CHAPTER 2

MASS COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

How Society and Media Interact
During 2017, attention to the issue of sexual harassment and abuse, both sensational and serious, became the major cultural story for our media. As Secret 3 points out, the stories moved this issue from the margins of society to the center. While there are many points on the timeline we could highlight as the start of the media’s focus on sexual harassment and abuse, there is no doubt that it exploded when multitudes of women started coming forward and telling their stories of mistreatment at the hands of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

On October 8, 2017, following the news that he had paid financial settlements to eight women to drop their claims, The Weinstein Company fired Weinstein from the movie production company he helped found. And while this may have been the point where most people started paying attention to the story, it certainly wasn’t the beginning. According to the New York Times, the accusations and rumors about Weinstein dated back for three decades. It wasn’t as though these stories weren’t known about by reporters; they simply weren’t reported.¹

In November 2017, the New York Times started keeping track of the number of men who have been fired or forced to resign over accusations of sexual misconduct since Weinstein was fired.² As of February 8, 2018, the Times count had reached seventy-one. The paper also had a second list of twenty-eight men who had faced charges of sexual misconduct but who had only been suspended or received similar lesser punishment. The list was a who’s who of the powerful behind and in front of the scenes in the entertainment business, industry, and politics.

So this leaves us with a question: Why, after years of neglect, did the press, in all its varied forms, suddenly start paying attention to these accusations and the women making them?

While the story of women being sexually harassed and abused by powerful men had been slowly breaking further and further into the media for several years, the real explosion came when actress Ashley Judd went public with her story from two decades earlier.

Judd told the New York Times in early October 2017 that she went to what she thought was a breakfast meeting at a hotel. She was instead sent up to Weinstein’s room where he greeted her wearing a bathrobe and suggested either he give her a massage or she “watch him shower.”³ It is at this point that we see the basic elements of the narrative coming through. Judd had to figure out how to get out of the room without alienating one of the most powerful producers in Hollywood.

The Times goes on to report that Weinstein reached “at least eight settlements with women,” paying them to drop their claims and keep their silence. When all of these stories started surfacing, Weinstein said in a statement to the Times:

I appreciate the way I’ve behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it. Though I’m trying to do better, I know I have a long way to go.⁴

Judd had previously talked about what had happened with Weinstein back in 2015 with Variety magazine, but she didn’t name him.

Judd told Variety she felt bad because she didn’t do anything about it at the time:

I beat myself up for a while. This is another part of the process. We internalize the shame. It really belongs to the person who is the aggressor. And so later, when I was able to see what happened, I thought: Oh god, that’s wrong. That’s sexual harassment. That’s illegal. I was really hard on myself because I didn’t get out of it by saying, “OK motherf—er, I’m calling the police.”⁵

The common theme between Judd and the other women who say Weinstein abused or harassed them was that women didn’t speak out because they didn’t know each other; they
History of Media Effects Research
As we discussed in Chapter 1 in the section on media literacy, media consumers often assume that the media have large, obvious, and generally negative effects on people, and they look to blame the media for complex social problems. In this section, we look at how our understanding of media effects has evolved and changed over the past two hundred years.

Rise of Mass Society
Prior to the 1800s, most people in Europe and North America lived in rural communities where their neighbors were likely to be similar in ethnic, racial, and religious background. People knew their neighbors, and their neighbors knew them. There were only limited opportunities for people to change their station in life or to learn much about the outside world. But with the rise of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, we started to see massive migration from the rural areas into the cities and from various countries to the United States. As people moved into the cities, they started working for wages in factories with people who were quite different from them. With industrialization, people went from small, close-knit communities where they knew everyone to a mass society where they learned about the world from mass media sources, such as the new inexpensive newspapers, magazines, and paperback novels.

SECRET 7
At the end of the nineteenth century, people came to believe that the traditional ties of church, community, and family were breaking down and losing their power to influence people. The comfortable local community was being replaced by something impersonal, complex, and removed from the traditions that had previously held people together; people felt that their community was being replaced by a mysterious “they” or “them.” Concerned observers noted that people seemed to be alienated, isolated, and interchangeable members of a faceless mass audience, separated by the decline of the family and the growth of technology. What held this new mass society together? The increasingly frequent answer was that the mass media were replacing the church, family, and community in shaping public opinion.

(For additional discussion of the growth of the mass media from its origins in the 1400s to the present day, see Chapter 1.)

Propaganda and the Direct Effects Model
Fears that media messages would have strong, direct effects on audience members grew out of propaganda efforts by all combatants during World War I and by Nazi Germany and Fascist
Italy in the 1930s. Critics worried that mass media messages would overwhelm people in the absence of the influences of family and community. With traditional social forces in decline, it was inevitable, critics feared, that the media would become the most powerful force within society.

This argument viewed audience members as passive targets who would be hit or injected with the message, which, like a vaccine, would affect most people in similar ways. But research looking for powerful, direct effects leading to opinion and behavioral changes generally came up short. In fact, in the 1940s and 1950s, researchers sometimes doubted whether media messages had any effect on individuals at all. Although most scholars now focus on the media’s indirect effects on society rather than their direct effects on individuals, they remain concerned about how the media influence individuals.

The big problem is that the direct effects approach viewed media messages as a stimulus that would lead to a predictable attitudinal or behavioral response with nothing intervening between sender and audience. But although people have a shared biological heritage, they have different backgrounds, needs, attitudes, and values. In short, everyone has been socialized differently. The indirect effects approach still looks at the effects that messages have on individuals, but it accounts for the fact that audience members perceive and interpret these messages selectively according to individual differences. Because people’s perceptions are selective, their responses to the messages vary as well. A person who is preparing to buy a car, a person who just bought a car, and a person who doesn’t drive will each react differently to an automobile commercial.

