an individual and to which an individual compares himself or herself, and by which we judge our successes and failures. We might do very well without the latest smartphone, until we see characters using it on our favorite television show or our classmates whipping it out between classes.

While media may indeed be the medium to spread the message of rich White men, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) point out that some forms of media discourse allow competing constructions of reality to appear. For example, advertisers find new and creative ways to sell us products we don’t need and probably wouldn’t want without their prompting, but some networking sites such as Freecycle offer a commercial-free way of requesting and trading items that would otherwise be discarded. The web is also full of blogs chronicling lives lived “off the grid,” or without participation in the commercial economy.

#### Social Networking and Social Construction

While Tumblr and Facebook encourage us to check in and provide details of our day through online social networks, corporations can just as easily promote their products on these sites. Even supposedly crowd-sourced sites like Yelp (which aggregates local reviews) are not immune to corporate shenanigans. That is, we think we are reading objective observations when in reality we may be buying into one more form of advertising.

Facebook, which started as a free social network for college students, is increasingly a monetized business, selling you goods and services in subtle ways. But chances are you don’t think of Facebook as one big online advertisement. What started out as a symbol of coolness and insider status, unavailable to parents and corporate shills, now promotes consumerism in the form of games and fandom. For example, think of all the money spent to upgrade popular Facebook games like Candy Crush. And notice that whenever you become a “fan,” you likely receive product updates and special deals that promote online and real-world consumerism. It is unlikely that millions of people want to be “friends” with Pampers. But if it means a weekly coupon, they will, in essence, rent out space on their Facebook pages for Pampers to appear. Thus, we develop both new ways to spend money and brand loyalties that will last even after Facebook is considered outdated and obsolete.[[23]](#footnote-23)

## Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence theory, which states that those who hold a minority opinion silence themselves to prevent social isolation, explains the role of mass media in the formation and maintenance of dominant opinions. As minority opinions are silenced, the illusion of consensus grows, and so does social pressure to adopt the dominant position. This creates a self-propagating loop in which minority voices are reduced to a minimum and perceived popular opinion sides wholly with the majority opinion. For example, prior to and during World War II, many Germans opposed Adolf Hitler and his policies; however, they kept their opposition silent out of fear of isolation and stigma.

Because the media is one of the most important gauges of public opinion, this theory is often used to explain the interaction between media and public opinion. According to the spiral of silence theory, if the media propagate a particular opinion, then that opinion will effectively silence opposing opinions through an illusion of consensus. This theory relates especially to public polling and its use in the media.

## Media Logic

The media logic theory states that common media formats and styles serve as a means of perceiving the world. Today, the deep rooting of media in the cultural consciousness means that media consumers need to engage for only a few moments with a particular television program to understand that it is a news show, a comedy, or a reality show. The pervasiveness of these formats means that our culture uses the style and content of these shows as ways to interpret reality. For example, think about a TV news program that frequently shows heated debates between opposing sides on public policy issues. This style of debate has become a template for handling disagreement with those who consistently watch this type of program.

Media logic affects institutions as well as individuals. The modern televangelist has evolved from the adoption of television-style promotion by religious figures, while the utilization of television in political campaigns has led candidates to consider their physical image as an important part of a campaign.

## Cultivation Analysis

The cultivation analysis theory states that heavy exposure to media causes individuals to develop—or cultivate—an illusory perception of reality based on the most repetitive and consistent messages of a particular medium. This theory most commonly applies to analyses of television because of that medium’s uniquely pervasive nature. Under this theory, someone who watches a great deal of television may form a picture of reality that does not correspond to actual life. Televised violent acts, whether those reported on news programs or portrayed on television dramas, for example, greatly outnumber violent acts that most people encounter in their daily lives. Thus, an individual who watches a great deal of television may come to view the world as more violent and dangerous than it actually is.

Cultivation analysis projects involve a number of different areas for research, such as the differences in perception between heavy and light users of media. To apply this theory, the media content that an individual normally watches must be analyzed for various types of messages. Then, researchers must consider the given media consumer’s cultural background of individuals to correctly determine other factors that are involved in his or her perception of reality. For example, the socially stabilizing influences of family and peer groups influence children’s television viewing and the way they process media messages. If an individual’s family or social life plays a major part in her life, the social messages that she receives from these groups may compete with the messages she receives from television.[[24]](#footnote-24)

## Functionalism

Because functionalism focuses on how media and technology contribute to the smooth functioning of society, a good place to begin understanding this perspective is to write a list of functions you perceive media and technology to perform. Your list might include the ability to find information on the Internet, television’s entertainment value, or how advertising and product placement contribute to social norms.

#### Commercial Function

Companies use advertising to sell to us, but the way they reach us is changing. Naomi Klein identified the destructive impact of corporate branding in her 1999 text, *No Logo*, an anti-globalization treatise that focused on sweatshops, corporate power, and anti-consumerist social movements. In post-millennial society, synergistic advertising practices ensure you are receiving the same message from a variety of sources and on a variety of platforms. For example, you may see billboards for Miller beer on your way to a stadium, sit down to watch a game preceded by a Miller commercial on the big screen, and watch a halftime ad in which people are shown holding up the trademark bottles. Chances are you can guess which brand of beer is for sale at the concession stand.

As you might guess, with nearly every U.S. household possessing a television, and the 250 billion hours of television watched annually by people in the United States, companies that wish to connect with consumers find television an irresistible platform to promote their goods and services (Nielsen 2012). Television advertising is a highly functional way to meet a market demographic where it lives. Sponsors can use the sophisticated data gathered by network and cable television companies regarding their viewers and target their advertising accordingly. Whether you are watching cartoons on Nick Jr. or a cooking show on Telemundo, chances are advertisers have a plan to reach you.

But advertising has changed, as technology and media have allowed consumers to bypass traditional advertising venues. From the invention of the remote control, which allows us to skip television advertising without leaving our seats, to recording devices that let us watch programs but skip the ads, conventional television advertising is on the wane. And print media is no different. Advertising revenue in newspapers and on television has fallen significantly, which shows that companies need new ways of getting their messages to consumers.

And it certainly doesn’t stop with television. Commercial advertising precedes movies in theaters and shows up on and inside public transportation, as well as on the sides of buildings and roadways. Major corporations such as Coca-Cola bring their advertising into public schools, by sponsoring sports fields or tournaments, as well as filling the halls and cafeterias of those schools with vending machines hawking their goods. With rising concerns about childhood obesity and attendant diseases, the era of soda machines in schools may be numbered. In fact, as part of the United States Department of Agriculture's Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act and Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Initiative, a ban on junk food in school began in July 2014.

Brand ambassadorships can also be powerful tools for advertisers. For example, companies hire college students to be their on-campus representatives, and they may target students engaged in high-profile activities like sports, fraternities, and music. (This practice is slightly different from sponsorships, and note that some students, particularly athletes, need to follow strict guidelines about accepting money or products.) The marketing team is betting that if we buy perfume because Beyoncé tells us to, we’ll also choose our workout gear, clothing, or make-up brand if another student encourages that choice. Tens of thousands of brand ambassadors or brand evangelists work on college campuses, and such marketing approaches are seen as highly effective investments for companies. The numbers make it clear: Ambassador-referred customers provide sixteen percent higher value to companies than other customers, and over ninety percent of people indicate that people trust referrals from people they know (On-Campus Advertising, 2017).

Social media has made such influencer and ambassador marketing a near constant. Some formal ambassadors are sponsored by companies to show or use their products. In some cases, compensation arrives only in the form of free products and whatever monetization the ambassador receives from the site, such as YouTube. Influencers are usually less formally engaged with companies than are ambassadors, relying mostly on-site revenue to reward their efforts. Some influencers may overstate their popularity in order to get free products or services. For example, luxury hotels report that they are barraged by influencers (some with very few followers, and therefore questionable influence) who expect free stays in exchange for creating posts promoting the location (Locker 2019).

One ethical and perhaps relationship-oriented question is whether paid ambassadors should be required to disclose their relationship with a company, and how that works in online versus face-to-face interactions. In this case, online presence may be more "truthful" than in-person relationships. A video can formally include sponsorship information, and some ambassadors list partners or sponsors on their profiles. But in day-to-day, in-person conversations, it might be awkward for a classmate or colleague to mention that they are wearing a particular brand or using gear based on a financial relationship. In other words, the person sitting next to you with the great bag may be paid to carry it, and you may never know.

#### Entertainment Function

An obvious manifest function of media is its entertainment value. Most people, when asked why they watch television or go to the movies, would answer that they enjoy it. And the numbers certainly illustrate that. While 2012 Nielsen research shows a slight reduction of U.S. homes with televisions, the reach of television is still vast. And the amount of time spent watching is equally large. Clearly, enjoyment is paramount. On the technology side, as well, there is a clear entertainment factor to the use of new innovations. From online gaming to chatting with friends on Facebook, technology offers new and more exciting ways for people to entertain themselves.

#### Social Norm Functions

Even while the media is selling us goods and entertaining us, it also serves to socialize us, helping us pass along norms, values, and beliefs to the next generation. In fact, we are socialized and resocialized by media throughout our whole lives. All forms of media teach us what is good and desirable, how we should speak, how we should behave, and how we should react to events. Media also provide us with cultural touchstones during events of national significance. How many of your older relatives can recall watching the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* on television? How many of those reading this textbook followed the events of September 11 or Hurricane Katrina on television or the Internet?

Just as in Anderson and Bushman's (2011) evidence in the Violence in Media and Video Games: Does It Matter? feature, debate still exists over the extent and impact of media socialization. One recent study (Krahe et al. 2011) demonstrated that violent media content does have a desensitizing affect and is correlated with aggressive thoughts. Another group of scholars (Gentile, Mathieson, and Crick 2011) found that among children exposure to media violence led to an increase in both physical and relational aggression. Yet, a meta-analysis study covering four decades of research (Savage 2003) could not establish a definitive link between viewing violence and committing criminal violence.

It is clear from watching people emulate the styles of dress and talk that appear in media that media has a socializing influence. What is not clear, despite nearly fifty years of empirical research, is how much socializing influence the media has when compared to other agents of socialization, which include any social institution that passes along norms, values, and beliefs (such as peers, family, religious institutions, and the like).

#### Life-Changing Functions

Like media, many forms of technology do indeed entertain us, provide a venue for commercialization, and socialize us. For example, some studies suggest the rising obesity rate is correlated with the decrease in physical activity caused by an increase in use of some forms of technology, a latent function of the prevalence of media in society (Kautiainen et al. 2011). Without a doubt, a manifest function of technology is to change our lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Think of how the digital age has improved the ways we communicate. Have you ever used Skype, Zoom, or another webcast to talk to a friend or family member far away? Or maybe you have organized a fund drive, raising thousands of dollars, all from your desk chair.

Of course, the downside to this ongoing information flow is the near impossibility of disconnecting from technology that leads to an expectation of constant convenient access to information and people. Such a fast-paced dynamic is not always to our benefit. Some sociologists assert that this level of media exposure leads to **narcotizing dysfunction**, a result in which people are too overwhelmed with media input to really care about the issue, so their involvement becomes defined by awareness instead of by action (Lazerfeld and Merton 1948).

## Conflict Perspective

In contrast to theories in the functional perspective, the conflict perspective focuses on the creation and reproduction of inequality—social processes that tend to disrupt society rather than contribute to its smooth operation. When we take a conflict perspective, one major focus is the differential access to media and technology embodied in the digital divide. Conflict theorists also look at who controls the media, and how media promotes the norms of upper-middle-class White people in the United States while minimizing the presence of the working class, especially people of color.

#### Control of Media and Technology

Powerful individuals and social institutions have a great deal of influence over which forms of technology are released, when and where they are released, and what kind of media is available for our consumption, which is a form of gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define **gatekeeping** as the sorting process by which thousands of possible messages are shaped into a mass media-appropriate form and reduced to a manageable amount. In other words, the people in charge of the media decide what the public is exposed to, which, as C. Wright Mills (1956) famously noted, is the heart of media’s power. Take a moment to think of the way “new media” evolve and replace traditional forms of hegemonic media. With hegemonic media, a culturally diverse society can be dominated by one race, gender, or class that manipulates the media to impose its worldview as a societal norm. New media weakens the gatekeeper role in information distribution. Popular sites such as YouTube and Facebook not only allow more people to freely share information but also engage in a form of self-policing. Users are encouraged to report inappropriate behavior that moderators will then address.

In addition, some conflict theorists suggest that the way U.S. media are generated results in an unbalanced political arena. Those with the most money can buy the most media exposure, run smear campaigns against their competitors, and maximize their visual presence. Almost a year before the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the candidates––Barack Obama for the Democrats and numerous Republican contenders––had raised more than $186 million (Carmi et al. 2012). Some would say that the *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Committee* is a major contributing factor to our unbalanced political arena. In *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of outside groups, including Super Political Action Committees (SuperPACs) with undisclosed donor lists, to spend unlimited amounts of money on political ads as long as they don't coordinate with the candidate's campaign or specifically advocate for a candidate. What do you think a conflict perspective theorist would suggest about the potential for the non-rich to be heard in politics, especially when SuperPACs ensure that the richest groups have the most say?

#### Technological Social Control and Digital Surveillance

Social scientists take the idea of the surveillance society so seriously that there is an entire journal devoted to its study, *Surveillance and Society*. The **panoptic surveillance** envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, depicted in the form of an all-powerful, all-seeing government by George Orwell in *1984*, and later analyzed by Michel Foucault (1975) is increasingly realized in the form of technology used to monitor our every move. This surveillance was imagined as a form of constant monitoring in which the observation posts are decentralized and the observed is never communicated with directly. Today, digital security cameras capture our movements, observers can track us through our cell phones, and police forces around the world use facial-recognition software.

#### Feminist Perspective

Take a look at popular television shows, advertising campaigns, and online game sites. In most, women are portrayed in a particular set of parameters and tend to have a uniform look that society recognizes as attractive. Most are thin, White or light-skinned, beautiful, and young. Why does this matter? Feminist perspective theorists believe this idealized image is crucial in creating and reinforcing stereotypes. For example, Fox and Bailenson (2009) found that online female avatars conforming to gender stereotypes enhance negative attitudes toward women, and Brasted (2010) found that media (advertising in particular) promotes gender stereotypes. As early as 1990, *Ms.* magazine instituted a policy to publish without any commercial advertising.

The gender gap in tech-related fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) is no secret. A 2011 U.S. Department of Commerce Report suggested that gender stereotyping is one reason for this gap which acknowledges the bias toward men as keepers of technological knowledge (US Department of Commerce 2011). But gender stereotypes go far beyond the use of technology. Press coverage in the media reinforces stereotypes that subordinate women; it gives airtime to looks over skills, and coverage disparages women who defy accepted norms.

Recent research in new media has offered a mixed picture of its potential to equalize the status of men and women in the arenas of technology and public discourse. A European agency, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women (2010), issued an opinion report suggesting that while there is the potential for new media forms to perpetuate gender stereotypes and the gender gap in technology and media access, at the same time new media could offer alternative forums for feminist groups and the exchange of feminist ideas. Still, the committee warned against the relatively unregulated environment of new media and the potential for antifeminist activities, from pornography to human trafficking, to flourish there.

Increasingly prominent in the discussion of new media and feminism is **cyberfeminism**, the application to, and promotion of, feminism online. Research on cyberfeminism runs the gamut from the liberating use of blogs by women living in Iraq during the second Gulf War (Peirce 2011) to an investigation of the Suicide Girls web site (Magnet 2007).[[25]](#footnote-25)

## Theory Controversies

*Active versus Passive Audience*

A significant division among media studies theorists is the belief that audiences are passive or active. A passive audience, in the most extreme statement of this position, passively accepts the messages that the media send it. An active audience, on the other hand, is fully aware of media messages and makes informed decisions about how to process and interact with media. Newer trends in media studies have attempted to develop a more complex view of media audiences than the active versus passive debate affords, but in the public sphere, this opposition frames many of the debates about media influence.

*Arguments against Agenda-Setting Theory*

A number of criticisms have dogged agenda-setting theory. Chief among these is that agenda-setting studies are unable to prove cause and effect; essentially, no one has truly shown that the media agenda sets the public agenda and not the other way around. An agenda-setting study could connect the prevalence of a topic in the media with later changes in public policy and may conclude that the media set this agenda. However, policymakers and lobbyists often conduct public relations efforts to encourage the creation of certain policies. In addition, public concern over issues generates media coverage as well, making it difficult to tell if the media are responding to the public desire for coverage of an issue or if they are pushing an issue on their own agenda.

*Arguments against Uses and Gratifications Theory*

The general presuppositions of the uses and gratifications theory have drawn criticism. By assuming that media fulfill a functional purpose in an individual’s life, the uses and gratifications theory implicitly justifies and reaffirms the functional place of media in the public sphere; critics say that people do not always use media to fulfill a function. They ask whether unconscious motivations or social rituals might be at play. Furthermore, because it focuses on the personal and psychological aspects of media, the theory cannot question whether media are artificially imposed on an individual. Studies involving the uses and gratifications theory are often sound methodologically, but the overall assumptions of the studies are left

unquestioned.

*Arguments against Spiral of Silence Theory*

Although many regard the spiral of silence theory as useful when applying its broadest principles, it is weak when dealing with specifics. For example, the phenomenon of the spiral of silence is most visible in individuals who are fearful of social isolation. Those who are less fearful are less likely to be silent if public opinion turns against them. Nonconformists contradict the claims of the spiral of silence theory. Critics have also pointed out that the spiral of silence theory relies heavily on the values of various cultural groups. A public opinion trend in favor of gun control may not silence the consensus within National Rifle Association meetings. Every individual is a part of a larger social group with specific values. Although these values may differ from widespread public opinion, individuals need not fear social isolation within their particular social group.

*Arguments against Cultivation Analysis Theory*

Critics have faulted cultivation analysis theory for relying too heavily on a broad definition of violence. Detractors argue that because violence means different things to different subgroups and individuals, any claim that a clear message of violence could be understood in the same way by an entire culture is false. This critique would necessarily extend to other studies involving cultivation analysis. Different people understand media messages in varying ways, so broad claims can be problematic. Cultivation analysis is still an important part of media studies, but critics have questioned its unqualified validity as a theory.

# Research Methods

## Introduction

Media theories provide the framework for approaching questions about media effects ranging from as simple as how 10-year-old boys react to cereal advertisements to as broad as how Internet use affects literacy.[[26]](#footnote-26) Social scientists must then examine the social world, see a problem or interesting pattern, and set out to study it. They use research methods to design a study. Social Scientists generally choose from widely used methods of social investigation: **primary source data collection** such as survey, participant observation, ethnography, case study, unobtrusive observations, experiment, and **secondary data analysis**, or use of existing sources. Every research method comes with plusses and minuses, and the topic of study strongly influences which method or methods are put to use. When you are conducting research think about the best way to gather or obtain knowledge about your topic, think of yourself as an architect. An architect needs a blueprint to build a house, as a researcher your blueprint is your research design including your data collection method.

When entering a particular social environment, a researcher must be careful. There are times to remain anonymous and times to be overt. There are times to conduct interviews and times to simply observe. Some participants need to be thoroughly informed; others should not know they are being observed.

Making the researchers’ presence invisible is not always realistic for other reasons. That option is not available to a researcher studying prison behaviors, early education, or the Ku Klux Klan. Researchers can’t just stroll into prisons, kindergarten classrooms, or Klan meetings and unobtrusively observe behaviors or attract attention. In situations like these, other methods are needed. Researchers choose methods that best suit their study topics, protect research participants or subjects, and that fit with their overall approaches to research.[[27]](#footnote-27)

## Surveys

Surveys are ubiquitous in modern life. Questionnaires record data on anything from political preferences to personal hygiene habits.[[28]](#footnote-28) As a research method, a **survey** collects data from subjects who respond to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire or an interview. The survey is one of the most widely used scientific research methods. The standard survey format allows individuals a level of anonymity in which they can express personal ideas.

At some point, most people in the United States respond to some type of survey. The 2020 U.S. Census is an excellent example of a large-scale survey intended to gather sociological data. Since 1790, United States has conducted a survey consisting of six questions to receive demographical data pertaining to residents. The questions pertain to the demographics of the residents who live in the United States. Currently, the Census is received by residents in the United States and five territories and consists of 12 questions.

Not all surveys are considered sociological research, however, and many surveys people commonly encounter focus on identifying marketing needs and strategies rather than testing a hypothesis or contributing to social science knowledge. Questions such as, “How many hot dogs do you eat in a month?” or “Were the staff helpful?” are not usually designed as scientific research. The Nielsen Ratings determine the popularity of television programming through scientific market research. However, polls conducted by television programs such as *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance* cannot be generalized, because they are administered to an unrepresentative population, a specific show’s audience. You might receive polls through your cell phones or emails, from grocery stores, restaurants, and retail stores. They often provide you incentives for completing the survey.

Sociologists conduct surveys under controlled conditions for specific purposes. Surveys gather different types of information from people. While surveys are not great at capturing the ways people really behave in social situations, they are a great method for discovering how people feel, think, and act—or at least how they say they feel, think and act. Surveys can track preferences for presidential candidates or report individual behaviors (such as sleeping, driving, or texting habits) or information such as employment status, income, and education levels.

A survey targets a specific **population**, people who are the focus of a study, such as college athletes, international students, or teenagers living with type 1 (juvenile-onset) diabetes. Most researchers choose to survey a small sector of the population, or a **sample**, a manageable number of subjects who *represent* a larger population. The success of a study depends on how well a population is represented by the sample. In a **random sample**, every person in a population has the same chance of being chosen for the study. As a result, a Gallup Poll, if conducted as a nationwide random sampling, should be able to provide an accurate estimate of public opinion whether it contacts 2,000 or 10,000 people.

After selecting subjects, the researcher develops a specific plan to ask questions and record responses. It is important to inform subjects of the nature and purpose of the survey up front. If they agree to participate, researchers thank subjects and offer them a chance to see the results of the study if they are interested. The researcher presents the subjects with an instrument, which is a means of gathering the information. [[29]](#footnote-29)Media surveys generally take one of the following two forms.

A descriptive survey aims to find the current state of things, such as public opinion or consumer preferences. In media, descriptive surveys establish television and radio ratings by finding the number of people who watch or listen to particular programs. An analytical survey, however, does more than simply document a current situation. Instead, it attempts to find out why a particular situation exists.

In both cases, the researchers poses questions or hypotheses about media and then conduct analytical surveys to answer these questions. Analytical surveys can determine the relationship between different forms of media consumption and the lifestyles and habits of media consumers. [[30]](#footnote-30)

Subjects often answer a series of **closed-ended questions**. The researcher might ask yes-or-no or multiple-choice questions, allowing subjects to choose possible responses to each question. This kind of questionnaire collects **quantitative data**—data in numerical form that can be counted and statistically analyzed. Just count up the number of “yes” and “no” responses or correct answers, and chart them into percentages.

Questionnaires can also ask more complex questions with more complex answers—beyond “yes,” “no,” or checkbox options. These types of inquiries use **open-ended questions** that require short essay responses. Participants willing to take the time to write those answers might convey personal religious beliefs, political views, goals, or morals. The answers are subjective and vary from person to person. *How do plan to use your college education?*

Some topics that investigate internal thought processes are impossible to observe directly and are difficult to discuss honestly in a public forum. People are more likely to share honest answers if they can respond to questions anonymously. This type of personal explanation is **qualitative data**—conveyed through words. Qualitative information is harder to organize and tabulate. The researcher will end up with a wide range of responses, some of which may be surprising. The benefit of written opinions, though, is the wealth of in-depth material that they provide[[31]](#footnote-31). Although surveys are useful in media studies, effective use requires keeping their limitations in mind.

## Social Role Analysis

As part of child-rearing, parents teach their children about social roles. When parents prepare children to attend school for example, they explain the basics of school rules and what is expected of a student to help the youngsters understand the role of students. Like the role of a character in a play, this role carries specific expectations that differentiate school from home. Adults often play a number of different roles as they navigate between their responsibilities as parents, employees, friends, and citizens. Any individual may play a number of roles depending on his or her specific life choices.

Social role analysis of the media involves examining various individuals in the media and analyzing the type of role that each plays. Role analysis research can consider the roles of men, women, children, members of a racial minority, or members of any other social group in specific types of media. For example, if the role children play in cartoons is consistently different from the role they play in sitcoms, then certain conclusions might be drawn about both of these formats. Analyzing roles used in media allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the messages that the mass media sends.[[32]](#footnote-32)

## Interviews

An **interview** is a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and the subject, and it is a way of conducting surveys on a topic. However, participants are free to respond as they wish, without being limited by predetermined choices. In the back-and-forth conversation of an interview, a researcher can ask for clarification, spend more time on a subtopic, or ask additional questions. In an interview, a subject will ideally feel free to open up and answer questions that are often complex. There are no right or wrong answers. The subject might not even know how to answer the questions honestly.

Questions such as “How does society’s view of alcohol consumption influence your decision whether or not to take your first sip of alcohol?” or “Did you feel that the divorce of your parents would put a social stigma on your family?” involve so many factors that the answers are difficult to categorize. A researcher needs to avoid steering or prompting the subject to respond in a specific way; otherwise, the results will prove to be unreliable. The researcher will also benefit from gaining a subject’s trust, from empathizing or commiserating with a subject, and from listening without judgment.

Interviews often collect both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, a researcher interviewing people who are incarcerated might receive quantitative data, such as demographics – race, age, sex, that can be analyzed statistically. For example, the researcher might discover that 20 percent of incarcerated people are above the age of 50. The researcher might also collect qualitative data, such as why people take advantage of educational opportunities during their sentence and other explanatory information. The Interview can be carried out online, over the phone, by mail, or face-to-face. [[33]](#footnote-33)

## Focus Groups

Like interviews, focus groups allow researchers to better understand public responses to media. Unlike a depth interview, however, a focus group allows the participants to establish a group dynamic that more closely resembles that of normal media consumption. In media studies, researchers can employ focus groups to judge the reactions of a group to specific media styles and to content. This can be a valuable means of understanding the reasons for consuming specific types of media.

## Experiments

Media research studies also sometimes use controlled experiments that expose a test group to an experience involving media and measure the effects of that experience.[[34]](#footnote-34) You have probably tested some of your own personal social theories. “If I study at night and review in the morning, I’ll improve my retention skills.” Or, “If I stop drinking soda, I’ll feel better.” Cause and effect. If this, then that. When you test the theory, your results either prove or disprove your hypothesis. One way researchers test social theories is by conducting an **experiment**, meaning they investigate relationships to test a hypothesis—a scientific approach

There are two main types of experiments: lab-based experiments and natural or field experiments. In a lab setting, the research can be controlled so that more data can be recorded in a limited amount of time. In a natural or field-based experiment, the time it takes to gather the data cannot be controlled but the information might be considered more accurate since it was collected without interference or intervention by the researcher.

As a research method, either type of experiment is useful for testing if-then statements: if a particular thing happens (cause), then another particular thing will result (effect). To set up a lab-based experiment, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables.

Classically, the sociologist selects a set of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education. Those people are divided into two groups. One is the experimental group and the other is the control group. The **experimental group** is exposed to the independent variable(s) and the **control group** is not.[[35]](#footnote-35) For example, researchers may show one group of children a program with three incidents of cartoon violence and another control group of similar children the same program without the violent incidents. Researchers then ask the children from both groups the same sets of questions, and the results are compared. [[36]](#footnote-36)

Sometimes when a researcher tells subjects that they will be observed as part of a study, the kids might not behave naturally. This is called the **Hawthorne effect**—which occurs when people change their behavior because they know they are being watched as part of a study. The Hawthorne effect is unavoidable in some research studies because sociologists have to make the purpose of the study known. Subjects must be aware that they are being observed, and a certain amount of artificiality may result (Sonnenfeld 1985).

## Ethnography

**Ethnography** is the immersion of the researcher in the natural setting of an entire social community to observe and experience their everyday life and culture. The heart of an ethnographic study focuses on how subjects view their own social standing and how they understand themselves in relation to a social group.

An ethnographic study might observe, for example, a small U.S. fishing town, an Inuit community, a village in Thailand, a Buddhist monastery, a private boarding school, or an amusement park. These places all have borders. People live, work, study, or vacation within those borders. People are there for a certain reason and therefore behave in certain ways and respect certain cultural norms. An ethnographer would commit to spending a determined amount of time studying every aspect of the chosen place, taking in as much as possible.

A sociologist studying a tribe in the Amazon might watch the way villagers go about their daily lives and then write a paper about it. To observe a spiritual retreat center, an ethnographer might sign up for a retreat and attend as a guest for an extended stay, observe and record data, and collate the material into results.

##### *Institutional Ethnography*

Institutional ethnography is an extension of basic ethnographic research principles that focuses intentionally on everyday concrete social relationships. Developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1990), institutional ethnography is often considered a feminist-inspired approach to social analysis and primarily considers women’s experiences within male-dominated societies and power structures. Smith’s work is seen to challenge sociology’s exclusion of women, both academically and in the study of women’s lives (Fenstermaker, n.d.).

Historically, social science research tended to objectify women and ignore their experiences except as viewed from the male perspective. Modern feminists note that describing women, and other marginalized groups, as subordinates helps those in authority maintain their own dominant positions (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada n.d.). Smith’s three major works explored what she called “the conceptual practices of power” and are still considered seminal works in feminist theory and ethnography (Fensternmaker n.d.).

### *Field Research*

The work of social science rarely happens in limited, confined spaces. Rather, social scientists go out into the world. They meet subjects where they live, work, and play. **Field research** refers to gathering **primary data** from a natural environment. To conduct field research, the researcher must be willing to step into new environments and observe, participate, or experience those worlds. In field work, the researcher, rather than the subjects, are the ones out of their element.

The researcher interacts with or observes people and gathers data along the way. The key point in field research is that it takes place in the subject’s natural environment, whether it’s a coffee shop or tribal village, a homeless shelter or the DMV, a hospital, airport, mall, or beach resort.

While field research often begins in a specific setting, the study’s purpose is to observe specific behaviors in that setting. Field work is optimal for observing how people think and behave. It seeks to understand why they behave that way. However, researchers may struggle to narrow down cause and effect when there are so many variables floating around in a natural environment. And while field research looks for correlation, its small sample size does not allow for establishing a causal relationship between two variables. Indeed, much of the data gathered in sociology do not identify a cause and effect but a **correlation**.

