Shopping malls are the "cathedrals of consumption" in the age of branding.

A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection—not an invitation for hypnosis.

—Eco (1979, p. 12)

About a 15-minute drive from where I live in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, there’s a place called the Streets at Southpoint. For anybody who likes to shop (and let’s face it, who doesn’t?) it represents a cornucopia of possibilities for satisfying our consumption cravings. In addition to major department stores such as Nordstrom’s and Sears, all the major clothing brands are represented—Gap, Banana Republic, J. Crew, Ann Taylor, Anthropologie, and so on—as well as various “lifestyle” stores such as Bose (high-end audio), Pottery Barn (home furnishings), and Williams-Sonoma (expensive kitchen stuff). There are also lots of chain restaurants, as well as a 12-screen cinema. In short, it’s a shopper’s dream.

But there’s also something a bit odd about Southpoint. You see, Southpoint didn’t exist 10 years ago, and there aren’t really any streets, as we would understand them in the
conventional sense—places where people walk and talk freely in public. “The streets” are actually a real estate developer’s ideal of what a downtown area might look like with all the grime and messiness and urban feel taken away. So, in addition to the usual indoor, climate-controlled space we think of when we hear the word mall, shoppers can also step outside where the “streets” are lined with stores and restaurants, a fountain, a town square complete with a bandstand. There are even fake, intentionally faded billboard ads for quaint old products painted on the sides of buildings to enhance the urban vibe of the place. There are also kids playing. But wait—those kids are curiously immobile and don’t act like kids at all. In fact, the “kids” in question are actually statues frozen in the act of doing what kids do—riding scooters, playing with the pet dog, and just goofing around. I suspect that if real kids tried doing what the statues are doing, they would be immediately removed from the premises by one of the numerous security guards that control the area.

Welcome to the 21st century conception of the marketplace—a place where not only are branded goods on sale but the entire experience of shopping and consumption is branded. Gone are the traditional conceptions of “the streets,” where we think of people being “street-wise” or having “street knowledge” or “taking it to the streets” (a phrase associated with rebellion and social transformation as, for example, with the civil rights movement). All these terms and associations make us think of an environment where ideas and opinions freely circulate, where people congregate (perhaps in cafés, perhaps on street corners) to get together with friends, argue about the issues of the day, or protest injustice. Indeed, for hundreds of years “the marketplace” has been a public space where the free exchange of both goods and ideas has occurred (the latter sometimes literally from atop a soapbox!).

In the 21st century the marketplace has been largely privatized and branded to create a reality that is very much a reflection of corporate efforts to control the meanings people associate with their everyday experiences. In this chapter I will make the argument that, while meanings and realities are always mediated in some manner (by friends, family, education, and so forth), today much of what we experience and the realities we inhabit and take for granted are largely the product of corporate branding efforts. Corporations, in this sense, not only shape reality for their employees but also for their customers. Of course, on the face of it this is hardly news—corporations have been attempting to influence the way we think (especially to get us to buy their products) for a long, long time. However, I will argue that the corporate meaning management process has reached a point where it profoundly influences our sense of who we are and the world we inhabit.

In addressing the phenomenon of branding, then, we will discuss it as a primarily communicative process that involves the efforts of corporations to shape human identity and influence the cultural and social landscape in order to sell consumer products. Our lives are saturated with corporate, manufactured meanings that, in many respects, lie largely out of our control. What is interesting about this corporate meaning management process is that companies have very much taken to heart the idea that communication is not about transmitting information from A (company) to B (consumer)—a process characteristic of early advertising and branding—but, rather, is about creating complex systems of meaning that shape social realities and people’s identities. Corporations are incredibly sophisticated in their methods of meaning management. As such, it is extremely important that as consumers we are equally sophisticated in our ability to decode and critique the ways such meanings are constructed. In addition, it’s important that we appreciate the extent to which
we participate in this meaning construction process, and how we engage in a “dialogue” with the brands we purchase (Fiske, 1989).

This chapter, then, will be a communication analysis of the branding and consumption process, examining how corporations construct and manage not only meaning systems but also the very identities of consumers; indeed, the fact that we think of ourselves as “consumers” should give us some insight to the degree to which “consumption” and “identity” are closely tied. First, let’s talk about the very idea of branding.

**BRANDING**

In the second half of the 19th century branding emerged as a revolutionary way for companies to market their products to an increasingly literate working population (Olins, 2000). As capitalism and industrialization expanded and new markets developed, companies competed to secure shares of the newly emerging consumer class. Branding their products was the principal way to develop customer loyalty and increase customer base. Quickly, however, branding became both a way to create customer loyalty but also to create customer needs. The expansion of capitalism is dependent on the creation of new consumer markets, as old and established markets become saturated and less profitable. Consumers not only need to be continually persuaded to fulfill their needs and desires but also must be continually convinced of new needs and desires they were previously unaware they had!

In the early days of branding, the “housewife” was the target consumer for branded goods, especially household products.
advertising the very notion of the brand was intimately connected with perishable household items such as laundry detergent, soap, jam, butter, toothpaste, and so forth—precisely the products that homemakers purchased. Of course, for the most part the various kinds of laundry detergent or toothpaste were virtually indistinguishable from one another, and so the brand—via mass advertising—became the only means that one company’s product could be distinguished from another’s.

As Olins (2000, 2003) indicates, companies developed a brand formula that highlighted what the advertising industry referred to as the “unique selling proposition” (USP) of a product—a uniqueness often rooted in highly questionable claims. Such USPs, however, were—and still are—an essential part of the effort to establish a distinct brand identity. According to Olins (2003, p. 53), USPs were based on the following formula, aimed at homemakers:

1. This product is better because it contains X (secret, magic, new, miracle) ingredient that will make it work more effectively.
2. If you use it, your home will look more beautiful or your food will taste much better or you will be even more glamorous than ever before.
3. This will leave you more time to remain even more desirable and attractive for your lovely husband and family.

What I find interesting about this 100-year-old formula is that while branding generally has become far more sophisticated, advertising for household products today pretty much sticks to these principles. TV ads for household products are still almost exclusively aimed at women, who are depicted in commercials as completely obsessed with dirt, odors, and food! My current favorite commercial (though probably long off the air by the time you read this) depicts the efforts of a forlorn, lovesick floor mop that has been cast aside by a homemaker in favor of a more modern floor-cleaning implement. The mop keeps trying to win back the affections of the homemaker who has discarded “him.” But, of course, she rebuffs his wooing efforts—how could she possibly subject her family to an inferior cleaning tool? There’s so much wrong (not to say plain weird) about depicting a mop as a woman’s former love interest that I won’t even begin to analyze it (you might have fun doing this yourself). Suffice it to say that the branding of household products attempts to engage (even exploit) women’s emotions in very particular ways (later we will discuss the idea of “emotional branding”). But in essence, and consistent with the USP described above, all such branding efforts attempt to position women as better, smarter, more caring people by virtue of their purchase of a certain branded product.

One further example of how the USP and the process of need creation were brought together in the early 20th century involves the mouthwash Listerine. Listerine had actually been around for several decades as an ordinary household disinfectant before someone at the company had the bright idea of marketing it as a mouthwash. So, in the 1920s, the company began an aggressive marketing campaign to convince people that halitosis was a serious social problem—a “problem” that, prior to the marketing campaign, was not publically recognized as requiring attention. Similarly, deodorants were first aggressively marketed in the 1920s through an effort to make natural human body odor a problem to be addressed.
Given these examples, then, how might we define a brand? A brand is “the total constellation of meanings, feelings, perceptions, beliefs and goodwill attributed to any market offering displaying a particular sign” (Muniz, 2007). In this sense, a brand can be distinguished from a product. While the latter refers to an item that provides a function or a service for people (cars to be driven, clothes to wear, food to eat, etc.), the former refers to the particular relationships and meanings that a company attempts to construct around its product. So, a product can also be a brand, but from a corporation’s perspective the brand—not the product—is the most important thing. Indeed, Phil Knight—Nike’s former CEO—has argued that Nike makes brands and lifestyles, not products.

Thus, as sociologist Janette Webb (2006) points out, automobile companies such as Ford and GM long ago abandoned the idea that they simply make cars and trucks. Instead, through marketing, advertising, and branding, they focus on “organizing social dependencies on the ownership of a car, and . . . creating the perception that car ownership symbolises status, independence, mobility and opportunity” (p. 56).

A brand, then, is a constructed set of meanings that a company attaches to a particular product. Such meanings are extremely carefully constructed, and sometimes literally billions of dollars (in the case of the pharmaceutical industry, for example) are spent on the careful development of such meanings. What’s interesting about this process, however, is that the meanings associated with products are, by and large, completely arbitrary; that is, there is little or no natural or intrinsic connection between a product and the way it is branded with meanings (recall the discussion of semiotics from Chapter 2).

For example, cigarette brands run the gamut of meanings from ruggedly masculine (Marlboro) to sexy and feminine (Virginia Slims).
is none of these things in and of itself until millions of dollars are spent on branding it in these ways and creating emotional attachments between the product/brand and the consumer. Hardee’s “Thickburgers” are branded as a masculine product that “real men” eat (notice the emphasis on size and weight in Hardee’s commercials), even though there’s nothing “naturally” masculine about eating ground-up cow between two pieces of bread. As such, brands are created through what is referred to as the floating signifier effect. In other words, literally any meaning or quality can be attached to any object or product, including dirt and water (see Critical Case Study 12.1 for an extended example of how the floating signifier effect works).

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**Critical Case Study 12.1**

**Diamonds Are Forever?**

Perhaps the best and most interesting example I can provide of the floating signifier effect involves the diamond industry and, in particular, the selling of diamond rings (I should warn all the women reading this part of the chapter that there’s a good chance they will be very upset with me when I’ve finished explaining this!). Common sense tells us that diamonds are expensive because they are both inherently valuable and very rare. Surprisingly, this is not the case; diamonds are actually incredibly plentiful and have been since the discovery of extensive diamond fields in Southern Africa beginning in the late 19th century (Epstein, 1981, 1982). Furthermore, as a society we instinctively associate diamonds with romance, love, and marriage; most women would probably say that at some time in their lives they’ve imagined the moment when a man would get down on bended knee and ask her to marry him, expensive engagement ring in hand.

So, how do these two facts come together—that is, the ready availability of diamonds and their connection to love and romance? First, when diamonds began to be discovered in great quantities the various mining companies quickly realized that if they didn’t act fast the price of diamonds would fall precipitously; so, in order to preserve the value of their commodity (and maintain the illusion of scarcity), they created a cartel of companies—called DeBeers—that could control the flow of diamonds onto the market and, thus, their price. With the value and distribution of diamonds secured, DeBeers had to figure out how to sell its (now plentiful) product in a way that would not reduce its value. Indeed, despite the existence of the cartel, the price of diamonds had fallen steadily in the first part of the 20th century due to economic crises.

In the late 1930s, however, DeBeers hired an advertising firm—N. W. Ayer—to do two things. First, the firm branded diamonds in a way that created a strong tie with love and romance. They did this in part by employing the new medium of film to show movie idols symbolizing their love for “leading ladies” with diamonds. For example, N. W. Ayer wrote a memo to DeBeers suggesting that the cartel contact screenwriters to encourage them to write into movies scenes of men buying engagement rings for their girlfriends. The agency also recommended giving diamonds to public personalities and even to the Queen of Great Britain to cement the public’s perception of diamonds as symbols of romance and indestructible love.