Voter Studies and the Limited Effects Model

During the 1920s and 1930s, the decades when the Nazis, Italian Fascists, and Soviets were using propaganda, many critics worried that the media might be responsible for powerful direct effects on the public. Their general worries about the media extended to the possible effects of political campaign messages. Critics, considering recent urbanization and the decline of traditional institutions, feared that political media campaigns would “inject” people with ideas that would lead to the message creator’s desired actions, such as supporting a particular candidate, ideology, or point of view. This model of powerful direct campaign effects was largely discredited by voter studies in the 1940s and 1950s, but it remains important because many people still believe that it is accurate.

The People’s Choice. One of the first large-scale social-scientific studies of campaign influences was the People’s Choice study of the 1940 U.S. presidential election contest between Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt and Republican Wendell Willkie. A team of researchers led by Paul Lazarsfeld looked at how voters in Erie County, Ohio, decided which candidate to vote for. Lazarsfeld’s team found that people who were highly interested in the campaign and paid the most attention to media coverage of it were the least likely to be influenced by the campaign. Why? Because they had decided whom they supported before the campaign had even begun.

In contrast, voters who decided at the last minute usually turned to friends or neighbors, rather than the media, for information about the campaign. In general, they turned to people who followed the campaign closely, the ones whom Lazarsfeld called opinion leaders.
TEST YOUR VISUAL MEDIA LITERACY

THE MESSAGES IN PROPAGANDA

There’s an internet meme known as Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies that states: “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.”

With the common use of Nazi name-calling these days, it’s hard sometimes to remember that during World War II when people talked about Hitler and the Nazis, they were talking about actual Nazis. Hitler was a popular figure used by American and European government propagandists, as can be seen in the poster on the left promoting car sharing. Although it doesn’t invoke Hitler, the Los Angeles Metro transit agency used persuasive posters to get people out of their cars and onto the local bus system. The campaign was successful, increasing the number of discretionary riders from 24 to 36 percent.

WHAT are these posters saying?
What message is the World War II poster on the left trying to convey? What is the message of the poster on the right from the Los Angeles Metro system?

WHY are they sending these messages?
Why are these two groups sending these messages? What is their goal in trying to persuade you to stop driving solo in a car?

HOW do you and your classmates interpret these messages?
How do you react to messages like these? How do arguments today comparing someone to Hitler differ from those made during the World War II era? How do the arguments for carpooling during World War II differ from arguments today? Do you think one is more persuasive than the other? Why?
OPINION LEADERS are influential community members—friends, family members, and coworkers—who spend significant time with the media. Lazarsfeld suggested that information flows from the media to opinion leaders, and then from opinion leaders to the rest of the public. Keep in mind that the opinion leaders are ordinary people who are simply very interested and involved in a topic. Although this finding was not expected, it should not be terribly surprising that interpersonal influence is more important than the media. The idea here is fairly simple: People in groups tend to share opinions with one another, and when they want reliable information, they go to the people they know. And this serves to illustrate Secret 5—All media are social. Even decades before so-called social media (like Facebook and Twitter) existed, people were still drawn to talk about the news at length.

With the lengthy campaigns today, people find it easier to turn to interpersonal sources than the wealth of media information. Yet this trend is nothing new. Although many people believe that our election campaigns are starting earlier and earlier every election cycle, presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan started his campaign for the 1900 election one month after the election of 1896! Even as early as the 1830s, when the penny press was just getting started, presidential campaigns could run as long as two years.

The People's Choice study, as well as other early voter studies, found that campaigns typically reinforced existing political predispositions and that few people changed their minds about whom they were going to support. There are several reasons for this:

- The voters who start off with strong opinions are unlikely to change them.
- The voters who pay the most attention to a campaign are those with the strongest political views; thus, they are the least likely to change their opinions.
- The most persuadable voters (those who are least informed) are not likely to pay attention to political communication and therefore are not strongly influenced by media coverage of the campaign.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANING AND THE CRITICAL/CULTURAL MODEL

In the decades between World War I and World War II came the rise of a revolution in social science thinking known as critical theory. Originated by a group of German scholars known as the Frankfurt School, these cultural critics were trying to make sense of a changing world that was leaving people alienated, exploited, and repressed with no good way of making sense of what was happening. Many of these scholars were Marxist in their political and social views, deeply concerned by the upheavals brought about by the end of World War I. These upheavals led to the rise of fascism in some parts of Europe and communism divorced from Karl Marx’s ideas in others. There are several key principles to this approach:

- There are serious problems that people suffer that come from exploitation and the division of labor.
- People are treated as “things” to be used rather than individuals who have value.
- You can’t make sense out of ideas and events if you take them out of their historical context.
- Society is coming to be dominated by a culture industry (what we might call the mass media) that takes cultural ideas, turns them into commodities, and sells them in a way to make the maximum amount of money. This separates ideas from the people who produce them.
- You cannot separate facts from the values attached to them and the circumstances from which these facts emerged.
Political science scholar Stephen Bronner writes that it is out of critical theory that we saw the rise of environmentalism, racial equality, sexual equality, and the examination of privilege. While critical theory cannot always help us understand ideas themselves, it can, Bronner writes, help us understand where they come from: “To put it crudely, critical theory can offer fruitful perspectives on the historical genesis and social uses of, say, the theory of relativity introduced by Albert Einstein. But it should not attempt to make philosophical judgments about its truth character.”

SECRET 3 ▶ C. Wright Mills, who was heavily influenced by critical theorists, argued that media coverage of private problems helped turn them into major public issues. Bronner writes, “Women have already turned incest and spousal abuse from private into public concerns; gay and lesbian citizens have advocated the need for legislation against ‘hate crimes’; people of color are challenging institutional racism; and countless other attempts have been made . . . to render the myriad institutions of the powerful accountable to the disempowered.” In other words, this is Secret 3—Everything from the margin moves to the center.