*Participant Observation*

In 2000, a comic writer named Rodney Rothman wanted an insider’s view of white-collar work. He slipped into the sterile, high-rise offices of a New York “dot com” agency. Every day for two weeks, he pretended to work there. His main purpose was simply to see whether anyone would notice him or challenge his presence. No one did. The receptionist greeted him. The employees smiled and said good morning. Rothman was accepted as part of the team. He even went so far as to claim a desk, inform the receptionist of his whereabouts, and attend a meeting. He published an article about his experience in The New Yorker called “My Fake Job” (2000). Later, he was discredited for allegedly fabricating some details of the story and The New Yorker issued an apology. However, Rothman’s entertaining article still offered fascinating descriptions of the inside workings of a “dot com” company and exemplified the lengths to which a writer, or a sociologist, will go to uncover material.

Rothman had conducted a form of study called **participant observation**, in which researchers join people and participate in a group’s routine activities for the purpose of observing them within that context.[[37]](#footnote-37) In participant observation, researchers try to become part of the group they are studying. Although this technique is typically associated with anthropological studies in which a researcher lives with members of a particular culture to gain a deeper understanding of their values and lives, it is also used in media research.[[38]](#footnote-38) This method lets researchers experience a specific aspect of social life. A researcher might go to great lengths to get a firsthand look into a trend, institution, or behavior. A researcher might work as a waitress in a diner, experience homelessness for several weeks, or ride along with police officers as they patrol their regular beat. Often, these researchers try to blend in seamlessly with the population they study, and they may not disclose their true identity or purpose if they feel it would compromise the results of their research.

At the beginning of a field study, researchers might have a question: “What really goes on in the kitchen of the most popular diner on campus?” or “What is it like to be homeless?” Participant observation is a useful method if the researcher wants to explore a certain environment from the inside.

Field researchers simply want to observe and learn. In such a setting, the researcher will be alert and open-minded to whatever happens, recording all observations accurately. Soon, as patterns emerge, questions will become more specific, observations will lead to hypotheses, and hypotheses will guide the researcher in analyzing data and generating results.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Media consumption often takes place in groups. Families or friends gather to watch favorite programs, children may watch Saturday morning cartoons with a group of their peers, and adults may host viewing parties for televised sporting events or awards shows. These groups reveal insights into the role of media in the lives of the public. A researcher might join a group that watches football together and stay with the group for an entire season. By becoming a part of the group, the researcher becomes part of the experiment and can reveal important influences of media on culture.

Researchers have studied online role-playing games, such as *World of Warcraft*, in this manner. These games reveal an interesting aspect of group dynamics: Although participants are not in physical proximity, they function as a group within the game. Researchers are able to study these games by playing them. In the book *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, a group of researchers discussed the results of their participant observation studies. The studies reveal the surprising depth of culture and unwritten rules that exist in the World of Warcraft universe and give important interpretations of why players pursue the game with such dedication.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In a study of small towns in the United States conducted by sociological researchers John S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, the team altered their purpose as they gathered data. They initially planned to focus their study on the role of religion in U.S. towns. As they gathered observations, they realized that the effect of industrialization and urbanization was the more relevant topic of this social group. The Lynds did not change their methods, but they revised the purpose of their study.

This shaped the structure of Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture, their published results (Lynd & Lynd, 1929). The Lynds were upfront about their mission. The townspeople of Muncie, Indiana, knew why the researchers were in their midst. But some social scientists prefer not to alert people to their presence. The main advantage of covert participant observation is that it allows the researcher access to authentic, natural behaviors of a group’s members. The challenge, however, is gaining access to a setting without disrupting the pattern of others’ behavior. Becoming an inside member of a group, organization, or subculture takes time and effort. Researchers must pretend to be something they are not. The process could involve role playing, making contacts, networking, or applying for a job.

Once inside a group, some researchers spend months or even years pretending to be one of the people they are observing. However, as observers, they cannot get too involved. They must keep their purpose in mind and apply the sociological perspective. That way, they illuminate social patterns that are often unrecognized. Because information gathered during participant observation is mostly qualitative, rather than quantitative, the end results are often descriptive or interpretive. The researcher might present findings in an article or book and describe what he or she witnessed and experienced.

This type of research is what journalist Barbara Ehrenreich conducted for her book Nickel and Dimed. One day over lunch with her editor, Ehrenreich mentioned an idea. How can people exist on minimum-wage work? How do low-income workers get by? she wondered. Someone should do a study. To her surprise, her editor responded, Why don’t you do it?

That’s how Ehrenreich found herself joining the ranks of the working class. For several months, she left her comfortable home and lived and worked among people who lacked, for the most part, higher education and marketable job skills. Undercover, she applied for and worked minimum wage jobs as a waitress, a cleaning woman, a nursing home aide, and a retail chain employee. During her participant observation, she used only her income from those jobs to pay for food, clothing, transportation, and shelter.

She discovered the obvious, that it’s almost impossible to get by on minimum wage work. She also experienced and observed attitudes many middle and upper-class people never think about. She witnessed firsthand the treatment of working-class employees. She saw the extreme measures people take to make ends meet and to survive. She described fellow employees who held two or three jobs, worked seven days a week, lived in cars, could not pay to treat chronic health conditions, got randomly fired, submitted to drug tests, and moved in and out of homeless shelters. She brought aspects of that life to light, describing difficult working conditions and the poor treatment that low-wage workers suffer. The book she wrote upon her return to her real life as a well-paid writer, has been widely read and used in many college classrooms.

## Case Study

Sometimes a researcher wants to study one specific person or event. A **case study** is an in-depth analysis of a single event, situation, or individual. To conduct a case study, a researcher examines existing sources like documents and archival records, conducts interviews, engages in direct observation and even participant observation, if possible.

Researchers might use this method to study a single case of a foster child, drug lord, cancer patient, criminal, or rape victim. However, a major criticism of the case study as a method is that while offering depth on a topic, it does not provide enough evidence to form a generalized conclusion. In other words, it is difficult to make universal claims based on just one person, since one person does not verify a pattern. This is why most sociologists do not use case studies as a primary research method.

However, case studies are useful when the single case is unique. In these instances, a single case study can contribute tremendous incite. For example, a feral child, also called “wild child,” is one who grows up isolated from human beings. Feral children grow up without social contact and language, which are elements crucial to a “civilized” child’s development. These children mimic the behaviors and movements of animals, and often invent their own language. There are only about one hundred cases of “feral children” in the world.

As you may imagine, a feral child is a subject of great interest to researchers. Feral children provide unique information about child development because they have grown up outside of the parameters of “normal” growth and nurturing. And since there are very few feral children, the case study is the most appropriate method for researchers to use in studying the subject.

At age three, a Ukranian girl named Oxana Malaya suffered severe parental neglect. She lived in a shed with dogs, and she ate raw meat and scraps. Five years later, a neighbor called authorities and reported seeing a girl who ran on all fours, barking. Officials brought Oxana into society, where she was cared for and taught some human behaviors, but she never became fully socialized. She has been designated as unable to support herself and now lives in a mental institution (Grice 2011). Case studies like this offer a way for sociologists to collect data that may not be obtained by any other method.

## Secondary Data Analysis

While sociologists often engage in original research studies, they also contribute knowledge to the discipline through **secondary data analysis**. Secondary data does not result from firsthand research collected from primary sources but are the already completed work of other researchers or data collected by an agency or organization. Sociologists might study works written by historians, economists, teachers, or early sociologists. They might search through periodicals, newspapers, or magazines, or organizational data from any period in history.

Using available information not only saves time and money but can also add depth to a study. Sociologists often interpret findings in a new way, a way that was not part of an author’s original purpose or intention. To study how women were encouraged to act and behave in the 1960s, for example, a researcher might watch movies, television shows, and situation comedies from that period. Or to research changes in behavior and attitudes due to the emergence of television in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a sociologist would rely on new interpretations of secondary data. Decades from now, researchers will most likely conduct similar studies on the advent of mobile phones, the Internet, or social media.

Social scientists also learn by analyzing the research of a variety of agencies. Governmental departments and global groups, like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics or the World Health Organization (WHO), publish studies with findings that are useful to sociologists. A public statistic like the foreclosure rate might be useful for studying the effects of a recession. A racial demographic profile might be compared with data on education funding to examine the resources accessible by different groups.

One of the advantages of secondary data like old movies or WHO statistics is that it is **nonreactive research** (or unobtrusive research), meaning that it does not involve direct contact with subjects and will not alter or influence people’s behaviors. Unlike studies requiring direct contact with people, using previously published data does not require entering a population and the investment and risks inherent in that research process.[[41]](#footnote-41)

## Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research technique that involves analyzing the content of various forms of media. Through content analysis, researchers hope to understand both the people who created the content and the people who consumed it. A typical content analysis project does not require elaborate experiments.

Instead, it simply requires access to the appropriate media to analyze, making this type of research an easier and inexpensive alternative to other forms of research involving complex surveys or human subjects.

Content analysis studies require researchers to define what types of media to study. For example, researchers studying violence in the media would need to decide which types of media to analyze, such as television, and the types of formats to examine, such as children’s cartoons. The researchers would then need to define the terms used in the study; media violence can be classified according to the characters involved in the violence (strangers, family members, or racial groups), the type of violence (self-inflicted, slapstick, or against others), or the context of the violence (revenge, random, or duty-related). These are just a few of the ways that media violence could be studied with content-analysis techniques.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In some cases, there is no way to verify the accuracy of existing data. It is easy to count how many drunk drivers, for example, are pulled over by the police. But how many are not? While it’s possible to discover the percentage of teenage students who drop out of high school, it might be more challenging to determine the number who return to school or get their GED later.

Another problem arises when data are unavailable in the exact form needed or do not survey the topic from the precise angle the researcher seeks. For example, the average salaries paid to professors at a public school is a public record. But these figures do not necessarily reveal how long it took each professor to reach the salary range, what their educational backgrounds are, or how long they’ve been teaching.

When conducting content analysis, it is important to consider the date of publication of an existing source and to take into account attitudes and common cultural ideals that may have influenced the research. For example, when Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd gathered research in the 1920s, attitudes and cultural norms were vastly different then than they are now. Beliefs about gender roles, race, education, and work have changed significantly since then. At the time, the study’s purpose was to reveal insights about small U.S. communities. Today, it is an illustration of 1920s attitudes and values.[[43]](#footnote-43)

## Archival Research

Some researchers gain access to large amounts of data without interacting with a single research participant. Instead, they use existing records to answer various research questions. This type of research approach is known as **archival research**. Archival research relies on looking at past records or data sets to look for interesting patterns or relationships.[[44]](#footnote-44) Any study that analyzes older media must employ archival research. Old local newspapers are often available on microfilm at local libraries or at the newspaper offices. University libraries generally provide access to archives of national publications such as *The New York Times* or *Time*; publications can also increasingly be found in online databases or on websites. Older radio programs are available for free or by paid download through a number of online sources.

Many television programs and films have also been made available for free download, or for rent or sale through online distributors. Performing an online search for a particular title will reveal the options available. Resources such as the Internet Archive (www.archive.org) work to archive a number of media sources. One important role of the Internet Archive is website archiving. Internet archives are invaluable for a study of online media because they store websites that have been deleted or changed. These archives have made it possible for Internet content analyses that would have otherwise been impossible.[[45]](#footnote-45)

In comparing archival research to other research methods, there are several important distinctions. For one, the researcher employing archival research never directly interacts with research participants. Therefore, the investment of time and money to collect data is considerably less with archival research. Additionally, researchers have no control over what information was originally collected. Therefore, research questions have to be tailored so they can be answered within the structure of the existing data sets. There is also no guarantee of consistency between the records from one source to another, which might make comparing and contrasting different data sets problematic.[[46]](#footnote-46)

## Rhetorical Analysis

Rhetorical analysis involves examining the “styles” used in media and attempting to understand the kinds of messages those styles convey. Media styles refer to form, presentation, composition, use of metaphors, and reasoning structure. Rhetorical analysis reveals the messages not apparent in a strict reading of content. Studies involving rhetorical analysis have focused on media such as advertising to better understand the roles of style and rhetorical devices in media messages.

## Media Studies Controversies

Important debates over media theory have questioned the foundations and hence the results of media research. Within academia, theories and research can represent an individual’s lifework and livelihood. As a result, issues of tenure and position, rather than issues of truth and objectivity, can sometimes fuel discussion over theories and research.

*Problems with Methodology and Theory*

Although the use of advanced methodologies can resolve many of the questions raised about various theories, the fact remains that the use of these theories in public debate generally follows a broader understanding. For example, if a hypothetical study found that convicted violent offenders had aggressive feelings after playing the video game *Mortal Kombat*, many would take this as proof that video games cause violent acts without considering other possible explanations. Often, the nuances of these studies are lost when they enter the public arena.

*Politics and Media Studies*

Media theories and studies afford a variety of perspectives. When proponents of a particular view employ those theories and studies, however, they are often oversimplified and can result in contradictory claims. In fact, when politicians and others employ media studies to validate a political perspective, this is a common result.

*Media Bias*

A good example of the ways that media can bolster political opinion is through coverage, which leads to the debate over media bias. One 1985 study found that journalists were more likely to hold liberal views than were members of the public. Over the years, many have cited this study to support the opinion that the media holds a liberal bias. However, another study found that between the years of 1948 and 1990, 78 percent of newspaper presidential endorsements were for Republicans.

Media favoritism again became a source of contention during the 2008 presidential race. A random sampling of campaign coverage in the run-up to the election found that 82 percent of stories featured Barack Obama, while only 52 percent discussed John McCain. [7] Allegations that the media favored Obama seemed to bolster the idea of a liberal bias. But other studies belied this belief. Research conducted during the election showed that favorable media coverage of Obama occurred only after his poll numbers rose, hinting that the media were reacting to public opinion rather than attempting to influence it.

*Media Decency*

Decency standards in media have long been an issue, and they continue to change in ways that are not necessarily predictable. Once banned in the United States for obscenity, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is now considered a classic of modern literature, while many schools have banned children’s classic *Adventures of* *Huckleberry Finn* for its use of ethnic slurs. Because of the regulatory powers that government possesses over the media, decency is also an inherently political issue. As media studies have progressed, they have increasingly appeared in the debates over decency standards. Although media studies cannot prove a word or image is indecent, they can help discern the impact of that word or image and, thus, greatly influence the debate.

Organizations or figures with stated goals often use media studies to support those aims. For example, the Parents Television Council reported on a study that compared the ratio of comments about nonmarital sex to comments about marital sex during the hours of 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. The study employed content analysis to come up with specific figures; however, the Parents Television Council then used those findings to make broad statements, such as “the institution of marriage is regularly mocked and denigrated.” Because content analysis does not analyze the effect on audiences or analyze how the material is presented, it does not offer a scientific way to judge whether a comment is mocking and denigrating marriage, so such interpretations are arguably unsupported by the research. For example, researchers performing a content analysis by documenting the amount of sex or violence on television are not analyzing how this content is interpreted by the audience. They are simply noting the number of instances. Equally, partisan groups can use a number of different linguistic turns to make media studies fit their agenda.

Media studies involving violence, pornography, and profanity are inherently politically charged, and politicians have also conducted their own media studies. In 2001, for example, a Senate bill aimed at Internet decency that had little support in Congress came to the floor. One of the sponsoring senators attempted to increase interest by bringing to the Senate floor a file full of some of the most egregious pornographic images he could find on the Internet. The bill passed 84 to 16.

*Jack Thompson versus Violent Video Games*

One of the most outspoken critics of violent video games is the now-disbarred lawyer Jack Thompson. Despite questionable use of media research, Thompson has made many claims referencing research. In an interview with *CBS News*, Thompson stated that “hundreds of studies” existed that proved the link between violent video games and real violence. Later in the interview, he listed increasing school murder statistics as proof of the effects of violent video games. In light of the media effects theories elucidated in this chapter, Thompson was obviously not being honest about the findings of video game–violence research and was making claims that no media effects scholar could confidently make.

Thompson initiated several lawsuits against *Grand Theft Auto* video game developer Take 2 Interactive, claiming that the company should be held liable for encouraging violent actions by minors. His lawsuits were thrown out of court, and he eventually came to a settlement with Take 2 Interactive—who had countersued—to drop all litigation. Thompson’s frivolous use of the legal system caused the state of Alabama to revoke his license to practice law in 2005, and, in 2008, the Florida Supreme Court disbarred him for life.

Jack Thompson’s actions may seem extreme, but he represents a common pattern of media study misrepresentation. Pundits, social reformers, and politicians frequently use the results of media studies to support their agenda without regard for accuracy. The use of media research to lend credence to a political opinion is widespread even as the public struggles to understand the effects of new media on culture.

*Media Consolidation*

Media consolidation occurs when large media companies buy up smaller media outlets to create giant conglomerates. Some scholars predict that a handful of companies will soon control most of the world’s media. Although government regulation has historically stymied this trend in the United States by prohibiting ownership of a large number of media outlets, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has loosened many of the restrictions on large media companies in recent years.

Media studies often prove vital to decisions regarding media consolidation. These studies measure the impact that consolidation has had on the media’s public role and on the content of local media outlets to compare it with that of conglomerate-owned outlets. The findings often vary depending on the group conducting the test. Sometimes tests are ignored entirely.

In 2003, the FCC loosened restrictions on owning multiple media outlets in the same city, citing studies that the agency had developed to weigh the influence of particular media outlets such as newspapers and television stations. In 2006, however, reports surfaced that a key study had been discarded during the 2003 decision. The study showed an increase in time allocated for news when TV stations were owned locally, thus raising questions about whether media consolidation was a good thing for local news.

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# Economics of Mass Media

## Media Conglomerate or Monopoly?

In the late 19th century, Andrew Carnegie had a brilliant idea. Instead of buying materials and manufacturing steel, Carnegie bought up mines, railways, and all other aspects of the industry, pioneering a business model that later became known as vertical integration, in which a company owns both its suppliers and buyers. Gathering, manufacturing, and delivering raw materials and finished goods all under the control of a single corporation allowed Carnegie’s profits to soar by cutting out the middleman and allowing him to drive the competition out of certain markets. A century later, this same strategy still works; it may not drive industrialization, but its effects are just as powerful.

In late 2009, cable company Comcast announced a plan to purchase a controlling ownership stake in NBC Universal to allow Comcast to join with NBC. This multibillion-dollar deal would give Comcast a 51 percent stake in the company, with present owners General Electric (GE) retaining control of the other 49 percent. The proposed venture brought together all NBC Universal content—including Universal Pictures and Focus Features; Spanish-language network Telemundo and the cable networks USA, Bravo, CNBC, and MSNBC—with Comcast’s cable channels, which include E! Entertainment, the Golf Channel, and the sports network Versus. Already one of the nation’s largest cable and broadband Internet providers, Comcast would then conceivably have the power to restrict these hugely popular NBC-owned networks to its own cable service, thus forcing consumers to adopt Comcast in order to watch them, or to charge huge premiums to competitors’ cable subscribers for the channels, thereby making their own cable service more desirable.

The most concerning—or beneficial, for Comcast—aspect of this merger is how it may integrate online content with traditional cable media. NBC Universal cofounded Hulu, the second-largest online video channel in the United States. If Comcast sees ad-driven sites such as Hulu as a threat to its cable business, then ownership over the online video portal would allow Comcast to restrict the site and all of NBC’s online content to its own cable subscribers. In effect, Comcast would be allowed to create a subscription model for Internet content, just as it sells subscriptions for cable content. For years, viewers have been able to pick and choose from a wide variety of sources, selecting only the online content that they want; now, some fear that Comcast could bring the problems of a cable subscription—hundreds of channels but only some worth watching—to the Internet.

This merger has the potential to reshape the way that mass media is produced and distributed to consumers. When most Internet users subscribed to America Online (AOL), the company set up its own site simply as a portal to other companies’ content. The proposed integration of content producers and service providers, however, allows for unprecedented control of Internet content. Net neutrality poses another problem; Comcast could potentially grant its own content channels— such as a subscription-only version of Hulu— privileges over competing channels. While this does not necessarily pose a problem when there is healthy competition, in many regions Comcast is the only provider of broadband Internet, thus raising concerns of a potential monopoly. No matter what happens with this particular merger, it seems that the economics of mass media are becoming even more tangled as the rapid rise of new technology threatens to transform or replace traditional media outlets.

## Ownership of the Media

Between print media, radio, television, and streaming services, it feels like people have a lot of choice when it comes to media. However, the United States and Europe have what is called **media concentration**, where a few firms own the majority of channels and content. In fact, five companies own and produce 90 percent of what Americans watch today. Another word to describe this type of media ownership pattern, in which a small number of corporations dominate the market, is an **oligopoly**.

Is media concentration a cause for concern? Columbia Business School professor Eli Noam argues that larger corporations have the money to invest in good journalists and foster reader loyalty. Since being acquired by Amazon owner Jeff Bezos, the *Washington Post* has increased hiring and has shown profitability, unlike many other newspapers. However, because these companies are privately owned, it is not irrational to assume that they are profit-seeking businesses that look to maximize earnings over other, perhaps loftier, goals. As such, these companies may choose easy-to-sell programming over content with high information value. Providence College professor Matt Guardino writes, “When control over the media is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, owners may be able to use their corporations’ powerful platforms to amplify propaganda driven by their own political views or business interests.” In addition, profit maximization can lead to budgetary constraints such as reduced foreign news coverage or other staffing cutbacks, which can affect the content of the news and, by extension, what information citizens and voters can access. A 2018 study found that “ownership chains” had “a homogenizing effect on the content of newspapers’ coverage of foreign policy, resulting in coverage across co-owned papers that is more similar in scope (what they cover), focus (how much ‘hard’ relative to ‘soft’ news they offer), and diversity (the breadth of topics they include in their coverage of a given issue) relative to . . . papers that are not co-owned.” As Senior Research and Teaching Associate at University of Zurich Edda Humprecht notes, “Large media corporations are assumed to offer superficial or scandalizing news content in order to attract large audiences,” and this idea has been backed by various empirical studies that point to the reduction of more serious news in favor of content with what is perceived to be higher entertainment value. Stanford researcher Mark Cooper iterates this point: “Concentration of ownership may foster entertainment variety, but it undermines the diversity of information and journalistic enterprise.” He also notes that “concentration of media ownership reduces the diversity of local reporting and gives dominant firms in local markets an immense amount of power to influence critical decisions. Consolidation in national chains squeezes out the local point of view.” A study of the Sinclair Broadcasting Group, which provides news to more than 70 percent of American households, found that news outlets under concentrated ownership focused on national news over local interest, produced slightly more politically conservative content, and resulted in a small downward shift in viewership. This is troubling when considered alongside research that finds that smaller station groups produce higher-quality newscasts than stations owned by larger companies—by a significant margin. It is not difficult to see how ownership affects not just what people see but also what they consider important—and how that can affect the public’s view of politics.

The picture of media ownership in Europe is similar to that in the United States in that six corporations also own the majority of media content across Europe, prompting the European Union to commission the 2020 report *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era* and to issue a warning about the threat that media concentration poses to pluralism and diversity of views. The European Federation of Journalists echoes this concern: “Many politicians, particularly those in the European Parliament, have repeatedly expressed concerns over the growth of huge media companies that are exercising unprecedented levels of political and commercial influence. In the process, they threaten diversity and pluralism in society.”

Private ownership is not the only media model. In many countries outside of the United States, the media are either partially or wholly owned by the state with positive effects. For example, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the world’s first public broadcaster, draws its funding via the government in the form of a user fee while not having any direct government intervention when it comes to programming or editing. Many hail the BBC as a model for public ownership because of its high-quality news, content, and accessibility. Countries that have strong public broadcasters such as the BBC have been shown to “have higher levels of social trust, and the people who live in them are less likely to hold extremist political views.” Public news media continue to play a particularly prominent role in western Europe, where public news stations, including the BBC in the UK, Sveriges Television (SVT) and Sveriges Radio (SR) in Sweden, and ARD in Germany, continue to be top sources for news. However, in poorer, autocratic nations, state ownership of the media has been shown to undermine political and economic rights and freedoms. In the United States, the two highest-profile public news outlets, National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), rank far lower than private news outlets in terms of listeners and viewership. [[47]](#footnote-47)

### *Homogenization and Fragmentation*

Despite the variety of media at hand, the mainstream news and entertainment you enjoy are increasingly homogenized. Research by McManus (1995) suggests that different news outlets all tell the same stories, using the same sources, resulting in the same message, presented with only slight variations. So, whether you are reading the *New York Times* or the CNN’s web site, the coverage of national events like a major court case or political issue will likely be the same.

Simultaneously with this homogenization among the major news outlets, the opposite process is occurring in the newer media streams. With so many choices, people increasingly customize their news experience, minimizing their opportunity to encounter information that does not jive with their worldview (Prior 2005). For instance, those who are staunchly Republican can avoid centrist or liberal-leaning cable news shows and web sites that would show Democrats in a favorable light. They know to seek out Fox News over MSNBC, just as Democrats know to do the opposite. Further, people who want to avoid politics completely can choose to visit web sites that deal only with entertainment or that will keep them up to date on sports scores. They have an easy way to avoid information they do not wish to hear. Americans seem to view this phenomenon with great concern, indicating that the impact of customized or personalized news delivers worse news. Yet, they still engage with the platforms that deliver news in that manner.

The fragmentation of the news has led to an increased amount of digital tribalism. Tribalism in this sense is the state or tendency to gather and reinforce ideas belonging to a group, and to do so out of a sense of strong loyalty. Digital tribalism, then, is the tendency to do so online, and also to forge new tribes purely based on online personas or ideologies. Instead of basing these groups on the classic bonds of ethnic, religious, or geographic ideologies, they are based on politics, emotions, lifestyles or lifestyle goals, or even brands (Taute & Sierra 2014). Digital tribes can lead people to a greater sense of belonging and can also be heavily exploited for commercial or power-attaining interests.[[48]](#footnote-48)

## Characteristics of Media Industries

The merger of Comcast and NBC is just one example of the myriad ways media companies do business. Television, print publishing, radio broadcasting, music, and film all have their own economic nuances and distinct models. However, these business models fall into three general categories: monopoly, oligopoly, and monopolistic competition.

Of these three basic media business models, monopoly is probably the most familiar. A monopoly occurs when one controls a product or service—for example, a small town with only one major newspaper. Oligopoly, or the control of a product or service by just a few companies, commonly occurs in publishing; a few major publishers put out most best-selling books, and relatively few companies control many of the nation’s highest-circulating magazines. Television is much the same way, as the major broadcast networks—Comcast and GE’s NBC, Disney’s ABC, National Amusements’ CBS, and News Corporation’s Fox—own nearly all broadcast and cable outlets. Finally, monopolistic competition takes place when multiple companies offer essentially the same product or service. For example, Ticketmaster and Live Nation were longtime competitors until they merged in 2010, with both providing basically the same set of event-management services for music and other live entertainment industries.

The last few decades have seen increasing conglomeration of media ownership, allowing for economies of scale that previously could not be achieved. Instead of individual local radio stations competing for advertising revenue among a range of local companies, for example, large corporations can now buy wholesale advertising for any or all of their brands on a dozen different radio stations in a single media market all owned by a conglomerate such as Clear Channel. The economics of mass media has become a matter of macroeconomic proportions: GE now makes everything from jet engines to cable news. The implications of this go beyond advertising. Because major corporations now own nearly every media outlet, ongoing fears of corporate control of media messaging have intensified.

However, these fears are often channeled into productive enterprises. In many media industries, an ongoing countercurrent exists to provide diversity not found in many corporate-owned models. Independent radio stations such as those affiliated with nonprofit organizations and colleges provide news and in-depth analysis as well as a variety of musical and entertainment programs that are not found on corporate stations. Likewise, small music labels have had recent success promoting and distributing music through online CD sales or digital distribution services such as iTunes appliance program. YouTube makes it easier for videographers to reach a surprisingly large market, often surpassing even professional sites such as Hulu.

*Raising Revenue*

Companies employ many different ways to raise revenue for their services, but all boil down to two fundamental ideas: The money comes either from consumers or from advertising. In practice, many outlets combine the two to give themselves a flexible stream of income. Equally, consumers may be willing to pay slightly more for fewer ads, or to sit through more advertising in exchange for free content.

Traditional book publishers, which make practically all of their money by selling their products directly to consumers, lie on one extreme end of the spectrum. In some respects, cable companies use a related model under which they directly sell consumers the delivery and subscription of a bundled package of programming channels. However, cable channels primarily rely on a mix of media revenue models, receiving funding from advertising along with subscription fees. Magazines and newspapers may fall into this middle-ground category as well, although online classified advertising has caused print publications to lose this important revenue stream in recent years. Broadcast television is the clearest example of advertising-driven income, as there are no subscription fees for these channels. Because this lack of direct fees increases the potential audience for the network, networks can sell their advertising time at a premium, as opposed to a cable channel with a more limited and likely more narrow viewership.

*Print Media*

Print media fall into three basic categories: books, newspapers, and magazines. The book publishing industry is basically an oligopoly; the top 10 trade publishers made up 72 percent of the total market in 2009, with the top five alone comprising 58 percent of this. Newspapers tend toward local monopolies and oligopolies, as there are generally few local news sources. In the past classified advertising made up a substantial portion of newspaper revenue. However, the advent of the Internet—particularly free classified services such as Craigslist—has weakened the newspaper industry through dwindling classified advertising revenues.

*Newspapers*

The newspaper industry also entails a mix of initial, or first copy costs, and relatively low marginal costs. Journalistic and editorial costs are relatively high, whereas the costs of newsprint and distribution are fairly low. The transition from the labor-intensive process of mechanical typesetting to modern electronic printing greatly reduced the marginal costs of producing newspapers. However, the price of newsprint still goes through cyclical ups and downs, making it difficult to price a newspaper in the long run. The highest costs of publishing a paper remain the editorial and administrative overheads. Back-office activities such as administration and finance can often be combined if a company owns more than one paper. Unlike the historical restrictions on broadcast media that limited the number of stations owned by a single network, print media has faced no such ownership limits. Because of this, a company such as Gannett has come to own *USA Today* as well as mostly local newspapers in 33 states, Guam, and the United Kingdom. [2] Other companies, such as McClatchy, also run their own wire services, partly as a way of reducing the costs of providing national journalism to many local markets.