Second, it was extremely important for the stability of the diamond market that consumers were convinced diamonds should be kept as family treasures and keepsakes, not resold. An estimated half-billion karats of diamonds are privately owned—about 50 times the yearly output of the diamond industry. Imagine what would happen to the market price of diamonds if this half-billion karats (or even a portion of it) went back on the market? To prevent this, N. W. Ayer initiated a campaign around the phrase, “A diamond is forever.” This phrase, created in 1952 by an N. W. Ayer copywriter, is perhaps the most famous phrase in advertising history (even inspiring a James Bond novel and film!) and was incredibly persuasive in creating the image
of diamonds not as a valuable commodity to be bought and sold but as a precious item that is eternal and should be kept for generations.

One final example from the diamond industry effectively demonstrates the power of branding to shape social realities. In the mid-1960s the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson began a campaign to sell diamond engagement rings in Japan. The interesting thing about Japan is that for 1,500 years Japanese culture had followed the Shinto tradition of arranged marriage, with no real prenuptial courtship and romance as we would understand it in the West. In fact, in 1967 less than 5% of Japanese women wore engagement rings. So the Thompson agency began a campaign that branded engagement rings as a symbol of Western modernism and a break from traditional Japanese life. Print ads featured men and women dressed in European clothes, often driving European-model cars, and engaged in nontraditional (for Japan) activities such as hiking, camping, and swimming. The message of the ad campaign was clear—wearing diamonds is a symbol of entry into modern life and a break with the traditions of a premodern Japan. By 1972 27% of Japanese women wore engagement rings; in 1978 this figure had risen to 50%, and by 1981 the figure was about 60%. So, in the space of a mere 14 years, the advertising campaign had displaced 1,500 years of cultural tradition.

In summarizing the branding of diamonds, then, I want to reiterate two points about the floating signifier effect. First, the connection between diamonds and love and romance is an arbitrary, socially constructed relationship that is a result of the diamond industry’s need to market what had become, by the 1930s, a plentiful commodity. Second, and related, in order to prevent the market price of this plentiful product from falling, diamonds had to be branded as precious heirlooms that signified eternity—“a diamond is forever.” If you watch diamond commercials even today, you will see the same “branding” efforts in operation—diamonds are eternal; if you give a diamond to your loved one, your love will also be eternal. So that common-sense, almost instinctive association that most women make between diamonds and love/romance is a socially constructed association; it is the invention of an industry anxious to preserve the illusion that diamonds are rare and precious and intrinsically valuable.

The branding of diamonds is an extremely successful example of how companies manage meanings for consumers, but the reality is that such corporate meaning management is such a routine feature of our everyday lives that we barely notice it.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the expectations, feelings, and sentiments that you associate with a diamond engagement ring? Where do these come from?
2. How many of you (men and women) have been involved in purchasing a diamond engagement ring? What were you told by friends, family, and diamond sellers about the rules and norms for purchasing diamond rings?
3. Analyze commercials from diamond retailers (Zales, Kay Jewelers). How do they construct love and relationships?
4. In groups, brainstorm other examples of consumer products that have been successful in constructing systems of meanings that have become part of our culture. How do these products use the idea of the floating signifier to create meanings? How have these products shaped our lives?

Just to make things a little more complicated, however, not only products are branded; companies are branded, too. Indeed, companies are increasingly aware that consumers not only purchase particular products/brands but also “buy” the company behind the brand (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008, p. 64). Many companies therefore rely on the strength of their corporate brand to engage in brand extension; that is, leveraging the meanings and emotions associated with the company to a variety of different products—products that frequently bear little relationship to one another.

For example, the British company Virgin, which began in the 1970s as a record store, has extended its brand to include an airline (Virgin Atlantic), rail services, cell phones,
financial services, among many others. As you can see, there is little direct connection amongst these various products. But in the spirit of the “floating signifier” these products are connected by the Virgin brand that, as Olins (2003) has described it, is “all attitude” (p. 95). Embodied in the maverick personality of its founder and CEO, Sir Richard Branson, Virgin brands itself as the cool, counterculture, upstart, renegade company that defends the little person against the corporate giants (even though Virgin is now a massive corporate empire!). This attitude was illustrated in Virgin Atlantic’s rivalry with British Airways (whose image is one of tradition and elitism—its company slogan is “Upgrade to BA”), in which Virgin accused BA of running a “dirty tricks” campaign against Virgin to undermine its success. Virgin even went as far as painting “No Way BA” on the sides of its planes. Virgin won a court libel action against BA, receiving millions in damages and further cementing its image as the scrappy underdog fighting the corporate giants.

Not only things and companies are branded; so are people. Michael Jordan is one of the earliest examples of a single individual becoming a brand that extends across a range of companies (Nike, Gatorade, Wheaties, Hanes, etc.). Tiger Woods is an interesting example of branding, especially in the wake of his 2009 sex scandal. When the news reports about his marital infidelity first broke, one of the first issues discussed was how his behavior would impact his brand image, and a lot of the reporting detailed his various corporate sponsors’ reactions to the scandal Buick severed ties with him largely because of its brand focus on family-oriented, more-conservative automobiles and its older consumer base. Finally, Kim Kardashian is an example of a person who is almost all brand and no substance; she exists because of her branding, not because of any talent or skill that was deemed marketable and branded. Indeed, her short-lived marriage to basketball player Kris Humphries (broadcast as a two-part special on E! Entertainment Television) was widely reported to be a publicity stunt aimed at extending the Kardashian brand—an interesting example of how branding and consumption drive even the most personal aspects of people’s lives.

Olins (2003) and others have argued that such is the power of branding that the real wealth and capital of a company lie with the brand rather than with the company’s actual economic assets. As Olins indicates, this means that “many successful corporations are shifting their ground from making and selling to being—to representing a set of values” (p. 18). A Niketown, for example, is less a retail store that sells sports apparel and more “a three-dimensional expression of Nikeness” (p. 67). Even the name, “Niketown,” suggests a place that people inhabit—a space that embodies a certain set of values, beliefs, and meanings. A Niketown store is “Just Do It” brought to life.

The notion that the brand is where the real wealth of a company is located is effectively illustrated by Ford Motor Company’s purchase in 1989 of the British car company Jaguar. Ford purchased the company for $2.5 billion, or $13.32 a share—twice the actual market value of Jaguar (Prokesch, 1989). How could such a deal be justified from a business perspective, especially when, at the time it was purchased, Jaguar was barely breaking even and making fewer than 52,000 cars a year? Ford executives made it clear that they were principally interested in the Jaguar brand, which is associated with luxury, elegance, and prestige.

After it purchased Jaguar, Ford radically altered its construction, building the cars with a Ford chassis and many Ford components so a Jaguar was, in many respects, no longer a
Jaguar. But, of course, in a branded world the actual product is much less important than the image and meanings associated with it. Thus, if Ford were able to use its vast resources to construct large volumes of Jaguars, with some models in the price range of the average middle-class consumer, then many more people would be able to connect themselves to a luxury item (despite the decidedly blue-collar reputation of its parent company). In 2008, however, Ford sold Jaguar to Tata, an Indian automobile manufacturer, for $2.3 billion, having spent a further $10 billion trying to revive the Jaguar brand.

A 2008 report in USA Today provides a sense of how a company’s efforts to extend its brand identity can sometimes result in failure and economic disaster:

Ford spent a fortune acquiring Jaguar. . . . It paid $2.5 billion for Jaguar in 1990 after a bidding war of sorts with General Motors. Industry experts at the time estimated that was about $1.2 billion more than Jaguar was worth. Ford has since said the deal was worse than that. . . .

Meanwhile, Jaguar’s U.S. sales fell from 35,000 to a forecast 17,000 by the end of the year. . . . Despite current sales, Lindland says, both brands have strong images. “It’s the brands that make it worth the money. They’re iconic brands with really storied histories.” Still, she says, “It’s a little bit like Wal-Mart buying Prada.” (Carty, 2008)

I suspect that for most of us the final sentence of this quotation puts company branding into sharp relief. If we know anything about consumption, we know that Wal-Mart and Prada are at opposite ends of the brand spectrum—the former is the dominant retailer in high-volume, low-cost items, while the latter is a high-end fashion company whose clothes and accessories are status symbols for its consumers. Wal-Mart, by definition, would never stock Prada items, and Prada customers would mutiny if its clothes were sold at Wal-Mart, even if the clothes/bags and their labels (extremely important!) remained the same.

Thus, we can say that some brand associations are good, while others contaminate the brands with meanings that are deadly to the health of both brands. Thus, we can speculate that, amongst other factors, Ford’s acquisition of Jaguar failed because it extended Ford’s core brand identity too far away from its historical identity as a producer of cheap, reliable vehicles (remember that the “Model T” Ford was the world’s first mass-produced car). It’s interesting to note that Ford also purchased Volvo in the late 1990s but sold it to a Chinese auto manufacturer in 2010—another sign of its failure to extend brand identity.

A final example illustrates how companies will sometimes purchase other companies not only because of their perceived brand value but also because it allows them to expand into markets far removed from their original reason for being in business. In 1988 Philip Morris tobacco corporation purchased Kraft foods for about 6 times its actual asset value—a decision based purely on the perceived brand strength of Kraft (Klein, 2001). Of course, this takeover also enabled Philip Morris to move into a market—food products—that is far removed from the product with which it is synonymous, especially at a time when tobacco companies were coming under increasing pressure from class-action suits and legislation. I suspect that all of us would have a difficult time buying food and snacks from a tobacco company, but the Kraft brand allows us to do just that and feel okay about it.
It’s clear, then, that the branding process is murky and complex—something to be expected given that companies are dealing with the ways meanings and identities are constructed and communicated. Meaning, as we have discussed, is inherently ambiguous, and it is impossible fully to control and determine how customers take up brand meanings. However, what is clear is that when consumers purchase a particular brand they are not only purchasing a product to be used for something but also engaging in an act of identity construction. In this sense, in developing brands, companies are very consciously exploiting the human desire for affiliation and identification. In the next section we explore in more detail the complex relationship between branding and human identities.

BRANDING AND IDENTITY

Wally Olins (2003) argues that brand affiliation has in many respects replaced religious belief as a central element of human identity. By extension, the shopping mall is perhaps the cathedral of a (post)modern consumer-oriented economy (Ritzer, 2005, 2007). It is not hard to see why some social commentators might make this argument, given that shopping has become the principal leisure activity of many people; where once shopping was something that had to be done out of necessity, now it is a defining activity in people’s sense of self. President George W. Bush even encouraged people to shop as a way to help them overcome the sense of national malaise and personal trauma in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The central role of consumption in creating a sense of self is supported by the work of sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) in his widely read book Bowling Alone. Putnam argues that in the past few decades Americans have experienced a decline in ”social capital”; that is, the sense of well-being and identity derived from our social networks and involvement in our communities. As our memberships in clubs and societies have declined, so has the amount of time we spend actually interacting with other human beings in social contexts, and so we feel increasingly isolated from one another and disconnected from the communities in which we live. We might argue, then, that consumption has at least partially replaced the role of clubs and societies in our sense of identity and well-being. Consumption provides us with a sense of psychological and emotional security and provides connection—albeit superficial—to the world and other people. Thus, where people once joined bowling clubs, softball leagues, and voluntary associations, today they pay a visit to the postmodern cathedral of consumption—the mall—in order to gain a sense of identity and connectedness.