Up through the 1940s, most of the research on the mass media focused on direct and indirect effects of media messages on the behaviors of groups and individuals. But another school of thought looks at how people use media to construct their view of the world rather than looking at how media change people’s behaviors. Instead of using the quantitative data analysis of the voter studies, the critical/cultural approach takes a more qualitative examination of the social structure in which communication takes place. It considers how meaning is created within society, who controls the media systems, and the roles the media play in our lives. Instead of looking at how messages affect people, it looks at how people use and construct messages.

An example of the critical/cultural approach is the charge, leveled by many critics, that the crime stories that deal with attractive, wealthy, white women and girls attract much more media attention than do disappearances of women of color or those who are poor. Consider the story of Casey Anthony. The attractive, young, white mother was accused of murdering her two-year-old daughter. During her trial in 2011, the news media, especially cable television, was obsessed with the case. When Anthony was found not guilty, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites were filled with outraged comments about the verdict. In addition, talk show hosts such as Nancy Grace seemed to be obsessed with the case.

Five years after the court acquitted Anthony, Google News still featured more than 202,000 links to news stories connected to the case. On the other hand, a 2016 Google search for Jhessye Shockley, a five-year-old African American girl from Arizona who disappeared in 2011, only turned up 341 news stories, most connecting to the 2015 conviction of her mother in Jhessye’s death.

Keith Woods, an expert on diversity issues who has worked for both the Poynter Institute (a journalism think tank) and NPR, says stories about minority women tend to receive less attention because reporters are more likely to report about people they see as being like themselves. And since most newsrooms tend to be disproportionately white and middle class, the disappearance of a white woman is seen as a bigger story. This control over which stories are reported means that the public at large is not aware that African American women are disproportionately more likely to disappear than white women.
Effects of the Media in Our Lives

Media scholars throughout the twentieth century who studied the effects of the mass media on individuals and society questioned several aspects of the media, including the messages being sent, the media sending them, the owners of the media, and the audience members themselves.22

Message Effects

Not surprisingly, the earliest concerns about the effects of mass communication focused on how messages might change people’s behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs. These message effects can take a variety of forms.

Cognitive Effects. The most common and observable message effect is on the short-term learning of information. This can be as significant as learning about a new medical treatment or as trivial as remembering the lyrics to a popular song. The amount of learning that takes place from media content depends largely on the motivation level of the person consuming the media.23

SECRET 5 ► Political scientist Doris Graber found that people who want to be able to talk intelligently with others about media content (whether it be the news, a sporting event, or an entertainment program) learn much more from the media than people who are simply seeking entertainment. (This is one more example of Secret 5—All media are social. Remember, you don’t need to be using Facebook or Twitter to make media social.) Research also shows that people learn more from people they identify with and pay more attention to political commentators they agree with than ones they dislike.24 Hence the most popular political radio talk shows, such as those hosted by conservatives Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, argue a single and consistent point of view rather than providing a range of views.24

Attitudinal Effects. People can develop feelings about a product, an individual, or an idea on the basis of media content. Viewers might decide that they like a new product, political candidate, or hairstyle because of what they have seen in a television commercial, a news broadcast, or a sitcom. Typically, it is much easier to get people to form new opinions than to get them to change existing ones.25 For example, political advertising generally tries to change the opinions of uncommitted voters rather than those of voters who already have strong political loyalties. In the 2016 presidential election campaign, the Bernie Sanders campaign found substantial success by targeting young, uncommitted voters who value being asked directly for their support.26

Behavioral Effects. Behavioral effects include actions such as clipping a coupon from a newspaper, buying a product, making a phone call, and voting for a candidate. They might also include imitating attractive behaviors (for example, dressing in a certain way). Behavioral effects are in many ways the most difficult to achieve because people are reluctant to change their behavior. Sometimes, however, people go to the media deliberately looking for behavior to copy, as when a child watches an episode of Batman and then imitates it in play, or when a teenager watches a movie to learn how to behave on a date.27

Can you come up with a recent example of someone publicly making the argument that “the media” have powerful direct effects on people? How would you respond to his or her arguments?
Psychological Effects. Media content can inspire fear, joy, revulsion, happiness, or amusement, among other feelings. A major psychological effect of media content, especially violent or erotic material, is arousal. Symptoms of arousal can include a rise in heart rate, adrenaline levels, or sexual response. Seeking a psychological response is a common reason for spending time with the media, whether the response sought is relaxation, excitement, or emotional release. Arousal can come from content (action, violence, sexuality, loud music or sound) and from style (motion, use of color, the rate and speed at which new images appear). Notice that music videos, which often offer little in terms of learning, provide many of these elements.

Legendary film composer John Williams is known for his sweeping, emotionally memorable scores for movies like the Indiana Jones series, the Jurassic Park series, and even Kobe Bryant’s Academy Award–winning animated short Dear Basketball. But he is undoubtedly best known for his scores for the eight (soon to be nine) core Star Wars films. From the opening fanfare played over the crawling text, to the menacing Imperial March for Darth Vader, to the Love Theme for Han and Leia, these melodies are instantly recognized cultural icons. They also are a key part of how the Star Wars movies are capable of so blatantly manipulating our feelings.

Alex Ross, music critic for the New Yorker, writes that Williams manipulated the audience in Episode VII: The Force Awakens by composing vaguely menacing music for Luke Skywalker to make the audience question whether the Jedi hero has gone over to the dark side. “The new film tells us otherwise,” Ross says, “but shadowy chords surround the exiled hero for much of the film, leaving us in suspense as to his intentions.”