*Magazines*

Like newspapers, magazines are largely owned by just a few companies. However, unlike newspapers, many magazine chains are themselves owned by much larger media conglomerates. Time Warner—the highest-ranking media company in 2003—owns numerous magazines, including *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Taking all of its publications into account, Time Warner controls a 20 percent share of all magazine advertising in the United States. However, many smaller publishers produce niche publications, many of which do not aspire to a wider market. In all, magazines seem to be undergoing a period of economic decline, with a net loss of some 120 publications in 2009 alone.

*Television and Radio*

As discussed above, large media conglomerates own nearly all television networks. Both national networks and local affiliates are typically owned by conglomerates; however, stations such as Fox-owned WNYW in New York or CBS-owned KCNC in Denver are able to mix local content with national reporting and programming, much as large newspaper companies do. In a local market, one cable company usually dominates the cable service market. In many places, one cable company, such as Comcast—the largest of the cable companies—is the only option. Over the past several years, however, satellite companies such as Dish Network and DirecTV, which are able to reach any number of consumers with limited local infrastructure, have introduced increased, albeit limited, levels of competition.

Even as cable is expanding, radio has become heavily consolidated. Since the 1990s, massive radio networks such as Clear Channel Communications have bought up many local stations in an effort to control every radio station in a given media market. However, the FCC has designated the lower part of the FM radio band for noncommercial purposes, including nonprofit programming such as educational, religious, or public radio stations—and continues to hold public discussion on frequency allocations. These practices help retain a certain level of programming diversity in the face of increased homogenization, largely because such stations are not supported through advertising. Because they are funded by donations or nonprofit institutions, these stations benefit economically from catering to a minority of listeners who may support the station directly, rather than a larger majority that has other options for entertainment.

*Music and Film*

Because both the music and film industries face unique business opportunities and challenges, each operates on an economic model unlike either print or broadcast media. Just like those forms of media, however, music and film have undergone significant changes due to consolidation and technological and consumer shifts in recent years.

*The Big Four*

The music industry is closely related to the radio industry, and the two have a high degree of codependence. Without music, radio would not be quite as lively or nearly as popular; without radio, music would be more difficult for listeners to discover and perhaps be limited to a local consumer base. As radio companies have consolidated, so has the music industry. A total of four record companies, popularly called the “Big Four” within the industry, dominate the recorded music business and thus most mainstream radio airwaves. Because a conglomerate such as Clear Channel is ill-equipped to handle local tastes and musical acts—and because it tends to be easier to manage programming across a large regional area than on a station-by-station basis—the Big Four record companies tend to focus on national and international acts. After all, if a label can convince a single radio conglomerate to play a particular act’s music, that performer instantly gains access to a broad national market.

Music is therefore widely considered an oligopoly, despite the presence of countless small, independent companies. A handful of major record labels dominate the market, and they are all basically structured the same way. Universal is owned by NBC, which was in turn owned by GE and now Comcast; Sony Music is owned by the eponymous Japanese technology giant; Warner Music Group, although now its own entity, was previously under the umbrella of Time Warner; and the EMI Group is owned by a private investment firm.

*Consolidation and Ticketing*

Although the Big Four dominate the recorded music industry, they have surprisingly little to do with live performances. Traditionally, musicians have toured to promote their albums—and sell enough copies to pay off their advances—and the live show was a combination of self-promotion and income. An artist’s record company provided financial support, but a concert ticket generated significantly more income per sale than a CD. Since the merger of ticketing companies Ticketmaster and Live Nation, the ticketing services for large venues have practically been monopolized. For example, Madison Square Garden, one of the largest venues in New York City, does not handle its booking in-house, and with good reason; the technology to manage tens of thousands of fans trying to buy tickets to a soon-to-be-sold-out concert the day they go on sale would likely break the system. Instead, Ticketmaster handles all of the ticketing for Madison Square Garden, adding a 10 percent to 20 percent fee to the face value of the ticket for its exclusive service, depending on the venue and price of the show.

*Film*

Because of the nature of film, the economics of the medium are slightly different from those of music. The absence of film in broadcasting, the lack of a live performance, and the exponentially higher budgets are just some of its unique facets. As with music, however, large companies tend to dominate the market.

These massive studios are now connected corporately with other media outlets. For example, Sony and Universal both have partners in the music industry, while Fox and Disney control major television broadcast and cable networks as well as film studios. Just as record labels do with radio conglomerates, film distribution companies tend to sell to large chains, such as the over 6,000-screens-strong Regal Entertainment Group and the over 4,000-screens-strong AMC Entertainment, which have national reach. However, independent filmmakers still provide limited competition to these larger studios.

*From Miramax to the Weinstein Company*

Brothers Bob and Harvey Weinstein founded Miramax in 1979 with the intention of independence. Over the ensuing years, they released films that were off-limits to major distributors, such as Quentin Tarantino’s violent *Reservoir Dogs* and Steven Soderbergh’s controversial *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. After Disney bought the smaller studio in 1993, Miramax gained access to even larger financial backing, albeit somewhat begrudgingly. Miramax had cultivated relationships with the now-blockbuster directors Tarantino and Kevin Smith—the director of *Clerks*, *Dogma*, and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*—and when Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* made more than $100 million at the box office within 2 years of Disney’s purchase of Miramax, it seemed like a good deal. As a result, Disney signed the Weinsteins to a new contract, giving them an annual budget of $700 million, and in 2003 Disney gave the Weinsteins permission to raise additional hundreds of millions of dollars from Goldman Sachs in order to make even more expensive movies.

By 2004, however, relations between Miramax and Disney were turning sour. In May of that year, Disney would not allow Miramax to release Michael Moore’s incendiary documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In response, the Weinsteins sought outside funding and released it themselves to great success; the film became the highest-grossing documentary of all time, with revenue of $222 million on a mere $6 million budget. A year later, the Weinsteins dissolved their relationship with Disney. Disney, however, kept the Miramax brand and the entire Miramax library of films.

Yet this fissure did not end the Weinsteins’ careers. In 2005, the brothers founded a new independent film company, the Weinstein Co., which has had some success with films including *Vicky Cristina* *Barcelona* and *The Queen*, as well as the Michael Moore documentaries *Sicko* and *Capitalism: A Love* *Story*. However, when even independent film legends such as the Weinsteins have only limited success, it’s clear that success is hard to come by. The *A.V. Club*—a companion to the satirical newspaper *The* *Onion*—asked in January 2010, just after Disney closed Miramax for good, “How much longer will the studio ‘indie’ model be viable at all?” Today, there are few true “indie” studios left, and several major studios have closed their boutique studios, such as Warner Independent and Paramount Vantage. But even if some are questioning the economics of the indie-studio models of the 1980s and 1990s, it seems that there will always be an artistic drive for independent film—and, eventually, someone’s bound to make the economics of it work again.[[49]](#footnote-49)

*New Media, Old Models*

In many ways, the Internet has been a game-changer throughout the media industry. However, a few things have stayed the same; major media companies own popular media content sites such as Hulu and YouTube and control access to a great deal of online information. Even bloggers, who have found a new role as drivers of the media cycle, are at a disadvantage when it comes to the ability to generate original content. They tend to drive much of their traffic by reposting and adding commentary to news stories from established media outlets. One large and relatively influential outlet, the *Drudge Report*, is mainly composed of links to outside news organizations rather than original journalism. It gained fame during the late 1990s for breaking the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal—albeit by posting about how *Newsweek* killed reporter Michael Isikoff’s story on the matter. Still, the economic complications of the Internet have changed the calculus of media permanently, a status made clear by the drastic increase in free content over the past decade.

# New Media Economics

## The Internet’s Effects on Media Economies

The challenge to media economics is one of production. When print media was the only widely available media, the concept was simple: Sell newspapers, magazines, and books. Sales of these goods could be gauged like any other product, although in media’s case, the good was intangible—information—rather than the physical paper and ink. The transition from physical media to broadcast media presented a new challenge, because consumers did not pay money for radio and, later, television programming; instead, the price was an interruption every so often by a “word from our sponsors.” However, even this practice hearkened back to the world of print media; just as newspapers and magazines sell advertising space, radio and television networks sell space on their airwaves.

The fundamental shift in Internet economics has been the miniscule price of online space compared to that in print or broadcast media. Combined with the instantaneous proliferation of information, the Internet seems to pose a grave threat to traditional media. Media outlets have responded by establishing themselves online, and it is now practically unheard of for any media company to lack an Internet presence. Companies’ archives have opened up, and aside from a few holdouts such as the *Wall Street Journal*, nearly every newspaper allows free online access, although some papers, like *The New York Times*, are going to experiment with a paid subscription model to solve the problem of dwindling revenues. Newspapers now offer video content online, and radio and television networks have published traditional text-and-photo stories. Through Internet portals, media companies have synergized their content; they are no longer merely television networks or local newspapers but instead are quickly moving to become a little bit of everything.

*Online Synergy*

Although the Internet has had many effects on media economics, ranging from media piracy to the lowered costs of distribution, arguably the greatest effect has been the synergy of different forms of media. For example, the front page of *The New York Times* website contains multiple short video clips, and the front page of Fox News’ website contains clips from the cable television network along with relevant articles written by FoxNews.com staff. Media outlets offer many of these services for free to consumers, if for no other reason than because consumers have become accustomed to getting this content for free elsewhere on the Internet.

The Internet has also drastically changed the way that companies’ advertising models operate. During the early years of the Internet, many web ads were geared toward sites such as Amazon and eBay, where consumers purchased products or services. Today, however, many ads—particularly on sites for high-profile media outlets such as Fox News and *The New York Times*—are for products that are not typically bought online, such as cars or major credit cards. However, another category of advertising that is tailored toward individual web pages has also gained prominence on the Internet. In this form of advertising, marketers match advertisers with particular keywords on particular web pages. For example, if the page is a how-to guide for fixing a refrigerator, some of the targeted ads might be for local refrigerator repair shops.

*Internet by Google*

Search-engine company Google has been working to perfect this type of targeted advertising search. Low-cost text ads may appear next to its search results, on various web pages, and in the sidebar of its free web-based email service, Gmail. More than just using algorithms to sort through massive amounts of data and matching advertising to content, Google has lowered the cost barrier to advertising, as well as the volume barrier to hosting advertising. Because Google automatically matches sites with advertisers, an independent site can sign up for its advertising service and get paid for each person who follows the text links. Likewise, relatively small companies can buy advertising space in specialized niches without having to go through a large-volume ad buyer. This business has proven extremely productive; the bulk of Google’s revenue comes from advertising even as it gives away services such as email and document

sharing.

*Problems of Digital Delivery*

Search engines like Google and video-sharing sites like YouTube (which is owned by Google) allow access to online information, but they do not actually produce that information themselves. Thus, the propensity of these sites to gather information and then make it available to consumers free of charge does not necessarily sit well with those who financially depend on the sale of this information.

*Google News*

One of Google’s more controversial projects is Google News, a news aggregator that automatically collects news stories from various sources on the Internet. This service allows users to view the latest news from many different sources conveniently in one location. However, the project has been met with opposition from a number of those news sources, who contend that Google has infringed on their copyrights and cost them revenue. The *Wall Street Journal* has been one of the more vocal critics of Google News. In April 2009, editor Robert Thomson said that news aggregators are “best described as parasites.” In December 2009, Google responded to these complaints by allowing publishers to set a limit on the number of articles per day a reader can view for free through Google.

*Music and File Sharing*

The recent confrontation between Google and the traditional news media is only one of many problems resulting from digital technology. Digital technology can create exact copies of data so that one copy cannot be distinguished from the other. In other words, although a printed book might be nicer than a photocopy of that book, a digitization of the book is exactly the same as all other digitized copies and can be transmitted almost instantly. Similarly, although cassette tape copies of recorded music offered lower sound fidelity than the originals, the emergence of writable CD technology during the 1990s allowed for the creation of a copy of a digital audio CD that was identical to the original.

As data storage and transmission costs dropped, CDs no longer had to be physically copied to other CDs. With the advent of MP3 digital encoding, the music information on a CD could be compressed into a relatively small, portable format that could be transmitted easily over the Internet, and music file sharing took off. Although these recordings were not exactly the same as their CD-quality counterparts, most listeners could not tell the difference—or they just didn’t care, because they were now able to share music files conveniently and for free. The practice of transmitting music over the Internet through services such as Napster quickly ballooned.

*Video Streaming*

As high-bandwidth Internet connections proliferated, video-sharing and streaming sites such as YouTube started up. Although these sites were supposedly intended for users to upload and share their own amateur videos, one of the big draws of the site was the high quantity of television show episodes, music videos, and other commercial content that has been posted illegally. The replication potential inherent in digital technology combined with online transmission has caused a sea change in media industries that rely on income directly from consumers, such as books and recorded music. However, as the next section will show, the shift of media and information to the Internet can pose the risk of a digital divide, where those without Internet access are at an even greater disadvantage than they were before.

*Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA)*

Producers of content are not without protection under the law. In 1998, Congress enacted the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) in an effort to stop the illegal copying and distribution of copyrighted material. The legislation defined many digital gray areas that previously may not have been explicitly covered, such as circumventing antipiracy measures in commercial software; requiring webcasters to pay licensing fees to record companies; and exempting libraries, archives, and some other nonprofit institutions from some of these rules under certain circumstances. Since 1998, this legislation has been the bedrock of a variety of claims against sites such as YouTube. Under the law, copyright holders may send letters to Internet hosts distributing their copyrighted material. Certifying that they have a good-faith belief that the host does not have prior permission to distribute the content, copyright holders may request a removal of that material from the site.

Although much of the law has to do with the rights of copyright holders to request the removal of their works from unlicensed sites, much of the DMCA also enacts protections for Internet service providers (ISPs). Although before there had been some question as to whether ISPs could be charged with copyright infringement merely for allowing reproductions to use their bandwidth, the DMCA made it clear that ISPs are not expected to police their own bandwidth for illegal use and are therefore not liable. Although the DMCA is not necessarily to everyone’s liking—requiring individual takedown notices is time-consuming for corporations, and the relative lack of safeguards can allow large companies to bully ISPs into shutting down smaller sites, given a good-faith notice—the protections and clarifications that it has created have cleared up some of the confusion surrounding digital media. However, as the price of bandwidth drastically drops and as more media goes digital, copyright laws will inevitably need to be amended again.

## Information Economy

The modern theory of the information economy was expressed in the 1998 publication of *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the Network Economy*, written by Cal Shapiro, an economics professor at University of California, Berkeley, and Hal Varian, now chief economist at Google. Their fundamental argument was simple: “Technology changes. Economic laws do not.” [1] While economic laws may not change, the fundamentals of the business of information are far different from the fundamentals of most traditional businesses. For example, the cost of producing a single sandwich is relatively consistent, per sandwich, with the cost of producing multiple sandwiches but information works differently. With a newspaper, the first copy costs are far higher than the marginal costs of secondary copies. The high first costs and low marginal costs of the information economy contribute very heavily to the potential for large corporations gaining dominance. The confluence of these two costs creates a potential economy of scale, favoring the larger of the competitors.

In addition, information is what economists refer to as an experience good, meaning that consumers must actually experience the good to judge its value. The problem with information is that the experience is the good; how do you know, for example, that a movie has high-quality acting and an interesting plot before you’ve watched it? The solution to this is branding.

Although it may be difficult to judge a movie before watching, knowing that a given film was made by a certain director or stars an actor you like increases its value. Marketers use movie trailers, press coverage, and other marketing tools to communicate this branding message in the hopes of convincing you to watch the films they are promoting.

Another important facet of information technology is the associated switching costs. When economists consider switching costs, they take into account the difference between the cost of one technology and the cost of another. If this difference is less than the cost it would take to switch—for information, the cost of moving all of the relevant data to the new technology—then it is deemed possible to switch. A classic example is moving a music collection from vinyl LPs to CDs. For a consumer to switch systems—that is, to buy a CD player and stereo—that person would also have to rebuild his or her entire music collection with the new format. Luckily for the CD player, the increase in convenience and quality was great enough that most consumers were inclined to switch technologies; however, as is apparent to anyone going to a thrift store or garage sale, old technologies are still being used because the information on the records was important enough for some people to keep them around.

*Regulation of the Information Economy*

Public policy and governmental intervention exacerbate an already complicated system of information economics, but for good reason—unlike typical goods and services, the information economy has many significant side effects. The consequences of one hamburger chain outcompeting or buying up all other hamburger chains would surely be fairly drastic for the hamburger-loving world, but not altogether disastrous; there would be only one type of hamburger, but there would still be many other types of fast food remaining. On the contrary, the consequences of monopolization by one media company could be alarming. Because distributed information can influence public policy and public opinion, those in charge of the government have an interest in ensuring fair distribution of that information. The bias toward free markets has been mitigated—even in the United States—when it comes to the information economy.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is largely responsible for this regulation. Established by the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC is charged with “regulating interstate and international communications” for nearly every medium except for print. The FCC also attempts to maintain a nonpartisan, or at least bipartisan, outlook, with a maximum of three of its five commissioners belonging to the same political party. Although the FCC controls many important things—making sure that electronic devices don’t emit radio waves that interfere with other important tools, for example—some of its most important and most contentious responsibilities relate to the media.

As the guardian of the public interest, the FCC has called for more competition among media companies; for example, the ongoing litigation of the merger between Comcast and NBC is not concerned with whether consumers will like streaming Hulu over the Internet, but rather whether one company should own both the content and the mode of distribution. The public good is not served if consumers’ ability to choose is taken away when a service provider like Comcast restricts access to only the content that the provider owns, especially if that service provider is the consumers’ only choice. In other words, the idea of public good is concerned not with the end result of competition, but with its process. The FCC protects consumers’ ability to choose from a wide variety of media products, and the competition among media producers hopefully results in better products for consumers. If the end result is that all customers choose Hulu anyway, either because it has the shows they like or because it offers the best video-streaming capability, then the process has worked to create the best possible model; there was a winner, and it was a fair fight.

*A Brief History of Antitrust Legislation*

The main tool that the government employs to keep healthy competition in the information marketplace is antitrust legislation. The seminal Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 helped establish modern U.S. antitrust legislation. Although originally intended to dissolve the monopolistic enterprises of late-19th-century industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, the law’s basic principles have applied to media companies as well. The antitrust office has also grown since the original Sherman Act; although the office of the attorney general originally brought antitrust lawsuits after the act’s passage, this responsibility shifted to its own Antitrust Division in 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 outlined many propositions and goals that legislators deemed necessary to foster a competitive marketplace. For example, Chapter 1, Section 2, of the act states that “Every person who shall monopolize, or attempt to monopolize, or combine or conspire with any other person or persons, to monopolize any part of the trade or commerce among the several States … shall be deemed guilty of a felony.” This establishment of monopolization as a felony was remarkable; before, free-market capitalism was the rule regardless of the public good, making the Sherman Antitrust Act an early proponent of the welfare of people at large.

Two additional pieces of legislation, the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1911 and the Celler-Kefauver Act of 1950, refined the Sherman Antitrust Act in order to make the system of antitrust suits work more effectively. For instance, the Clayton Act makes it unlawful for one company to “acquire … the whole or any part of the stock” of another company when the result would encourage the development of a monopoly. More than just busting trusts, the Clayton Act thus seeks to stop anticompetitive practices before they take hold. The Celler-Kefauver Act made it more difficult for corporations to get around antitrust legislation; while the Clayton Act allowed the government to regulate the purchase of a competitor’s stock, the Celler- Kefauver Act extended this to include the competitor’s assets.

*Deregulation and the Telecommunications Act of 1996*

Although the early part of the 20th century seemed to be devoted to breaking up trusts and keeping monopolies in check, the media—particularly in the latter part of the century—was still able to move steadily toward conglomeration (companies joining together to form a larger, more diversified corporations). Widespread deregulation (the removal of legal regulations on an industry) took place during the 1980s, in large part through the efforts of free-market economists who argued that deregulation would foster more competition in the information marketplace. However, possibly due in large part to the media economy’s focus on economies of scale, this was not the case in practice. Companies became increasingly conglomerated, and corporations such as Comcast and Time Warner came to dominate the marketplace. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 helped solidify this trend. Although touted as a way to let “any communications business compete in any market against any other” and to foster competition, this act in practice sped up the conglomeration of media.

*Media Conglomerates and Vertical Integration*

The extension of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 of corporate abilities to vertically integrate was a primary driving factor behind this increased conglomeration. Vertical integration has proven particularly useful for media companies due to their high first costs and low marginal costs. For example, a television company that both produces and distributes content can run the same program on two different channels for nearly the same cost as only broadcasting it on one. Because of the localized nature of broadcast media, two broadcast television channels will likely reach different geographical areas. This results in cost savings for the company, but also somewhat decreases local diversity in media broadcasting. In fact, the Telecommunications Act made some changes in authority for these local markets. The concept of Section 253 is that no state may prohibit “the ability of any entity to provide any interstate or intrastate telecommunications service.” Thus, since state and local governments cannot prohibit any company from entering into a marketplace, there are checks on the amount of a local market that any one company can reach. In addition, the Telecommunications Act capped the share of U.S. television audience for any one company at 35 percent. However, the passage of additional legislation in 1999 allowing any one company to own two television stations in a single market greatly diluted the effect of this initial ruling. Although CBS, NBC, and ABC may be declining in popularity, they “still offer the only means of reaching a genuinely mass television audience” in the country.

*Corporate Advantages of Vertical Integration*

Almost all of the major media players in today’s market practice extensive vertical integration through either administrative management or content integration. Administrative management refers to the potential for divisions of a single company to share the same higher-level management structure, which presents opportunities for increased operational efficiency. For example, Disney manages theme parks and movie studios. Although these two industries are not very closely connected through content, both are large, multinational ventures. Placing both of these divisions under a single corporation allows them to share certain structural similarities, accounting practices, and any other administrative resources that may be helpful across multiple industries. Content integration—an important practice for media industries—is the ability of these companies to use the same content across multiple platforms. Disney’s theme parks would lose much of their charm and meaning without Mickey Mouse and Cinderella’s castle; the integration of these two industries—Disney’s theme parks and Disney’s animated characters—proves profitable for both. Behind the scenes, Disney is also able to reap some excellent benefits from their consolidation. For example, Disney could release a movie through its studio, and then immediately book the stars on news programs that air on Disney-owned broadcast television network ABC. Beyond just the ABC broadcast network, Disney also has many cable channels that it can use to directly market its movies and products to the targeted demographics.

Unlike a competitor that might be wary of promoting a Disney movie, Disney’s ownership of many different media outlets allows it to single-handedly reach a large audience.

*Ethical Issues of Vertical Integration*

However, this high level of vertical integration raises several ethical concerns. In the above situation, for example, Disney could entice reviewers on its television outlets to give positive reviews to a Disney studio movie. Therefore, this potential for misused trust and erroneous information could be harmful. In many ways, the conglomeration of media companies takes place behind the scenes, with only a minority of consumers aware of vertically integrated holdings. Media companies often try to foster a sense of independence from a larger corporation. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule; the NBC sitcom *30 Rock* often delves into the troubles of running a satirical sketch-comedy show (a parody of NBC’s *Saturday Night Live*) under the ownership of GE, NBC’s real-life owner.

*The Issues of the Internet*

Although media companies are steadily turning into larger businesses than ever before, many of them have nevertheless fallen on hard times. The instant, free content of the Internet is largely blamed for this decline. From the shift of classified advertising from newspapers to free online services to the decline in physical music sales in favor of digital downloads, the Internet has transformed traditional media economics.

One of the main issues with an unregulated Internet is that it allows digital files to be replicated and sent anywhere else in the world. Large music companies, which traditionally made almost all of their money from selling physical music formats such as vinyl records or compact discs, find themselves at a disadvantage. Consumers can share and distribute music files to anyone, and Internet service providers are exempted from liability under the DMCA. With providers freed of liability and media consumption a driving factor in the rise of high-speed Internet services, ISPs have no incentive to deter illegal sharing along with legal downloads.

*Digital Downloads and DRM*

Although music companies have had some success selling music through digital outlets, they have not been pioneers in online music sales. Rather, technology companies such as Apple and Amazon.com, sensing a large market for digital downloads coupled with a sleek delivery system, have led the way. Already accustomed to downloading MP3s, consumers readily adopted the model. However, record companies believed that the lack of digital rights management (DRM) protection offered by MP3s represented a major downside.

Apple provided a way to strike a compromise between accessibility and rights control. Having already captured much of the personal digital audio player market with the iPod that uses other Apple products, Apple has also long prided itself on creating highly integrated systems of both software and hardware. Because so many people were already using the iPod, Apple had a huge potential market for a music store even if it offered DRM-locked tracks that would only play on Apple devices. This inflexibility even offered a small benefit for consumers; Apple succeeded in convincing companies to price their digital downloads lower than CDs.

This compromise may have sold a lot of iPods and MP3s, but it did not satisfy the record companies. When consumers started to download one hit single for 99 cents—rather than buying the whole album for $15 on CD—the music industry felt the pain. Still, huge monetary advances in digital music have taken place. Between 2004 and 2008, digital music sales increased from $187 million to $1.8 billion.

*Piracy*

The music industry has wasted no amount of firepower to blame piracy for the decline in album sales: “There’s no minimizing the impact of illegal file-sharing. It robs songwriters and recording artists of their livelihoods, and it ultimately undermines the future of music itself,” said Cary Sherman, president of the Recording Industry Association of America. [8] However, economists see the truth of the matter as significantly more ambiguous. Analyzing over 10,000 weeks of data distributed over many albums, a pair of economists at the Harvard Business School and University of North Carolina found that “Downloads have an effect on sales which is statistically indistinguishable from zero.” Either way, two things are clear: Consumers are willing to pay for digital music, and digital downloads are on the market to stay for the foreseeable future.

## Globalization of Media

The media industry is, in many ways, perfect for globalization, or the spread of global trade without regard for traditional political borders. As discussed earlier, the low marginal costs of media mean that reaching a wider market creates much larger profit margins for media companies. Because information is not a physical good, shipping costs are generally inconsequential. Finally, the global reach of media allows it to be relevant in many different countries.

However, some have argued that media is actually a partial cause of globalization, rather than just another globalized industry. Media is largely a cultural product, and the transfer of such a product is likely to have an influence on the recipient’s culture. Increasingly, technology has also been propelling globalization. Technology allows for quick communication, fast and coordinated transport, and efficient mass marketing, all of which have allowed globalization—especially globalized media—to take hold.

*Globalized Culture, Globalized Markets*

Much globalized media content comes from the West, particularly from the United States. Driven by advertising, U.S. culture and media have a strong consumerist bent (meaning that the ever-increasing consumption of goods is encouraged as an economic virtue), thereby possibly causing foreign cultures to increasingly develop consumerist ideals. Therefore, the globalization of media could not only provide content to a foreign country but may also create demand for U.S. products. Some believe that this will “contribute to a one-way transmission of ideas and values that result in the displacement of indigenous cultures.”

Globalization as a world economic trend generally refers to the lowering of economic trade borders, but it has much to do with culture as well. Just as transfer of industry and technology often encourages outside influence through the influx of foreign money into the economy, the transfer of culture opens up these same markets. As globalization takes hold and a particular community becomes more like the United States economically, this community may also come to adopt and personalize U.S. cultural values. The outcome of this spread can be homogenization (the local culture becomes more like the culture of the United States) or heterogenization (aspects of U.S. culture come to exist alongside local culture, causing the culture to become more diverse), or even both, depending on the specific situation.

Making sense of this range of possibilities can be difficult, but it helps to realize that a mix of many different factors is involved. Because of cultural differences, globalization of media follows a model unlike that of the globalization of other products. On the most basic level, much of media is language and culture based and, as such, does not necessarily translate well to foreign countries. Thus, media globalization often occurs on a more structural level, following broader “ways of organizing and creating media. In this sense, a media company can have many different culturally specific brands and still maintain an economically globalized corporate structure.

*Vertical Integration and Globalization*

Because globalization has as much to do with the corporate structure of a media company as with the products that a media company produces, vertical integration in multinational media companies becomes a necessary aspect of studying globalized media. Many large media companies practice vertical integration: Newspaper chains take care of their own reporting, printing, and distribution; television companies control their own production and broadcasting; and even small film studios often have parent companies that handle international distribution.

A media company often benefits greatly from vertical integration and globalization. Because of the proliferation of U.S. culture abroad, media outlets are able to use many of the same distribution structures with few changes. Because media rely on the speedy ability to react to current events and trends, a vertically integrated company can do all of this in a globalized rather than a localized marketplace; different branches of the company are readily able to handle different markets. Further, production values for single-country distribution are basically the same as those for multiple countries, so vertical integration allows, for example, a single film studio to make higher-budget movies than it may otherwise be able to produce without a distribution company that has as a global reach.

*Foreign Markets and* Titanic

Worth considering is the reciprocal influence of foreign culture on American culture. Certainly, American culture is increasingly exported around the world thanks to globalization, and many U.S. media outlets count strongly on their ability to sell their product in foreign markets. But what Americans consider their own culture has in fact been tailored to the tastes not only of U.S. citizens but also to those of worldwide audiences. The profit potential of foreign markets is enormous: If a movie does well abroad, for example, it might make up for a weak stateside showing, and may even drive interest in the movie in the United States.

One prime example of this phenomenon of global culture and marketing is James Cameron’s 1997 film *Titanic*. One of the most expensive movies ever produced up to that point, with an official budget of around $200 million, *Titanic* was not anticipated to perform particularly well at the U.S. box office. Rather, predictions of foreign box-office receipts allowed the movie to be made. Of the total box-office receipts of *Titanic*, only about one-third came from the domestic market. Although *Titanic* became the highest-grossing film up to that point, it grossed just $140 million more domestically than *Star Wars* did 20 years earlier. The difference was in the foreign market. While *Star Wars* made about the same amount—$300 million—in both the domestic and foreign markets, *Titanic* grossed $1.2 billion in foreign box-office receipts. In all, the movie came close to hitting the $2 billion mark, and now sits in the No. 2 position behind Cameron’s 2009 blockbuster, *Avatar*.