This may seem like an exaggerated claim about the power of consumption (and, hence, of corporations) in our lives, but it is worth exploring further the ways corporations attempt to create a sense of connection between their brands and the consumers who identify with and purchase them. As Olins (2003) has indicated, branding is an act of seduction, and in order to win a share of the market, companies must win a share of people’s minds. This act of seduction is fundamentally a communication process.

As I hope I have made clear, corporations do not want us simply to buy products; they want us to enter into a relationship with a brand that we see as an expression of who we are as people. For example, it says something about our identities that we choose to
purchase Ralph Lauren or Tommy Hilfiger clothing rather than Diesel or Sean John or Ted Baker. Brand guru Marc Gobé (2001) probably best captures this relationship with his description of what he calls **emotional branding**:

> Emotional branding provides the means . . . for connecting products to the consumer in an emotionally profound way. It focuses on the most compelling aspect of the human character; the desire to transcend material satisfaction, and experience emotional fulfillment. A brand is uniquely situated to achieve this because it can tap into the aspirational desires which underlie human motivation. (p. xv)

According to Gobé, buying a particular brand can take us beyond mere material satisfaction and move us to a higher plane of existence—one that fulfills us in an emotionally profound way. While perhaps rather fanciful, statements such as Gobé’s do provide interesting insights into how brand managers attempt to tap into and influence our sense of who we are. From a communication perspective, it’s interesting to explore how brand managers think about the way this process of influence works. Gobé (2001) argues that “emotional branding is a means of creating a personal dialogue with consumers. Consumers today expect their brands to know them—intimately and individually—with a solid understanding of their needs” (p. xxii).

Here we see that branding is not simply a matter of imposing meaning and identity on passive consumers but, rather, involves thinking about the “brand relationship” in active and dynamic terms—the consumer enters into a **dialogue** with the brand. Notice here how both the consumer and the brand are conceived as having agency—the brand is not viewed simply as something that has meaning to the consumer but, rather, as an active (human?) participant in an ongoing dialogue. Gobé’s quote above even implies a high level of intimacy and connection between the brand and the consumer, very like a close friendship or even a romantic relationship.

In developing successful brands, then, companies have taken to heart a very important lesson about how communication works. Back in Chapter 1 we discussed the limitations of a conduit, or transmission, model of communication, arguing instead that communication is a dynamic process of creating complex meanings. Companies understand that simply transmitting the idea behind a brand to consumers is less effective than getting consumers to be active participants in the meaning creation process. In this sense, brands are, to a certain degree, “open texts” that allow for individual interpretations.

A classic example of this kind of brand is Hello Kitty. Since 1974, when this image was created, it has helped turn the Japanese Sanrio company into a billion-dollar corporation. About 10,000 Hello Kitty items are available in North America, all emblazoned with the simple drawing of the mouthless, blank-faced cat with the red bow in her hair. Why is this image so wildly popular, adored by children and adults alike? As journalist Rob Walker (2008) points out, Hello Kitty doesn’t have a strong personality we can identify with, such as that of Mickey Mouse or Snoopy; in fact, she has no definable character at all. In short, as Walker states, “Hello Kitty stands for nothing. Or perhaps for anything” (p. 17). Hello Kitty is, in this sense, an open text, “waiting to be interpreted.” Her very simplicity allows consumers to project whatever thoughts, feelings, or emotions they wish onto Hello Kitty—she
can be seen as cute, welcoming, solemn, cool, camp, and so on. As such, Hello Kitty is a great example of a brand that exploits humans’ desire to construct a world that is meaningful to them; it taps into consumers’ ability to engage actively in sense-making practices that are consistent with their own sense of identity. See Critical Case Study 12.2 for an example of how the “open text” nature of branding can sometimes have negative consequences for those brands.

As we’ve discussed in this chapter, a company’s brand is considered a crucial part of its wealth. Some commentators estimate that up to 75% of a company’s wealth is tied up in its brand, and any company will go to great lengths to protect that brand. Companies thus spend millions of dollars in their efforts to cultivate and nurture the meanings attached to their brands. However, one thing I hope you have learned about communication and meaning is that it is completely impossible to corral and control the ways meanings work. The meanings of brands (or anything else) are inherently ambiguous and are thus always open to reinterpretation and change.

Sometimes companies deliberately manage shifts in meaning of their brands in order to appeal to a different demographic. In recent years, for example, Nike and Adidas have strategically shifted from a purely sports brand toward a fashion brand associated with “streetwear” and “urbanwear.” These companies and others have carefully cultivated what some have called “gangster chic” (Neate, Wood, & Hinkley, 2011) that appeals to a more youthful—primarily male—demographic.

However, the risks entailed by such shifts in meaning are reflected in what happened during the riots in several cities in the United Kingdom during August 2011. Many of the rioters and looters appeared in the streets in such “urbanwear” and even specifically targeted for looting stores that carried the labels associated with this clothing. A massive public relations disaster occurred for Adidas when a photograph of a rioter dressed entirely in Adidas clothing (and standing in front of a burning car) appeared on the front page of several national newspapers. Adidas was forced to issue a statement saying, “Adidas condemns any antisocial or illegal activity. Our brand has a proud sporting heritage and such behavior goes against everything we stand for” (quoted in Neate et al., 2011, p. 11). Of course, the fact that Adidas has for many years cultivated an image that has little to do with “sporting tradition” highlights how “meaning management” is a precarious process that can seriously backfire. Adidas and other companies have been eager to exploit an image that draws, in many respects, on a culture that has been associated with disenfranchised and marginalized (poor and minority) populations, and then they are shocked when their strategy comes back to bite them in the butt.

On a much more frivolous (but related) note, Abercrombie & Fitch recently offered to pay “The Situation” (of Jersey Shore fame) to stop wearing its clothing, arguing that he was harming the company’s brand. In this case, I suspect that Abercrombie & Fitch was engaged in a creative public relations stunt as a way to draw attention to its brand. However, it is another indication of the degree to which companies are sensitive to any negative meanings and interpretations that may get attached to their brands.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on your own consumption habits. Are there particular brands that you buy consistently? Why?
2. What meanings are, for you, associated with the brands you purchase? How did these associations arise?
3. Are there brands you would not purchase? Why?
4. Reflect in general on your consumption habits and the ways the brands you use make you feel. What does this tell you about your identity as a consumer in the broader society? How is your life shaped by your consumption practices?
MARKETING, “MURKETING,” AND CORPORATE COLONIZATION

One of the biggest changes that have occurred in the past decade or so in the process of branding and consumption is the way companies market their products to consumers. Relatively speaking, achieving brand visibility used to be a fairly straightforward process; companies thought in terms of mass audiences who were watching TV, listening to the radio, or reading newspapers and magazines. The trick was to market brands in a way that had a wide appeal and developed a large, loyal group of consumers. In this context, the consumers themselves were viewed as fairly passive recipients of marketing messages (think of the stereotypical Homer Simpson-like “couch potato” who’s glued to the TV and is a brand manager’s dream in terms of susceptibility to advertising).

Then, along came what Walker (2008) calls the “click” phenomenon. With the emergence of new communication technologies (the Internet, digital video recorders, smartphones, etc.) audiences are no longer “captive” in the way they once were—entertainment and media choices are almost unlimited, and audiences are one “click” away from choosing a new form of distraction. In such a media/marketing environment, traditional branding methods are ineffective. Why spend millions of dollars on TV commercials if viewers simply digitally record their favorite shows and fast-forward right through them? So marketers had to get creative, inventing what Rob Walker describes as murketing.

Whereas in traditional marketing strategies a fairly clear distinction exists between the programming of a particular medium and advertising (we know when we’re watching a “commercial break” and when we’re watching an actual program), with murketing the distinction is basically erased. At one level, murketing has been around for a long time; companies have used “product placement” in TV shows and movies to increase “brand awareness” (next time you go to a movie see how many examples of product placement you can identify). In the past few years, however, the extent to which branding and everyday life have merged together has exploded. From a corporate perspective, the point is that if, indeed, consumers can exercise much greater freedom in choosing brands and integrating them into their “lifestyles,” then developing brand loyalty requires a much more sophisticated set of marketing strategies.

With murketing the trick is to blend a brand seamlessly into everyday life and popular culture—to be successful, a brand must become an integral part of the way people express their identities. Again, we are back to the idea that consumers do not buy products but, rather, extensions of their own sense of self and relationship to the world and others. In murketing, then, the relationship between cultural expression and commercial expression is blurred.

In addition, murketing relies on a much more dynamic relationship between brand and consumer. While corporations have long relied on consumer feedback and brand research strategies such as focus groups to hone their brand image, now consumers play an active role in promoting and branding products. For example, companies will frequently recruit unpaid volunteers to engage shoppers in casual conversations about particular products. Indeed, it’s quite possible that you’ve had such conversations in stores yourselves, unaware that the person to whom you were speaking had a vested interest in promoting a particular product.
Axe men’s deodorant (owned by the British conglomerate Unilever) has developed a phenomenally successful campaign that heavily depends on blurring the relationship between everyday culture and branding. For example, it has made fake documentaries about skateboarders (complete with moves that incorporate and are named after Axe products), has created its own “girl band” complete with MTV-style videos (the Bom Chicka Wah Wah Girls), and has its own YouTube channel, currently featuring an Axe graphic novel called *Axe Anarchy* (check it out at [http://www.youtube.com/user/axe?blend=5&ob=4](http://www.youtube.com/user/axe?blend=5&ob=4)). Recently, Axe has promoted a campus-focused “Axe Undie Run Challenge,” described on Axe’s Facebook page as “the world’s sexiest charity event.” On this same Facebook page, you could pay a visit to the Women’s Attention Deficit Disorder Research and Prevention Center.

What’s fascinating about this entire branding campaign is that it says little or nothing about Axe’s quality as a product (“It keeps you dry”; “It smells good”) but, rather, constructs a set of meanings to which the product itself is secondary. In fact, Axe’s branding strategy was deliberately aimed not to compete against other deodorants on the market. As one of its brand managers stated,

> To be successful as a youth brand is to realize that [deodorant] is not what you’re competing against. . . . You’re competing against things like movies, television shows, sporting events, other advertisers, the Internet. . . . You have to become part of pop culture. (quoted in Walker, 2008, pp. 132–133)

In other words, Axe is not selling a deodorant but a particular young masculine identity that taps into (and creates) popular culture expressions.

One final way to get a sense of how branding is weaving itself into the very fabric of popular culture and human identity is to explore how corporations engage in brand research. You are probably familiar with (and may even have been involved in) focus-group research. Companies (or at least their brand management consultants) bring together groups of people from the demographic they are targeting and get their opinions on a particular branded product. This could involve anything from taste-testing a new soda to viewing a yet-to-be released Hollywood movie.

These days, however, such tried-and-tested methods have been supplemented by more sophisticated techniques as companies seek to get an edge in ever more competitive and crowded markets. As such, *brand ethnography* has become a commonly used research method for developing branded products. In an earlier chapter we talked about ethnography as a field method used by culture researchers to explore the meanings and identities of members of a given culture. In the context of brand development, ethnography is used to examine how people interact with and use products in their everyday lives.