Medium Effects

As mass media consumption grew in the 1950s, scholars also started paying more attention to the particular medium being used to transmit messages. Until the 1950s, most media effects research focused on the interactions among the sender, the message, and the receiver, ignoring the influence of the medium itself. But the medium used to communicate is crucial. Canadian communication researcher Marshall McLuhan argued that the medium used for transmission can be as important as the message itself, if not more so. McLuhan is best known for his statement “The medium is the message,” by which he meant that the method of message transmittal is a central part of the message. For example, television does an excellent job of transmitting emotional messages because it includes both visual (explosions, luxury interiors) and audio (laugh tracks, scary music) cues along with words. And consider technology that enhances the sound of movies: Surround sound systems are designed to create a realistic experience by surrounding viewers with five distinct sound channels, as well as shaking them with a deep bass channel. The goal is not to transmit the message better, but to create a more overwhelming experience. (Think of how the impact of a summer blockbuster film would be diminished if the sound were turned down.) The same is true of large-screen high-definition television sets. Books and newspapers, in contrast, are much better at transmitting complex rational information because these media allow us to review the information and consider its meaning at our own pace. The web excels at providing obscure materials that appeal to a limited, widely dispersed audience, and it makes it easy for receivers to respond to what they’ve seen or heard.
Chapter 2  MASS COMMUNICATION EFFECTS: HOW SOCIETY AND MEDIA INTERACT

FROM CLAY TO PAPER TO ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS

Back in 1971, Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg leaked copies of many of the volumes of the so-called Pentagon Papers to reporters first at the New York Times, and later at the Washington Post. The Pentagon Papers were a top-secret forty-seven-volume report commissioned by the Secretary of Defense to explain how the United States got involved and fought in the Vietnam War. The story of Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers was recently told in the Steven Spielberg movie The Post. You can read more about the Pentagon Papers case and Ellsberg in Chapter 13.

Leaking the documents was physically a big job. To do so, Ellsberg had to physically photocopy pages at a time when photocopy machines were uncommon and typically locked down after hours. Smuggling the thousands of copied pages out of a secure building was also a major undertaking.

Forty-one years later, former National Security Agency contract worker Edward Snowden decided he wanted to leak a massive collection of meticulously categorized top-secret documents that he believed would show the overreach of the NSA without endangering lives. Snowden delivered the thousands of pages of documents to journalist Glenn Greenwald in electronic form on a flash drive that fit in his pocket. Snowden had to know how to bypass computer security, but beyond that, all he had to do was a few keystrokes and mouse clicks.

Just as Ellsberg’s leaked documents helped Americans better understand what had happened during the Vietnam War, so did Snowden’s documents help us understand what the NSA was doing with all the information it was secretly collecting about the American people following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

A blogger writing for the newsweekly the Economist says that whether you view people who leak top-secret electronic documents as heroes or traitors really doesn’t matter. The writer argues that we are undergoing a major shift from a world with paper documents that are heavy and tied to a place to electronic documents that can be moved around the globe with the click of a mouse, and no amount of prosecuting cyberleakers will change that. The writer is not defending those who release electronic documents; rather, he’s explaining the long-term impact that this change of media means.

The blogger is essentially bringing to the forefront the ideas of Canadian economist Harold Innis, who believed that any given medium has a bias of lasting a long time or of being easy to distribute. Paper documents, which we are more used to, are heavy and hard to move. Electronic documents, on the other hand, don’t have a physical form and thus can be moved about with incredible ease. To be fair to Innis, he considered parchment, clay, and stone to be durable media biased toward the concept of time, while paper and electronic media were easy to distribute and thus biased toward space. But we should keep in mind that Innis wrote his original book on the subject, Empire and Communications, in 1950 when it was published as a hardback paper book. Your author downloaded his copy electronically from Amazon’s Kindle store.

Innis was the scholar who inspired media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s popular concept of “the medium is the message” and the importance of the inherent characteristics of different media. But while Innis was a much more serious and meticulous scholar than McLuhan, McLuhan’s writing was much more popular and accessible. And Innis biographer Alexander Watson credits McLuhan with popularizing Innis’s often dense writing.

As you think about the transformations that electronic documents have brought to our society, remember that it is a key example of Secret 5—All media are social. Because electronic documents are so portable, they can always be shared. Although both Innis and McLuhan predated computers and the internet, their work on influence of the changing nature of our media continues to be relevant today.

WHAT does Innis mean by the “bias of communication”?

HOW has the changing bias of our media changed how we handle documents?

HOW does the changing bias of our media transform the level of control we have over information?

CAN anything be kept secret now in the age of electronic documents? Why or why not?
Media scholars now recognize that communication technology is a fundamental element of society and that new technologies can lead to social change. As Secret 1 points out, the media are essential components of our lives. Media sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz, for example, argues that the existence and development of various media can lead to radical changes in society.

He writes that the development of publishing and books in the sixteenth century made it easy for new ideas to spread beyond the person who originated them and that this tended to undermine the control of ideas by both the monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. As can be seen by the Edward Snowden story discussed in this chapter’s “Media Transformation,” the existence of digital documents, encrypted email, and high-capacity thumb drives now allows a small group of technically skilled individuals to spread news and documents around the world, with governments powerless to stop them. Meyrowitz also identifies some social effects of particular media. In No Sense of Place, he argues that the major effect of print as a medium is to segregate audiences according to education, age, class, and gender. For example, a teenager needs to be able to read at a certain level to understand the content of a magazine targeted at young women or young men—content that a young child would be unable to comprehend. In contrast, electronic media such as television tend to cross the demographic boundaries. A child too young to read a magazine or book can still understand at least some of the information in a television program targeted at adults. This is why parent groups and childhood educators push to have early-evening programming on television contain more “family-friendly” programs and why parents seek to restrict certain sites and apps on a child’s smartphone or tablet.

The importance of the particular medium used to convey a message applies at every level of communication, from intrapersonal (how is an audio journal different from a written one?) to interpersonal (how is a phone call different from an email?) to mass (how is a book different from a movie?).

Ownership Effects

Instead of looking at the effects of media and their messages, some scholars examine the influence of those who own and control the media. These critical scholars are concerned because owners of media determine which ideas will be produced and distributed by those media.