One reason that U.S. studios can make these kinds of arrangements is their well-developed ties with the worldwide movie industry. Hollywood studios have agreements with theaters all over the world to show their films. By contrast, the foreign market for French films is not nearly as established, as the industry tends to be partially subsidized by the French government. Theaters showing Hollywood studio films in France funnel portions of their box-office receipts to fund French films. However, Hollywood has lobbied the World Trade Organization—a largely pro-globalization group that pushes for fewer market restrictions—to rule that this French subsidy is an unfair restriction on trade. In many ways, globalization presents legitimate concerns about the endangerment of indigenous culture. Yet simple concerns over the transfer of culture are not the only or even the biggest worries caused by the spread of American culture and values.

## Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism was around long before the United States became a world power. In its broadest strokes, imperialism describes the ways that one nation asserts its power over another. Just as imperial Britain economically ruled the American colonists, so did Britain strongly influence the culture of the colonies. The culture was still a mix of nationalities—many Dutch and Germans settled as well—but the ruling majority of ex-Britons led British culture to generally take over. Today, cultural imperialism tends to describe the United States’ role as a cultural superpower throughout the world. American movie studios are generally much more successful than their foreign counterparts not only because of their business models but also because the concept of Hollywood has become one of the modern worldwide movie business’s defining traits. Multinational, nongovernmental corporations can now drive global culture. This is neither entirely good nor entirely bad. On one hand, foreign cultural institutions can adopt successful American business models, and corporations are largely willing to do whatever makes them the most money in a particular market—whether that means giving local people a shot at making movies or making multicultural films such as 2008’s *Slumdog Millionaire*. However, cultural imperialism has potential negative effects as well. From the spread of Western ideals of beauty to the possible decline of local cultures around the world, cultural imperialism can have a quick and devastating effect.

*Cultural Hegemony*

To begin discussing the topic of cultural imperialism, it is important to look at the ideas of one of its founding theorists, Antonio Gramsci. Strongly influenced by the theories and writings of Karl Marx, Italian philosopher and critic Gramsci originated the idea of cultural hegemony to describe the power of one group over another. Unlike Marx, who believed that the workers of the world would eventually unite and overthrow capitalism, Gramsci instead argued that culture and the media exert such a powerful influence on society that they can actually influence workers to buy into a system that is not economically advantageous to them. This argument that media can influence culture and politics is typified in the notion of the American Dream. In this rags-to-riches tale, hard work and talent can lead to a successful life no matter where one starts. Of course, there is some truth to this, but it is by far the exception rather than the rule.

Marx’s ideas remained at the heart of Gramsci’s beliefs. According to Gramsci’s notion, the hegemons of capitalism—those who control the capital—can assert economic power, while the hegemons of culture can assert cultural power. This concept of culture is rooted in Marxist class struggle, in which one group is dominated by another and conflict arises. Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony is pertinent in the modern day not because of the likelihood of a local property-owning class oppressing the poor, but because of concern that rising globalization will permit one culture to so completely assert its power that it drives out all competitors.

*Spreading American Tastes Through McDonaldization*

A key danger of cultural imperialism is the possibility that American tastes will crowd out local cultures around the globe. The McDonaldization of the globe applies not just to its namesake, McDonald’s, with its franchises in seemingly every country, but to any industry that applies the technique of McDonald’s on a large scale. Coined by George Ritzer in his book *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), the concept is rooted in the process of rationalization. With McDonaldization, four aspects of the business are taken to the extreme: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These four things are four of the main aspects of free markets. Applying the concepts of an optimized financial market to cultural and human items such as food, McDonaldization enforces general standards and consistency throughout a global industry.

Unsurprisingly, McDonald’s is the prime example of this concept. Although the fast-food restaurant is somewhat different in every country—for example, Indian restaurants offer a pork-free, beef-free menu to accommodate regional religious practices—the same fundamental principles apply in a culturally specific way. The branding of the company is the same wherever it is; the “I’m lovin’ it” slogan is inescapable, and the Golden Arches are, according to Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation*, “more widely recognized than the Christian cross.” Yet, more importantly, the business model of McDonald’s stays relatively the same from country to country. Although culturally specific variations exist, any McDonald’s in a particular area has basically the same menu as any other. In other words, wherever a consumer is likely to travel within a reasonable range, the menu options and the resulting product remain consistent.

*McDonaldizing Media*

Media works in an uncannily similar way to fast food. Just as the automation of fast food—from freeze-dried french fries to prewrapped salads—attempts to lower a product’s marginal costs, thus increasing profits, media outlets seek to achieve a certain degree of consistency that allows them to broadcast and sell the same product throughout the world with minimal changes. The idea that media actually spreads a culture, however, is controversial. In his book *Cultural Imperialism*, John Tomlinson argues that exported American culture is not necessarily imperialist because it does not push a cultural agenda; it seeks to make money from whatever cultural elements it can throughout the world. According to Tomlinson, “no one really disputes the dominant presence of Western multinational, and particularly American, media in the world: what is doubted is the cultural implications of this presence.”

There are, of course, by-products of American cultural exports throughout the world. American cultural mores, such as the Western standard of beauty, have increasingly made it into global media. As early as 1987, Nicholas Kristof wrote in *The New York Times* about a young Chinese woman who was planning to have an operation to make her eyes look rounder, more like the eyes of Caucasian women. Western styles—“newfangled delights like nylon stockings, pierced ears and eye shadow”—also began to replace the austere blue tunics of Mao-era China. The pervasiveness of cultural influence is difficult to track, however, as the young Chinese woman says that she wanted to have the surgery not because of Western looks but because “she thinks they are pretty.”

*Cultural Imperialism, Resentment, and Terrorism*

Not everyone views the spread of American tastes as a negative occurrence. During the early 21st century, much of the United States’ foreign policy stemmed from the idea that spreading freedom, democracy, and free-market capitalism through cultural influence around the world could cause hostile countries such as Iraq to adopt American ways of living and join the United States in the fight against global terrorism and tyranny. Although this plan did not succeed as hoped, it raises the question of whether Americans should truly be concerned about spreading their cultural system if they believe that it is an ideal one.

Speaking after the attacks of September 11, 2001, then-President George W. Bush presented two simple ideas to the U.S. populace: “They [terrorists] hate our freedoms,” and “Go shopping.” These twin ideals of personal freedom and economic activity are often held up as the prime exports of American culture. However, the idea that other local beliefs need to change may threaten people of other cultures.

*Freedom, Democracy, and Rock ’n’ Roll*

The spread of culture works in mysterious ways. Hollywood probably does not actually have a master plan to export the American way of life around the globe and displace local culture, just as American music may not necessarily be a progenitor of democratic government and economic cooperation. Rather, local cultures respond to the outside culture of U.S. media and democracy in many different ways. First of all, media are often much more flexible than believed; the successful exportation of the film *Titanic* was not an accident in which everyone in the world suddenly wanted to experience movies like an American. Rather, the film’s producers had judged that it would succeed on a world stage just as on a domestic stage.

Therefore, in some ways, U.S. media have become more widespread, and also more worldwide in focus. It could even be argued that American cultural exports promote intercultural understanding; after all, to sell to a culture, a business must first understand that culture.

By contrast, some local cultures around the world have taken to Western-style business models so greatly that they have created their own hybrid cultures. One well-known example of this is India’s Bollywood film industry. Combining traditional Indian music and dance with American-style filmmaking, Bollywood studios release around 700 major films each year, three times the rate of the major Hollywood studios. India’s largest film industry mixes melodrama with musical interludes, lip-synced by actors but sung by pop stars. These pop songs are disseminated well before a movie’s release, both to build up hype and to enter multiple media markets. Although similar marketing tactics have been employed in the United States, Bollywood seems to have mastered the art of cross-media integration. The music and dance numbers are essentially cinematic forms of music videos, both promoting the soundtrack and adding variety to the film. The numbers also feature many different Indian national languages and a hybrid of Western dance music and Indian classical singing, a certain departure from conventional Western media.

While cultural imperialism might cause resentment in many parts of the world, the idea that local cultures are helpless under the crushing power of American cultural imposition is clearly too simplistic to hold water. Instead, local cultures seem to adopt American-style media models, changing their methods to fit the corporate structures rather than just the aesthetics of U.S. media. These two economic and cultural aspects are clearly intertwined, but the idea of a foreign power unilaterally crushing a native culture does not seem to be entirely true.[[50]](#footnote-50)

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# Books[[51]](#footnote-51)

## A Lost Generation of Readers?

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released a report that it said represented “a national crisis.” What was under such dire peril that it threatened to “impoverish both cultural and civic life,” as NEA Chairman Dana Gioia put it? Reading—or, more aptly put, not reading. According to the report, *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, less than half the population engaged in any literary reading in 2002, a record low since the survey’s beginnings in 1982.

The report, which asked respondents whether they had read any literary fiction (novels, short stories, plays, or poetry) over the past year showed especially stark numbers among the youngest adults. Those aged 18–24 saw a rate of decline 55 percent greater than the total adult population. (Books read for school or work weren’t counted in the survey, which was examining Americans’ leisure reading habits.) According to the NEA, the overall 10 percent drop in literary readers represented a loss of 20 million potential readers, most of them young. In 1982, young adults (people aged 18–34) were most likely to engage in literary reading; by 2002, they were the least likely group. Based on this, the report asks, “Are we losing a generation of readers?”

Despite these facts, the publishing industry’s releasing more books than ever before. In 2003, just 1 year after the NEA issued its gloomy warning about the state of reading, 175,000 new titles were published in the United States—a 19 percent jump from the year before. Since the early part of the 21st century, the United States publishing industry has had an average annual monetary growth rate of 1.1 percent; however, net sales have dropped from $26 billion to $23 billion in the past year. Meanwhile, as the NEA report notes, 24 percent of Americans’ recreational spending went to electronics, while books accounted for only 5.6 percent in 2002. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the households that watched television more read less. The report warned that “at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually

disappear in half a century.”

As a response to the alarming statistics, in 2006 the NEA launched its Big Read program, essentially a city-wide book club in which community members are encouraged to read the same book at the same time. The NEA provided publicity, funding for kickoff parties, and readers’ guides. The residents of Tampa, Florida, read *The Joy Luck Club* and were accorded a visit by author Amy Tan, and the residents of Washington, DC, chose Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying* with hopes that it would spur conversations about race, justice, and violence. The Big Read’s DC program director said that he hoped the book got young people talking, noting that the book raises all sorts of relevant questions, such as “Do we offer second chances for people after making mistakes, especially youth in DC? What about youth in the justice system? So many people who have been through the juvenile justice system will testify a book set them free,” he claimed.

When the NEA’s 2008 numbers were released, many people were again surprised. The statistics showed that the decline in reading had reversed, the first such increase in 26 years. Once again, the change was most significant among young adults, who had a 21 percent increase from 2002. The NEA credited the “millions of parents, teachers, librarians, and civic leaders [who] took action… [to ensure that] reading became a higher priority in families, schools, and communities.” Another factor may have been in play, however; the 2008 study was the first to include online reading. To understand what books mean in the present world of e-readers and digital libraries, it helps to examine how they functioned in the past and to consider how they might change in the future.

## History of Books

*Ancient Books*

Most historians trace the origins of the book back to the ancient Egyptians, whose papyrus scrolls looked very different from the books we’re accustomed to today. From the time they first developed a written script, around 3000 BCE (Before Common Era), Egyptians wrote on many different surfaces, including metal, leather, clay, stone, and bone. Most prominent, though, was the practice of using reed pens to write on papyrus scrolls. In many ways, papyrus was an ideal material for the Egyptians. It was made using the tall reeds that grew plentifully in the Nile Valley. Individual sheets of papyrus were glued or sewn together to make scrolls. A standard scroll was around 30 feet long and 7 to 10 inches wide, while the longest Egyptian scroll ever found stretched over 133 feet, making it almost as long as the Statue of Liberty when it was rolled all the way out.

By the 6th century BCE, papyrus was the most common writing surface throughout the Mediterranean and was used by the Greeks and Romans. Because papyrus grew in Egypt, the Egyptians had a virtual monopoly over the papyrus trade. Many ancient civilizations housed their scrolls in large libraries, which acted as both repositories of knowledge and displays of political and economic power. The Royal Library of Alexandria boasted around half a million scrolls in its collection; some scholars claim that this was between 30 and 70 percent of all books in existence at the time. But other powerful entities in the ancient world were growing tired of the Egyptians’ monopoly over the papyrus trade.

Parchment was made from treated animal skins that were scraped thin to create a flexible, even surface. Parchment had several advantages over papyrus: It was more durable, both sides could be written on, and its trade wasn’t monopolized by the Egyptians. Its spread coincided with another crucial development in the history of the book. Between the 2nd and 4th centuries, the Romans began sewing folded sheets of papyrus or parchment together and binding them between wooden covers. This form, called the codex, has essentially the same structure as today’s books. The codex was much more user-friendly than was the papyrus scroll: more portable, easier to store and handle, and less expensive to produce. It also allowed readers to quickly flip between sections. While reading a scroll was a two-handed activity, a codex could be propped open in front of a reader, allowing for note-taking. Traditions changed slowly in the ancient world, however, and the scroll remained the dominant form for secular works for several centuries. The codex was the preferred form for early Christian texts, and the spread of Christianity eventually brought about the dominance of the codex; by the 6th century CE, it had almost entirely replaced the scroll.

The next major innovation in the history of books, the use of block printing on paper, began in Tang Dynasty China around 700 CE, though it wouldn’t arrive in Europe for nearly 800 years. The first known examples of text printed on paper are tiny, 2.5-inch-wide scrolls of Buddhist prayers commissioned by Japan’s Empress Shōtoku in 764 CE. The earliest example of a dated, printed book is a Buddhist text called the *Diamond Sutra* (868 CE). Woodblock printing was a meticulous process that involved carving an entire page of text onto a wooden block, then inking and pressing the block to print a page.

In medieval Europe, however, scribes were still laboriously copying texts by hand. Book culture in the Middle Ages was dominated by monasteries, which became centers of intellectual life. The largest monasteries had rooms called scriptoria where monks copied, decorated, and preserved both religious and secular volumes. Many of the classical texts we have today owe their preservation to diligent medieval monks, who thought of scholarship, even the study of secular and pre–Christian writers, as a way to become closer to God. The hand-copied books produced in the Middle Ages were much more ornate than the mass-produced books of today. These were illuminated manuscripts that included painted embellishments that were added on to the handwritten books. The word *illuminate* comes from the Latin *illuminare*, which means to *light up*, and some medieval books were literally made to shine through applications of gold or silver decorations. Other ornate additions included illustrations, decorative capital letters, and intricately drawn borders. The degree of embellishment depended on the book’s intended use and the wealth of its owner. Medieval manuscripts were so highly valued that some scribes placed so-called book curses at the front of their manuscripts, warning that anyone who stole or defaced the copy would be cursed. Written in a copy of the Vulgate Bible, for example, is this warning: “Whoever steals this book let him die the death; let be him be frizzled in a pan; may the falling sickness rage within him; may he be broken on the wheel and be hanged.”

Though illuminated books were highly prized, they were also expensive and labor-intensive to create. By the end of the Middle Ages, the papal library in Avignon, France, held only a few thousand manuscripts compared to the nearly half-million texts found at the Library of Alexandria in ancient times. Bookmaking in the Western world became somewhat less expensive when paper emerged as the primary writing surface. Making paper from rags and other fibers, a technique that originated in 2nd century China, reached the Islamic world in the 8th century and led to a flowering of book culture there.

By the 12th century, Marrakesh, in modern-day Morocco, was said to have had a street lined with a hundred booksellers. But it wasn’t until the 14th century that paper manufacturing began in earnest in Europe.

*Gutenberg’s Industry-Changing Invention*

Papermaking coincided with another crucial step forward in the history of books: Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of mechanical movable type in 1448. Though the simple act of crafting small, movable letters may seem mundane in the contemporary world of digital devices and microchips, it is difficult to overstate the importance of Gutenberg’s invention and the effect it had on the world. The Biography Channel and A&E both named Gutenberg as the single most influential person of the second millennium, ahead of Shakespeare, Galileo, and Columbus, and *Time* magazine cited movable type as the single most important invention of the past 1,000 years. Through his invention, Gutenberg indisputably changed the world.

Much of Gutenberg’s life is shrouded in mystery. It is known that he was a German goldsmith and book printer and that he spent the 1440s collecting investors for a mysterious project. That invention turned out to be the printing press, which combined existing technologies—such as the screw press, which was already used for papermaking—with his own innovation—individual metal letters and punctuation marks that could be independently rearranged—to revolutionize how books were made. Though Gutenberg probably printed other, earlier materials, it was the Bible he printed in 1455 that brought him renown. In his small print shop in his hometown of Mainz, Germany, Gutenberg used his movable type press to print 180 copies of the Bible, 135 on paper and 45 on vellum. This book, commonly called the Gutenberg Bible, ushered in Europe’s so-called Gutenberg Revolution and paved the way for the commercial mass printing of books. In 1978, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin purchased a complete copy of the Gutenberg Bible for $2.4 million.

Over the next few centuries, the printing press changed nearly everything about how books were made, distributed, and read. Printing books was a vastly swifter system than handwriting books was, and paper was much less expensive to produce than parchment. Before the printing press, books were generally commissioned and then copied. The printing press meant that multiple identical editions of the same book could be printed in a relatively short time, while it probably would’ve taken a scribe at least a year to handwrite the Bible. As Gutenberg’s invention led to more and more printing shops springing up all over Europe, the very idea of what a book looked like began to change. In medieval times, books were the valuable, rare product of hundreds (if not thousands) of hours of work, and no two were the same. After Gutenberg, books could be standardized, plentiful, and relatively cheap to produce and disseminate. Early printed books were made to look like illuminated manuscripts, complete with hand-drawn decorations. However, printers soon realized the economic potential of producing multiple identical copies of one text, and book printing soon became a speculative business, with printers trying to guess how many copies a particular book could sell. By the end of the 15th century, 50 years after Gutenberg’s invention of movable type, printing shops had sprung up throughout Europe, with an estimated 300 in Germany alone.

Gutenberg’s invention was a resounding success, and the printing and selling of books boomed. The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center estimates that before the invention of the printing press, the total number of books in all of Europe was around 30,000. By 1500 CE, the book was thriving as an industrial object, and the number of books in Europe had grown to as many as 10 to 12 million.

*Effects of the Mass Production of Books*

The post-Gutenberg world was revolutionized by the advent of the printed book. One thing that did not substantially change, however, was the form of the book itself. Despite minor tweaks and alterations, the ancient form of the codex remained relatively intact. What did rapidly evolve was the way books were produced and distributed and the way information circulated through the world. Simply put, the mechanical reproduction of books meant that there were more books available at a lower cost, and the growth of international trade allowed these books to have a wider reach. The desire for knowledge among the growing middle class and the new availability of classical texts from ancient Greece and Rome helped fuel the Renaissance, a period of celebration of the individual and of a turn toward humanism. For the first time, texts could be widely dispersed, allowing political, intellectual, religious, and cultural ideas to spread widely. Also, for the first time, many people could read the same books and be exposed to the same ideas at the same time, giving rise to mass media and mass culture. Science was revolutionized as well. For example, standardized, widely dispersed texts meant that scientists in Italy were exposed to the theories and discoveries of scientists in England. Because of improved communication, technological and intellectual ideas spread more quickly, enabling scientists from disparate areas to more easily build on the breakthroughs and successes of others.

As the Renaissance progressed, the size of the middle class grew, as did literacy rates. Rather than a few hundred precious volumes housed in monastery or university libraries, books were available to people outside monastic or university settings, which meant that more books were available to women. In effect, the mass production of books helped knowledge become democratized. However, this spread of information didn’t proceed without resistance. Thanks in part to the spread of dissenting ideas, the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant institution of medieval Europe, found its control slipping. In 1487, only a few decades after Gutenberg first printed his Bible, Pope Innocent VIII insisted that all books be prescreened by church authorities before they were allowed to be printed. One book the church banned was the Bible printed in any language other than Latin—a language that few people outside of clerical or scholarly circles understood. In 1517, Martin Luther instigated the Protestant Reformation. He challenged the church’s authority by insisting that people had the right to read the Bible in their own language. The church rightly feared the spread of vernacular Bibles; the more people who had access to the text, the less control the church was able to exert over how it was interpreted. Since the church’s interpretation of the Bible dictated in no small part the way many people lived their lives, the church’s sway over the hearts and minds of the faithful was severely undermined by accessible printed Bibles and the wave of Protestantism they encouraged. The Catholic Church’s attempt to control the printing industry proved impossible to maintain, and over the next few centuries, the church would see its power decline significantly, as it was no longer the sole keeper of religious knowledge as it had been throughout the Middle Ages.

The Bible wasn’t the only text that was beginning to be published in languages other than Latin. The Renaissance saw a growing interest in texts published in the vernacular, the speech of the “common people.” As books became more available to the middle class, people wanted to read books written in their native tongue. Early well-known works in the vernacular included Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (first printed in Italian in 1472) and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (published in Middle English in the 15th century). Genres with popular appeal, such as plays and poetry, became increasingly widespread. In the 16th and 17th centuries, inexpensive chapbooks (the name derives, appropriately enough, from *cheap books*) became popular. Chapbooks were small and cheaply printed, and they often included popular ballads, humorous stories, or religious tracts. The proliferation of chapbooks showed just how much the Gutenberg Revolution had transformed the written word. In just a few hundred years, many people had access to reading material, and books would no longer be considered sacred objects.

Because of the high value placed on human knowledge during the Renaissance, libraries flourished during this time period. As they had been in ancient Egypt, libraries were once again a way of displaying national power and wealth. The German State Library in Berlin was founded in 1661, and other European centers soon followed, such as the National Library of Spain in Madrid in 1711 and the British Library (the world’s largest) in London in 1759. Libraries were also associated with universities, clubs, and museums; however, these were often only for subscribers. The United Kingdom’s Public Libraries Act of 1850 fostered the development of free, public lending libraries. After the American Civil War, public libraries flourished in the newly reunified United States, helped by fundraising and lobbying by women’s clubs. Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie helped bring the Renaissance ideals of artistic patronage and democratized knowledge into the 20th century when he helped found more than 1,700 public libraries between 1881 and 1919.

*History of Document Control*

While Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press ushered in an age of democratized knowledge and incipient mass culture, it also transformed the act of authorship, making writing a potentially profitable enterprise. Before the mass production of books, authorship had few financial rewards (unless a generous patron got involved). As a consequence, pre-Renaissance texts were often collaborative, and many books didn’t even list an author. The earliest concept of the copyright, from the time of the scriptoria, was who had the right to copy a book by hand. The printed book, however, was a speculative commercial enterprise, in that large numbers of identical copies could be sold. The explosive growth of the European printing industry meant that authors could potentially profit from the books they made and then wrote if their legal rights were recognized. In contemporary terms, copyright allows a person the right to exclude others from copying, distributing, and selling a work. This is a right usually given to the creator, although that right can be sold or otherwise transferred. Works not covered by copyright or for which the copyright has expired are part of the public domain, which means that they are essentially public property and can be used freely by anyone without permission or royalty payments.

The origins of contemporary copyright law are usually traced back to the Statute of Queen Anne. This law, enacted in England in 1710, was the first to recognize the legal rights of authors, though in an incomplete manner. It granted a book’s publisher 14 years of exclusive rights and legal protection, renewable for another 14-year term if the author was still living. Anyone who infringed on a copyrighted work paid a fine, half of which went to the author and half to the government. Early copyright was intended to limit monopoly and censorship, to provide a sense of stability to authors, and to promote learning by ensuring that documents would be widely accessible.

The United States established its first copyright law not long after the Declaration of Independence. The U.S. Constitution granted Congress the power “to promote the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries” in Article I, Section 8, Clause 8. The first federal copyright law, the Copyright Law of 1790, was modeled on the Statute of Queen Anne and it similarly granted exclusive rights for 14 years, renewable for 14 more if the author was living at the end of the first term.

The “limited times” mentioned in the Constitution have steadily lengthened since the 18th century. The Copyright Act of 1909 allowed for an initial 28-year term of copyright, which was renewable for one additional 28-year term. The Copyright Act of 1976, which preempted the 1909 act, extended copyright protection to “a term consisting of the life of the author and 50 years after the author’s death,” was substantially longer than the original law’s potential 56-year term. In 1998, copyright was extended even further, to 70 years after the author’s death. The 1998 law, called the Copyright Term Extension Act, also added a 20-year extension to all currently copyrighted works. This automatic extension meant that no new works would enter the public domain until 2019 at the earliest. Critics of the Copyright Term Extension Act called it the Mickey Mouse Protection Act because the Walt Disney Company lobbied for the law. [9] Because of the 20-year copyright extension, Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters remained out of the public domain, which meant that they were still the exclusive property of Disney.

The 1976 law also codified the terms of fair use for the first time. Fair-use law specifies the ways in which a work (or parts of a work) under copyright could legally be used by someone other than the copyright holder for “purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research, is not an infringement of copyright.” That is, a book review quoting snippets of a book, or a researcher citing someone else’s work is not infringing on copyright. Given an Internet culture that thrives on remixes, linking, and other creative uses of source material, the boundaries of the legal definition of fair use have met with many challenges in recent years.

*History of the Book-Publishing Industry*

With the exception of self-published works, the author isn’t the person in charge of producing the book or sending it out into the world. These days, the tasks of editing, designing, printing, promoting, and distributing a book generally fall to the book’s publisher. Although authors are usually the ones with their names prominently displayed on the spine, a published book is actually the product of many different kinds of labor by many different people.

Early book printers acted as publishers, because they produced pages and sold them commercially. In England, the Stationer’s Company, which was essentially a printer’s guild, had a monopoly over the printing industry and was also allowed to censor texts. The Statute of Queen Anne, the 1710 copyright law, came about partially as a result of some of these early publishers overstepping their bounds.

In the 19th-century United States, publishers fulfilled many roles, and it was not uncommon for one company to print, wholesale, and even retail their own books. Although bookstores and printers existed in the United States, the Northeast emerged as the nation’s publishing epicenter, with hotspots in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. During the 1800s, the U.S. book industry swiftly expanded. In 1820, the books manufactured and sold in the United States totaled about $2.5 million; by 1850, even though the price of books had dropped substantially, sales figures had quintupled. Technological advances in the 19th century, including machine-made paper and the Linotype typesetting machine, made book publishing simpler and more profitable. Many of today’s large publishing companies were created in the 19th century; for example, Houghton Mifflin originated in 1832; Little, Brown and Company formed in 1837; and Macmillan was founded in Scotland in 1843 and opened its U.S. branch in 1869. By the turn of the century, New York was the center of publishing in the United States.

The rapid growth of the publishing industry and evolving intellectual property laws meant that authors could make money from their writing during this period. Perhaps it’s no surprise, then, to learn that the first literary agents also emerged in the late 19th century. Literary agents act as intermediaries between the author and the publisher, negotiating contracts and parsing difficult legal language. The world’s first literary agent, A.P. Watt, worked in London in 1881 and essentially defined the role of the contemporary literary agent—he got paid to negotiate on behalf of the author. A former advertising agent, Watt decided to charge based on commission, meaning that he would take in a set percentage of his clients’ earnings.

Watt set the fee as 10 percent, which is still considered standard today. The biggest change to hit publishing in the first half of the 20th century was the increasing popularity of the paperback book. Books covered in less expensive, less durable paper existed since Renaissance chapbooks were invented, but they were usually crudely printed works that were meant only as passing entertainment. In 1935, the publishing industry was changed forever when Penguin Books Ltd., a paperback publisher, launched in England, ushered in the so-called paperback revolution. Instead of being crude and cheaply made, Penguin titles were simple but well designed. Though Penguin sold paperbacks for only 25 cents, it concentrated on providing works of literary merit, thus fundamentally changing the idea of what quality books should look like. Some early Penguin titles included Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and Dashiell Hammett’s *The Thin Man*. In the decades that followed, more and more paperback publishing companies were launched by people hoping to capitalize on Penguin’s success. The first U.S.-based paperback company was Pocket Books, founded in 1939. By 1960, paperbacks were outselling hardbacks in the United States.

The second half of the 20th century was marked by the consolidation of the U.S. book-publishing industry and by a larger trend toward media consolidation. Between 1960 and 1989, about 578 mergers and acquisitions occurred in the U.S. book industry; between 1990 and 1995, 300 occurred; and between 1996 and 2000, nearly 380 occurred. This was just a part of the larger international trend toward mass media consolidation, where large international media empires acquired smaller companies in many different industries. For example, the German media company Bertelsmann AG had acquired Bantam Books, Doubleday, and Random House; London-based Pearson owned Viking, Penguin, Putnam, and the Dutton Group; and AOL Time Warner, Warner-owned, Brown and Company and Warner Books. Because publicly traded companies have obligations to their shareholders, the publishing industry found itself pressured to turn increasingly high profits. By 2010, roughly 60 percent of all books sold in the United States were published by six large publishing houses, often referred to as the Big Six. In the first years of the third millennium, book publishing was an increasingly centralized, profit-driven industry.

## Books and the Development of U.S. Popular Culture

At the turn of the 18th century, the American colonies could only claim about 250 published books. In 2010 alone, more than 288,000 new titles were published. As the United States has grown and developed, books have grown and developed along with it. Sometimes books have amplified differences within the nation, sometimes their authors have worked to proclaim a distinctive American style; sometimes the author has tried to expose hypocrisies in government and society, and sometimes the author has celebrated America’s multifaceted population. Throughout the history of the United States, books have influenced American popular culture and have been influenced by it as well.

In the years leading up to the American Revolution, newspapers and pamphlets were the publication method of choice because they could be quickly printed and were ideal for circulating short political and news items at a moment of rapid change. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, first published anonymously in 1776, could be considered America’s first bestseller. As literacy rates soared in post-independence America and the nation became more stable, the market for longer books increased.