For example, in her study of children and consumption, Juliet Schor (2004) reports that brand researchers now regularly visit people’s homes to study the way products get used once they are purchased. In marketing products to children, researchers spend hours interacting with kids at home, asking questions and observing how they use products ranging from online games to bath soap. In one ethnographic study, Schor reports that brand researchers recommended to a manufacturer of bubble bath that it repackage its product to better take advantage of kids’ tendency to turn soap containers into toys—a finding that could not have been made without direct observation and questioning in the home environment.
Ethnography is now also used extensively at the point of purchase in stores. Brand researchers spend many hours observing people as they walk around stores and interact with products. Schor even provides examples of researchers fitting kids with hidden cameras to document their behavior as they walk around stores. The researchers then watch the footage with the kids and ask them questions about why they looked at certain products, what they liked/didn’t like, and so forth. Such information provides companies with important information about consumers’ relationship with their products. For example, Paco Underhill (1999), one of the pioneers of the ethnographic study of consumer behavior, heads a company that records about 20,000 hours of in-store behavior annually. As a result of this systematic observation, he has developed principles such as “the law of the invariant right turn” (consumers invariably turn right rather than left when they enter a store) and the “decompression zone” (the area where we all pause, right after entering a store, to take stock of the situation and decide what we want to do). While such principles may seem relatively banal, they provide companies with incredibly important information about consumer behavior and how that might affect the placement of particular products and brands in stores.

In this section, then, we have focused on how, as an extension of efforts to link branding and individual identities, companies are increasingly attempting to blur the distinction between branding and everyday life. Indeed, brands no longer try simply to reflect popular culture—they attempt to shape it in their own image. For brands to be truly successful and powerful, they must become part of the ways people/consumers engage in everyday sense making and meaning construction. But like the 2010 Leonardo DiCaprio movie *Inception*, the real trick is to provide people with a sense of agency while at the same time shaping their sense of reality and the choices they make—such is the power of 21st-century branding.

**ORGANIZATIONS, BRANDING, AND THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF**

One of the very core ideas at the center of the branding process is the notion of the sovereign consumer. Going well beyond the age-old slogan that “the customer is always right,” this idea envisions a brand-new (excuse the pun!) relationship between production and consumption in which companies strive to anticipate and adapt to a fast-moving and global consumer market. As we have already seen in this chapter, this new relationship is very much framed in terms of an intimate, almost romantic connection between producer and consumer in which brands meet the most important identity needs and desires of the sovereign consumer. Indeed, books on branding with titles such as *Romancing the Customer: Maximizing Brand Value Through Power Relationship Management* (Temporal & Trott, 2001); *Primal Branding: Create Zealots for Your Company, Your Brand, and Your Future* (Hanlon, 2006); *Passion Brands: Getting to the Heart of Branding* (Edwards & Day, 2005); and *Emotional Branding* (Gobé, 2001) provide much insight into how companies frame the producer–consumer relationship as one that exists at a deep—even primitive—emotional level.

However, the idea of the sovereign consumer has not only altered the producer–consumer relationship but has also fundamentally changed the way organizations operate. As we saw in Chapter 8, the “soulless” bureaucratic form has increasingly given way to the fast-moving, adaptive, decentralized organizational form that is responsive to changing
environments and consumer tastes. While unchanging bureaucratic structures could meet the needs of the easily pleased consumers of the Fordist era (“You can have any color car as long as it’s black”), the constantly changing needs of the postmodern, post-Fordist consumer require flexible organizations that can shift gears quickly.

One of the consequences of this “cult[ure] of the consumer,” as sociologists Paul Du Gay and Graeme Salaman (1992) have described it, is that the very idea of branding and the sovereign consumer is increasingly applied to organization members themselves. While in Fordist organizations employee success was predicated on loyalty, technical skill, and seniority (as well as blending in to the prevailing corporate culture), in the post-Fordist company success is heavily dependent on employees taking an entrepreneurial approach to their work and identities. In other words, employees are increasingly required to brand themselves as a way to become distinct and provide “value-added” performance for the company. In the (post)modern corporation, everyone must adopt and cultivate an entrepreneurial self. Du Gay argues that this shift has involved imposing a model of customer– producer relations on internal organization processes, hence blurring the spheres of production and consumption.

When employees are asked to brand themselves, then their work and nonwork selves become increasingly interrelated, with work becoming a constant performance of a carefully nurtured professional identity that visibly contributes to the company’s bottom line. In this context, the employee’s body can be a key element in such branding, as the employee strives to present a particular corporate image through dress and bodily comportment.

A number of commentators have pointed out that this new discourse of enterprise and self-branding has a distinct moral tone to it, such that “becoming a better worker is represented as the same thing as becoming a more virtuous person, a better self” (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992, p. 626). Thus, as well as the “sovereign customer” there is also the “sovereign worker” who is responsible for making him or herself into “a more virtuous and empowered human being” (p. 627) through efforts to add value to the company he or she works for. In this scenario, workers are responsible for their successes and failures, for their own careers; they are framed as self-actualizing individual agents who engage in personal acts of choice, much like the sovereign customers whom they serve (including their fellow coworkers).

I suspect that many of you reading this chapter have been asked on more than one occasion to think about ways you can “brand” yourselves in a way that’s different from other college graduates in a competitive job market. Of course, there is nothing wrong with developing a distinct set of abilities that make you stand out from the crowd, but oftentimes such “branding” is less about particular skills and more about the packaging—just like consumer products, students are increasingly being asked to focus on image rather than substance as a way to “market” themselves. In other words, they are being asked to engage in a “discourse of enterprise” where the focus is marketing and branding rather than engaging in an educational process. Our discussion in Chapter 1 of David Brooks’s (2001) essay “The Organization Kid” is an example of how pervasive this discourse of enterprise has become among college students.

For example, I suspect that most of you reading this have, at one time or another, complained about a final grade you received in a class. If you are honest with yourselves, you
might admit that sometimes your complaint was based less on the feeling that the quality of your work deserved a better grade and more on your concern about how a “C” on your transcript would affect your personal brand—your image and meaning in the eyes of a potential employer. When a discourse of enterprise pervades even an educational environment, then one of the consequences is that education becomes less about developing critical thinking skills and more about producing employees/consumers who can perform to meet the needs of a constantly shifting image and symbolic environment.

In the final section of this chapter we will discuss the relationship between branding and organizational ethics.

Critical Technologies 12.1
Do You Have Klout?

I’m writing this on Cyber Monday—the "officially" designated day after Black Friday when everyone is supposed to shop online and receive huge savings on purchases. I guess shopping online is safer than actually going to the stores, especially given the violent incidents that are now a routine part of the media reporting on Black Friday—this year a woman at a Wal-Mart in Los Angeles used pepper spray on fellow customers to clear her way to the Xbox console she craved.

Of course, the Internet and social media have had a massive impact on branding and marketing. As we discussed in this chapter, “the click factor” (Walker, 2008) completely changed the ways brands needed to market themselves, requiring a much greater level of interactivity between customer and brand. It’s estimated that as of 2011, 80% of companies engage in some form of social media marketing, such as Twitter and Facebook campaigns (Manjoo, 2011).

One of the newest developments in the world of marketing and social media is the Klout score. Developed by the online company it’s named for, your Klout score is a measure between 1 and 100 that indicates your personal influence online. According to Klout, your score consists of three elements: (1) true reach, or the number of people you influence; (2) amplification, or how much you influence people (how many people spread your messages further); and (3) network, or the influence of the people in your “true reach” (klout.com/corp/kscore). For example, Justin Bieber’s Klout score is a perfect 100; President Obama’s is 87 (Manjoo, 2011). No irony there, then. Apparently, some people are putting their Klout scores on their résumés—another bizarre example of how personal branding and the entrepreneurial self are seen as increasingly important. Do you know what your Klout score is? Without checking, I’m pretty certain mine is 1.

But how does a Klout score help companies sell stuff? Klout (“Measuring influence since 2008”) works on the principle that “our friendships and professional connections have moved online, making influence measurable for the first time in history. When you recommend, share, and create content you impact others” (http://klout.com/corp/about). Klout has collected data on the influence of more than 100 million people online. Companies come to Klout so they can target messages to potential customers who they know have a high degree of social media impact. For example, Klout can identify for Nike the most influential people in Los Angeles who talk about athletic shoes; Nike can then direct marketing messages to these people, and Klout can track how, via the “klout” of these influential people, the marketing messages spread across the social media landscape. Company marketing of brands is thus mediated through professional and personal relationships. Again, according to Klout, 90% of customers trust peer recommendations, while only 33% trust ads.

From a company’s perspective, there’s no way of measuring precisely how such use of social media impacts sales—unlike with more conventional advertising, where data can show the return of every dollar spent on advertising. However, this does not seem to bother companies—it is estimated that money spent on social media advertising will increase from $2.1 billion in 2010 to $8 billion in 2014.
The Ethics of Branding

This chapter has provided a critical examination of corporate branding. However, is it fair to say that all branding is problematic or even unethical? Branding has been with us for 150 years, and there is little doubt that it will continue to define our relationship to organizations and corporations. One might argue that branding in and of itself is not unethical; rather, certain branding practices are. The reality is that in contemporary organizational life branding is an intrinsic element of what all organizations do on a routine basis. Any organization that needs to maintain a relationship with various stakeholder groups (customers, employees, shareholders, community members, etc.) has to articulate a set of meanings to those groups that enables them to identify with the organization in a particular way. Indeed, most corporations and their employees would probably argue that they believe strongly in the values embodied in their brand.

And, of course, branding is by no means limited to for-profit organizations. Nonprofit, volunteer, charitable, even government and public institutions engage in branding in an effort to cultivate stakeholder relationships. As a department chair at a public university I am constantly aware of the need to raise funds to support my department’s teaching and research missions. And, as my development officer frequently tells me, such fundraising is most successful when the department has a strong “brand” that it can pitch to potential donors. As students at colleges and universities, you are probably aware of branding efforts at your own institution that attempt to pitch it to consumers (i.e., you!) in a certain way. For example, your college or university might develop a brand that highlights its friendly, “family” atmosphere (easier to do when there are 3,000 students on campus rather than 60,000!) or its tradition of a strong liberal arts education or its belief in putting students’ needs first. Or it might have an unofficial brand as a “party” school!

None of these branding efforts are intrinsically unethical; this occurs only when there is a contradiction between an organization’s branding efforts and its everyday organizational practices. For example, if a university brands itself as student oriented, with frequent contact between faculty and students, and then new students discover that teaching is neglected in favor of faculty research, one might argue that such a university behaves unethically in trying to part students from their hard-earned tuition dollars. Or if a company brands itself as environmentally responsible as a way to increase its profits but then exploits nonrenewable resources (a practice described as “greenwashing”), one might legitimately accuse that company of unethical behavior.

However, not all ethical questions are quite so straightforward in the world of branding. At the beginning of this chapter I provided a description of the consumer experience provided by the “Disneyesque” environment of the Streets at Southpoint. Are the developers of this shopping destination unethical? Not in any straightforward sense, and the consumers would probably describe an enjoyable retail/leisure experience. As a critical theorist, though, I am concerned with a broader set of ethical issues regarding the relationship between branding and the role of the modern corporation in everyday life, or with what we identified in an earlier chapter as the process of “corporate colonization” (Deetz, 1992a). That is, to what extent should corporations play a role in defining who we are and how we see ourselves as connected human beings who are members of broader communities? Who gets to decide what is important and what is not in our lives?
My sense is that the ultimate goal of corporate branding efforts is to mediate as many aspects of human experience and identity construction as possible. Certainly, the development of marketing suggests that the days of a relatively clear separation of corporate advertising and everyday life are long gone. We live in an environment that is completely saturated with mediated, branded meanings. It’s almost as though nothing is meaningful until it is framed for us by a corporate sponsor. As such, corporations and the meaning systems they create play a disproportionately large role in defining who we are as people.