In the United States, the majority of media outlets are owned by a small number of giant multinational conglomerates and new media companies: Disney, News Corporation/21st Century Fox, Time Warner, Viacom/CBS, Bertelsmann, Comcast/NBCUniversal, and Google. Some observers, such as German academic and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, fear that these corporations are becoming a sort of ruling class, controlling which books are published, which programs are aired, which movies are produced, and which news stories are written. As we discuss in Chapter 3, Disney, News Corporation, and Google have all had to compromise at times with the Chinese government in order to keep doing business in China. For example, Google had to agree to censor its search results about sensitive topics in China for the company to be allowed to operate there.

Media critic and former newspaper editor Ben Bagdikian suggests that the influence of media owners can be seen in how the news media select stories to be covered. He argues that large media organizations will kill news stories and entertainment programs that don’t reflect well on the corporation. The roots of this tendency go back to when captains of industry such as J. P. Morgan and the Rockefellers bought out magazines that criticized them in order to silence that criticism. What we end up with, Bagdikian says, is not the feared bogeyman of government censorship, but rather “a new Private Ministry of Information and Culture” that gives corporations control...
over what we will see, hear, or read. Increasingly, however, the new alternative media are providing channels that allow consumers to bypass Big Media controls. (See the section on long-tail media in Chapter 3 for more on how these new channels are enabling anyone who wants to distribute content to do so on a large scale.) Websites such as Breitbart or Daily Kos give voice to issues from a partisan point of view with no controls at all other than those the authors choose to employ. There are also data-driven, online news sources like Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight that have an underlying political point of view but nevertheless are committed to honest reporting backed up by hard, supporting data.

Active Audience Effects

Some of the early fears about the effects of the media on audience members arose from the belief that the audience truly was a faceless, undifferentiated mass—that the characteristics of the audience en masse also applied to the audience’s individual members. Early critics viewed modern people as alienated and isolated individuals who, separated by the decline of the family and the growth of a technological society, didn’t communicate with one another. After World War II, the concept of the mass audience began to change as scholars came to realize that the audience was made up of unique members who responded as individuals, not as undifferentiated members of a mass.

Today, communicators, marketers, and scholars realize that individuals seek and respond to different messages at different times and for different reasons. Therefore, they divide audiences on the basis of geographics, or where people live; demographics, or their gender, race, ethnic background, income, education, age, educational attainment, and the like; or psychographics, a combination of demographics, lifestyle characteristics, and product usage. Hence, a young woman buying a small SUV to take her mountain bike out into the mountains will respond to a very different kind of advertising message than a mother seeking a small SUV so that she can safely drive her child to school during rush hour in the winter.

Audiences can also be classified by the amount of time they spend using media or by the purposes for which they use media. Each segment of the media audience will behave differently. Take television viewing as an example. Some people tune in daily to watch their favorite soap opera or talk show and won’t change the channel for the entire hour. This is known as appointment viewing. Others surf through a number of channels using the remote control, looking for something that will capture their interest. Still others switch back and forth between two channels.

SECRET 7 ▶ With regard to television, the concept of a mass audience consuming the same content at the same time existed to some extent from the 1950s to the 1970s when the vast majority of viewers had access to only three broadcast networks, but that concept broke down completely with the advent of cable, satellite, multiple broadcast networks, TiVo, DVDs, and VCRs. (This is an example of Secret 7—There is no “they.”)

Media scholar James Potter suggests that the media audience resembles a pyramid. (Remember the pyramid figure in Chapter 1?) At the peak of the pyramid, we are all consuming the same messages, such as the horrifying reports of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At the base of the pyramid, we are all different, consuming what interests us personally, such as when we surf the internet. In between the narrow top and the wide base are the various audience segments that the media and advertisers are trying to reach.

In addition to recognizing that different people use the media in different ways, scholars have realized that mass communication messages are generally mediated through other levels of communication. One reason this book discusses intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group
communication in addition to mass communication is that these levels all come into play in how mass communication operates. People discuss political news with one another, cheer together for their favorite teams while watching a hockey game on television, and think about how stock market information is going to affect their investment plans. A young man's reaction to a love scene in a movie will differ depending on if he watches it with a group of friends, with his sweetie, or with his parents.47

Theories of Media and Society
There is a scene in Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back in which Luke Skywalker is nervous about entering a cave beneath a tree in the Dagobah jungle. He asks Master Yoda, “What’s in there?” Yoda replies, “Only what you take with you.” And so it is with mass communication. What we find with mass communication research depends in large part on the theory base we take with us and the questions the theories suggest we pose. It’s not so much that different approaches to research give us different answers—it’s more that they take us to different questions. In this section, we look at several of the theoretical approaches to mass communication and the types of questions they raise.

Functional Analysis
The effects of the media are not limited to those on individuals or groups. Some of the media’s most significant effects reach society as a whole.

According to media scholar Harold Lasswell, the mass media are simply an extension of basic functions that society has always needed. Earlier societies had priests, town criers, storytellers, bards who sang ballads, and travelers who brought news from distant lands.48 Communication can be functional or dysfunctional, but in either case it operates within the social system.49 For example, some people respond inappropriately to the news of approaching danger. Instead of going to the basement during a tornado warning, a functional response, they go outside with their video cameras to get footage of the storm, a dysfunctional response. In both cases, they are responding to the news of the storm.

Lasswell wrote that the media perform three major social functions50:

1. Surveillance of the environment, looking for both threats and opportunities
2. Correlation of different elements of society, allowing segments of society to work together
3. Transmission of culture from one generation to the next

To these three, media sociologist Charles Wright adds the function of entertainment.51 Let’s look more closely at each of these functions.

Surveillance of the Environment. Much of what we know about the world we learn from the media through the process of surveillance. The media show us what is happening not only within our own culture, but in other societies as well. Our only other sources of knowledge about the world are our own direct experiences and the direct experiences that others share with us. For example, people who live in the Middle East learn much of what they know about the outside world through their use of social media and direct messaging software like WhatsApp, which allow them to bypass much of the local censorship that limits legacy media.52

The constant flow of information from the media allows us to survey our surroundings. It can give us warnings of approaching danger—everything from changes in the weather to earthquakes to violence in the streets. This flow of information is essential for the everyday operation of society. The stock markets depend on the business news, travelers depend on weather forecasts, and grocery shoppers depend on knowing what’s on special this week.
Surveillance can also serve to undermine society. For example, when people in poor nations see media images of what life is like in the United States and other industrialized Western nations, they may become dissatisfied with the conditions of their own lives, and this may lead to social unrest and violence. News about violence may also make people more fearful for their own safety.