William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy: or, The Triumph of Nature*, published in 1789, is considered the first American novel. Brown’s epistolary novel, which is a novel made up of letters of correspondence, warned about the dangers of seduction. Brown’s novel shares some features with a novel published 2 years later, *Charlotte Temple* by Susannah Rowson, another cautionary tale about a woman falling prey to seduction. Though women were often the subjects of popular novels, they were increasingly the audience as well. Eighteenth-century Americans were influenced by Enlightenment values, which maintained that a strong nation needed an educated, moral population. Although the public realm of education, employment, and politics was dominated by men, women had control over the domestic sphere and the education of the next generation. The 18th-century idea that American women should educate their children for the good of the emerging nation, sometimes called republican motherhood, helped to legitimize, expand, and improve women’s education. Women’s literacy rates rose sharply during this period, and more and more books were tailored to women’s interests, as women tended to have more leisure time for reading. Authors such as Frances Burney and Mary Wollstonecraft wrote about issues facing women of the period and openly criticized the fixed role of females in society.

However, in these early years of the American novel, some people found the form potentially dangerous and subversive because it was too entertaining and it appealed to people’s, especially women’s, imaginations. A character in *The Boarding School* by Hannah Webster Foster, a popular writer of the time period, espouses this particular viewpoint: Novels, are the favorite and the most dangerous kind of reading, now adopted by the generality of young ladies…Their romantic pictures of love, beauty, and magnificence, fill the imagination with ideas that lead to impure desires, a vanity of exterior charms, and a fondness for show and dissipation, by no means consistent with that simplicity, modesty, and chastity, which should be the constant inmates of the female breast.

Part of the perceived threat of novels was their widespread popularity with many different kinds of people. An early biography of Susannah Rowson characterized the wide readership of her novel: It has stolen its way alike into the study of the divine and into the workshop of the mechanic, into the parlor of the accomplished lady and the bed-chamber of her waiting-maid, into the log-hut on the extreme border of modern civilization and into the forecastle of the whale ship on the lonely ocean. It has been read by the grey-bearded professor after his ‘divine Plato’; by the beardless clerk after balancing his accounts at night, by the traveler waiting for the next conveyance at the village inn; by the school girl stealthfully in her seat at school. These popular 18th-century novels were preoccupied with providing moral guidance and cautionary tales to the citizens of the newly formed United States. Questions of freedom and responsibility were paramount as the emerging nation attempted to establish a uniquely American literature.

*Books in the 1800s—How* Uncle Tom’s Cabin *Helped Start a War*

Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* became the most popular book in the 1800s until *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published. Written by abolitionist and preacher Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852—9 years before the beginning of the Civil War—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a smash hit by any definition. An impassioned critique of slavery that tugged on readers’ emotions, the novel sold 300,000 copies in its first year and became the century’s second-best-selling book after the Bible. Stowe’s novel has been credited with heightening tensions between the North and the South. The novel was not only popular domestically. The first London edition sold 200,000 copies in a year, and the book was the first American novel to be translated into Chinese. [6] The absence of international copyright law meant that Stowe was not compensated for most of these translations. Many unauthorized stage versions of the play were produced as well, causing historians to theorize that more people saw theatrical adaptations of the play than read the book. As with today’s stage and film adaptations of books, some of these versions of Stowe’s story were faithful to the novel, while others changed the story’s ending or even twisted the story to make it proslavery. In the early 1900s, 9 silent film versions of the novel were released, making *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the most-filmed story of the silent film era. With her book, Stowe helped establish the political novel as an important touchstone of American literature.

Other 19th-century writers in the United States concentrated on developing a uniquely American style, a mode of self-expression distinct from European models. James Fenimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), wrote adventure stories that celebrated the American frontier, championing a theme that would intrigue U.S. writers for centuries to come. Poet Walt Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a collection of poems that shocked readers with its frank sexuality and fresh use of language. In contrast to most other English-language poets at the time, Whitman wrote in free verse, mimicking the rhythms of actual speech in his poems. He was purposefully informal; he valued everyday speech; he spoke openly about sexual themes; and he was an important figure in establishing an American idiom that was open, informal, and focused on the experiences of common people. Washington Irving, author of the now-iconic short stories “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820), helped establish satire and wit as important aspects of the emerging American style.

Mark Twain famously used humor in his many works of journalism, travel writing, and fiction. Twain’s characters’ voices are funny, irreverant, and full of off-the-wall idioms and odd regional coinages. This passage, from the first chapter of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), shows Twain’s use of distinctively American speech patterns: “The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn’t stand it no longer I lit out.” Twain was also one of the first writers to use a then-newfangled invention—the typewriter.

Edgar Allan Poe is best known for writing macabre stories and poems like “The Raven” (1845), “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), and “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843). A master of the Gothic genre, Poe is also credited with writing the first detective story, 1841’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” (Some people also credit Poe with the invention of the horror story and the science fiction story.) In this and other stories, Poe established many of the classic features of detective stories, including Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes tales: a brilliant, crime-solving detective who works outside the standard police system; the detective’s assistant or friend, who serves as narrator; and an emphasis on analysis and solving a crime through reason. Poe had such a strong effect on the mystery genre that the Mystery Writers of America annually give out the Edgar Awards, named in honor of Poe.

At the end of the 1800s, American literature could be broadly categorized as reflecting an interest in the natural landscape, preoccupation with questions of identity (both of the individual and the nation), an interest in humor or satire, a pride in common speech, and an interest in politics. An emerging interest in what we now call genre fiction was increasing and would become a fully-fledged movement as the 20th century progressed.

*Twentieth Century and Beyond*

The production of books in the 1900s was cheaper than ever because of improved technology. The 20th century saw a multiplicity of genres that began to better reflect the diversity of experiences and interests in the United States. Furthermore, the paperback revolution eroded the distinction between high and low art. By the end of the century, however, books were facing competition for attention with films, television, video games, and the Internet.

In 1900, L. Frank Baum published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a novel set in the fantastical world of Oz. It became the best-selling children’s book for the next 2 years and went on to spawn 13 sequels. Baum’s book is considered part of the so-called golden age of children’s literature, which is considered to have begun with Lewis Carroll’s *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and ended with A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh books (1924–1928). Along with children’s literature, other kinds of genre fiction saw their birth or growth in the 20th century. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) and Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage*(1912) established the Western as a uniquely American genre that would influence the popular Wild West films of the 1920s and beyond. Other genres including science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance sprung up out of the late-19th and early-20th dime novels, named for their cheap cost and known for their sensational, quickly written stories. The dime novel gave way to the even-cheaper pulp magazines and books, inexpensive publications named for the cheap pulp paper they were printed on. Pulp stories were generally sensational and featured sordid tales of murder, prostitution, and gangster violence; others told fantastical stories of aliens or monsters. The pulps were gleefully low culture and were quite popular with readers. Conan the Barbarian, Tarzan, Zorro, and The Shadow all made their first appearances as characters in early pulps. The paperback revolution of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s gave genre stories a wider reach in a more durable format.

While many 19th-century U.S. writers worked to create a distinctive American style, some 20th-century writers aimed to debunk American myths. After World War II, the United States emerged as a dominant world power. Some writers became preoccupied with critiquing American society and government. Dissatisfied with the widespread 1950s ideals of conformity and homogeneity, Beat Generation authors wrote in a freewheeling, informal style and proudly described their drug use and sexual exploits Touchstone works of the Beat Generation include Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), and William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959). These books celebrated road trips, drug trips, spiritual yearning, distrust of the mass media, and gleeful obscenity, and they helped pave the way for the hippie movement of the 1960s.

After the end of the Cold War in 1991, American literature saw an upswing in books that expressed the diversity of voices and experiences of late-20th-century America. Jhumpa Lahiri and Amy Tan wrote about the immigrant experience; Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich penned acclaimed novels about Native American life, and Toni Morrison explored the political and historical dimensions of slavery and race in the United States. Sometimes called multicultural literature, these and other books were celebrated as a way to promote cross-cultural understanding by examining the different value systems, histories, traditions, and speech patterns of people in America. The 21st-century market has so far been dominated by several massively popular novel franchises—such as *Left Behind*, *Harry Potter*, *The Twilight Saga*, and *The Da Vinci Code*—that have collectively sold hundreds of millions of copies. These haven’t only been popular as books; they’ve also spawned equally lucrative films and merchandise tie-ins. Consumers who are so inclined can purchase *Twilight Saga* wall decals, *Harry Potter* earrings, or *Da Vinci Code* board games. In some ways, such novel franchises harken back to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the 19th century, which was a multiplatform success popular on the page, stage, and screen.

*Defining Obscenity: “Howl” Goes on Trial*

Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” met with strong reactions, both positive and negative, when it was released by City Lights Books in 1956. Ginsberg’s poem was instantly notorious for its descriptions of sexual acts, both heterosexual and homosexual, drug use, mental hospitals, and anti-establishment conspiracies. Many readers were shocked by Ginsberg’s words; however, that was precisely his intent. He once described “Howl” as “an emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in U.S. consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalist complex solidified.” [8] In 1957, U.S. customs officials seized a shipment of copies of the book on the grounds of obscenity, but soon after dropped their charges. However, the poem’s legal struggles weren’t over; that same year, the California police sent plainclothes officers to City Lights Bookstore to buy a copy and then promptly arrested the salesclerk and the store owner on charges of obscenity.

The “Howl” trial came in the same year as several other landmark Supreme Court cases that liberalized the legal definition of obscenity in the United States. Before 1957, a stricter definition held that any material with a possible immoral influence was obscene. This stance led to a ban on works by authors such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence. Under the new law, a work would be judged by “community standards” and could only be judged obscene if its “dominant theme taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest.” In other words, books could no longer be deemed obscene on the basis of a single four-letter word. It also meant that the poem’s obscenity would have to be judged against the relatively liberal standards of San Francisco, where the police sting operation had taken place.

The ACLU leapt to City Lights’ defense, and the presiding judge overturned the obscenity charge, citing the poem’s “redeeming social importance.” In hindsight, the judge seems undoubtedly correct about the poem’s social importance. “Howl” and the obscenity rulings of 1957 marked a crucial bridge between the post–World War II years of enthusiastic patriotism and social conformity and the 1960s ethos of free love and antigovernment sentiment. By the time of Ginsberg’s death in 1997, *Howl and Other Poems* had sold more than 800,000 copies.

# Contemporary Publishing

## Major Book Formats

From ancient Egyptian papyrus scrolls to scrollable 21st-century e-books, a book can come in many different formats. However, in some ways, it seems like the more things change, the more they stay the same. In the same way that early printed books were painstakingly illuminated to look more like medieval books, today’s e-books use e-paper technology to mimic the look of a printed page. Even the hardcover books we’re familiar with today are direct descendants of the ancient codex.

*Hardcover*

While the first codices enclosed bound papers between wooden covers (the word *codex* means *block of wood* in Latin), contemporary hardcover book covers are usually made of cardboard sheathed in cloth, paper, or leather. The printed pages of the book are either sewn or glued to the cover. Until the early 1800s, most books were sold unbound. A buyer would purchase a sheath of printed papers that would be bound either by the bookseller or by a commissioned bindery. British publisher William Pickering is considered the first publisher to issue books in uniform cloth bindings in 1820. About a decade later, dust jackets, the detachable outer covers that sheathe most hardback books today, arrived on the scene. Dust jackets were initially meant only as a protective covering for the binding, but soon they became a place where designers could create a colorful and distinctive cover for a book. The durability of hardcover books makes them attractive to both authors and book purchasers. However, the competitive economics of today’s publishing industry means that some books are never issued in hardcover. Because hardcover books are more expensive to produce and almost always cost more than their paperback equivalents, publishers tend to reserve the format for books that they expect will sell well. Based on projected sales, publishers must decide how big of a print run to order for a new hardcover book. A book’s print run refers to all the copies made in one setup of the printing apparatus. A failed book may only have one, while a successful book may have 50 or more printings. Figuring out how many copies of a book to print is an inexact science, as publishers must essentially guess how well a book will sell.

There is no standard size for a print run. The U.K. edition of the first *Harry Potter* book had an initial print run of only 500 copies; the U.S. print run of the seventh and final book in the series was a record-breaking 12 million. When an initial print run is sold out, the book is either reprinted (these copies are considered a second printing) or is considered out of print. The contemporary publishing industry will often issue a first-run hardcover printing, followed by subsequent paperback editions.

*Paperback*

Inexpensive paper-bound books have been around for centuries in formats like the chapbook, the British penny dreadful, and the American dime novel. However, the hardcover book, whether as an ancient codex or its contemporary equivalent, was the dominant format in the book world for thousands of years. The introduction of a new format in the 1930s, the paperback, was considered revolutionary. The so-called paperback revolution began during the Great Depression, when paperbacks were marketed as inexpensive alternatives to hardcover editions. Penguin Books, Ltd., the first majorly successful paperback publishing company, kept prices low by ordering large print runs and selling books in nontraditional retailers, such as Woolworth’s drugstores. Penguin also broke the traditional paperback mold by avoiding pulp fiction entertainment novels and instead printing books that were both cheap and intellectually stimulating.

Donald Porter Geddes, the editor of Pocket Books, the first paperback publishing house in the United States, spelled out this new approach to bookselling in 1944: “The best books apparently have the greatest appeal to the greatest number of people … the larger American public need no longer suffer from the delusion that it is intellectually inferior, or, from a literary point of view, lacking in any aspect in good taste, judgment, and appetite.” [1] By 1960, when paperback books first outsold hardcovers, these early paperback innovators were proved right. While paperback publishing first issued only reprints of books that had already been issued in hardcover, paperback originals, books that had their initial print run as a paperback edition, emerged in the 1950s. Paperback originals were another step in helping to remove the stigma from the paperback book. In 1999, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies* was the first paperback original to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Today’s books published in paperback are traditionally divided into two broad categories: mass-market paperbacks and trade paperbacks. Mass-market paperbacks are small, inexpensive editions that are sometimes issued after a hardcover edition, although many genre novels are printed only in mass-market paperback editions. Trade paperbacks are larger and generally of better quality. They’re often printed on higher-quality paper (sometimes acid-free paper). If the trade paperback follows a hardcover release, the paperback will be the same size as the hardcover and will have the same pagination and page layout as the hardcover edition.

Traditionally, hardcover books have been seen as more prestigious than paperbacks, though that stereotype may be beginning to change. In recent years, some publishers of literary fiction were seeing 50 to 75 percent of the hardcover books they shipped to bookstores returned to them unsold. As a response, certain publishers opted to release books with uncertain sales potential as trade paperbacks, bypassing the hardcover format entirely. “Getting somebody to spend $22 on a book by an author who they’ve never heard of is hard, but getting them to spend $13.95 on a paperback is much easier,” Random House’s Jane von Mehren told *The New York Times* in 2006. Some publishers are concerned that book reviewers don’t take trade paperback editions as seriously, but that too may be slowly changing. Another publishing strategy is to release hardcover and trade paperback editions simultaneously rather than delaying the paperback edition for several months (or even years, in the case of exceptionally popular books). Such a technique is intended to drive up sales, taking advantage of initial publicity to capture readers who may be unwilling to pay the full hardcover price for a book.

Whatever the concerns that publishers may have about issuing paperbacks, the format is still dominant in the U.S. publishing industry. According to the American Association of Publishers, 35 percent of the books sold in 2009 were trade paperbacks; 35 percent hardcovers; 21 percent mass market paperbacks; 2 percent audio books; 2 percent e-books; and 5 percent “other.”

*E-Books*

The hardcover book’s expensive, durable binding seemed to say that it was an object intended for posterity. If paperback books disrupted the traditional concept of books by making them cheaper and more portable, then the e-book is poised to cause an even greater change in how readers interact with a text. E-books, also known as electronic or digital books, are the digital media equivalent of printed books. That is, they are books read on the screen of an electronic device, whether a cell phone, personal computer, or dedicated e-book reader.

E-books differ from their print equivalents in many significant ways. For one, there’s no physical production cost, which means that e-books are generally less expensive than traditional books. There’s also no cost to store or transport e-books. Because an e-book’s publisher doesn’t need to order a set print run, a text issued as an e-book doesn’t ever have to go out of print. E-books also appeal to readers who want instant gratification. Instead of having to travel to a brick-and-mortar bookstore or wait for a delivery, a reader can download an e-book in a matter of minutes. Early e-books were mostly technical manuals or digitized versions of works in the public domain. As the Internet took off and as electronic devices became increasingly mobile, book publishers began to issue digital editions of their works. In the first decade of the 21st century, various companies began issuing software and hardware platforms for electronic books, each competing for dominance in this emerging market.

Although e-books make up only a small percentage of total book sales, that number is growing. Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol*, the follow-up to his massively popular novel *The Da Vinci Code*, sold more copies as a Kindle e-book than as a hardcover in the first few days after its September 2009 release. However, e-book successes have led to a threat that faces many kinds of digital content: online piracy. Only a few days after its initial release, Brown’s novel had been illegally downloaded more than 100,000 times. Some authors and publishers are concerned that Internet users expect free content and will find a way around spending money on e-books. American novelist Sherman Alexie recently voiced some of these anxieties, “With the open-source culture on the Internet, the idea of ownership—of artistic ownership— goes away.” Other prominent authors have reacted to the e-book in various ways. In 2000, Stephen King published his novella *Riding the Bullet* as a digital file that could only be read on a computer; in contrast, J. K. Rowling has stated that the Harry Potter novels won’t ever be released as ebooks. However, piracy has struck Rowling’s novels as well. Every Harry Potter novel is available in pirated form, either as a scanned copy or one that was manually typed out by fans.

Another concern with e-books is the possibility of digital decay. All an e-book is, after all, is a collection of data saved to a disk. It turns out that digital formats tend to decay much faster than their physical counterparts. The swift turnover of digital devices is another concern; the possibility exists that a book bought on a Kindle device in 2010 will not be compatible with an equivalent device in 2035.

E-book sales still make up a small part of the overall book market, 3 to 5 percent by most estimates, but their sales increased by 177 percent in 2009. *The New Yorker* cites a projection that e-books will someday account for between 25 and 50 percent of all book sales. [7] And with newer models of e-book readers, such as the iPad, boasting full-color screens and the ability to embed web links and video in a book’s text, ebooks may fundamentally reshape how people read in the future.

## Current Publishing Trends

The last few decades have seen a sharp rise in electronic entertainment. In 2009, the average American spent 56 percent of his or her free time watching television, and less than 7 percent of his or her free time reading. Video game sales rose 19 percent in 2008 alone and has continued to climb. In a world full of diverting entertainments, each clamoring for people’s time, the publishing industry is endeavoring to do everything it can to capture readers’ attention.

*Blockbuster Syndrome*

Imagine this scenario: A young author has spent the last few years slaving over his novel, rewriting and revising until the whole thing is polished, exciting, and fresh. He sends out his manuscript and is lucky enough to find a literary agent eager to support his work. The agent sells the book to a publisher, netting the author a decent advance; the book goes on to get great reviews, win some awards, and sell 20,000 copies. To most people, this situation sounds like a dream come true. But in an increasingly commercialized publishing industry, with a focus on finding the next blockbuster, this burgeoning author could be at risk of not getting his contract renewed.

In an industry increasingly dominated by large media corporations with obligations to stockholders, publishers feel pressured to turn a profit. As a result, they tend to bank on sure-fire best sellers, books that are expected to sell millions (or tens of millions) of copies, regardless of literary merit. The industry’s growing focus on a few best-selling authors, called blockbuster syndrome, often means less support and less money for the vast majority of writers who don’t sell millions of copies.

An advance is a sum of money paid to the author in expectation of future royalties. Royalties are a percentage of the book’s sale price. So if a publisher gives an author a $10,000 advance, the author has immediate access to that money, but the first $10,000 worth of royalties goes to the publisher. After that, the author accumulates royalties for every book sold. In this way, an advance is a cross between a loan and a gamble. If the book doesn’t sell well, the author doesn’t have to pay back the advance; however, he or she won’t earn any additional money from royalties. However, as many as three-quarters of books don’t earn back their advances, meaning that their authors aren’t making any money from sales at all.

Publishers and writers are notoriously hush-hush about the actual sums of advances. A recent *New York Times* article estimated an average advance to be around $30,000, though actual figures vary widely. Keeping in mind that a book may take years to write, it’s clear that many authors are barely eking out a living from their books.

These days, though, most of the media attention is focused on the few books each year that earn their authors huge advances and go on to sell massive numbers of copies—the blockbusters. But the focus on blockbusters can have a damaging effect on emerging writers. Because publishing is a gamble, advances to new or unproven writers are generally low. Additionally, because a publishing house wants to recoup its initial investment, a book that earned an author a big advance will probably get a big publicity budget.

Unfortunately, the flip side is also true; a small advance equals a small publicity budget, which can trap many authors in a vicious circle. In most cases, a book without much promotion won’t have the chance to become a hit. If the book isn’t a hit, the publisher can justify an even lower advance for the next book and a lower budget for promotion. The result is that many books by emerging authors get lost in the shuffle. “It used to be that the first book earned a modest advance, then you would build an audience over time and break even on the third or fourth book,” Morgan Entrekin, the publisher of Grove/Atlantic, told *The New York Times*. “Now the first book is expected to land a huge advance and huge sales…. Now we see a novelist selling 9,000 hardcovers and 15,000 paperbacks, and they see themselves as a failure.”

Potential blockbusters come at a high price for the publisher as well. They threaten to eat up publicity budgets and dominate publishers’ attention. An extremely large advance will only pay off if a massive number of copies sell, which makes the publishing houses less likely to take a gamble on unconventional books. This can also lead to a glut of similar books being pushed by publishers. After Dan Brown’s huge success with *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003, publishers rushed to capitalize on its success by releasing similar art history–conspiracy–mystery thrillers, few of which interested readers.

To a certain extent, focusing on blockbusters has worked for the publishing industry. Today’s best sellers sell more copies than best sellers did 10 years ago and make up a larger share of the market. However, overall book sales have remained relatively flat over the past 8 years. [8] In other words, it’s not that more books are being sold; it’s just that more of the sales are taken up by a few heavily promoted blockbusters. However, the blockbuster syndrome threatens to damage the industry in other ways. In a bestseller driven system, literature becomes a commodity, with little value placed on a book’s artistic merit. Instead, the primary concern is whether or not it will sell.

*Authors Say “No” to Blockbuster Syndrome*

Discontented with the industry’s focus on blockbusters at the expense of other books, some authors are taking control of publishing their materials. John Edgar Wideman, a celebrated author who has been a finalist for the National Book Award and is the only writer to have twice won the International PEN/Faulkner Award, had published more than 20 books through the traditional publishing system. But by the time he was looking for a home for his new collection of short stories, *Briefs: Stories for the Palm of the Mind*, he was ready for something new. “The blockbuster syndrome is a feature of our social landscape that has gotten out of hand,” Wideman said. “Unless you become a blockbuster, your book disappears quickly. It becomes not only publish or perish but sell or perish.” Wideman eventually decided to team up with self-publishing service Lulu, which meant that he gave up a traditional contract and advance payment in favor of greater control and a higher percentage of royalties. Other authors are turning away from the Big Six publishers and seeking out independent publishing houses, which often offer a different model. McSweeney’s offers low advances and splits all profits with the author evenly. Vanguard offers no advances but gives authors high royalties and guarantees a high marketing budget. These nontraditional systems allow authors more flexibility at a time when the publishing industry is facing rapid change. As Wideman puts it, “I like the idea of being in charge. I have more control over what happens to my book. And I have more control over whom I reach.”

*Rise (and Fall?) of Book Superstores*

In the late 20th century, a new group of colossal bookstores reshaped the retail sale of books in the United States. Two of the most well-known and prevalent book retailers, Barnes & Noble and Borders (the largest and second-largest book retailers in the United States, respectively) expanded extensively by building book superstores in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These large retail outlets were different from traditional, smaller bookstores in several ways. They often sold many products other than books, including calendars, paper goods, and gifts. Many also housed in-store cafes, allowing patrons to browse books and sip lattes under the same roof. They were also physically bigger, and such megastores drew customers because of their wide selection and their ability to offer books at deeply discounted prices. Many independent bookstores couldn’t compete with the large chains’ discounts, wide selection, and upscale atmosphere. According to *Publishers Weekly*, independent booksellers’ share of the book market fell from 58 percent in 1972 to 15.2 percent in 1999. The American Booksellers Association (ABA), a trade association of bookstores, notes that its membership peaked at 5,200 in 1991; by 2005, that number had declined by 65 percent to 1,791. The decline of the independent bookstore coincided with the consolidation of the publishing industry, and some supporters of independent bookstores see a link between the two. Richard Howorth—owner of Square Books—an independent bookstore in Oxford, Mississippi, told *Mother Jones* magazine that “when the independent bookselling market was thriving in the ’70s and ’80s, more books were being published, more people were reading books, the sales of books were higher, and publishers’ profit margins were much greater. With the rise of the corporate retailing powers and the consolidation in publishing, all of those things have declined.” Book superstores emphasized high turnover and high-volume sales, placing a higher emphasis on best sellers and returning some mass market paperbacks to publishers after only 6 weeks on the shelves.

In more recent years, the book superstores have been under threat themselves. In 2009, large retailers like Target, Wal-Mart, and Costco sold more books than both independent and chain bookstores combined: nearly 45 percent of the market. These stores didn’t specialize in books and tended to offer only a few heavily promoted blockbuster titles. Large discount stores were able to negotiate favorable deals with publishers, allowing them to discount books even further than the book superstores in some cases. In more recent years, book superstores have also faced a threat from the increasing number of books purchased online. By 2010, Amazon, the largest online bookseller, accounted for around 15 to 20 percent of book sales in the United States.

The shift away from independent bookstores and toward bigger retailers, such as book superstores or nonspecialized retailers like Wal-Mart, has benefited the industry in some ways, most notably by making books cheaper and more widely available. Mega best sellers, such as the Harry Potter and Twilight series, were able to set sales records at least in part because the books were available for purchase in malls, convenience stores, supermarkets, and other nontraditional venues. However, overall book sales have not risen. And though consumers may be paying less for the books they’re buying through these retailers, something may be lost as well. Jonathan Burnham, a publisher from HarperCollins, discussed the value of independent bookstores with *The New Yorker*, noting how they are similar to community centers: “There’s a serendipitous element involved in browsing…. We walk in and know the people who work there and like to hear their reading recommendations.”

*Price Wars*

Part of the reason book superstores were able to crowd out smaller, independent retailers was their ability to offer significant discounts on a book’s cover price. Because the big chains sell more books, they can negotiate better deals with publishers and then pass the discounts to their customers. Not surprisingly, deep discounts appeal to customers, which is one reason the book superstores gained such a large share of the market in the 1990s. The superstores are able to sell books at such a sharp discount, sometimes even half of the listed price, because their higher sales numbers gives them bargaining power with the publishers. Independent bookstores buying the books at a normal wholesale rate (usually half the list price) are at a disadvantage; they can’t offer deep discounts and, as a result, they must charge higher prices than the superstores. This deep discount policy is one reason bestseller sales have risen over the past decade (book superstores usually slash the prices of best sellers and new releases only). However, large discounts encourage high-volume selling and emphasizing on high-volume selling encourages safe publishing choices. That is, the bookstores are able to make up for the big discounts only by selling tons of copies, and the books most likely to sell this well are blockbuster works by known-quantity authors. The threat of deep discounting to independent bookstores and its effect on the publishing industry has led some European countries to regulate prices. For example, bookstores in France are prohibited from discounting more than 5 percent, and in Germany, price slashing can only happen 9 months after a book’s release.

The brick-and-mortar bookstores aren’t the only book discounters in the mix. Wal-Mart and other discount retailers sell more copies of the few books they offer at their stores, so they can negotiate even more favorable terms with publishers. Amazon, which dominates online book sales, routinely discounts books 20 percent or more. Recently, other online retailers have been battling with Amazon for online bookselling profits. In October 2009, as retailers were preparing for the holiday season, Amazon and Wal-Mart were preparing to compete for sales. When Wal-Mart announced that it would lower preorder prices for 10 highly anticipated hardcover books to only $10, Amazon responded by matching that price the next day. Wal-Mart then lowered its price to $9, and Amazon followed. Unwilling to give up the fight, Wal-Mart lowered its prices by a penny, listing the 10 books at $8.99. Then another online retailer, Target, joined the fray, matching Wal-Mart’s price. Wal-Mart dropped its list prices again by a penny, listing the books at $8.98.

While there’s something almost comical about major retailers duking it out over pennies, it’s also a situation that looked quite sobering to book retailers, from the independents to the large chains. The startling thing about the price wars among Amazon, Target, and Wal-Mart was that no one involved expected to make any money from these deeply discounted books. At $9 or less, these books were almost certainly selling at below retail value, perhaps by quite a lot.

If a book’s list price is $35, its wholesale price is usually around half of that, in this case $17. If that book is priced at $9, that means an $8 loss to the retailer per copy. Although at first this seems like blatantly bad business, it works because all of these retailers are in the business of selling much more than just books. Large online retailers use the deep discounts to lure customers to their websites in hopes that these customers will purchase other items. These book sales are valuable as a way to drive traffic to the retailer’s website. However, booksellers whose main business is still selling books, such as local independent bookstores, don’t have this luxury.

E-books have also entered into the retail struggle. Because there are no printing costs, e-books are relatively cheap to make, and consumers expect to see the savings on their end. However, book publishers still sell the books to distributors at wholesale prices—about half of the retail value of the hardcover version. To tempt buyers, companies such as Amazon charge only $9.99 for the average e-title, once again taking a loss. Many hope to make up for it with device sales—consumers are more likely to spend hundreds of dollars on an inexpensive reader to access cheaper books. While major retailers may eventually profit from this method of sales, many wonder how long it will last. Author David Baldacci argues that a book industry based solely on profit isn’t sustainable. In the end, he argues, “there won’t be anyone selling [books] anymore because you just can’t make any money.”

The inclination to focus only on net profits is indicative of a larger trend in the book industry. Retailers are getting larger, consumer prices are getting lower, and popular books are receiving the majority of attention. While this has positive short-term results for consumers and large retailers, the effects are devastating for most authors and smaller bookstores. Although, in the end, the introduction of e-books may be no more harmful to the industry than the explosion of paperbacks was in the early 1900s, the larger emphasis on quantity over quality threatens the literary value and sustainability of books.