Some brand theorists have argued that branding and democracy are tied together in a positive manner (Gobé, 2002). Marc Gobé (2007), for example, argues that

[branding] is not about money: branding is about life, it is about respect, it is about success, it is about love, freedom, and hope. It is about building bonds everyone can trust. . . . There is an economic and psychological divide that exists between societies. If brands are the great equalizer, shouldn’t they then inspire, motivate, problem solve? Shouldn’t brands be part of the solution, not the problem? Shouldn’t brands continue to foster freedom of choice? (pp. 65, 66)

Obviously, such a perspective makes a close connection between consumption and democracy. But do we really want to live in a society where freedom is defined in terms of the ability to purchase consumer goods that help us feel good about ourselves? Is having the choice between hundreds of different brands of soft drinks (a significant factor in obesity rates) or being able to choose how you want your burger prepared an appropriate litmus test for freedom and democracy? If, as Gobé suggests, Coca-Cola via its branding provides a message of optimism and freedom, and if Nike is a symbol of infinite possibilities (Just Do It!), then what does that say about the nature of democracy in the 21st century?

One of the issues that brand theorists such as Gobé consistently ignore is that, ultimately, branding is about making profits for corporations and their shareholders. While it is possible to argue that brands embody principles of freedom and democracy, such a perspective adopts a very superficial view of democracy, overlooking at least two issues. First, because of the floating signifier effect, any meaning attached to a brand is purely arbitrary and, thus, the product of careful marketing—a brand signifies freedom only to the extent that its corporate parent wants it to! Second, in genuine democracies, ordinary people have a strong voice in the ways their political and civil interests are represented. As such, consumption is a form of pseudo-democracy that provides the illusion of participation and empowerment but is carefully mediated and managed by corporate interests.

Benjamin Barber (2007) has argued that “consumer empowerment” (a favorite phrase among brand managers) basically involves choice without consequences. We can feel empowered by our choice of a particular clothing brand, or in voting for our favorite American Idol contestant (more people vote for that show’s contestants than for presidential candidates), but it’s an activity that ultimately is intensely private and isolated. Genuine democracy involves engaged, informed citizens participating with one another in the public sphere and vigorously debating the issues of the day. As we argued earlier, the goal of branding is to get us to respond in emotional rather than rational ways to products. Indeed, the phenomenon of “buyer remorse,” which we’ve all experienced, is a great illustration of how our rational faculties kick in once it’s too late!
In many ways, such brand relationships stand in opposition to strong democracy, which requires careful and thoughtful examination of issues and active engagement with other members of our communities. As Barber (2007) argues, however, “shopping seems to have become a more persuasive marker of freedom than voting . . . and what we do alone in the mall counts more importantly in shaping our destiny than what we do together in the public square” (p. 37).

Perhaps the most important test of ethical or unethical behavior involves how companies treat the most vulnerable members of society—children. There is strong evidence suggesting that corporations are increasingly targeting children and teenagers directly and attempting to bypass the influence of parents. In her book *Born to Buy*, sociologist Juliet Schor (2004) argues that “kids and teens are now the epicenter of consumer culture” (p. 9) and U.S. children are “bonded to brands.” Research shows that the average 10-year-old knows 300 to 400 brands and that in 2004 $15 billion in brand marketing was directed at children.

Corporations are fully aware of the revenue opportunities that children represent, and, indeed, the purchasing power of kids has risen considerably in the past two decades or so. Schor (2004) reports that children aged four to twelve made $6.1 billion in purchases in 1989, $23.4 billion in 1997, and $30 billion in 2002. . . . Older kids, aged twelve to nineteen, spend even more: they accounted for $170 billion of personal spending in 2002, or a weekly average of $101 per person. (p. 23)

In order to gain their share of this revenue, corporations have become increasingly sophisticated in their branding efforts. Schor (2004) reports on a fascinating interview she conducted with Nancy Shalek, president of the Shalek Agency—a brand management firm. In speaking about advertising brands to children, Shalek stated the following:

Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you’re a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them that they’ll be a dork if they don’t, you’ve got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it’s very easy to do with kids because they’re the most emotionally vulnerable. (p. 65)

It’s interesting to compare this quote with Gobé’s earlier comments about emotional branding and the need to provide consumers with “emotional fulfillment.” The problem with adopting the same approach with children, however, is that their identities are very much in flux and unformed, and they have no clear sense of what emotional fulfillment means, except when they are provided with adult guidance and strong, nurturing role models. Advertisers and brand managers understand this and frequently attempt to circumvent the parental gatekeeper role in appealing to children.

For example, brand industry analysts understand the importance of the *nag factor* in purchases; that is, the power children possess in pestering their parents to buy certain products. According to the original “nag factor” study conducted in 1998, 70% of parents are susceptible to kids’ pestering for purchases. Indeed, marketers advise their clients that...
many products will not sell unless kids request them. And this does not apply just to products aimed at kids. Even expensive consumer items such as cars are marketed to children because advertisers understand the powerful role children play in purchase decisions. Thus, one of the reasons you see so many kids in car commercials is not so that parents will identify with the carmaker; rather, it increases the possibility that kids will identify with the brand of automobile and influence their parents’ choice! Some brand analysts would even maintain that no food product has been truly successful unless it has been marketed to kids rather than mothers, even though parents make the food purchases for the household. Such is the “nagging” power of children.

One might argue, then, that branding is unethical when it develops strategies that attempt to exploit the psychological and emotional insecurities of children. Kids need a sense of security and the knowledge that they’re loved in order to develop into stable adults. When advertisers deliberately exploit these insecurities in the name of kid “empowerment,” when they market products in ways that tell kids they are uncool if they don’t own them, I would argue they are acting unethically. Similarly, pitching brands to children in an effort to circumvent parental authority and deliberately exploit the “nag factor” is also unethical.

In sum, I would suggest that branding is not, by definition, unethical; all organizations have both the right and the responsibility to construct meaningful relationships with their various stakeholders, and branding is one part of that process. Branding does become ethically suspect, however, when organizations adopt communication and meaning construction strategies that (a) contradict their actual business practices; (b) deliberately exploit the vulnerabilities of less powerful members of society; or (c) present consumption as an empowering, defining feature of who we are as people. Consumption is a disempowering act to the extent that it undermines our sense of ourselves as engaged citizens and makes a fetish out of our relationships to objects (the Miller Lite commercial featuring the guy who can’t tell his girlfriend he loves her but has no problem expressing his love for his Miller Lite, while funny, exemplifies this fetishism). Consumption makes us all a little more private, a little more isolated, and a little more disengaged from the world and the people around us.

**CONCLUSION**

One of the ironies of this chapter is that by the time you read it many of the examples I have used to illustrate branding are likely to be outdated. Brands, by definition, have to stay current in order to maintain their market share. More important, brands constantly have to create new “needs” that consumers take up as part of their identities. Thus, for example, where once everyone drank water from the faucet, now we drink branded water from bottles, even though the water purchased in bottles is often inferior in quality to water from the faucet (it’s amazing to me that the bottle of water one carries around can be a status symbol!). The latest development is “smart water” (notice again how brands are given human qualities to make them appealing). Water, by its very nature, is a blank canvas on which all kinds of meanings (floating signifiers) and identity associations can be constructed.
If, in a postmodern, consumption-oriented society, brands and identities are tied closely together, then the constantly shifting nature of the branding process leads to a constant sense of slippage and insecurity regarding our sense of who we are in the world. While brand managers can speak of “empowering” consumers through their brands, the reality is that it is a fleeting and superficial sense of empowerment that offers little in the way of a genuine connection to self, others, and the communities we inhabit. The branded identity that gave us a sense of security last year doesn’t provide that same sense of security this year. As Rob Walker (2008) points out, such a relationship between branding and identity leads to “terminal materialism” as we engage in a constant, fruitless, and ultimately unsatisfying search for the next consumption high. Tying our identities to consumption practices pretty much guarantees we will be in constant search of an always elusive sense of security about who we are.

The same sense of insecurity around identity issues occurs in the workplace. In a postmodern, post-Fordist organizational environment, the branding process goes beyond consumer products to include employees as well, who must constantly brand and rebrand themselves in a constantly changing, turbulent organizational environment. This notion of an “entrepreneurial self” (Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000) means that employees must constantly strive to be better, always have an edge over other employees, always be selling themselves. As a Fortune magazine article states, “Forget old notions of advancement and loyalty. In a more flexible, more chaotic world of work you’re responsible for your career” (quoted in Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000, p. 228). Of course, such a sense of self is frequently unsustainable, leading to increased stress, a lack of work–life balance, and overall poorer life quality (perhaps in spite of more disposable income).

Branding, then, is a fundamentally communicative process that plays a pivotal role in how we view ourselves and the world around us. For some, branding is precisely what gives the world meaning and significance. But this meaning and significance is superficial. Because branding is such a pervasive and all-encompassing element of our world, it is important that we understand the fundamentally communicative processes through which branding works.

Of course, as educated people we would probably claim to be largely immune to the siren call of advertising messages, but the reality is that we are all susceptible to branding in some way. We are all loyal to some degree to particular brands or get excited by the release of a new branded item. Indeed, while I was writing this chapter, thousands of people were spending hours in line outside Apple stores to purchase the new iPad. As New York Times reporter Brad Stone stated after talking to people standing in line to purchase the iPad, “No one can really say what they’re going to do with the iPad, but they’re getting one anyway” (Gallagher, 2010).

The important thing about branding, I think, is that we are aware of the extent to which it shapes our lives and are thus able to be more reflective about our relationship to a world of images, symbols, and meanings mediated by corporate interests. As Rob Walker (2008) states, “Considering yourself immune to advertising and branding is not a solution, it’s part of the problem.”
1. Choose a brand with which you are familiar and perform an analysis of the brand identity it cultivates. Who does the brand appeal to? What meanings do you associate with the brand? Why? What are the various communicative elements that make up the branding process? How does the brand appeal to elements of popular culture?

2. Take a trip to the mall. Reflect on your experience as you walk around the stores. How do you feel? If you choose to purchase something, reflect on the experience; what were your feelings before, during, and after the purchase? Can you identify various ways you are encouraged to make purchases?

**KEY TERMS**

- brand 285
- brand ethnography 294
- brand extension 287
- emotional branding 291
- entrepreneurial self 296
- floating signifier effect 286
- murketing 293
- nag factor 300
- sovereign consumer 295

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Globalization has transformed the relationships among people, organizations, and communication processes.

Part-time barista wanted. Must speak Danish.
—Sign on the door of a café in Copenhagen, Denmark, 2011

There’s an old saying, attributed to the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, that Britain and America are “two countries separated by a common language.” When I first arrived in the United States from the United Kingdom in the early 1980s to go to graduate school, I was constantly reminded of this phrase. In some ways it was easier for me to make myself understood in Paris, France, than in Carbondale, Illinois, and my French isn’t that great! Of course, part of this “separation” was due to differences in U.K. and U.S. vernacular for everyday objects: car bonnet, not car hood; chips, not french fries; potato crisps, not potato chips; a jumper is a sweater, not a dress; pants are underwear, not outerwear; and so on. My most embarrassing (and funny) moment came when, in my first semester of teaching,
I told students to bring to the midterm exam a pencil and a rubber (Britspeak for eraser). I think they wondered what kind of exam it would be!

But what most made me feel like a fish out of water was a profound feeling of isolation from my native culture: TV was quite different (More than four channels? How do I navigate all this? And what’s with the commercials every 5 minutes?); the supermarkets made no sense (Why do I need 50 different breakfast cereals to choose from? And why is milk in those massive 1-gallon containers?); and I had no way of keeping up with news back home, other than the 2-week-old British newspapers at the library and the weekly letters (yes, letters) from my mom (international calls cost about $1 per minute in the early 1980s, and I was living on a meager grad-student stipend).