Surveillance is not just for the masses. Government and industry leaders worldwide watch CNN or C-SPAN or read the *New York Times* or *Financial Times* to know what other government leaders are saying and thinking.

News can also give status to individuals. Because media coverage exposes them to large audiences, they seem important. This process is known as **status conferral**. In a rather extreme example, Omarosa Manigault Newman initially became famous after being a villainous character/competitor on the first season of Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* back in 2004. After becoming a celebrity through being on the show, she went on to be featured on a range of television shows primarily designed to feature people who had become prominent on reality TV. Then, in a strange twist of fate, Manigault Newman became President Trump’s director of communications for the White House Office of Public Liaison. After getting fired from the White House, she went on to star on the CBS series *Celebrity Big Brother*. Thus Manigault Newman became a television celebrity and a national political figure, and then used that status to return to reality TV.

**Correlation of Different Elements of Society.** **Correlation** is the selection, evaluation, and interpretation of events to impose structure on the news. Correlation is accomplished by persuasive communication through editorials, commentary, advertising, and propaganda. Through media-supplied correlation, we make sense out of what we learn through surveillance. It puts news into categories and provides cues that indicate the importance of each news item. Does it appear on the front page of the newspaper? Is it the first item on the broadcast? Is there a teaser on the magazine cover promoting the story?

Although many people say that they would prefer just the facts, virtually the only news outlet that provides no interpretation of events is the public affairs network C-SPAN, which has rigid rules governing how every event is covered. Far more viewers choose to go to the broadcast networks or cable news channels, which provide some interpretation, rather than watch the relatively dry, “just the facts” C-SPAN.

It is often difficult to distinguish between communication that is informative and communication that is persuasive. Editorial judgments are always being made as to which stories should be covered and which should be omitted, which picture of a politician should be published, or what kind of headline should be written. Thus, it is useful to view surveillance and correlation as two functions that can be shared by a particular message.

**Socialization and Transmission of Culture.** **Socialization** is the process of integrating people within society through the transmission of values, social norms, and knowledge to new members of the group.

**SECRET 1** It is through the media, as well as through our friends, family, school, and church, that we learn the values of our society. Socialization is important not only to young people as they are growing up, but also to immigrants learning about and assimilating into their new country, high school students heading off to college, and new graduates going to work. (Here is another example of Secret 1—The media are essential components of our lives.)
The media provide socialization in a variety of ways:

- Through role models in entertainment programming
- Through goals and desires as presented in media content
- Through the citizenship values portrayed in the news
- Through advertisements for products that may be useful to us in different stages of our lives

**Entertainment.** Entertainment is communication designed primarily to amuse, even if it serves other functions as well, which it almost always does. A television medical drama would be considered entertainment, even though it might educate a person about life in a hospital or the symptoms of a major illness. In fact, a major characteristic of all television programming, including entertainment programming, is to let people know what life outside their own world is like.56

**Agenda Setting**

Although explanations of powerful direct effects did not hold up under research scrutiny, people still had a hard time accepting that the news media and political campaigns had little or no effect on the public. Agenda-setting theory provides an alternative explanation that does not minimize the influence of the media on society.57 This theory holds that issues that are portrayed as important in the news media become important to the public—that is, the media set the agenda for public debate. If the media are not able to tell people what to think, as the direct effects model proposed, perhaps they can tell people what to think about. Agenda-setting theorists seek to determine whether the issues that are important to the media are also important to the public.58

The initial study of agenda setting was conducted in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs. The researchers found, among uncommitted voters in the 1968 presidential election, a strong relationship between the issues the press considered important and the issues the voters considered important. Since these voters had not already made up their minds about the upcoming election, their most likely source of cues, the researchers concluded, was the mass media. The study compared the content of the press and the attitudes of voters and found a strong correlation. Even though the researchers did not find evidence that the press persuaded people to change their opinions, they did find that the issues featured in the campaign and in the press were also the issues that voters felt were important.59

There are, however, some limits on the usefulness of the agenda-setting concept. If a story does not resonate with the public, neither the media nor the candidates will be able to make people care. For example, reports that Ronald and Nancy Reagan had conceived a child before they were married did not seem to do any damage to Reagan’s image; nor was the Rev. Pat Robertson’s campaign damaged by reports that the candidate and his wife had lied about the date of their wedding anniversary to hide the fact that their first child was conceived premaritally.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and gratifications theory turns the traditional way of looking at media effects on its head. Instead of looking at the audience as a sheep-like mass of receivers of messages, uses and
TEST YOUR MEDIA LITERACY

WORKING WITH THEORY

So far, you’ve seen the application of several of the Seven Secrets, and you might have even asked yourself, which of these is most important? As you work your way through this text, you will likely suspect that the author would put forward Secret 3—everything from the margin moves to the center.

The introduction to this secret notes:

One of the mass media’s biggest effects on everyday life is to take culture from the margins of society and make it into part of the mainstream, or center. This process can move people, ideas, and even individual words from small communities into mass society.

So if we apply this to the case study that opens this chapter, we are left with the question:

Why, after years of neglect, did the press, in all its varied forms, suddenly start paying attention to these accusations and the women making them? (Want to read more on this subject? You can find that here: www.ralphehanson.com/tag/me-too/.) Why did these stories move to the center?