## The Influence of New Technology

The book industry has changed enormously since its creation. From the invention of the papyrus scroll to the introduction of the e-book, new technologies continuously affect how people view and experience literature. With the advent of digital media, old-media industries, such as the book industry, must find ways to adapt. Some fear that this new technology will destroy the industry, while others maintain that it works to the industry’s advantage. However, one thing is clear—digital technology promises to reshape the publishing industry as we know it.

*E-Books*

The first e-book readers were related to the personal digital assistant (PDA) devices, pocket-sized electronics that could store and display large amounts of text, that became popular in the 1990s. However, early e-book readers lingered on the market, popular in certain techy niches but unable to gain traction with the wider population. Early e-readers had minimal battery life and text that was difficult to read. Through the 2000s, technological advances allowed for smaller and sleeker models, the Apple iPhone and the iPad helped make readers more comfortable with reading on a small screen. The second half of the decade saw the release of many e-readers. The technology got a boost when Oprah Winfrey praised the Kindle on her show in October 2008. By that holiday season, e-book reader sales were booming, and it wasn’t just the technologically savvy individuals who were interested anymore. Despite being criticized by some as providing an inferior reading experience to dedicated e-readers, the Apple iPad has been a powerful driving force behind e-book sales—more than 1.5 million books were downloaded on the Apple iPad during its first month of release in 2010.

E-books make up less than 5 percent of the current book market, but that number is growing. At the beginning of 2010, Amazon had about 400,000 titles available for the Kindle device. Some devices offer wireless accessibility, meaning that an e-reader doesn’t have to be connected to a computer to access titles; an open Wi-Fi connection is all it needs. With access to a dazzling array of books available with just a few clicks, it’s no wonder the contemporary consumer seems enamored with the e-book. An e-book reader has the space to store thousands of titles in an object smaller and lighter than the average hardcover novel. And though the devices themselves can be expensive, e-books are usually cheaper than their hardcopy equivalents; sometimes they’re even free. Thanks to efforts like the Gutenberg Project and Google Books (see Section 3.5.2 "Digitizing Libraries"), more than a million public domain titles are available as free e-books.

Anything that gets people excited about books and reading should be good for the publishing industry, right? Unfortunately for U.S. publishers, it’s not that simple. Some publishers worry that e-book sales may actually end up hurting their bottom lines. During the Kindle’s first year, Amazon essentially set the standard price for bestselling or new release e-books at $9.99. Since Amazon was acting as a wholesaler and buying these books for half the publisher’s list price—generally around $25 for a new hardcover—the company was selling these titles at a loss. However, for Amazon, a short-term loss might have had long-term payoffs. At the start of 2010, the company controlled a 90 percent share of the e-book market. Faced with e-books that cost less than $10, traditional publishers worried that consumers would avoid purchasing a new hardcover priced at $25 (or even a $13 trade paperback).

In January 2010, the conflict between Amazon and the publishing establishment came to a head. Macmillan, one of the six major publishing companies in the United States, suggested a new business model to Amazon, one that resembled the deal that the Big Six publishers had worked out with Apple for e-book sales on the Apple iPad. Essentially, Amazon had been able to buy books from publishers at wholesale rates—half the hardcover list price—and then set whatever retail price it wanted. This allowed Amazon to choose to sell books at a loss in the hope of convincing more people to buy Kindles. Macmillan proposed a system in which Amazon would act more as a commission-earning agent than a wholesaler. In Macmillan’s proposed model, the publisher would set the retail price and take 70 percent of each sale, leaving 30 percent for the retailer. Macmillan couldn’t force Amazon to agree to this deal, but the publisher could strike a hard bargain: If Amazon refused Macmillan’s offer, it could still sell Macmillan titles under the wholesale model, but the publisher would delay e-book editions for 7 months after hardcover releases. What followed was a standoff. Amazon didn’t just reject Macmillan’s proposal; it removed the “buy” button from all Macmillan books listed on its website (including print books), essentially refusing to sell Macmillan titles. However, after a few days, Amazon capitulated and agreed to Macmillan’s terms, but not before issuing a strongly worded press release claiming that they agreed to sell Macmillan’s titles “at prices we believe are needlessly high for e-books,” because “Macmillan has a monopoly over their own titles.” Still, Macmillan and the other publishers seem to have won this battle: Amazon agreed that e-books for most new fiction and nonfiction books for adults will be priced at $12.99 to $14.99, though best sellers will still be $9.99.

But the $10 book may be the least of the publishing industry’s worries. At the start of 2010, more than half of the bestselling titles on Kindle were free. Some of these were public domain novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, but many others were books by living authors being promoted by publishers by giving away the book. The industry hasn’t yet come to a consensus about the utility of free e-books. Some publishers consider it a practice that devalues books in the eyes of customers. “At a time when we are resisting the $9.99 price of e-books,” David Young of the Hachette Book Group told *The New York Times*, “it is illogical to give books away for free.” [4] Other publishers consider free e-books a promotional tool to build word-of-mouth and to introduce readers to new authors.

Other e-books emerge from outside the traditional publishing system. Four of the five bestselling novels in Japan in 2007 were cell phone novels, books that were both written and intended to be read on cell phones. Cell phone novels are traditionally written by amateurs who post them on free websites. Readers can download copies at no cost, which means no one is making much of a profit from this new genre. Although the phenomenon has not caught on in the United States yet, the cell phone novel is feared by some publishers as a further sign of the devaluation of books in a world where browsers expect content to be free.

With e-book sales expected to triple by 2015, it’s hard to say what such a quickly growing industry will look like in the future. Some people have theorized that e-readers will lead to an increasing popularity of the short story, which can be bought and read in short increments. Others have claimed that they’ll destroy the book industry as we know it. Whatever the future of books looks like, everything—from the way books are produced to the way we read them—continues to change rapidly because of new technologies.

*Digitizing Libraries*

The idea of a digitized library has been around since the early years of the Internet. A digital library stores its materials in a digital format, accessible by computers. Some digital libraries can be accessed locally; others can be accessed remotely through a computer network. Michael Hart founded Project Gutenberg, the oldest digital library, in 1971, 3 years before the Internet went live. Hart’s initial goal was to make 10,000 of the most-consulted books publicly available and free by the end of the century. The forward-thinking Hart named his project after the inventor of the movable type printing press, perhaps realizing that book digitization had the potential to revolutionize the way humans produce and read books as much as Gutenberg’s invention had centuries earlier. At first, the process was slow for Hart and his fellow book-digitizing volunteers because they were forced to copy text manually until 1989. In the early 1990s, scanners and text-recognition software allowed them to somewhat automate the process.

Fast-forward to 2010. Project Gutenberg’s free online library boasts more than 30,000 public domain works available for free download. Stanford University uses a robotic page-turning scanner machine to digitize 1,000 book pages an hour. Stanford’s partner in digital library production is Google Books, which has scanned over 10 million books since it began Google Books in 2004. A Chinese company claims to have digitized more than half of all books that have been published in Chinese since 1949. In 2006, *The New York Times* estimated that humans have published at least 32 million books throughout history; the huge push for book digitization makes it seem entirely possible that nearly all known books could be digitized within 50 years.

Some liken the prospect of these widely accessible, easily searchable, free libraries to the proliferation of free libraries in the 19th century, which led to a surge in literacy rates. One of Project Gutenberg’s stated goals is “to break down the bars of ignorance and illiteracy” through its library of digitized books. Digital libraries make a huge selection of texts available to people with Internet access, giving them the amazing potential to democratize knowledge. As Bill McCoy, the general manager of Adobe’s e-publishing business, told *The New York Times* in 2006, “[s]ome of us have thousands of books at home, can walk to wonderful big-box bookstores and well-stocked libraries and can getAmazon.com to deliver next day. The most dramatic effect of digital libraries will be not on us, the well-booked, but on the billions of people worldwide who are underserved by ordinary paper books.” Digitized libraries can make fragile materials available to browsers without damaging originals; academic libraries are also able to share important texts without shipping books across the country.

Google Books, the largest online library, is not run by an academic institution, though it does claim several as partners. The bulk of free digital books available from Google Books or elsewhere come from the public domain, which constitutes approximately 15 percent of all books. Google Books has made over a million of these titles fully and freely searchable and downloadable. Other works in the Google Books digital library include in-print texts whose publishers have worked out a deal with Google. Some of these titles have their full text available online; others allow only a limited number of page previews. As part of its partnership with publishers, a Google Books search result will often provide links to the publisher’s website and to booksellers. Google Books ran into trouble, however, when it began to digitize the millions of books with unclear legal status, such as out-of-print works that weren’t yet in the public domain. Many of these are considered orphan works, meaning that no one is exactly sure who owns their copyright. In 2004, the site announced plans to scan these texts and to make them searchable, but it would only show sentence-long snippets to searchers. Copyright holders could ask Google to remove these snippets at any time. Google claimed that this digitization plan would benefit authors, whose books would no longer linger in out-of-print limbo; it would also help researchers and readers, who would be able to locate (and perhaps purchase) previously unavailable works.

Publishers and authors did not agree with Google. Many objected to Google’s plan to scan first and look into copyright ownership later; others saw Google’s profiting from works still under copyright as a clear violation of intellectual property law. In 2005, the Authors Guild of America and the American Association of Publishers (AAP) sued Google for “massive copyright infringement.” Google argued that it was essentially creating a massive online card catalog; the Authors Guild and AAP alleged that Google was attempting to monopolize information and profit from it. In 2008, Google agreed to a $125 million settlement with the publishers and the Authors Guild. Some of that money would go directly to copyright holders; some would pay for legal fees; and some would go to found the Book Rights Registry, an independent nonprofit association that would ensure content users (like Google) are paying copyright owners. Copyright owners would get money from Google and from potential book sales; Google would get money from advertisers, book sales, and institutional subscriptions by libraries.

Still, not everyone agreed with the decision. The Open Book Alliance was formed by a diverse partnership of organizations, including Amazon, Internet Archive, and the National Writers Union, who fear that Google’s proprietary control of so much copyrighted material was an antitrust violation. As the group states on its website: We will assert that any mass book digitization and publishing effort be open and competitive. The process of achieving this promise must be undertaken in the open, grounded in sound public policy, and mindful of the need to promote long-term benefits for consumers rather than isolated commercial interests. The Open Book Alliance will counter Google, the Association of American Publishers, and the Authors’ [sic] Guild’s scheme to monopolize the access, distribution, and pricing of the largest digital database of books in the world.

Another concern, which was mentioned earlier, in the digital library world is digital decay. One librarian at Harvard University told *The New York Times* that “[w]e don’t really have any methodology [to preserve digital material] as of yet…. We just store the disks in our climate-controlled stacks, and we’re hoping for some kind of universal Harvard guidelines.”

*Print-on-Demand and Self-Publishing*

Part of what made Gutenberg’s printing press so revolutionary was that it allowed books to be mass produced. In medieval times, readers often commissioned a scribe to copy a text by hand, a process that could take months or even years. But despite their many conveniences, printed books carry their own risks for authors and publishers. Producing books in bulk means that publishers are taking a gamble, attempting to publish enough books to satisfy demand, but not so many that unwanted copies linger in warehouses. When a book doesn’t sell as much as expected, the publisher may end up taking a loss if the costs of publishing the book exceed the revenue from its sale. Interestingly, modern technology has made it feasible for some authors and publishers to turn to an updated version of the medieval model of producing books on demand for specific customers, allowing them to avoid the risk of carrying a large inventory of books that may or may not sell. Print-on-demand, a system in which a book is printed only after an order is received, and the increasing trend of self-publishing may reshape the industry in the 21st century.

Self-publishing—a system that involves an author, not a third-party company, being in charge of producing and publishing a work—is not a new concept. Many authors self-published works in their lifetimes, including Virginia Woolf and Oscar Wilde. More recently, popular books like *The Joy of Cooking* and the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series had their origins in self-publishing. Many authors also self-publish when they’re unable to get support from the traditional publishing world. Daniel Suarez’s techno-thriller *Daemon* was rejected by 48 agents before he opted for self-publishing. After creating interest on blogs, Suarez eventually got a two-book deal with Dutton, an imprint of Random House. Additionally, self-publishing can be an attractive option for authors who want control over their own content. Instead of leaving decisions up to the publisher, authors can control their own editing, designing, and marketing.

One major challenge for authors who choose to strike out on their own is the stigma that’s sometimes attached to self-published books. Until recent years, most self-published authors went through the so-called vanity presses, which charge writers a premium for published copies of their books. As the name implies, these types of self-publishing ventures were often seen as preying on writers’ need to see their own work in print. To justify the cost of printing, a minimum order of a thousand copies was standard, and unless authors were able to find an audience, they had little hope of selling them all. Because there was no quality control and vanity presses would usually publish anyone with money, some readers were skeptical of self-published books. Major retailers and distributors generally refused to carry them, meaning that authors had to rely on their own marketing efforts to sell the books. Before the advent of the Internet, this usually meant either selling copies in person or relying on mail-order catalogs, neither of which is a very reliable way to sell enough copies to recoup costs.

However, beginning in the early 2000s, self-publishing has changed dramatically. Advances made in publishing technology have made it easier for self-published books to more closely resemble traditionally published ones. Free professional typesetting software has allowed writers to format their text for the page; Adobe Photoshop and similar programs have made image editing and graphic design feasible for amateurs and professionals. The Internet has revolutionized marketing and distribution, allowing authors of books about niche subjects to reach a worldwide audience. As a result, many new Internet-based self-publishing companies have sprung up, offering a variety of services. Some companies, such as Lulu Enterprises and CreateSpace, feature a low-cost service without many bells and whistles; others offer a package of services that may include professional editing, cover design, and marketing. The process has become streamlined as well. For example, to publish a book with Lulu, an author just has to upload a PDF of a properly formatted text file; decide what size, paper, and binding options to use; and make a cover using a premade template. Self-published books are generally quicker to produce and allow an author a higher share of the royalties, though it usually costs more on a per-book basis. As a result, self-published books often have a higher list price.

Whereas vanity publishers were stigmatized for charging authors sometimes thousands of dollars to publish their books, creating a book using the services of Lulu or CreateSpace doesn’t cost the author anything. That’s because users who upload their content aren’t creating an actual, physical copy of a book; instead, they’re essentially making a potential volume. With print-on-demand technology, books aren’t printed until an order is placed, which significantly lowers the financial risk for self-publishers. Print-on-demand is especially useful for books with a limited or niche audience. Print-on-demand isn’t only being used by self-publishers; both small presses and academic publishers are using the technology for older books without much of an audience. With print-on-demand, books that may only sell a few dozen copies a year can stay in print without the publisher having to worry about printing a full run of copies and being stuck with unsold inventory.

Although some self-published authors manage to find a huge audience, most don’t. Bob Young, the founder of Lulu, told the *London Times* that his goal is to publish 1 million books that each sell 100 copies, rather than 100 books that sell 1 million copies each. Lulu and other enterprising self-publishers disrupt the traditional notion of the publishing house, which acted as a sort of gatekeeper for the book industry—ushering a few talented, lucky writers in and keeping others out. In the world of self-publishing, there are no barriers—anyone with a book in a PDF file can whip up a nice-looking paperback in under 1 hour. This has democratized the industry, allowing writers who had been rejected by traditional publishers to find their own audience. But it has also meant that a lot of writing with little literary merit has been published as well. Additionally, if a bestseller in the Lulu world is a book that sells 500 copies, as Bob Young told the *London Times*, then few authors are going to be able to make a living through self- publishing. Indeed, most of the self-publishing success stories involve writers whose self-published efforts sold well enough to get them a book deal with one of the traditional publishing houses, a sign that for better or for worse, the traditional publishing model still has the social cachet and sales to dominate the industry.[[52]](#footnote-52)

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# Movies[[53]](#footnote-53)

## Are 3-D Effects Creating Two-Dimensional Films?

In 2009, many moviegoers were amazed by the three-dimensional (3-D) film *Avatar*. *Avatar* grossed over $1.8 billion in theaters worldwide, $1.35 billion from 3-D sales alone. Following in that vein, dozens of other movie studios released 3-D films, resulting in lesser box office successes such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Clash of the Titans*, and *Shrek Forever After*. Many film reviewers and audiences seemed adamant—3-D movies were the wave of the future. However, could this eye-popping technology actually ruin our moviegoing experience? Brian Moylan, a critic for Gawker.com, argues that it already has. The problem with 3-D, he says, is that “It is so mind-numbingly amazing that narrative storytelling hasn’t caught up with the technology. The corporate screenwriting borgs are so busy trying to come up with plot devices to highlight all the newfangled whoosiwhatsits—objects being hurled at the audience, flying sequences, falling leaves, glowing Venus Flytraps—that no one is really bothering to tell a tale.”

James Cameron, director of *Avatar*, agrees. “[Studios] think, ‘what was [*sic*] the takeaway lessons from *Avatar*? Oh you should make more money with 3-D.’ They ignore the fact that we natively authored the film in 3-D, and [they] decide that what we accomplished in several years of production could be done in an eight-week (post-production 3-D) conversion [such as] with *Clash of the Titans*.” Cameron makes the following point: While films such as *Avatar* (2009) and *Beowulf* (2007) were created exclusively for 3-D, many other filmmakers have converted their movies to 3-D after filming was already complete. *Clash of the Titans* is widely criticized because its 3-D effects were quickly added in postproduction.

What effect does this have on audiences? Aside from the complaints of headaches and nausea (and the fact that some who wear glasses regularly can find it uncomfortable or even impossible to wear 3-D glasses on top of their own), many say that the new technology simply makes movies looks worse. The film critic Roger Ebert has continuously denounced the technology, noting that movies such as *The Last Airbender* look like they’re “filmed with a dirty sheet over the lens.” [5] 3-D technology can cause a movie to look fuzzier, darker, and generally less cinematically attractive. However, movie studios are finding 3-D films attractive for another reason. Because seeing a movie in 3-D is considered a “premium” experience, consumers are expected to pay higher prices. And with the increasing popularity of IMAX 3D films, many moviegoers were amazed by the 3-D film *Avatar* 3-D, tickets may surpass $20 per person. This gives 3-D films an advantage over 2- D ones as audiences are willing to pay more to do so.

The recent 3-D boom has often been compared to the rise of color film in the early 1950s. However, some maintain that it’s just a fad. Will 3-D technology affect the future of filmmaking? With a host of new 3-D technologies for the home theater being released in 2010, many are banking on the fact that it will. Director James Cameron, however, is unsure of the technology’s continuing popularity, arguing that “If people put bad 3-D in the marketplace they’re going to hold back or even threaten the emerging of 3-D.” What is important, he maintains, is the creative aspect of moviemaking—no technology can replace good filmmaking. In the end, audiences will determine the medium’s popularity. Throughout the history of film, Technicolor dyes, enhanced sound systems, and computer-generated graphics have boasted huge box-office revenues; however, it’s ultimately the viewers who determine what a good movie is and who set the standard for future films.

## The History of Movies

The movie industry as we know it today originated in the early 19th century through a series of technological developments: the creation of photography, the discovery of the illusion of motion by combining individual still images, and the study of human and animal locomotion. The history presented here begins at the culmination of these technological developments, where the idea of the motion picture as an entertainment industry first emerged. Since then, the industry has seen extraordinary transformations, some driven by the artistic visions of individual participants, some by commercial necessity, and still others by accident. The history of the cinema is complex, and for every important innovator and movement listed here, others have been left out. Nonetheless, after reading this section you will understand the broad arc of the development of a medium that has captured the imaginations of audiences worldwide for over a century.

*The Beginnings: Motion Picture Technology of the Late 19th Century*

While the experience of watching movies on smartphones may seem like a drastic departure from the communal nature of film viewing as we think of it today, in some ways the small-format, single-viewer display is a return to film’s early roots. In 1891, the inventor Thomas Edison, together with William Dickson, a young laboratory assistant, came out with what they called the kinetoscope, a device that would become the predecessor to the motion picture projector. The kinetoscope was a cabinet with a window through which individual viewers could experience the illusion of a moving image. A perforated celluloid film strip with a sequence of images on it was rapidly spooled between a lightbulb and a lens, creating the illusion of motion. The images viewers could see in the kinetoscope captured events and performances that had been staged at Edison’s film studio in East Orange, New Jersey, especially for the Edison kinetograph (the camera that produced kinetoscope film sequences): circus performances, dancing women, cockfights, boxing matches, and even a tooth extraction by a dentist.

As the kinetoscope gained popularity, the Edison Company began installing machines in hotel lobbies, amusement parks, and penny arcades, and soon kinetoscope parlors—where customers could pay around 25 cents for admission to a bank of machines—had opened around the country. However, when friends and collaborators suggested that Edison find a way to project his kinetoscope images for audience viewing, he apparently refused, claiming that such an invention would be a less profitable venture. Because Edison hadn’t secured an international patent for his invention, variations of the kinetoscope were soon being copied and distributed throughout Europe. This new form of entertainment was an instant success, and a number of mechanics and inventors, seeing an opportunity, began toying with methods of projecting the moving images onto a larger screen. However, it was the invention of two brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière—photographic goods manufacturers in Lyon, France—that saw the most commercial success. In 1895, the brothers patented the Cinématographe (from which we get the term *cinema*), a lightweight film projector that also functioned as a camera and printer. Unlike the Edison kinetograph, the Cinématographe was lightweight enough for easy outdoor filming, and over the years the brothers used the camera to take well over 1,000 short films, most of which depicted scenes from everyday life. In December 1895, in the basement lounge of the Grand Café, Rue des Capucines in Paris, the Lumières held the world’s first-ever commercial film screening, a sequence of about 10 short scenes, including the brother’s first film, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, a segment lasting less than a minute and depicting workers leaving the family’s photographic instrument factory at the end of the day, as shown in the still frame here in Figure 8.3.

Believing that audiences would get bored watching scenes that they could just as easily observe on a casual walk around the city, Louis Lumière claimed that the cinema was “an invention without a future,” but a demand for motion pictures grew at such a rapid rate that soon representatives of the Lumière company were traveling throughout Europe and the world, showing half-hour screenings of the company’s films. While cinema initially competed with other popular forms of entertainment—circuses, vaudeville acts, theater troupes, magic shows, and many others—eventually it would supplant these various entertainments as the main commercial attraction. Within a year of the Lumières’ first commercial screening, competing film companies were offering moving-picture acts in music halls and vaudeville theaters across Great Britain. In the United States, the Edison Company, having purchased the rights to an improved projecter that they called the Vitascope, held their first film screening in April 1896 at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in Herald Square, New York City.

Film’s profound impact on its earliest viewers is difficult to imagine today, inundated as many are by video images. However, the sheer volume of reports about the early audience’s disbelief, delight, and even fear at what they were seeing suggests that viewing a film was an overwhelming experience for many. Spectators gasped at the realistic details in films such as Robert Paul’s *Rough Sea at Dover*, and at times people panicked and tried to flee the theater during films in which trains or moving carriages sped toward the audience. Even the public’s perception of film as a medium was considerably different from the contemporary understanding; the moving image was an improvement upon the photograph—a medium with which viewers were already familiar—and this is perhaps why the earliest films documented events in brief segments but didn’t tell stories. During this “novelty period” of cinema, audiences were more interested by the phenomenon of the film projector itself, so vaudeville halls advertised the kind of the projector they were using (for example, “The Vitascope—Edison’s Latest Marvel”) [10], rather than the names of the films.

By the close of the 19th century, as public excitement over the moving picture’s novelty gradually wore off, filmmakers were also beginning to experiment with film’s possibilities as a medium in itself (not simply, as it had been regarded up until then, as a tool for documentation, analogous to the camera or the phonograph). Technical innovations allowed filmmakers like Parisian cinema owner Georges Méliès to experiment with special effects that produced seemingly magical transformations on screen: flowers turned into women, people disappeared with puffs of smoke, a man appeared where a woman had just been standing, and other similar tricks.

Not only did Méliès, a former magician, invent the “trick film,” which producers in England and the United States began to imitate, but he was also the one to transform cinema into the narrative medium it is today. Whereas before, filmmakers had only ever created single-shot films that lasted a minute or less, Méliès began joining these short films together to create stories. His 30-scene *Trip to the Moon* (1902), a film based on a Jules Verne novel, may have been the most widely seen production in cinema’s first decade. However, Méliès never developed his technique beyond treating the narrative film as a staged theatrical performance; his camera, representing the vantage point of an audience facing a stage, never moved during the filming of a scene. In 1912, Méliès released his last commercially successful production, *The Conquest of the Pole*, and from then on, he lost audiences to filmmakers who were experimenting with more sophisticated techniques.

*The Nickelodeon Craze (1904–1908)*

One of these innovative filmmakers was Edwin S. Porter, a projectionist and engineer for the Edison Company. Porter’s 12-minute film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), broke with the stage-like compositions of Méliès-style films through its use of editing, camera pans, rear projections, and diagonally composed shots that produced a continuity of action. Not only did *The Great Train Robbery* establish the realistic narrative as a standard in cinema, it was also the first major box-office hit. Its success paved the way for the growth of the film industry, as investors, recognizing the motion picture’s great moneymaking potential, began opening the first permanent film theaters around the country. Known as nickelodeons because of their 5-cent admission charge, these early motion picture theaters, often housed in converted storefronts, were especially popular among the working class of the time, who couldn’t afford live theater. Between 1904 and 1908, around 9,000 nickelodeons appeared in the United States. It was the nickelodeon’s popularity that established film as a mass entertainment medium.

*The “Biz”: The Motion Picture Industry Emerges*

As the demand for motion pictures grew, production companies were created to meet it. At the peak of nickelodeon popularity in 1910, there were 20 or so major motion picture companies in the United States. However, heated disputes often broke out among these companies over patent rights and industry control, leading even the most powerful among them to fear fragmentation that would loosen their hold on the market. Because of these concerns, the 10 leading companies—including Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, and others—formed the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1908. The MPPC was a trade group that pooled the most significant motion picture patents and established an exclusive contract between these companies and the Eastman Kodak Company as a supplier of film stock. Also known as *the Trust*, the MPPC’s goal was to standardize the industry and shut out competition through monopolistic control. Under the Trust’s licensing system, only certain licensed companies could participate in the exchange, distribution, and production of film at different levels of the industry—a shut-out tactic that eventually backfired, leading the excluded, independent distributors to organize in opposition to the Trust.

*The Rise of the Feature*

In these early years, theaters were still running single-reel films, which came at a standard length of 1,000 feet, allowing for about 16 minutes of playing time. However, companies began to import multiple-reel films from European producers around 1907, and the format gained popular acceptance in the United States in 1912 with Louis Mercanton’s highly successful *Queen Elizabeth*, a three-and-a-half reel “feature,” starring the French actress Sarah Bernhardt. As exhibitors began to show more features—as the multiple reel film came to be called—they discovered a number of advantages over the single-reel short. For one thing, audiences saw these longer films as special events and were willing to pay more for admission, and because of the popularity of the feature narratives, features generally experienced longer runs in theaters than their single-reel predecessors. Additionally, the feature film gained popularity among the middle classes, who saw its length as analogous to the more “respectable” entertainment of live theater. Following the example of the French *film d’art*, U.S. feature producers often took their material from sources that would appeal to a wealthier and better educated audience, such as histories, literature, and stage productions.

As it turns out, the feature film was one factor that brought about the eventual downfall of the MPPC. The inflexible structuring of the Trust’s exhibition and distribution system made the organization resistant to change. When movie studio, and Trust member, Vitagraph began to release features like *A Tale of Two Cities* (1911) and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1910), the Trust forced it to exhibit the films serially in single-reel showings to keep with industry standards. The MPPC also underestimated the appeal of the star system, a trend that began when producers chose famous stage actors like Mary Pickford and James O’Neill to play the leading roles in their productions and to grace their advertising posters. Because of the MPPC’s inflexibility, independent companies were the only ones able to capitalize on two important trends that were to become film’s future: single-reel features and star power. Today, few people would recognize names like Vitagraph or Biograph, but the independents that outlasted them—Universal, Goldwyn (which would later merge with Metro and Mayer), Fox (later 20th Century Fox), and Paramount (the later version of the Lasky Corporation)—have become household names.

*Hollywood*

As movie-going increased in popularity among the middle class, and as the feature films began keeping audiences in their seats for longer periods of time, exhibitors found a need to create more comfortable and richly decorated theater spaces to attract their audiences. These “dream palaces,” so called because of their often lavish embellishments of marble, brass, guilding, and cut glass, not only came to replace the nickelodeon theater, but also created the demand that would lead to the Hollywood studio system. Some producers realized that the growing demand for new work could only be met if the films were produced on a regular, year-round system. However, this was impractical with the current system that often relied on outdoor filming and was predominately based in Chicago and New York—two cities whose weather conditions prevented outdoor filming for a significant portion of the year. Different companies attempted filming in warmer locations such as Florida, Texas, and Cuba, but the place where producers eventually found the most success was a small, industrial suburb of Los Angeles called Hollywood. Hollywood proved to be an ideal location for a number of reasons. Not only was the climate temperate and sunny year-round, but land was plentiful and cheap, and the location allowed close access to a number of diverse topographies: mountains, lakes, desert, coasts, and forests. By 1915, more than 60 percent of U.S. film production was centered in Hollywood.

*The Art of Silent Film*

While the development of narrative film was largely driven by commercial factors, it is also important to acknowledge the role of individual artists who turned it into a medium of personal expression. The motion picture of the silent era was generally simplistic in nature; acted in overly animated movements to engage the eye; and accompanied by live music, played by musicians in the theater, and written titles to create a mood and to narrate a story. Within the confines of this medium, one filmmaker in particular emerged to transform the silent film into an art and to unlock its potential as a medium of serious expression and persuasion. D. W. Griffith, who entered the film industry as an actor in 1907, quickly moved to a directing role in which he worked closely with his camera crew to experiment with shots, angles, and editing techniques that could heighten the emotional intensity of his scenes. He found that by practicing parallel editing, in which a film alternates between two or more scenes of action, he could create an illusion of simultaneity. He could then heighten the tension of the film’s drama by alternating between cuts more and more rapidly until the scenes of action converged. Griffith used this technique to great effect in his controversial film *The Birth of a Nation*, which will be discussed in greater detail later on in this chapter. Other techniques that Griffith employed to new effect included panning shots, through which he was able to establish a sense of scene and to engage his audience more fully in the experience of the film, and tracking shots, or shots that traveled with the movement of a scene, which allowed the audience—through the eye of the camera—to participate in the film’s action.