The picture I’ve painted of my early experiences in the United States now seems rather quaint; in the past 30 years globalization processes have profoundly transformed our relationship to the world and one another. Indeed, my own experience of the U.S.–U.K. relationship is very much one of cultural convergence, in which the two societies have grown increasingly similar in lots of ways, both profound and superficial. An American visiting the United Kingdom today would see many familiar consumer-culture landmarks: McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Domino’s, The Disney Store, Gap, Abercrombie & Fitch, Starbucks, and so on. Similarly, British culture has migrated across the Atlantic in a big way; the “British Invasion” that started with The Beatles has become a veritable flood. It’s hard to turn TV on these days without seeing a British personality (Simon Cowell, John Oliver on The Daily Show, Craig Ferguson on The Late Show, and so on), and there’s even a TV channel called BBC America. And most important, at least to me, Fox Soccer Channel and ESPN broadcast live English Premier League football (“soccer”) games, so I can watch my beloved Liverpool play.

So things have changed a lot over the past 30 years, and sometimes at a speed that’s hard to comprehend. For much of my adult life the Internet and World Wide Web did not exist; many of you reading this book have known nothing else. It still boggles my mind that I can sit in a café in Copenhagen, Denmark, and access research databases via the UNC library website.

In this chapter we will address through the lens of globalization many of the transformations that have occurred in the world around us. More specifically, we will examine the relationship between organizational communication and globalization. Indeed, one might argue that it is the organizational—mainly corporate—form along with revolutions in communication processes that have driven the processes of globalization. Some commentators even argue that the corporation has eclipsed the nation-state as the most significant institution in the world today, precisely as a result of globalization processes. Given this, an additional issue will concern us in this chapter; that is, what is the relationship between organizations and democracy in the context of a globalizing world?

First, however, we will examine the idea of globalization, exploring definitional issues as well as some of the debates that have emerged out of the effects of globalization on our understanding of the world.

**DEFINING GLOBALIZATION**

_The world is in a rush, and is getting close to its end._

—Archbishop Wulfstan, 1014 (quoted in Giddens, 2001, p. 1)
Trying to define globalization is like trying to pick up mercury with chopsticks—it’s a slippery and complex concept that doesn’t lend itself to easy categorization. It’s also a highly charged term that evokes a wide range of opinions and emotions—some people see globalization as a democratizing force that is making the world smaller and more interconnected, while others view it as a new form of cultural imperialism and economic colonization of indigenous cultures by Western corporations.

As you might guess, the picture is more complex than either of these positions suggests. So, in this section we will try to get a handle on some of the issues that are addressed by scholars across a number of different fields—communication, sociology, economics, geography, and political science, to name a few—as they grapple with globalization. Thus, because scholars from numerous disciplines have attempted to explain globalization, we will necessarily take an interdisciplinary approach in order to get a more complete picture of globalization.

First, it’s important to recognize that globalization is not a thing; that is, it is not a structure or a condition with a stable set of characteristics that can be enumerated one by one. It is much too fluid and dynamic a process to be characterized in this way. Rather, following geographer David Harvey (1995), we can think of globalization as a process. In this way, we shift the focus from addressing the question, “What is globalization?” and instead ask, “How is globalization occurring?”

A useful definition comes from sociologist Roland Robertson, who argues that “globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole . . . both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole” (quoted in Waters, 2001, p. 4).

This definition focuses not on specific features of globalization but, rather, on the overall transformation of space and time on the one hand and changes in human consciousness of the world on the other hand. Globalization has compressed the world through communication technologies and speed of travel, and, as a result, our consciousness of other places and our place in the world as a whole is intensified.

Robertson expands this definition by focusing on how globalization generates two competing but related forces: “What is involved in globalization is a complex process involving the interpenetration of sameness and difference—or, in somewhat different terms, the interpenetration of universalism and particularism” (Robertson & Khondker, 1998, p. 28).

This conception captures many of the arguments that circulate around the globalization process. On the one hand, advocates of globalization argue that the creation of an increasingly universal and homogeneous world with shared economic interests and values leads to a more stable and cosmopolitan global society (e.g., Friedman, 2005; Giddens, 2001). On the other hand, critics of globalization argue that it is an all-consuming force that destroys unique, indigenous cultures and erases difference, while also increasing the gulf between the haves and the have-nots (e.g., Klein, 2001, 2007). Organizational communication scholar Cynthia Stohl (2001) frames this central issue in a slightly different way when she states that in globalization, “the environmental and technical pressures on contemporary organizations to become more and more similar clash with the proprietary pull of cultural identifications, traditional values, and conventional practices of social life” (p. 326).

This idea of competing forces is taken up by other scholars. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (2001) argues that “the battleground of the 21st century will pit fundamentalism
against cosmopolitan tolerance” (p. 4). Giddens claims that fundamentalism—which he defines as “beleaguered tradition” (p. 49)—is actually a product of globalization and did not exist prior to it. In other words, fundamentalism has emerged as a response to the changes that modernity and globalization have wrought in the world. In this sense, fundamentalism (which, for Giddens, is not the same as religion but can be any unquestioned system of values) has emerged as an effort to defend tradition by asserting ritual “truths” in the face of a globalized, modern world that “asks for reasons” (p. 49). Giddens thus sees fundamentalism as the enemy of cosmopolitan values and tendencies toward increasing democratization.

Benjamin Barber (1995) makes a similar case in arguing that globalization is characterized by two competing worldviews: “Jihad” and “McWorld.” However, his position is much more pessimistic than Giddens’s regarding the relationship between globalization and democracy. Barber argues that McWorld is a global process that is increasingly dominant everywhere and that constructs the individual as a consumer. McWorld is an economic and cultural form that focuses on lifestyle, knowledge, and services rather than material goods, and, hence, the object of McWorld is human identity—a position consistent with our discussion of branding in the previous chapter. McWorld has helped create an MTV culture in which patience, careful analysis, and argument have given way to simplified debate and the dominance of visual imagery. Jihad, Barber argues, is the child of McWorld and represents a turn toward communalism, tribalism, and tradition (Giddens’s notion of fundamentalism). Barber sees Jihad as a response to the consumerist, homogeneous, and shallow culture of McWorld.

A further complication in discussing and defining globalization, however, is that its processes are occurring in multiple interrelated realms of human activity. Understanding globalization requires that we explore each of these spheres more closely. In the next section, then, we will examine globalization processes in the spheres of (1) economics, (2) politics, (3) culture, and (4) gender.

**SPHERES OF GLOBALIZATION**

**Globalization and Economics**

The ideas of globalization and capitalism as an economic system have historically gone hand in hand. In the 19th century Marx showed how, in order to increase profitability and surplus value, capitalism, by its very nature, needed to expand its markets constantly, finding new domains to colonize. Indeed, much of the imperialist expansions of countries such as Britain, Spain, Portugal, and France in the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s were not only about cultural imperialism and the spread of certain values but also about economic imperialism and the capture of working populations and raw materials.

Over the past 40 years the emergence of globalization has been associated with an economic philosophy called neoliberalism. This philosophy grew out of the writings of economist Milton Friedman and other members of the Chicago School of economics with which he was associated (Friedman, 1970, 1982; Klein, 2007). Since the early 1970s, the ideas of neoliberalism have been increasingly influential on many Western governments.
as they have begun to reject the principles of the previously dominant economic philosophy of Keynesianism, named after the British economist John Maynard Keynes.

Keynesianism became accepted economic policy in most Western nations after World War II. In brief, it was an effort to limit the “boom-and-bust” cycles of free market capitalism that had led to great economic hardship for many and resulted, amongst other things, in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Keynesianism advocated a “mixed economy,” in which state intervention created a welfare system (unemployment benefits, pensions, health care, etc.) and a mixture of publicly (state) and privately owned companies, the former typically being services such as railways, gas, water, and electricity companies. Moreover, labor contracts were put in place that ensured long-term job stability and cooperation between workers and capitalists. Such an economic system is more collectivist in the sense that the freedom of the individual capitalist to engage in the free market is limited by government policies that protect the broader society.

Neoliberalism rejects this economic philosophy and argues for the sovereignty of the free market. In a famous essay in *New York Times Magazine*, Friedman (1970) argued that

> there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.

From a neoliberal perspective, such a responsibility could be carried out only if the market were allowed to regulate itself, free from any kind of government intervention and restrictions on trade. Any kind of collectivism that required corporations to be socially responsible is, according to Friedman, “fundamentally subversive” in a free society. In this sense, and as indicated by the title of his famous book *Capitalism and Freedom*, Friedman (1982) argued for an essential link between unrestricted capitalism and the ability of individuals to exercise free choice, unfettered by any restraints of the collective.

The tenets of neoliberalism have been widely practiced over the past three decades. Led by the United States and the United Kingdom (under the leadership of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, respectively) many Western countries introduced neoliberal economic policies that included selling off publicly held companies to private corporations, implementing tax cuts, cutting support for welfare systems, reducing the power of trade unions, and reducing restrictions on global trade. As British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously said in a 1987 radio interview, “There is no such thing as society”—a statement that succinctly embodies the principles of neoliberal economics, where the individual is sovereign.

The result of neoliberal economics, many commentators have argued, has been the transformation of how business gets conducted both globally and nationally, with a massive increase in global trade, the “offshoring” of production to countries where labor is cheaper, huge movements of migrants seeking work, and trillions of dollars in investments being traded around the world every day. It is estimated that transnational corporations (TNCs) account for 70% of trade globally and that 51 of the 100 largest economies in the world are corporations (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006. p. 65).
There is considerable debate about the benefits of neoliberalism. Commentator Thomas Friedman (2005)—no relation to Milton—argues that the combination of neoliberal economic policy and new communication technologies has created a “flat world” in which previously “backward” nations such as India have now become global players. Moreover, the opening up of more and more countries to capitalism and free trade (e.g., countries of the former Soviet Union) has, it is argued, created more democratic political structures. The opening of a McDonald’s in the early 1990s in Red Square in Moscow is often taken as an iconic example of the connections among capitalism, globalization, and democracy.

On the other hand, critics of neoliberalism have pointed to how it has increased inequality—both between nations and within nations—as the gap between rich and poor has become wider and wider (see Figure 13.1). As we have seen in earlier chapters, in addition to increasing income disparities, globalization has created a U.S. workforce that is more subject to job insecurity through downsizing, outsourcing of jobs, reduction of benefits, and so forth, as companies move their business interests offshore.

Figure 13.1 Change in Average Incomes of Top 1% Versus Average Overall Wages, 1979–2009

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Productivity has surged, but income and wages have stagnated for most Americans. If the median household income had kept pace with the economy since 1970, it would now be nearly $92,000, not $50,000.
At a global level, critics point to greater disparities between nations. Journalist Naomi Klein (2007), for example, provides a devastating critique of what she calls “disaster capitalism” as she explores the ways neoliberal economic policies, employed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have actually created greater poverty in many nations because of high-interest loans and the restrictions the IMF imposes on countries as a condition for receiving loans.