Two of the theories you’ve read about so far could be used to answer this question. Here is a simplified summary of each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Setting</th>
<th>Critical/Cultural Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues that are portrayed as important in the news media become important to the public.</td>
<td>There are serious problems that people suffer that come from exploitation and the division of labor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While the media don’t tell people what to think, they can tell people what to think about.</td>
<td>People are treated as “things” to be used rather than individuals who have value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This theory asks whether people take their cues from the media as to what the most important stories are that they should attend to.</td>
<td>You can’t make sense out of ideas and events if you take them out of their historical context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society is coming to be dominated by a culture industry (the mass media) that takes cultural ideas, turns them into commodities, and sells them in a way to make the maximum amount of money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHO** are the sources?

Who were the sources for the sexual harassment and abuse stories? Who was publishing the stories? Where did the information come from?

**WHAT** are they saying?

Read through either the opening vignette or the series of blog posts linked to above. What reasons do the sources give for the sexual harassment/abuse story breaking out when it did? Whom do they say was responsible for this happening?

**WHAT** evidence exists?

What evidence is there for the story spreading because news organizations were interested in making the story spread? What evidence is there for the story spreading because women (and men) who had been abused were willing to speak out?

**WHAT** do you think explains what happened?

How would you explain the spread of the story using agenda setting? Critical/cultural theory? Which do you think does a better job of explaining what happened? Why?

gratifications theory views audience members as active receivers of information of their own choosing. Uses and gratifications theory is based on the following assumptions:

- Audience members are active receivers who have wants and needs. They then make decisions about media use based on those wants and needs. For example, in this approach, video games don’t do things to children; children make use of video games.
Media compete with many sources of gratification. I might watch television in the evening to relax. Television would be competing with reading a magazine, going for a walk, and playing with my son as alternative ways of relaxing.

Audience members are aware of these choices and make them consciously.

Our judgments about the value of various media uses must come from the audience's perspective. The idea behind uses and gratifications theory is that individuals are constantly seeking gratifications, and the media compete to provide them. Media scholar Arthur Asa Berger says that among the gratifications that audience members might seek are to be amused, to experience the beautiful, to have shared experiences with others, to find models to imitate, and to believe in romantic love. So someone who doesn’t care about football might still watch a game on television and enjoy it because he wants to spend time with friends. Although he is consuming media, that’s not the real point of his interaction with the television set.

Social Learning

At some point in your life, you’ve been told that experience is the best teacher. While experience may be a good teacher, it is also a harsh one, forcing us to suffer from our mistakes. Fortunately, we don’t have to make all these mistakes ourselves, according to social psychologist Albert Bandura’s social learning theory. Bandura writes, “If knowledge and skills could be acquired only by direct experience, the process of human development would be greatly retarded, not to mention exceedingly tedious and hazardous.” Instead, he says that we are able to learn by observing what others do and the consequences they face. Bandura says humans go through three steps to engage in social learning:

- We extract key information from situations we observe.
- We integrate these observations to create rules about how the world operates.
- We put these rules into practice to regulate our own behavior and predict the behaviors of others.

The media, by widening the information about the world that we are exposed to, play an important role in social learning. Students and young professionals have all been warned on numerous occasions to be careful what they post on social media. But media coverage of a public relations practitioner named Justine’s social media self-destruction has likely helped a lot of folks avoid her mistake. In 2013, Justine sent out a tweet that read “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!” just before her twelve-hour flight took off from London for Cape Town, South Africa. Her tweet spawned an extended online firestorm under the hashtag #HasJustineLandedYet. Tweets ranged from mocking her insensitivity, to parody accounts, to expressions of offense and hurt. Once Justine did land, she learned she had been fired while she was in the air. Despite having only about five hundred followers at the time she took off, her tweet rapidly spread around the world. With a case like #HasJustineLandedYet, social media users can learn from the example of one woman without having to suffer all the consequences she did.

Symbolic Interactionism

George Herbert Mead wrote back in 1934 that what holds us together as a culture is our common creation of society through our interactions based on language, or symbolic interactionism. We engage in symbolic interactions in which we continually attempt to arouse in others the feeling we have in ourselves by telling others how we feel.
SECRET 1  ▶ If our language is understood, we are able to communicate; if, on the other hand, we do not share common meanings, we will not be understood.64 The mass media are by far the biggest source of shared meanings in our world. (Secret 1—The media are essential components of our lives.)

If you think back to our discussion of the meaning of the yellow ribbon in Chapter 1, you can see how this works. We start with an arbitrary symbol: the yellow ribbon. We assign it meaning and then propagate that meaning through portrayal through the media. Eventually, nearly everyone comes to have the same shared meaning of the looped ribbon, and the ribbon becomes a universal symbol of support—support for the troops, for disease sufferers, and for all kinds of social causes.

Sociologist W. I. Thomas provides us with one of the most quoted and understandable statements of symbolic interactionism: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”65 If we ignore the outdated gender bias of the quote, there’s a lot to analyze there. What Thomas is saying is that if people view a problem as being real, and behave as though a problem is real, it will have real consequences, even if the problem does not truly exist. Back in 1938, Orson Welles narrated a famous radio adaptation of H. G. Wells’s War of the Worlds. The radio play was misinterpreted by some to be an actual news story, and there were many accounts at the time of people panicking and even committing suicide out of fear of the Martians invading New Jersey. Ever since then, broadcasters have been very careful to run extensive disclaimers on the air every time they run a War of the Worlds–style story, to make sure they don’t panic their audience. There is also a widespread fear of powerful effects that the mass media can have on susceptible audience members. The only problem is that the research conducted at the time on the War of the Worlds panic was seriously flawed, and criticism of the research, which dates back to the 1940s, has largely been ignored, in part because the belief in the War of the Worlds effect is so strong. The truth is that there was far more perception of panic than actual panic at the time. In summary, it doesn’t matter much now whether the panic actually took place. What matters is that people believe that it did.66