*MPAA: Combating Censorship*

As film became an increasingly lucrative U.S. industry, prominent industry figures like D. W. Griffith, slapstick comedian/director Charlie Chaplin, and actors Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks grew extremely wealthy and influential. Public attitudes toward stars and toward some stars’ extravagant lifestyles were divided, much as they are today: On the one hand, these celebrities were idolized and imitated in popular culture, yet at the same time, they were criticized for representing a threat, on and off screen, to traditional morals and social order. And much as it does today, the news media liked to sensationalize the lives of celebrities to sell stories. Comedian Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, who worked alongside future icons Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, was at the center of one of the biggest scandals of the silent era. When Arbuckle hosted a marathon party over Labor Day weekend in 1921, one of his guests, model Virginia Rapp, was rushed to the hospital, where she later died. Reports of a drunken orgy, rape, and murder surfaced. Following World War I, the United States was in the middle of significant social reforms, such as Prohibition. Many feared that movies and their stars could threaten the moral order of the country. Because of the nature of the crime and the celebrity involved, these fears became inexplicably tied to the Artbuckle case. Even though autopsy reports ruled that Rapp had died from causes for which Arbuckle could not be blamed, the comedian was tried (and acquitted) for manslaughter, and his career was ruined.

The Arbuckle affair and a series of other scandals only increased public fears about Hollywood’s impact. In response to this perceived threat, state and local governments increasingly tried to censor the content of films that depicted crime, violence, and sexually explicit material. Deciding that they needed to protect themselves from government censorship and to foster a more favorable public image, the major Hollywood studios organized in 1922 to form an association they called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America (later renamed the Motion Picture Association of America, or **MPAA**). Among other things, the MPAA instituted a code of self-censorship for the motion picture industry. Today, the MPAA operates by a voluntary rating system, which means producers can voluntarily submit a film for review, which is designed to alert viewers to the age-appropriateness of a film, while still protecting the filmmakers’ artistic freedom.

*Silent Film’s Demise*

In 1925, Warner Bros. was just a small Hollywood studio looking for opportunities to expand. When representatives from Western Electric offered to sell the studio the rights to a new technology they called Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc system that had failed to capture the interest of any of the industry giants, Warner Bros. executives took a chance, predicting that the novelty of talking films might be a way to make a quick, short-term profit. Little did they anticipate that their gamble would not only establish them as a major Hollywood presence but also change the industry forever.

The pairing of sound with motion pictures was nothing new in itself. Edison, after all, had commissioned the kinetoscope to create a visual accompaniment to the phonograph, and many early theaters had orchestra pits to provide musical accompaniment to their films. Even the smaller picture houses with lower budgets almost always had an organ or piano. When Warner Bros. purchased Vitaphone technology, it planned to use it to provide prerecorded orchestral accompaniment for its films, thereby increasing their marketability to the smaller theaters that didn’t have their own orchestra pits. In 1926, Warner debuted the system with the release of *Don Juan*, a costume drama accompanied by a recording of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra; the public responded enthusiastically. By 1927, after a $3 million campaign, Warner Bros. had wired more than 150 theaters in the United States, and it released its second sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, in which the actor Al Jolson improvised a few lines of synchronized dialogue and sang six songs. The film was a major breakthrough. Audiences, hearing an actor speak on screen for the first time, were enchanted. While radio, a new and popular entertainment, had been drawing audiences away from the picture houses for some time, with the birth of the “talkie,” or talking film, audiences once again returned to the cinema in large numbers, lured by the promise of seeing and hearing their idols perform. By 1929, three-fourths of Hollywood films had some form of sound accompaniment, and by 1930, the silent film was a thing of the past.

*“I Don’t Think We’re in Kansas Anymore”: Film Goes Technicolor*

Although the techniques of tinting and hand painting had been available methods for adding color to films for some time (Georges Méliès, for instance, employed a crew to hand-paint many of his films), neither method ever caught on. The hand-painting technique became impractical with the advent of mass-produced film, and the tinting process, which filmmakers discovered would create an interference with the transmission of sound in films, was abandoned with the rise of the talkie. However, in 1922, Herbert Kalmus’ Technicolor company introduced a dye-transfer technique that allowed it to produce a full-length film, *The Toll of the Sea*, in two primary colors. However, because only two colors were used, the appearance of *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *The Ten Commandments* (1923), and other early Technicolor films was not very lifelike. By 1932, Technicolor had designed a three-color system with more realistic results, and for the next 25 years, all color films were produced with this improved system. Disney’s *Three Little Pigs* (1933) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1936) and films with live actors, like MGM’s *The Wizard of Oz*(1939) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939), experienced early success using Technicolor’s three-color method.

Despite the success of certain color films in the 1930s, Hollywood, like the rest of the United States, was feeling the impact of the Great Depression, and the expenses of special cameras, crews, and Technicolor lab processing made color films impractical for studios trying to cut costs. Therefore, it wasn’t until the end of the 1940s that Technicolor would largely displace the black-and-white film.

*Rise and Fall of the Hollywood Studio*

The spike in theater attendance that followed the introduction of talking films changed the economic structure of the motion picture industry, bringing about some of the largest mergers in industry history. By 1930, eight studios produced 95 percent of all American films, and they continued to experience growth even during the Depression. The five most influential of these studios—Warner Bros., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, RKO, 20th Century Fox, and Paramount—were vertically integrated; that is, they controlled every part of the system as it related to their films, from the production, to release, distribution, and even viewing. Because they owned theater chains worldwide, these studios controlled which movies exhibitors ran, and because they “owned” a stock of directors, actors, writers, and technical assistants by contract, each studio produced films of a particular character.

The late 1930s and early 1940s are sometimes known as the “Golden Age” of cinema, a time of unparalleled success for the movie industry; by 1939, film was the 11th-largest industry in the United States, and during World War II, when the U.S. economy was once again flourishing, two-thirds of Americans were attending the theater at least once a week. Some of the most acclaimed movies in history were released during this period, including *Citizen Kane* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, postwar inflation, a temporary loss of key foreign markets, the advent of the television, and other factors combined to bring that rapid growth to an end. In 1948, the case of the *United States v. Paramount Pictures*—mandating competition and forcing the studios to relinquish control over theater chains—dealt the final devastating blow from which the studio system would never recover. Control of the major studios reverted to Wall Street, where the studios were eventually absorbed by multinational corporations, and the powerful studio heads lost the influence they had held for nearly 30 years.

*Post–World War II: Television Presents a Threat*

While economic factors and antitrust legislation played key roles in the decline of the studio system, perhaps the most important factor in that decline was the advent of the television. Given the opportunity to watch “movies” from the comfort of their own homes, the millions of Americans who owned a television by the early 1950s were attending the cinema far less regularly than they had only several years earlier. In an attempt to win back diminishing audiences, studios did their best to exploit the greatest advantages film held over television. For one thing, television broadcasting in the 1950s was all in black and white, whereas the film industry had the advantage of color. While producing a color film was still an expensive undertaking in the late 1940s, a couple of changes occurred in the industry in the early 1950s to make color not only more affordable but also more realistic in its appearance. In 1950, as the result of antitrust legislation, Technicolor lost its monopoly on the color film industry, allowing other providers to offer more competitive pricing on filming and processing services. At the same time, Kodak came out with a multilayer film stock that made it possible to use more affordable cameras and to produce a higher quality image. Kodak’s Eastmancolor option was an integral component in converting the industry to color. In the late 1940s, only 12 percent of features were in color; however, by 1954 (after the release of Kodak Eastmancolor) more than 50 percent of movies were in color.

Another clear advantage on which filmmakers tried to capitalize was the sheer size of the cinema experience. With the release of the epic biblical film *The Robe* in 1953, 20th Century Fox introduced the method that would soon be adopted by nearly every studio in Hollywood: a technology that allowed filmmakers to squeeze a wide-angle image onto conventional 35-mm film stock, thereby increasing the aspect ratio (the ratio of a screen’s width to its height) of their images. This wide-screen format increased the immersive quality of the theater experience. Nonetheless, even with these advancements, movie attendance never again reached the record numbers it experienced in 1946, at the peak of the Golden Age of Hollywood.

*Mass Entertainment, Mass Paranoia: HUAC and the Hollywood Blacklist*

The Cold War with the Soviet Union began in 1947, and with it came the widespread fear of communism, not only from the outside, but equally from within. To undermine this perceived threat, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) commenced investigations to locate communist sympathizers in America, who were suspected of conducting espionage for the Soviet Union. In the highly conservative and paranoid atmosphere of the time, Hollywood, the source of a mass-cultural medium, came under fire in response to fears that subversive, communist messages were being embedded in films. In November 1947, more than 100 people in the movie business were called to testify before the HUAC about their and their colleagues’ involvement with communist affairs. Of those investigated, 10 in particular refused to cooperate with the committee’s questions. These 10, later known as the Hollywood Ten, were fired from their jobs and sentenced to serve up to a year in prison. The studios, already slipping in influence and profit, were eager to cooperate in order to save themselves, and a number of producers signed an agreement stating that no communists would work in Hollywood.

The hearings, which recommenced in 1951 with the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s influence, turned into a kind of witch hunt as witnesses were asked to testify against their associates, and a blacklist of suspected communists evolved. Over 324 individuals lost their jobs in the film industry as a result of blacklisting (the denial of work in a certain field or industry) and HUAC investigations.

*Down with the Establishment: Youth Culture of the 1960s and 1970s*

Movies of the late 1960s began attracting a younger demographic, as a growing number of young people were drawn in by films like Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969)—all revolutionary in their genres—that displayed a sentiment of unrest toward conventional social orders and included some of the earliest instances of realistic and brutal violence in film. These four films in particular grossed so much money at the box offices that producers began churning out low-budget copycats to draw in a new, profitable market. [40] While this led to a rise in youth-culture films, few of them saw great success. However, the new liberal attitudes toward depictions of sex and violence in these films represented a sea of change in the movie industry that manifested in many movies of the 1970s, including Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973), and Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975), all three of which saw great financial success. [41]

*Blockbusters, Knockoffs, and Sequels*

In the 1970s, with the rise of work by Coppola, Spielberg, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and others, a new breed of director emerged. These directors were young and film-school educated, and they contributed a sense of professionalism, sophistication, and technical mastery to their work, leading to a wave of blockbuster productions, including *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Star Wars* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). The computer-generated special effects that were available at this time also contributed to the success of a number of large-budget productions. In response to these and several earlier blockbusters, movie production and marketing techniques also began to shift, with studios investing more money in fewer films in the hopes of producing more big successes. For the first time, the hefty sums producers and distributers invested didn’t go to production costs alone; distributors were discovering the benefits of TV and radio advertising and finding that doubling their advertising costs could increase profits as much as three or four times over. With the opening of *Jaws*, one of the five top-grossing films of the decade (and the highest-grossing film of all time until the release of *Star Wars* in 1977), Hollywood embraced the wide-release method of movie distribution, abandoning the release methods of earlier decades, in which a film would debut in only a handful of select theaters in major cities before it became gradually available to mass audiences. *Jaws* was released in 600 theaters simultaneously, and the big-budget films that followed came out in anywhere from 800 to 2,000 theaters nationwide on their opening weekends.

The major Hollywood studios of the late 1970s and early 1980s, now run by international corporations, tended to favor the conservative gamble of the tried and true, and as a result, the period saw an unprecedented number of high-budget sequels—as in the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Godfather* films—as well as imitations and adaptations of earlier successful material, such as the plethora of “slasher” films that followed the success of the 1979 thriller *Halloween*. Additionally, corporations sought revenue sources beyond the movie theater, looking to the video and cable releases of their films. Introduced in 1975, the VCR became nearly ubiquitous in American homes by 1998 with 88.9 million households owning the appliance. Cable television’s growth was slower, but ownership of VCRs gave people a new reason to subscribe, and cable subsequently expanded as well. And the newly introduced concept of film-based merchandise (toys, games, books, etc.) allowed companies to increase profits even more.

*The 1990s and Beyond*

The 1990s saw the rise of two divergent strands of cinema: the technically spectacular blockbuster with special, computer-generated effects and the independent, low-budget film. The capabilities of special effects were enhanced when studios began manipulating film digitally. Early examples of this technology can be seen in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Films with an epic scope—*Independence Day* (1996), *Titanic* (1997), and *The Matrix* (1999)—also employed a range of computer-animation techniques and special effects to wow audiences and to draw more viewers to the big screen. *Toy Story* (1995), the first fully computer-animated film, and those that came after it, such as *Antz* (1998), *A Bug’s Life* (1998), and *Toy Story 2*(1999), displayed the improved capabilities of computer-generated animation.[45] At the same time, independent directors and producers, such as the Coen brothers and Spike Jonze, experienced an increased popularity, often for lower-budget films that audiences were more likely to watch on video at home. A prime example of this is the 1996 Academy Awards program, when independent films dominated the Best Picture category. Only one movie from a big film studio was nominated—*Jerry Maguire*—and the rest were independent films. The growth of both independent movies and special-effects-laden blockbusters continues to the present day. You will read more about current issues and trends and the future of the movie industry later on in this chapter.

## Movies and Culture

*Movies Mirror Culture*

The relationship between movies and culture involves a complicated dynamic; while American movies certainly influence the mass culture that consumes them, they are also an integral part of that culture, a product of it, and therefore a reflection of prevailing concerns, attitudes, and beliefs. In considering the relationship between film and culture, it is important to keep in mind that, while certain ideologies may be prevalent in a given era, not only is American culture as diverse as the populations that form it, but it is also constantly changing from one period to the next. Mainstream films produced in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, for example, reflected the conservatism that dominated the sociopolitical arenas of the time. However, by the 1960s, a reactionary youth culture began to emerge in opposition to the dominant institutions, and these anti-establishment views soon found their way onto screen—a far cry from the attitudes most commonly represented only a few years earlier.

In one sense, movies could be characterized as America’s storytellers. Not only do Hollywood films reflect certain commonly held attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be American, but they also portray contemporary trends, issues, and events, serving as records of the eras in which they were produced. Consider, for example, films about the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *World Trade Center*, *United 93*, and others. These films grew out of a seminal event of the time, one that preoccupied the consciousness of Americans for years after it occurred.

*Birth of a Nation*

In 1915, director D. W. Griffith established his reputation with the highly successful film *The Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman*, a pro-segregation narrative about the American South during and after the Civil War. At the time, *The Birth of a Nation* was the longest feature film ever made, at almost 3 hours, and contained huge battle scenes that amazed and delighted audiences. Griffith’s storytelling ability helped solidify the narrative style that would go on to dominate feature films. He also experimented with editing techniques such as close-ups, jump cuts, and parallel editing which helped make the film an artistic achievement. Griffith’s film found success largely because it captured the social and cultural tensions of the era. As American studies specialist Lary May has argued, “[Griffith’s] films dramatized every major concern of the day.” In the early 20th century, fears about recent waves of immigrants had led to certain racist attitudes in mass culture, with “scientific” theories of the time purporting to link race with inborn traits like intelligence and other capabilities. Additionally, the dominant political climate, largely a reaction against populist labor movements, was one of conservative elitism, eager to attribute social inequalities to natural human differences. According to a report by the New York *Evening Post* after the film’s release, even some Northern audiences “clapped when the masked riders took vengeance on Negroes.” However, the outrage many groups expressed about the film is a good reminder that American culture is not monolithic, that there are always strong contingents in opposition to dominant ideologies.

While critics praised the film for its narrative complexity and epic scope, many others were outraged and even started riots at several screenings because of its highly controversial, openly racist attitudes, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan and blamed Southern blacks for the destruction of the war. Many Americans joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in denouncing the film, and the National Board of Review eventually cut a number of the film’s racist sections. However, it’s important to keep in mind the attitudes of the early 1900s. At the time the nation was divided, and Jim Crow laws and segregation were enforced. Nonetheless, *The Birth of a Nation* was the highest grossing movie of its era. In 1992, the film was classified by the Library of Congress among the “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant films” in U.S. history.

*“The American Way”*

Until the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, American films after World War I generally reflected the neutral, isolationist stance that prevailed in politics and culture. However, after the United States was drawn into the war in Europe, the government enlisted Hollywood to help with the war effort, opening the federal Bureau of Motion Picture Affairs in Los Angeles. Bureau officials served in an advisory capacity on the production of war-related films, an effort with which the studios cooperated. As a result, films tended toward the patriotic and were produced to inspire feelings of pride and confidence in being American and to clearly establish that America and its allies were forced of good. For instance, critically acclaimed *Casablanca* paints a picture of the ill effects of fascism, illustrates the values that heroes like Victor Laszlo hold, and depicts America as a place for refugees to find democracy and freedom.

These early World War II films were sometimes overtly propagandist, intended to influence American attitudes rather than present a genuine reflection of American sentiments toward the war. Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* films, for example, the first of which was produced in 1942, were developed for the U.S. Army and were later shown to general audiences; they delivered a war message through narrative. As the war continued, however, filmmakers opted to forego patriotic themes for a more serious reflection of American sentiments, as exemplified by films like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat*.

*Youth versus Age: From Counterculture to Mass Culture*

In Mike Nichols’s 1967 film *The Graduate*, Dustin Hoffman, as the film’s protagonist, enters into a romantic affair with the wife of his father’s business partner. However, Mrs. Robinson and the other adults in the film fail to understand the young, alienated hero, who eventually rebels against them. *The Graduate*, which brought in more than $44 million at the box office, reflected the attitudes of many members of a young generation growing increasingly dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the repressive social codes established by their more conservative elders. This baby boomer generation came of age during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Not only did the youth culture express a cynicism toward the patriotic, prowar stance of their World War II–era elders, but they displayed a fierce resistance toward institutional authority in general, an anti-establishmentism epitomized in the 1967 hit film *Bonnie and Clyde*. In the film, a young, outlaw couple sets out on a cross-country bank-robbing spree until they’re killed in a violent police ambush at the film’s close. *Bonnie and Clyde*’s violence provides one example of the ways films at the time were testing the limits of permissible on-screen material. The youth culture’s liberal attitudes toward formally taboo subjects like sexuality and drugs began to emerge in film during the late 1960s. Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, Sam Peckinpah’s 1969 Western *The Wild Bunch*, displays an early example of aestheticized violence in film. The wildly popular *Easy Rider* (1969)—containing drugs, sex, and violence—may owe a good deal of its initial success to liberalized audiences. And in the same year, *Midnight Cowboy*, one of the first Hollywood films to receive an X rating (in this case for its sexual content), won three Academy Award awards, including Best Picture. As the release and subsequently successful reception of these films attest, what at the decade’s outset had been countercultural had, by the decade’s close, become mainstream.

*The Hollywood Production Code*

When the MPAA (originally MPPDA) first banded together in 1922 to combat government censorship and to promote artistic freedom, the association attempted a system of self-regulation. However, by 1930—in part because of the transition to talking pictures—renewed criticism and calls for censorship from conservative groups made it clear to the MPPDA that the loose system of self-regulation was not enough protection. As a result, the MPPDA instituted the Production Code, or Hays Code (after MPPDA director William H. Hays), which remained in place until 1967. The code, which according to motion picture producers concerned itself with ensuring that movies were “directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking,” was strictly enforced starting in 1934, putting an end to most public complaints. However, many people in Hollywood resented its restrictiveness. After a series of Supreme Court cases in the 1950s regarding the code’s restrictions to freedom of speech, the Production Code grew weaker until it was finally replaced in 1967 with the MPAA rating system.

*MPAA Ratings*

As films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) tested the limits on violence and language, it became clear that the Production Code was in need of replacement. In 1968, the MPAA adopted a ratings system to identify films in terms of potentially objectionable content. By providing officially designated categories for films that would not have passed Production Code standards of the past, the MPAA opened a way for films to deal openly with mature content. The ratings system originally included four categories: G (suitable for general audiences), M (equivalent to the PG rating of today), R (restricted to adults over age 16), and X (equivalent to today’s NC-17).

The MPAA rating systems, with some modifications, is still in place today. Before release in theaters, films are submitted to the MPAA board for a screening, during which advisers decide on the most appropriate rating based on the film’s content. However, studios are not required to have the MPAA screen releases ahead of time—some studios release films without the MPAA rating at all. Commercially, less restrictive ratings are generally more beneficial, particularly in the case of adult-themed films that have the potential to earn the most restrictive rating, the NC-17. Some movie theaters will not screen a movie that is rated NC-17. When filmmakers get a more restrictive rating than they were hoping for, they may resubmit the film for review after editing out objectionable scenes.

*The New War Film: Cynicism and Anxiety*

Unlike the patriotic war films of the World War II era, many of the films about U.S. involvement in Vietnam reflected strong antiwar sentiment, criticizing American political policy and portraying war’s damaging effects on those who survived it. Films like *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) portray the military establishment in a negative light and dissolve clear-cut distinctions, such as the “us versus them” mentality, of earlier war films. These, and the dozens of Vietnam War films that were produced in the 1970s and 1980s—Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), for example—reflect the sense of defeat and lack of closure Americans felt after the Vietnam War and the emotional and psychological scars it left on the nation’s psyche. A spate of military and politically themed films emerged during the 1980s as America recovered from defeat in Vietnam, while at the same time facing anxieties about the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union. Fears about the possibility of nuclear war were very real during the 1980s, and some film critics argue that these anxieties were reflected not only in overtly political films of the time but also in the popularity of horror films, like *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, which feature a mysterious and unkillable monster, and in the popularity of the fantastic in films like *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Star Wars*, which offer imaginative escapes.

*Movies Shape Culture*

Just as movies reflect the anxieties, beliefs, and values of the cultures that produce them, they also help to shape and solidify a culture’s beliefs. Sometimes the influence is trivial, as in the case of fashion trends or figures of speech. After the release of *Flashdance* in 1983, for instance, torn T-shirts and leg warmers became hallmarks of the fashion of the 1980s. However, sometimes the impact can be profound, leading to social or political reform, or the shaping of ideologies.

*Film and the Rise of Mass Culture*

During the 1890s and up until about 1920, American culture experienced a period of rapid industrialization. As people moved from farms to centers of industrial production, urban areas began to hold larger and larger concentrations of the population. At the same time, film and other methods of mass communication (advertising and radio) developed, whose messages concerning tastes, desires, customs, speech, and behavior spread from these population centers to outlying areas across the country. The effect of early mass-communication media was to wear away regional differences and create a more homogenized, standardized culture.

Film played a key role in this development, as viewers began to imitate the speech, dress, and behavior of their common heroes on the silver screen. In 1911, the Vitagraph company began publishing *The Motion Picture Magazine*, America’s first fan magazine. Originally conceived as a marketing tool to keep audiences interested in Vitagraph’s pictures and major actors, *The Motion Picture Magazine* helped create the concept of the film star in the American imagination. Fans became obsessed with the off-screen lives of their favorite celebrities, like Pearl White, Florence Lawrence, and Mary Pickford.

*American Myths and Traditions*

American identity in mass society is built around certain commonly held beliefs, or myths about shared experiences, and these American myths are often disseminated through or reinforced by film. One example of a popular American myth, one that dates back to the writings of Thomas Jefferson and other founders, is an emphasis on individualism—a celebration of the common man or woman as a hero or reformer. With the rise of mass culture, the myth of the individual became increasingly appealing because it provided people with a sense of autonomy and individuality in the face of an increasingly homogenized culture. The hero myth finds embodiment in the Western, a film genre that was popular from the silent era through the 1960s, in which the lone cowboy, a seminomadic wanderer makes his way in a lawless, and often dangerous, frontier. An example is 1952’s *High Noon*. From 1926 until 1967, Westerns accounted for nearly a quarter of all films produced. In other films, like Frank Capra’s 1946 movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the individual triumphs by standing up to injustice, reinforcing the belief that one person can make a difference in the world. And in more recent films, hero figures such as Indiana Jones, Luke Skywalker (*Star Wars*), and Neo (*The Matrix*) have continued to emphasize individualism.

*Social Issues in Film*

As D. W. Griffith recognized nearly a century ago, film has enormous power as a medium to influence public opinion. Ever since Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* sparked strong public reactions in 1915, filmmakers have been producing movies that address social issues, sometimes subtly, and sometimes very directly. More recently, films like *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), about the 1994 Rwandan genocide, or *The Kite Runner* (2007), a story that takes place in the midst of a war-torn Afghanistan, have captured audiences imaginations by telling stories that raise social awareness about world events. And a number of documentary films directed at social issues have had a strong influence on cultural attitudes and have brought about significant change.

In the 2000s, documentaries, particularly those of an activist nature, were met with greater interest than ever before. Films like *Super Size Me* (2004), which documents the effects of excessive fast-food consumption and criticizes the fast-food industry for promoting unhealthy eating habits for profit, and *Food, Inc .*(2009), which examines corporate farming practices and points to the negative impact these practices can have on human health and the environment, have brought about important changes in American food culture. Just 6 weeks after the release of *Super Size Me*, McDonald’s took the supersize option off its menu and since 2004 has introduced a number of healthy food options in its restaurants. Other fast-food chains have made similar changes.

Other documentaries intended to influence cultural attitudes and inspire change include those made by director Michael Moore. Moore’s films present a liberal stance on social and political issues such as health care, globalization, and gun control. His 2002 film *Bowling for Columbine*, for example, addressed the Columbine High School shootings of 1999, presenting a critical examination of American gun culture. While some critics have accused Moore of producing propagandistic material under the label of documentary because of his films’ strong biases, his films have been popular with audiences, with four of his documentaries ranking among the highest grossing documentaries of all time. *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which criticized the second Bush administration and its involvement in the Iraq War, earned $119 million at the box office, making it the most successful documentary of all time.

# Contemporary Film

## Issues and Trends in Film

Filmmaking is both a commercial and artistic venture. The current economic situation in the film industry, with increased production and marketing costs and lower audience turnouts in theaters, often sets the standard for the films big studios are willing to invest in. If you wonder why theaters have released so many remakes and sequels in recent years, this section may help you to understand the motivating factors behind those decisions.

*The Influence of Hollywood*

In the movie industry today, publicity and product are two sides of the same coin. Even films that get a lousy critical reception can do extremely well in ticket sales if their marketing campaigns manage to create enough hype. Similarly, two comparable films can produce very different results at the box office if they have been given different levels of publicity. This explains why the film *What Women Want*, starring Mel Gibson, brought in $33.6 million in its opening weekend in 2000, while a few months later, *The Million Dollar Hotel*, also starring Gibson, only brought in $29,483 during its opening weekend. Unlike in the days of the Hollywood studio system, no longer do the actors alone draw audiences to a movie. The owners of the nation’s major movie theater chains are keenly aware that a film’s success at the box office has everything to do with studio-generated marketing and publicity. *What Women Want* was produced by Paramount, one of the film industry’s six leading studios, and widely released (on 3,000 screens) after an extensive marketing effort, while *The Million Dollar Hotel* was produced by Lionsgate, an independent studio without the necessary marketing budget to fill enough seats for a wide release on opening weekend.

The Hollywood “dream factory,” as Hortense Powdermaker labeled it in her 1950 book on the movie industry, manufactures an experience that is part art and part commercial product. While the studios of today are less factory-like than they were in the vertically integrated studio system era, the coordinated efforts of a film’s production team can still be likened to a machine calibrated for mass production. The films the studios churn out are the result of a capitalist enterprise that ultimately looks to the “bottom line” to guide most major decisions. Hollywood is an industry, and as in any other industry in a mass market, its success relies on control of production resources and “raw materials” and on its access to mass distribution and marketing strategies to maximize the product’s reach and minimize competition. In this way, Hollywood has an enormous influence on the films to which the public has access. Ever since the rise of the studio system in the 1930s, the majority of films have originated with the leading Hollywood studios. Today, the six big studios control 95 percent of the film business. In the early years, audiences were familiar with the major studios, their collections of actors and directors, and the types of films that each studio was likely to release. All of that changed with the decline of the studio system; screenwriters, directors, scripts, and cinematographers no longer worked exclusively with one studio, so these days, while moviegoers are likely to know the name of a film’s director and major actors, it’s unusual for them to identify a film with the studio that distributes it. However, studios are no less influential. The previews of coming attractions that play before a movie begins are controlled by the studios. Online marketing, TV commercials, and advertising partnerships with other industries—the name of an upcoming film, for instance, appearing on some Coke cans—are available tools for the big-budget studios that have the resources to commit millions to prerelease advertising. Even though studios no longer own the country’s movie theater chains, the films produced by the big six studios are the ones the multiplexes invariably show. Unlike films by independents, it’s a safe bet that big studio movies are the ones that will sell tickets.

*The Blockbuster Standard*

While it may seem like the major studios are making heavy profits, moviemaking today is a much riskier, less profitable enterprise than it was in the studio system era. The massive budgets required for the global marketing of a film are huge financial gambles. In fact, most movies cost the studios much more to market and produce—upward of $100 million—than their box-office returns ever generate. With such high stakes, studios have come to rely on the handful of blockbuster films that keep them afloat, movies like *Titanic*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Avatar*. The blockbuster film becomes a touchstone, not only for production values and storylines, but also for moviegoers’ expectations. Because studios know they can rely on certain predictable elements to draw audiences, they tend to invest the majority of their budgets on movies that fit the blockbuster mold. Remakes, movies with sequel setups, or films based on best-selling novels or comic books are safer bets than original screenplays or movies with experimental or edgy themes.

James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), the second highest-grossing movie of all time, saw such success largely because it was based on a well-known story, contained predictable plot elements, and was designed to appeal to the widest possible range of audience demographics with romance, action, expensive special effects, and an epic scope—meeting the blockbuster standard on several levels. The film’s astronomical $200 million production cost was a gamble indeed, requiring the backing of two studios, Paramount and 20th Century Fox. [10]However, the rash of high-budget, and high-grossing, films that have appeared since—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* and its sequels (2002–2011), *Avatar* (2009), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *The Lord of the Rings* films (2001–2003), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and others—are an indication that, for the time being, the blockbuster standard will drive Hollywood production.