Critics of neoliberalism have also pointed to a number of other factors. George Soros (2002), for example, argues that with fewer government restrictions economic markets tend to spiral out of control because they are based largely on speculation rather than knowledge—something we saw with the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008. In this sense, under neoliberalism, market speculation tends to function like the kind of deviation-amplifying system we discussed in Chapter 5—a type of system that always ends up crashing at some point. Moreover, Scholte (2000) claims that only about 5% of foreign exchange dealings involve transactions in real goods, with about 95% of all dealings being speculative in nature—greatly increasing the possibility of such crashes and bringing little or no economic benefit to anyone other than the market traders and stock owners.

Critics also point out that neoliberal policies create great human hardship for billions of people as the global flow of wealth creates mass migrations of people looking for work (something we discuss next). In addition, production gets relocated to “Free Trade Zones” in developing countries where wages are low, work and environmental regulations are minimal, and conditions for workers are frequently terrible. For example, as recently as 10 years ago Apple made its computers in the United States, but then the company outsourced this process to Southern China, to companies such as Foxconn, renowned for its repressive labor conditions. In the first 6 months of 2010, 11 Foxconn workers committed suicide and 1 died after working a 34-hour shift (Daisey, 2011; Fleming, 2010). Indeed, criticism of Apple’s relationship with Foxconn has been so widespread that Apple CEO Tim Cook personally visited one of its factories in March 2012, perhaps more as a way of reassuring consumers than actually to examine its labor practices.

Finally, in case you think a discussion of economics is a long way from communication issues, it is worth noting that, in many respects, the social world we inhabit is largely written in economic and market language; we are now all framed as consumers first and citizens second. Indeed, in a real sense, economic consumption and democracy are equated. As we saw in Chapter 12, brand guru Marc Gobé (2002) even argues that brands themselves are citizens that can contribute to a “consumer democracy.” There is perhaps no clearer indication of how much economic discourse shapes us.

**Globalization and Politics**

The politics of globalization has also been a significant point of debate among commentators (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 2001; Robertson, 1990; Waters, 2001). Much of this debate has revolved around the relationship between globalization processes and the nation-state. Put simply, a nation-state “possesses external, fixed, known, demarcated borders, and possesses an internal uniformity of rule” (Cochrane & Pain, 2007, p. 6). The nation-state has been a defining feature of modernity, providing stable political institutions and systems of government around the world, as well as functioning as a mediating mechanism between the individual and capitalist organizations. For example, it is at the level of the nation-state
that, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, restrictions were placed on the more exploitive aspects of capitalism (e.g., by passing labor laws), worker unions were legalized, and a welfare system was put in place.

However, as sociologist Ulrich Beck (2000) and others have pointed out, the nation-state is a geographic, territorial state, while globalization is a deterritorializing process that transcends national borders. Thus, according to some, globalization undermines the importance of the nation-state because it is based on a multiplicity of communication networks, lifestyles, and financial systems, none of which are tied to a particular place. Given this, it is argued that TNCs have become more powerful global actors than nation-states. As Beck (2000) states, the globalization process has political implications because it “permits employers and their associations to disentangle and recapture their power to act that was restrained by the political and welfare institutions of democratically organized capitalism” (p. 2).

Beck, then, sees dangers to democracy in the power that TNCs gain through globalization. Indeed, he goes even further, claiming that as the role of the nation-state declines and as corporations abdicate their role as citizens and “national champions” (El-Ojeli & Hayden, 2006, p. 64) for their home countries, they become “virtual taxpayers,” paying a lower and lower percentage of the tax burden while simultaneously laying off more workers (“reengineering”) and demanding more and more perks from the countries in which they are located. Beck (2000) thus describes globalization as “capitalism without work plus capitalism without taxes” (p. 5). Certainly, Figure 13.2 below supports his position, showing the steadily declining share of U.S. federal tax revenue paid by corporations.

**Figure 13.2** Corporate Share of Federal Tax Revenue, 1950–2010

![Graph showing the decline in corporate share of federal tax revenue from 1950 to 2010.](source: The Senate Joint Tax Committee.)
Anthony Giddens (2001) takes a somewhat different position from that of Beck, arguing that nation-states and the institutions that make them up “have become inadequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform” (p. 19). In this sense, they are “shell institutions” (p. 19). For Giddens, globalization provides opportunities for increasing levels of democracy around the world, fueled by developments in communication that compress the world and make it increasingly difficult for authoritarian governments to hide information from their citizens. Moreover, as the power of the nation-state weakens in the face of globalization, the demand for rights and autonomy of local cultures increases. Thus, Giddens argues that although globalization may threaten local cultures, this very threat “is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world” (p. 13).

One of the outcomes of this revival of local cultural identities is the emergence of various kinds of political resistance to globalization. Below we look at a couple of examples of the forms resistance to globalization has taken.

**Globalization and Resistance**

Researchers who study resistance to globalization examine collective responses to some of the effects of globalization around the world. Organizational communication scholars Shiv Ganesh, Heather Zoller, and George Cheney (2005) argue that it is critical to examine resistance “from the point of view of movements that work to resist and transform ideologies, practices, and institutions that support and constitute neo-liberalism” (p. 170).

As Ganesh et al. (2005) indicate, this resistance is sometimes referred to as **globalization from below** (Appadurai, 2000). In other words, where globalization is often framed as various forms of imperialism “from above” in which TNCs are turning the world into one global marketplace, the “globalization from below” movement is conceived as a grassroots effort to resist these imperialist tendencies and provide possibilities for more democratic forms of life. In particular, globalization from below argues that the power of TNCs is undemocratic because it is not subject to the governance of nation-states nor to popular will. In this sense, social movements against globalization are just as much opposed to the neoliberal economic policies we talked about earlier as they are to specific corporations (although corporations, as the beneficiaries and practitioners of neoliberalism, are frequently the target of antiglobalization protesters).

Ganesh et al. (2005) thus argue that “globalization from below” involves “collective resistance efforts that aim for the transformation of power relations in the global economy” (p. 172). Here, transformation refers to the ability to “effect large-scale, collective changes in the domains of state policy, corporate practice, social structure, cultural norms, and daily lived experience” (p. 172).

There are numerous examples of “globalization from below” in which can be seen collective efforts to resist the process of globalization. The most recent and visible example is the Occupy movement, which began as an occupation of Wall Street to protest the unregulated excesses of capitalism that led to the 2008 financial meltdown and has become a global movement. As of January 2012, 2,773 Occupy sites existed worldwide (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_movement). The movement’s protests focus on how, over the past 30 years, the richest 1% of the population has increased its wealth by around 240% while the income of the remaining 99% has stagnated (see Figure 13.1). The Occupy movement sees the lack of regulation of global capitalism as the origin of this problem.
While it’s hard to identify concrete changes in economic policy that the Occupy movement has inspired, its slogan of “We are the 99%” has had a significant effect on the political landscape, with politicians and political commentators now openly discussing inequities in the distribution of wealth. I even saw a program on CNN the other day called “Is Capitalism Broken?” And presidential candidate Mitt Romney suffered attacks from his Republican primary challengers for the “corporate raider” tactics he used as CEO of Bain Capital—exactly the kind of critiques of capitalism that the Occupy movement has been making. An interesting (and inspiring) video on the Occupy movement can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2-T6ox_tgM.

A very different kind of resistance to globalization—one rooted in consumption practices—is the phenomenon known as culture jamming (Klein, 2001, 2005). Associated with the Canadian group Adbusters (who initiated the Occupy movement), culture jamming is an effort to use the advertisements and billboards of corporations against the corporations themselves by reworking their meaning. On its website Adbusters describes itself as “a global network of culture jammers and creatives working to change the way information flows, the way corporations wield power, and the way meaning is produced in our society” (http://www.adbusters.org/abtv/occupy-wall-st-vs-fox-news.html).

Journalist Naomi Klein (2005) reiterates this sentiment, stating that “culture jamming baldly rejects the idea that marketing—because it buys its way into public spaces—must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow” (p. 438). Thus, the idea behind culture jamming is to seize back public space that has been colonized by advertising. Indeed,
culture jammers describe what they do as a kind of semiotic jujitsu. Jujitsu is a Japanese martial art that uses the opponent’s momentum to defeat him or her. Similarly, culture jammers use the power of corporate advertising against the corporations, creating new meanings that subvert the intended meanings. It’s in this sense that they reverse the one-way flow of information from corporation to consumer, creating ads that enable consumers to critique corporations.

Numerous examples of culture jamming can be viewed at www.adbusters.org, but some of the more interesting ones include ads that parody the “Joe Camel” ads, showing “Joe Chemo” in various settings, including in a hospital bed, hooked up to an IV machine, and so forth; a Marlboro billboard ad featuring two cowboys, with one saying to the other, “I miss my lung, Bob”; and hundreds of New York City taxicab rooftop ads selling “Virginia Slime” cigarettes. As Klein (2005) indicates, these ads don’t just parody the real ones; rather, they are “interceptions—counter-messages that hack into a corporation’s own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended” (p. 438).

Critical Case Study 13.1 provides an extended example of one person’s culture-jamming effort against Nike.

Globalization and Culture

From a communication perspective, perhaps the most interesting element of globalization is its effect on cultural processes and practices. Like political systems, particular cultures have traditionally been tied to specific geographic territories. However, culture and geography have lost some of their intrinsic connections as globalization processes diffuse and integrate geographically dispersed cultures.

From a critical perspective, globalization is often associated with cultural imperialism (El-Ojelí & Hayden, 2006). That is, because the process of globalization is dominated by Western countries, especially the United States, there tends to be a predominantly one-way flow of cultural products from the West to other nations, resulting in the steady eradication of local cultures and the creation of a single world “monoculture.” Terms such as Disneyfication, Coca-colonization, and McDonaldization are all intended to capture the ways the dominant culture industries of the Western nations are colonizing indigenous cultures.

Moreover, this critical perspective emphasizes the degree to which the globalization process is rooted in promoting an identity of consumption, where social actors’ identities are framed not in terms of work and family but in terms of a consumption lifestyle. Cultural imperialism, in this sense, promotes the idea that societies are not democratized and liberated until their members can drink Starbucks coffee, watch American Idol (available in more than 40 countries), and buy clothes at Gap and Banana Republic.

However, the concept of cultural imperialism is challenged by a number of scholars who argue that this apparent convergence of cultures into a single monoculture is highly exaggerated. First, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that in the process of globalization, cultural flows are not just one way. Most Western nations, for example, have many immigrant populations that have introduced their native cultures to their new homelands. For
Critical Case Study 13.1
Culture Jamming Nike

Perhaps the most interesting example of a culture jam that addresses concerns about globalization is the one attempted by Jonah Peretti, who used the fact that Nike enables people to personalize their Nike sneakers when they order them. Jonah asked for the word sweatshop to be stitched under the "swoosh" on his new sneakers. He received the following e-mail in response to his online order:

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled for one or more of the following reasons:

1) Your Personal iD contains another party’s trademark or other intellectual property.
2) Your Personal iD contains the name of an athlete or team we do not have the legal right to use.
3) Your Personal iD was left blank. Did you not want any personalization?
4) Your Personal iD contains profanity or inappropriate slang, and besides, your mother would slap us.

If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization please visit us again at www.nike.com

Thank you, NIKE iD

Jonah responded in the following manner:

Greetings,

My order was canceled but my personal NIKE iD does not violate any of the criteria outlined in your message. The Personal iD on my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes was the word "sweatshop."

Sweatshop is not:

1) another's party's trademark,
2) the name of an athlete,
3) blank, or
4) profanity.

I choose the iD because I wanted to remember the toil and labor of the children that made my shoes. Could you please ship them to me immediately.