Spiral of Silence
German media scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, with her spiral of silence, has raised the question of why people become unwilling to express what they perceive to be a minority opinion. Noelle-Neumann became interested in this question in part from trying to find out why the Germans supported political positions that led to national defeat, humiliation, and ruin in the 1930s and 1940s, or why the French under German occupation were seemingly complacent as Jewish friends and neighbors were sent to concentration camps. Noelle-Neumann says that societies function on the basis of perceived consensus. We want to view ourselves as part of a majority and as holding the consensus opinion. Thus people will refrain from expressing opinions that they think will be at odds with those of their friends and neighbors, even though their neighbors might actually agree with them.67

So how do people receive the cues that indicate what popular public opinion is so that they might agree with it? The media are important public institutions because they are often our best
source of public opinion. Central to Noelle-Neumann’s argument is that when people believe they are in the minority with their opinion, they will tend to stay quiet on the topic, thus feeding the sense that a particular opinion is held by a minority. Thus it becomes a death spiral of diversity of ideas, as more and more people come to believe that they hold a minority opinion.68

While the spiral of silence is a fascinating explanation of how public opinion functions, it is difficult to independently verify and prove whether it, in fact, works that way. Radicals will sometimes speak up with unpopular opinions precisely because they are unpopular. And people who care deeply about an issue will speak out simply because they feel they are correct. But a study from the Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project found support for the spiral of silence when it comes to discussing controversial issues on social media. The researchers were attempting to find out whether social media such as Facebook or Twitter might make people more willing to express their opinions on political issues. The Pew study looked at how willing people were to express an opinion about Edward Snowden’s release of classified documents as discussed in the “Media Transformation” for this chapter. Not surprisingly, the study showed that Americans were split as to whether Snowden’s leaks were a good idea and whether the surveillance policy was a good idea. But the study went on to show the following:

- People were less willing to discuss the Snowden case on social media than they were in person.
- People were more likely to share their opinions about Snowden if they thought their audience agreed with their point of view. This was true both in person and online.
- People who wouldn’t share their opinion on Snowden in a face-to-face conversation were even less likely to share their opinion on social media.

Overall, the Pew study found a strong spiral of silence effect for controversial issues on social media.69

**Cultivation Analysis**

George Gerbner (1919–2005), the best-known researcher of television violence, did not believe televised violence has direct effects on people’s behavior, but he was deeply concerned about its effect on society as a whole.70 Gerbner developed an alternative to traditional message effects research called cultivation analysis. His argument was that watching large amounts of television cultivates a distinct view of the world that is sharply at odds with reality.71

Over the years, Gerbner and his colleagues analyzed thousands of network television programs for the themes they presented and the level of violence they included. In a series of studies beginning in 1967, Gerbner’s team found high levels of violence on television. They defined violence as “the overt expression of force intended to hurt or kill.”72

Network officials have been openly critical of Gerbner, saying that his studies weren’t representative of television as a whole and that his definition of violence is not useful because it does not discriminate between the fantasy violence of a Road Runner cartoon and the more graphic gore of a Saw or Hostel movie.

Gerbner compared the rate of violence on television to the rate of it occurring in the real world. He concluded that television cultivates a view of the world that is much more violent than the world we live in. The nature of the violence is different as well, with most television violence occurring between strangers rather than between family members, as does real-life violence. Gerbner said that, because of this, people who watch a great deal of television perceive the world differently than do light viewers. Heavy television viewing cultivates a response that Gerbner calls the mean world syndrome.

Gerbner explained what he considered to be major misconceptions about the effects of televised violence and what his research suggested the real effects were. He argued that
watching large amounts of television cultivates a distinct view of the world that is at odds with reality.

Gerbner argued that, because of televised violence, heavy television viewers are more likely to

- Overestimate their chances of experiencing violence
- Believe that their neighborhoods are unsafe
- State that fear of crime is a very serious personal problem
- Assume that the crime rate is rising, regardless of the actual crime rate

In an appearance before Congress, Gerbner testified:

The most general and prevalent association with television viewing is a heightened sense of living in a “mean world” of violence and danger. Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures. . . . They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television.

The effect of violent television, Gerbner argued, is not that it will program children to be violent; instead, the real harm is more complex. Violent programming

- Pushes aside other ways of portraying conflict
- Deprives viewers of other choices
- Facilitates the victim mentality
- Discourages production of alternative programming

Gerbner’s point was that the most obvious-to-imagine effects might not be the most important actual effects.

CHAPTER REVIEW

CHAPTER SUMMARY

With the rise of mass society and the rapid growth of the mass media starting in the nineteenth century, the public, media critics, and scholars have raised questions about the effects various media might have on society and individuals. These effects were viewed initially as being strong, direct, and relatively uniform on the population as a whole. After World War I, critics were concerned that media-oriented political campaigns could have powerful direct effects on voters. This view, though still widespread, was largely discredited by voter studies conducted in the 1940s and 1950s. These studies found that the voters with the strongest political opinions were those most likely to pay attention to a campaign and hence least likely to be affected by it. More recently, research has expanded to move beyond looking just at the effects that media and media content have on individuals and society to examinations of how living in a world with all-pervasive media changes the nature of our interactions and culture.

Understanding the effects of media on individuals and society requires that we examine the messages being sent, the medium transmitting these messages, the owners of the media, and the audience members themselves. The effects can be cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, or psychological.

Media effects can also be examined in terms of a number of theoretical approaches, including functional analysis, agenda setting, uses and gratifications, social learning, symbolic interactionism, spiral of silence, and cultivation analysis.
KEY TERMS

opinion leaders 35
critical theory 35
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geographics 41
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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did the number of stories of sexual harassment and abuse explode in October 2017? What are at least two theoretical explanations of what happened then?
2. How did the existence of electronic documents allow Edward Snowden to steal and release so many secret government records? Could he have done the same thing with paper documents?
3. What were the major problems with the direct effects model—the original theory of media effects?
4. What are the four major types of media effects? Give an example of each.
5. Compare and contrast how the direct effects model, vs. the cultivation theory, would explain the effects of media violence.
6. What kind of questions can you best answer using critical theory? What kind of questions is it weakest at answering?

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