*The Role of Independent Films*

While the blockbuster still drives the industry, the formulaic nature of most Hollywood films of the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s has opened a door for independent films to make their mark on the industry. Audiences have welcomed movies like *Fight Club* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), and *Juno* (2007) as a change from standard Hollywood blockbusters. Few independent films reached the mainstream audience during the 1980s, but a number of developments in that decade paved the way for their increased popularity in the coming years. The Sundance Film Festival (originally the U.S. Film Festival) began in Park City, Utah, in 1980 as a way for independent filmmakers to showcase their work. Since then, the festival has grown to garner more public attention, and now often represents an opportunity for independents to find market backing by larger studios. In 1989, Steven Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape*, released by Miramax, was the first independent to break out of the art-house circuit and find its way into the multiplexes.

In the 1990s and 2000s, independent directors like the Coen brothers, Wes Anderson, Sofia Coppola, and Quentin Tarantino made significant contributions to contemporary cinema. Tarantino’s 1994 film, *Pulp Fiction*, garnered attention for its experimental narrative structure, witty dialogue, and nonchalant approach to violence. It was the first independent film to break $100 million at the box office, proving that there is still room in the market for movies produced outside of the big six studios.

*The Role of Foreign Films*

English-born Michael Apted, former president of the Director’s Guild of America, once said, “Europeans gave me the inspiration to make movies…but it was the Americans who showed me how to do it.” Major Hollywood studio films have dominated the movie industry worldwide since Hollywood’s golden age, yet American films have always been in a relationship of mutual influence with films from foreign markets. From the 1940s through the 1960s, for example, American filmmakers admired and were influenced by the work of overseas auteurs—directors like Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), Federico Fellini (Italy), François Truffaut (France), and Akira Kurosawa (Japan), whose personal, creative visions were reflected in their work. The concept of the auteur was particularly important in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s when French filmmaking underwent a rebirth in the form of the New Wave movement. The French New Wave was characterized by an independent production style that showcased the personal authorship of its young directors. The influence of the New Wave was, and continues to be, felt in the United States. The generation of young, film school-educated directors that became prominent in American cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s owes a good deal of their stylistic techniques to the work of French New Wave directors.

In the current era of globalization, the influence of foreign films remains strong. The rapid growth of the entertainment industry in Asia, for instance, has led to an exchange of style and influence with U.S. cinema. Remakes of a number of popular Japanese horror films, including *The Ring* (2005), *Dark Water* (2005), and *The Grudge* (2004), have fared well in the United States, as have Chinese martial arts films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002), and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). At the same time, U.S. studios have recently tried to expand into the growing Asian market by purchasing the rights to films from South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong for remakes with Hollywood actors.

*Cultural Imperialism or Globalization?*

With the growth of Internet technology worldwide and the expansion of markets in rapidly developing countries, American films are increasingly finding their way into movie theaters and home DVD players around the world. In the eyes of many people, the problem is not the export of a U.S. product to outside markets, but the export of American culture that comes with that product. Just as films of the 1920s helped to shape a standardized, mass culture as moviegoers learned to imitate the dress and behavior of their favorite celebrities, contemporary film is now helping to form a mass culture on the global scale, as the youth of foreign nations acquire the American speech, tastes, and attitudes reflected in film.

Staunch critics, feeling helpless to stop the erosion of their national cultures, accuse the United States of cultural imperialism through flashy Hollywood movies and commercialism—that is, deliberate conquest of one culture by another to spread capitalism. At the same time, others argue that the worldwide impact of Hollywood films is an inevitable part of globalization, a process that erodes national borders, opening the way for a free flow of ideas between cultures.

*The Economics of Movies*

With control of over 95 percent of U.S. film production, the big six Hollywood studios—Warner Bros., Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Universal, Columbia, and Disney—are at the forefront of the American film industry, setting the standards for distribution, release, marketing, and production values. However, the high costs of moviemaking today are such that even successful studios must find moneymaking potential in crossover media—computer games, network TV rights, spin-off TV series, DVD and releases on Blu-ray Disc format, toys and other merchandise, books, and other after-market products—to help recoup their losses. The drive for aftermarket marketability in turn dictates the kinds of films studios are willing to invest in.

*Rising Costs and Big Budget Movies*

In the days of the vertically integrated studio system, filmmaking was a streamlined process, neither as risky nor as expensive as it is today. When producers, directors, screenwriters, art directors, actors, cinematographers, and other technical staff were all under contract with one studio, the turnaround time for the casting and production of a film was often as little as 3 to 4 months. Beginning in the 1970s, after the decline of the studio system, the production costs for films increased dramatically, forcing the studios to invest more of their budgets in marketing efforts that could generate presales—that is, sales of distribution rights for a film in different sectors before the movie’s release. This is still true of filmmaking today. With contracts that must be negotiated with actors, directors, and screenwriters, and with extended production times, costs are exponentially higher than they were in the 1930s—when a film could be made for around $300,000. [20] By contrast, today’s average production budget, not including marketing expenses, is close to $65 million today.

Consider James Cameron’s *Avatar*, released in 2009, which cost close to $340 million, making it one of the most expensive films of all time. Where does such an astronomical budget go? When weighing the total costs of producing and releasing a film, about half of the money goes to advertising. In the case of *Avatar*, the film cost $190 million to make and around $150 million to market. Of that $19 million production budget, part goes toward above-the-line costs, those that are negotiated before filming begins, and part to below-the-line costs, those that are generally fixed. Above-the-line costs include screenplay rights; salaries for the writer, producer, director, and leading actors; and salaries for directors’, actors’, and producers’ assistants. Below-the-line costs include the salaries for non-starring cast members and technical crew, use of technical equipment, travel, locations, studio rental, and catering. For *Avatar*, the reported $190 million doesn’t include money for research and development of 3-D filming and computer-modeling technologies required to put the film together. If these costs are factored in, the total movie budget may be closer to $500 million. Fortunately for 20th Century Fox, *Avatar* made a profit over these expenses in box-office sales alone, raking in $750 million domestically (to make it the highest-grossing movie of all time) in the first 6 months after its release. However, one thing you should keep in mind is that *Avatar* was released in both 2-D and 3-D. Because 3-D ticket prices are more expensive than traditional 2-D theaters, the box-office returns are inflated.

*The Big Budget Flop*

However, for every expensive film that has made out well at the box office, there are a handful of others that have tanked. Back in 1980, when United Artists (UA) was a major Hollywood studio, its epic western *Heaven’s Gate* cost nearly six times its original budget: $44 million instead of the proposed $7.6 million. The movie, which bombed at the box office, was the largest failure in film history at the time, losing at least $40 million, and forcing the studio to be bought out by MGM. Since then, *Heaven’s Gate* has become synonymous with commercial failure in the film industry.

More recently, the 2005 movie *Sahara* lost $78 million, making it one of the biggest financial flops in film history. The film’s initial production budget of $80 million eventually doubled to $160 million, due to complications with filming in Morocco and to numerous problems with the script.

*Piracy*

Movie piracy used to be perpetrated in two ways: Either someone snuck into a theater with a video camera, turning out blurred, wobbly, off-colored copies of the original film, or somebody close to the film leaked a private copy intended for reviewers. In the digital age, however, crystal-clear bootlegs of movies on DVD and the Internet are increasingly likely to appear illegally, posing a much greater threat to a film’s profitability. Even safeguard techniques like digital watermarks are frequently sidestepped by tech-savvy pirates.

In 2009, an unfinished copy of 20th Century Fox’s *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* appeared online 1 month before the movie’s release date in theaters. Within a week, more than 1 million people had downloaded the pirated film. Similar situations have occurred in recent years with other major movies, including *The Hulk* (2003) and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). According to a 2006 study sponsored by the MPAA, Internet piracy and other methods of illegal copying cost major Hollywood studios $6.1 billion in the previous year. The findings of this report have since been called into question, with investigators claiming that there was no clear methodology for how researchers estimated those figures. Nonetheless, the ease of theft made possible by the digitization of film and improved filesharing technologies like BitTorrent software, a peer-to-peer protocol for transferring large quantities of information between users, have put increased financial strain on the movie industry.

## The Influence of New Technology

New technologies have a profound impact, not only on the way films are made, but also on the economic structure of the film industry. When VCR technology made on-demand home movie viewing possible for the first time, filmmakers had to adapt to a changing market. The recent switch to digital technology also represents a turning point for film. In this section, you will learn how these and other technologies have changed the face of cinema.

*Effects of Home Entertainment Technology*

The first technology for home video recording, Sony’s Betamax cassettes, hit the market in 1975. The device, a combined television set and videocassette recorder (VCR), came with the high price tag of $2,495, making it a luxury still too expensive for the average American home. Two years later, RCA released the vertical helical scan (VHS) system of recording, which would eventually outsell Betamax, though neither device was yet a popular consumer product. Within several years however, the concept of home movie recording and viewing was beginning to catch on. In 1979, Columbia Pictures released 20 films for home viewing, and a year later Disney entered the market with the first authorized video rental plan for retail stores. By 1983, VCRs were still relatively uncommon, found in just 10 percent of American homes, but within 2 years the device had found a place in nearly one-third of U.S. households.

At the same time, video rental stores began to spring up across the country. In 1985, three major video rental chains—Blockbuster, Hastings, and Movie Gallery—opened their doors. The video rental market took off between 1983 and 1986, reaching $3.37 billion in 1986. Video sales that year came to $1 billion, for total revenue of more than $4 billion, marking the first time in history that video would eclipse box office revenues ($3.78 billion that year).

Video sales and rentals opened a new mass market in the entertainment industry—the home movie viewer—and offered Hollywood an extended source of income from its films. On the other hand, the VCR also introduced the problem of piracy.

*VCRs Legal, Just Barely*

In an age when Hollywood was already struggling financially because of increased production costs, Sony’s release of home video recording technology became a major source of anxiety for Hollywood studios. If people could watch movies in their own homes, would they stop going to the movies altogether? In the 1976 case *Sony Corp. of America v. Universal City Studios*, Universal Studios, and the Walt Disney Company sued Sony in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. The suit argued that because Sony was manufacturing a technology that could potentially be used to break copyright law, the company was therefore liable for any copyright infringement committed by VCR purchasers. The District Court struggled with the case, eventually ruling against Sony. However, Sony appealed to the Supreme

Court, where the case was again highly debated. Part of the struggle was the recognition that the case had wider implications: Does a device with recording capabilities conflict with copyright law? Is an individual guilty of copyright infringement if she records a single movie in her own home for her own private use? Eventually, the Supreme Court ruled that Sony and other VCR manufacturers could not be held liable for copyright infringement. This case represented an important milestone for two reasons. It opened up a new market in the entertainment sector, enabling video rental and home movie sales. Additionally, the case set a standard for determining whether a device with copying or recording capability violated copyright law. The court ruled that because nonprofit, noncommercial home recording did not constitute copyright violation, VCR technology did have legitimate legal uses, and Sony and other companies could not be held liable for any misuse of their devices. Recently, this case has posed interpretive challenges in legal battles and in debates over file sharing through the Internet.

*The Optical Disc System*

In 1980, around the time when consumers were just beginning to purchase VCRs for home use, Pioneer Electronics introduced another technology, the LaserDisc, an optical storage disc that produced higher quality images than did VHS tapes. Nonetheless, because of its large size (12 inches in diameter) and lack of recording capabilities, this early disc system never became popular in the U.S. market. However, the LaserDisc’s successor, the digital versatile disc (DVD) was a different story. Like LaserDisc, the DVD is an optical storage disc—that is, a device whose encoded information follows a spiral pattern on the disc’s surface and can be read when illuminated by a laser diode. However, unlike the analog-formatted LaserDisc, the DVD’s information storage is entirely digital, allowing for a smaller, lighter, more compressed medium.

The first DVDs were released in stores in 1997, impressing consumers and distributors with their numerous advantages over the VHS tape: sharper-resolution images, compactness, higher durability, interactive special features, and better copy protection. In only a few years, sales of DVD players and discs surpassed those of VCRs and videos, making the DVD the most rapidly adopted consumer electronics product of all time. In 1999, the movie rental market was revolutionized by Netflix. Netflix began in 1997 as a video rental store in California. In 1999, the company began offering a subscription service online. Subscribers would select movies that they wanted to see on Netflix’s website, and the movies would arrive in their mailbox a few days later, along with a prepaid return envelope. This allowed users to select from thousands of movies and television shows in the privacy of their own home.

More recently, DVD technology has been surpassed by the Blu-ray Disc format, intended for storing and producing high-definition video. Released in 2006, the Blu-ray Disc technology has the same physical dimensions as DVDs, but because they are encoded to be read by lasers with a shorter wavelength, the discs have more than five times the storage capacity of the DVD. By 2009 there were 10.9 million Bluray Disc players in U.S. homes. However, the technology has yet to replace the DVD in rental stores and among the majority of U.S. consumers.

*DVD Revenues and Decline*

DVD rentals and sales make up a major source of revenue for the movie industry, accounting for nearly half of the returns on feature films. In fact, for some time the industry has been exploiting the profitability of releasing some films directly to DVD without ever premiering them in theaters or of releasing films on DVD simultaneously with their theater releases. According to one estimate, for every movie that appears in theaters, there are three that go straight to DVD. [7] While *direct-to-DVD* has become synonymous with poor production values and ill-conceived sequels, there are a number of reasons why a studio might bypass the multiplexes. Prequels and sequels of box-office hits, shot on a lower production budget, are often released this way and can generate considerable income from the niche market of hard-core fans.

The fourth *American Pie* film, *Bring It On: In It to Win It*, and *Ace Ventura Pet Detective, Jr.* are all examples of successful direct-to-DVD films. However, in other cases, the costs of theatrical promotion and release may simply be too high for a studio to back. This is especially true among independently produced films that lack big-studio marketing budgets. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009) was almost one of these cases. However, the film did make it to theaters, going on to win eight Academy Award awards in 2009, including Best Picture. [8] Finally, a film may go straight to DVD when its content is too controversial to be released in theaters. For example, almost all porn films are direct-to-DVD releases. Between 2005 and 2008, the number of direct-to-DVD releases grew 36 percent as studios began to see the profitability of the strategy. After a movie’s success at the box office, a prequel, sequel, or related movie might earn the same profit pound-for-pound at the rental store if filmmakers slash the production budget, often replacing the original celebrity actors with less expensive talent. In 2008, direct-to-DVD brought in around $1 billion in sales.

Despite the profitability of the DVD market, the economic downturn that began in 2007, along with the concurrent release of Blu-ray Disc technology and online digital downloads, have brought about a decline in DVD sales among U.S. consumers. With the rise in digital downloads, Netflix broadened its appeal in 2007 by offering subscribers live-streaming movies and TV shows. This allowed viewers to watch programs on their computers, handheld devices, the Nintendo Wii game system, the Sony PlayStation 3 game system, and the Microsoft Xbox 360 game system without ever having the disc itself. Additionally, by late 2007 film studios also became anxious over another trend: the Redbox rental system. Redbox, an American company that places DVD rental vending machines in pharmacies, grocery stores, and fast-food chains around the country, had placed a kiosk in approximately 22,000 locations by 2009. For the movie industry, the trouble isn’t the widespread availability of Redbox rentals, it’s the price. As of March 2001, customers can rent DVDs from a Redbox kiosk for only $1 per day, which has already led to a severe decline in rental revenue for the film industry. According to the traditional pricing model, prices for rentals are based on a release window; newly released films cost more to rent for a specified period of time after their release. When customers can rent both older and newly released movies at the same low price, rentals don’t produce the same returns.

Hollywood has also suffered major losses from online piracy. Since 2007, studios have been teaming up to turn this potential threat into a source of income. Now, instead of illegally downloading their favorite movies from file-sharing sites, fans can go to legal, commercial-supported sites like Hulu.com, where they can access a selected variety of popular movies and TV shows for the same price as accessing NBC, ABC, and CBS—free. In April 2010, Hulu announced it has already launched this service, the Hulu Plus service, in addition to its free service, for users who want access to even more programs, such as *Glee*. Hulu doesn’t allow viewers to download the films to their home computers, but it does provide a home-viewing experience through online streaming of content.

*The Industry Goes Digital*

In an industry where technological innovations can transform production or distribution methods over the course of a few years, it’s incredible to think that most movies are still captured on celluloid film, the same material that Thomas Edison used to capture his kinetoscope images well over a century ago. In 2002, George Lucas’s *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* became the first major Hollywood movie filmed on high-definition digital video. However, the move to digitally filmed movies has been gradual; much of the movie industry—including directors, producers, studios, and major movie theater chains—has been slow to embrace this major change in filming technology. At the time that Lucas filmed *Attack of the Clones*, only 18 theaters in the country were equipped with digital projectors.

However, digital cinematography has become an increasingly attractive, and increasingly popular, option for a number of reasons. For one thing, during production, it eliminates the need to reload film. A scene filmed in the traditional method, requiring multiple takes, can now be filmed in one continuous take because no raw material is being used in the process. The digital format streamlines the editing process as well. Rather than scanning the images into a computer before adding digital special effects and color adjustments, companies with digitally filmed material can send it electronically to the editing suite. Additionally, digital film files aren’t susceptible to scratching or wear over time, and they are capable of producing crystal-clear, high-resolution images.

For distributors and production companies, digitally recorded images eliminate the costs of purchasing, developing, and printing film. Studios spend around $800 million each year making prints of the films they distribute to theaters and additional money on top of that to ship the heavy reels. For a film like *Attack of the Clones*, widely released in 3,000 theaters, printing and shipping costs for 35-mm film would be around $20 million. On the other hand, with the digital format, which requires no printing and can be sent to theaters on a single hard drive, or, as the system develops, over cable or satellite, these costs are virtually eliminated.

In part, the change has been gradual because, for theaters, the costs of making the digital switch (at around $125,000 for a high-quality digital projector) is high, and the transformation offers them fewer short-term incentives than it does for distributors, who could save a significant amount of money with digital technology. Furthermore, theaters have already heavily invested in their current projection equipment for 35-mm film. In the long run, the high-definition picture capabilities of digital movies might boost profits as more moviegoers turn out at the theaters, but there are no guarantees. In the meantime, the major studios are negotiating with leading theater chains to underwrite some of the conversion expenses.

Another financial pitfall of digital film is, surprisingly, the cost of storage once the film is out of major circulation. For major studios, a significant portion of revenues—around one-third—comes from the rerelease of old films. Studios invest an annual budget of just over $1,000 per film to keep their 35-millimeter masters in archival storage. Keeping the film stock at controlled temperature and moisture levels prevents degradation, so masters are often stored in mines, where these conditions can be met most optimally.

Digital data however, for all of its sophistication, is actually less likely to last than traditional film is; DVDs can degrade rapidly, with only a 50 percent chance of lasting up to 15 years, while hard drives must be operated occasionally to prevent them from locking up. As a result, the storage cost for digital originals comes closer to $12,500 per film per year. Moreover, as one generation of digital technology gives way to another, files have to be migrated to newer formats to prevent originals from becoming unreadable.

*The Resurgence of 3-D*

After World War II, as movie attendance began to decline, the motion picture industry experimented with new technologies to entice audiences back into increasingly empty theaters. One such gimmick, the 3-D picture, offered the novel experience of increased audience “participation” as monsters, flying objects, and obstacles appeared to invade the theater space, threatening to collide with spectators. The effect was achieved by manipulating filming equipment to work like a pair of human eyes, mimicking the depth of field produced through binocular vision. By joining two cameras together and spacing them slightly apart with their lenses angled fractionally toward one another, filmmakers could achieve an effect similar to that created by the overlapping fields of vision of the right and left eye. In theaters, the resulting images were played simultaneously on two separate projectors. The 3-D glasses spectators wore were polarized to filter the images so that the left eye received only “left eye” projections and the right eye received only “right eye” projections.

3-D was an instant sensation. *House of Wax*, the first big-budget 3-D movie, released in 1953, brought in over $1 million during its first 3 weeks in theaters, making it one of the most successful films of the year. Best of all for investors, 3-D could be created with fairly inexpensive equipment. For this reason, a boom of 3-D development soon occurred nationwide. Forty-six 3-D movies were filmed in a span of 2 years. However, 3-D proved to be a brief success, with its popularity already beginning to wane by the end of 1953.

3-D soon migrated from the realm of common popular entertainment to novelty attraction, appearing in IMAX cinemas, as an occasional marketing draw for kids’ movies, and in theme-park classics like *Captain Eo* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Audience*. *Captain Eo*, a Disneyland attraction from 1986 to 1993, featured pop sensation Michael Jackson in his heyday. Following Jackson’s death, the film was rereleased for a limited time in 2010.

Despite the marginal role 3-D has played since the midcentury fad died out, new technologies have brought about a resurgence in the trend, and the contemporary 3-D experience seems less like a gimmick and more like a serious development in the industry. DreamWorks animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg, for one, likened the new 3-D to the introduction of color. One of the downfalls that lead to the decline of 3-D in the 1950s was the “3-D headache” phenomenon audiences began to experience as a result of technical problems with filming. To create the 3-D effect, filmmakers need to calculate the point where the overlapping images converge, an alignment that had to be performed by hand in those early years. And for the resulting image to come through clearly, the parallel cameras must run in perfect sync with one another—another impossibility with 35-millimeter film, which causes some distortion by the very fact of its motion through the filming camera.

Today the 3-D headache is a thing of the past, as computerized calibration makes perfect camera alignment a reality and as the digital recording format eliminates the celluloid-produced distortion. Finally, a single digital projector equipped with a photo-optical device can now perform the work of the two synchronized projectors of the past. For the theater chains, 3-D provides the first real incentive to make the conversion to digital. Not only do audiences turn out in greater numbers for an experience they can’t reproduce at home, even on their HD television sets, but theaters are also able to charge more for tickets to see 3-D films. In 2008, for example, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, which grossed $102 million, earned 60 percent of that money through 3-D ticket sales, even though it played in 3-D on only 30 percent of its screens. Two of the top-grossing movies of all time, *Avatar* (2009) and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), were both released in 3-D.[[54]](#footnote-54)

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# Traditional Principles of Animation[[55]](#footnote-55)

Many people assume that if you build a good-looking model, it will simply come to life all by itself. Unfortunately, this couldn't be farther from the truth. A poorly constructed animation will typically suffer from objects moving in an awkward and unrealistic manner. The motion you create in your scene is an *extremely important* element of your overall product. You must design and execute your movement with as much care as you give to designing the objects in your animation.

An analysis of unsuccessful animation usually reveals *too little motion* or motion that is *not life-like*. So how does motion become part of your overall design? Planning must begin immediately—even before you begin to build your scene.

Below, you'll find a list of principles that the traditional masters of animation have discovered, learned and applied in their journey to learn their art. Applicable to both traditional 2D animation and computer 3D animation, every quality animated film makes use of at least a few of these basic principles developed at the Walt Disney studios during the 1930s. Believable movement starts with applying these concepts. As you continue to gain experience and knowledge, you'll come to realize just how important these techniques are. Every animator is *expected* to not just know these principles, but to apply them to their work. Memorizing them isn't enough. Knowing when, where and how to apply them is what's important.

## [Anticipation](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Traditional_Principles_of_Animation/Anticipation)

*Anticipation* is a preliminary action that sets up a primary action. It cues or prepares the audience for what is about to happen. Let's look at an example. Let's say that a steel cable is being stretched extremely tight by two opposing forces. Before the cable snaps in two, you position your camera for a close up on the actual breaking point. The close up shows the cable fraying as more and more tension is applied. Seeing this, the audience automatically *anticipates* what's about to happen (the eventual breaking of the cable).

In some cases, anticipation is needed physically. For example, before you can throw a ball, you must first swing your arm backwards. As the arm goes back, the audience *anticipates* it coming forward and releasing the ball. more important than just audience anticipation... there is a need for a set up to the coming movement. every movement requires anticipation and recovery. there is a need to show a transfer of weight before performing an action. it is here where the action is set up.

Anticipation is also required to simulate real motion. If an object is at rest, some preliminary action that transfers energy to the object must occur so that it can use that energy to execute the primary action. Before a character can jump, they must crouch down and swing their arms for counterbalance. By seeing the crouch, the audience *anticipates* that the character is about to jump.

## Squash and stretch

# The principle of *Squash and Stretch* implies that no matter how much an object deforms, it must always maintain the same apparent volume. Proper use of Squash and Stretch illustrates just how dense or rigid an object is. All real-world objects, unless extremely hard, exhibit some form of squash and stretch.

# The classic example is the bouncing ball. The ball *squashes* as it hits the ground, then *stretches* on its way up and then back down. When an object squashes along one axis (direction), it automatically expands along the other two. It is up to you, as the animator, to ensure that any deformation along on axis is offset be an opposite deformation along other axes maintaining a constant volume.

# Consider the way a pillow changes shape as it's tossed across the room. The shape deforms, but does the volume of the pillow change? No matter how contorted the pillow becomes, it still maintains the same weight and amount of stuffing.

## Overlapping action

# *Overlapping action* implies that not everything happens at the same time. Take the example of moving a character's arm from a position of rest to that of picking up a set of keys on a table. A common mistake would be to advance a few frames from the at-rest position, then move all of the arm elements (objects) to the final position. This technique would result in a very lifeless motion (because everything starts and stops moving at the same time). The proper sequence requires that the upper arm begins to rise first. Then the forearm pivots out, followed by the wrist bending back. Finally, the fingers curl around the keys. Each of these motions begins before the preceding motion is complete, providing the realistic overlap that your viewer expects. In other words, the motion of the arm rotating upward is *overlapped* by the wrist bending back.

## [Follow Through](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Traditional_Principles_of_Animation/Follow_through)

# *Follow-Through* is a companion to the overlapping action. An action almost never comes to a complete and sudden stop. Instead, inertia carries the object beyond the termination point, often causing the object to slowly reverse direction and settle back to the intended stop location. A golfer's swing provides an ideal example of a follow-through. Once the ball is struck, the club (and golfer) *follow through* the point of contact to complete the swing. What about a pencil that drops to the ground? When it hits, does it stop dead in its tracks? Or, does it bounce around a little, then rolls to a stop? Two cars collide in the middle of an intersection. Do they hit and stick? No, recoil occurs, causing them to reverse direction. Again, an action almost never comes to a complete and sudden stop.

## Staging

# The concept behind *Staging* is that objects (still or animated) should be positioned in a way that they are quickly detected and are easily understood. A common mistake involves placing an object or action where it can't be noticed or in front of a more interesting object that divides the audience's attention. If your audience can't detect the action that you want them to notice, was your staging poor?

# Think of this situation. Your scene involves two characters sitting at a table talking to each other. You want your audience to view their conversation by positioning your camera behind one of the characters, looking over their shoulder. Do you think the shot is staged well if part of the character's head partially blocks the face of the other character? Or, would it be better to move the camera a little more to the side so you see both characters clearly. Which of the two would represent better staging? Obviously, the second.

# Try to visualize the primary objects in your scene as silhouettes. If an action occurs within the silhouette of an object, it is hard to detect. If you move the action to one side, where it's not masked by another object, it stands out much better. If you view your scene in silhouette and can't easily discern what's happening, consider using either a better viewing angle or possibly moving your scene objects so they can be more easily understood.

## Exaggeration

# *Exaggeration* is used to accentuate an action or idea. You often must exaggerate a motion or effect to ensure that the audience catches it. Exaggeration works in conjunction with anticipation and staging to direct the audience's attention to the action that you want them to see. Anticipation sets up the action, staging ensures that the action occurs where it can be seen, and exaggeration makes sure the action is not so subtle that the audience fails to notice it.

# Use of exaggeration shouldn't detract from the scene, but rather enhance reality by making sure the audience catches what is happening. Remember the Big Bad Wolf's exaggerated Mannerisms in attempting to blow down the Three Little Pig's house? The exaggerated size of his chest implied that nothing would withstand the hurricane-like force of his breath.

# Be careful on just how much exaggeration you use when working on human characters. Most people are very aware of how their body moves. Because of that, they are less forgiving of exaggeration of movement that goes to far beyond what is really possible.

## Secondary Action

# *Secondary Action* is any action that results directly from another action. Secondary actions heighten interest and add realistic complexity to an animation. They should always remain subordinate (not as important) to the primary action. They should not conflict, become more interesting or in any way dominate your primary point of interest. If the audience is paying too much attention to the secondary actions, they're missing the most important element (primary action) of your shot.

# It is sometimes easy to forget about secondary actions because we take such 'side effects' for granted in real life. Think of the basketball shot that hits the backboard rim. As an animator, you did a great job with the ball's shape as it hits the rim. But what about the effect the ball had on the rim itself? Did the rim wobble back and forth a little after the ball hit it? The rim wobbling is the secondary action; the result from another action (the ball hitting it).

## Weight

# Weight transfer is essential for realistic motion. Watch an elephant or rhinoceros walk through its surroundings. You can actually see (and almost feel) its weight shift from one portion of its body to another. Does a young kitten move the same way? Does a bowling ball bounce like a beach ball? Imagine how unbelievable a feather would appear if, when dropped, it shot straight down to the ground. Instead it sways from one side to another as it descends; its motion provides a clue as to its ratio of mass to surface area, and the resistance of the air.

## Balance

# With the exception of falling, the body is almost always in balance. If you extend your right arm, your left arm, shoulder and torso all pivot and move back. Few people stand perfectly straight. Think of what position other body parts should be in when one body part moves or changes location.

# Interesting Note: Walking and running are special cases of falling. When you walk, you constantly cycle through a process of falling forward, restoring balance and falling forward again. Running works the same way except that you spend most of your time falling forward.

## Curved Motion

# No straight lines exist in nature. This statement also applies to natural motion. Watch a person as they swing their arm up in a handshake. Does the arm simply swing straight up? Usually the arm not only swings up, but also swings out from the side and back in again. This subtle motion makes all the difference between an unnatural, robotic move and something that appears life-like.

# In contrast, a motion by an *intentionally* inanimate object should follow Newton's laws, i.e. move in a straight line until it is affected by a force. This provides the necessary contrast that differentiates it from a "sentient" object.[[56]](#footnote-56)

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49. In March 2020, Harvey Weinstein was sentenced to 23 years in prison for sex crimes after testimony of his assault from six women. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/nyregion/harvey-weinstein-sentencing.html [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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