Thanks and Happy New Year, Jonah Peretti

Nike responded:

Dear NIKE iD Customer,

Your NIKE iD order was cancelled because the iD you have chosen contains, as stated in the previous e-mail correspondence, “inappropriate slang”.

If you wish to reorder your NIKE iD product with a new personalization please visit us again at www.nike.com

Thank you, NIKE iD

Jonah’s response was:

Dear NIKE iD,

Thank you for your quick response to my inquiry about my custom ZOOM XC USA running shoes. Although I commend you for your prompt customer service, I disagree with the claim that my personal iD was inappropriate slang. After consulting Webster’s Dictionary, I discovered that “sweatshop” is in fact part of standard English, and not slang. The word means: “a shop or factory in which workers are employed for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions” and its origin dates from 1892. So my personal iD does meet the criteria detailed in your first email.

Your web site advertises that the NIKE iD program is “about freedom to choose and freedom to express who you are.” I share Nike’s love of freedom and personal expression. The site also says that “If you want it done right . . . build it yourself.” I was thrilled to be able to build my own shoes, and my personal iD was offered as a small token of appreciation for the sweatshop workers poised to help me realize my vision. I hope that you will value my freedom of expression and reconsider your decision to reject my order.

Thank you, Jonah Peretti


And so it continues, until Nike simply states that Jonah’s order contains material “that we simply do not want to place on our products.” Of course, the irony of Nike’s refusal to honor Jonah’s order is that the e-mail thread it produced has probably been circulated to far more people than would ever have seen Jonah’s sneakers! The other irony is that Nike’s stated commitment to freedom of expression, captured by their “just do it” slogan, clearly does not extend to efforts to draw attention to their labor practices. When it became clear that Nike would not
example, in a speech celebrating “Britishness,” former British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (2001) declared that

Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.

This is a perfect example of what globalization scholars refer to as cultural hybridity, or hybridization (Appadurai, 2000; Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity is a process in which two or more cultures intersect, producing cultural artifacts that did not previously exist in either culture. Thus, Chicken Tikka Massala, which has been identified as the most popular dish in the United Kingdom, is an example of cultural hybridity—it is an Indian dish, adapted to British tastes, that does not exist in India.

The idea of cultural hybridity thus suggests that, rather than increased cultural uniformity, there is actually more heterogeneity, or variety, amongst cultures. Indeed, critics of the cultural imperialism viewpoint argue that it ignores the degree to which social actors who consume artifacts actively interpret and reinterpret them. In other words, the mere act of consumption does not necessarily mean that members of a culture are mindless consumers, uncritically buying the ideology of “Disneyfication” or “McDonaldization.”

Finally, the cultural imperialism thesis has been critiqued because it ignores the fact that no culture is ever pure and pristine, and is inevitably a hybrid mixture of various cultures, subcultures, and traditions. In this sense, the question of precisely what culture is adulterated by the process of globalization is often hard to answer. Indeed, if Giddens is correct that tradition is a modernist creation, then the assumptions of the cultural imperialism perspective become even more suspect.

Perhaps the best approach to the relationship between globalization and culture is to recognize that neither a cultural imperialist perspective nor a celebration of local cultures’ ability to resist globalization and consumer culture quite captures the dynamics of the globalization process. What is needed, then, is an approach that moves beyond the binary logic of homogeneity versus heterogeneity, convergence versus divergence. Let’s examine one such approach—sociologist George Ritzer’s work on the “globalization of nothing.”
The Globalization of Nothing

Ritzer (2004) provides an extension of his work on “McDonaldization” (see Chapter 3) with an analysis of how this process has been globalized. His discussion can be viewed as a way to think in a more global context about the issues around branding and consumption that we addressed in the previous chapter.

In describing the process of globalization, he argues that it is the result of two intersecting and interrelated processes: (1) glocalization and (2) grobalization. Glocalization refers to the intersection of local cultures and globalization processes, with a hybrid culture being produced that is reducible neither to the indigenous culture nor the global culture. The concept of glocalization recognizes globalization as a reality but attributes active roles to the members of indigenous cultures, suggesting that they are not simply passive recipients of an all-powerful globalization process. Instead, they appropriate the products of globalization for their own use, creating new cultural artifacts, as we saw above with the hybrid dish of Chicken Tikka Masala.

The idea of grobalization, on the other hand, refers to “the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas” (Ritzer, 2004, p. 15). Grobalization is a term that addresses processes of cultural convergence, whereby there is an increasing homogeneity across cultures as a result of globalization processes. Ritzer argues that grobalization itself involves three interrelated processes: (1) capitalism, (2) McDonaldization, and (3) Americanization. As we have already discussed, in a capitalist economic system companies must grow (grobalization) or die, hence the ongoing search for new markets. Second, McDonaldization as a set of principles (efficiency, predictability, calculability, control through technology) has been applied globally to a wide range of industries, from fast food to hotel services to university education. Third, Americanization refers to the predominance of American ideas, customs, industry, and politics around the world. For example, the dominance of Hollywood movies worldwide would be an example of Americanization, as too would efforts to sell the National Basketball Association and National Football League worldwide.

For Ritzer, then, the process of globalization involves the ongoing tensions and conflicts between grobalization and glocalization processes, as depicted in the diagram below:

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Globalization

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>—Nothing</td>
<td>—Something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—Homogeneity</td>
<td>—Heterogeneity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Ritzer (2004) argues that, in terms of the construction of cultural forms, grobalization is associated with “nothing,” which he defines as “a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive, substantive content” (p. 36).
On the other hand, glocalization produces “something”—that is, “a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content” (p. 38). Globalization, then, is about the worldwide diffusion of mass-produced and homogeneous artifacts, services, brands, lifestyles, and so forth. Glocalization, on the other hand, entails the creation of distinctive products and services that are unique to a particular context.

For example, a Big Mac is an example of the globalization of nothing—a generic, mass-produced burger that is the same regardless of location. On the other hand, down the road from me in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a company called Raleigh Denim that uses local products and artisanal methods to make jeans, all of which are designed, cut, and sewn under one roof. The company makes only small runs of jeans, and each pair is individually numbered and signed like a work of art. In Ritzer’s sense, Raleigh Denim produces “something.”

Ritzer argues that the something–nothing relationship is a continuum that can be measured along several dimensions: complexity (something is unique; nothing is generic), spatiality (something has local geographic ties; nothing has a lack of local ties), temporality (something is specific to the times; nothing is time free), humanity (something is humanized; nothing is dehumanized), and magic (something is enchanted; nothing is disenchanted). For example, Raleigh Denim products are complex, requiring careful artisanship; have local ties, using local workers and materials; are time specific, made by certain humans in particular relationships; are humanized, in that the company is owned by a couple who are interested in contributing to the local community; and are enchanted, in that the products are tied to old traditions of denim making (e.g., the machines and the workforce that make the denim jeans are right in the store; when you buy a pair, you’re told not to wash them for 2 months to get them properly worn in!). It’s hard to associate any of these qualities with a pair of mass-produced jeans from Old Navy or Gap.

Ritzer argues that it is precisely the branding of products that attempts to deal with the problem of “nothingness” in the global process of consumption. In other words, and as we saw in the previous chapter, branding is an effort to instill meaning in a product or service that is otherwise generic and largely devoid of any unique identity.

The globalization of nothing, then, reflects the ways, at a worldwide level, struggles over meanings and identities occur. Particularly at the level of culture and meaning, the globalization process involves attempts to imbue generic products and services with branded meanings that transcend national and cultural boundaries. At the same time, the glocalization process creates distinctive cultural meanings that resist the homogeneity of globalization, often interacting to create new, hybrid cultural forms.

**Gender, Work, and Globalization**

What is interesting about the relationship among gender, work, and globalization is that it runs counter to the dominant narrative and media reports of globalization, which focus mainly on the “upper circuits of global capital” (Sassen, 2003, p. 254)—that is, the “hyper-mobile” capital, people, and investments in the fast-paced world of global finance. In contrast to this, the alternative narrative of gender and work in a global context tells the tale of southern, “Third World” women—a “lower circuit” of global capital and work—who
provide the labor that enables that “upper circuit” to be maintained. Thus, although accounts of globalization tend to present it as gender neutral (Acker, 2004), the reality is that the globalization process has had a profound effect on the gender dynamics of work (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003).

As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2003) state, as a result of globalization, “women are on the move as never before in history” (p. 2). But this movement is not the kind of upward mobility that has seen the movement of many women into managerial positions in the past 30 years. Indeed, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out, while an élite group of successful “First World” women enjoy the benefits of a high-consumption, “jet-set” lifestyle, a much larger flow of migrant women are taking on the roles of nannies, maids, and even sex workers. This “female underside of globalization” (p. 3) involves a form of migration that sees women from poor southern countries taking on the child-rearing and home-maintenance tasks that many women from northern nations no longer perform. This is due in part to the fact that as household incomes in the United States have declined steadily in real terms since the 1970s, women have increasingly moved into the workforce to make up the income shortfall.

Ehrenreich and Hochschild argue, however, that this “feminization of migration” is largely invisible because unlike factory workers or taxi drivers, female migrant workers are often hidden away in private homes, working as maids and nannies to the children that professional dual-career couples don’t have the time to look after. Moreover, the dominance of the ideology of individualism in U.S. society means that professional women are frequently loath to advertise their use of maids and nannies, instead perpetuating the myth of the “superwoman” and the idea of the “CEO Mom” who can have it all.

In examining the relationship of gender, work, and globalization, then, we get a close-up view of the ways the economics and politics of the globalization process come together in the everyday lives of real people—in this case, mostly women who are providing (often invisible) support services that maintain the machinery of global capitalism.

Sociologist Saskia Sassen has written a great deal about the dynamics of gender, work, and globalization, focusing in particular on what she calls global cities (Sassen, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005). Sassen argues that while much of globalization theory focuses on the compression of time and space and the “virtual” nature of global processes, little attention has been paid to the fact that a whole infrastructure of activities and services has to be in place in order for the global economy to function. She advocates a focus on what she calls “counter-geographies of globalization” that shift the globalization lens to include not only the mobile professionals and knowledge workers but also the low-wage support workers who labor alongside them (Sassen, 2005).

Sassen (2005) argues that the global city reflects the fact that “the globalization of economic activity entails a new kind of organizational structure” (p. 28). Rather than nation-states functioning as the principal players in the global economy, global cities have become the primary “production sites for the leading information industries of our time” (Sassen, 2006, p. 109). Global cities such as New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Zurich, and Sao Paulo are the new dominant financial centers that coordinate the flow of money and knowledge. This is where the highly paid knowledge professionals work and communicate with one another across borders of time and space.
Sassen argues, however, that such time–space flexibility would be impossible without the reproductive work necessary to maintain this system. Thus, working right alongside the highly paid knowledge workers are the nannies, domestics, custodial staff, restaurant workers, and so forth who engage in the labor that constitutes the service infrastructure of the global cities. In this sense, the global city draws attention to issues of power and inequality, as the rich and the poor live side by side.

In examining the situation of women who migrate to the north from the south, Sassen (2003) argues that there are two sets of dynamics at work.

First, in relation to the global city, globalization has created a demand for low-wage workers to take jobs that offer few opportunities for advancement—positions that native workers will typically not take. Given the increasing demand for high-level professional jobs in global cities, more and more women have entered the professions. In addition, high-income, dual-career couples often prefer urban living for family life, leading to an expansion of high-income residential areas in global cities. One of the consequences of this is the “professional household without a wife” (Sassen, 2003, p. 259) and, hence, the return of servant classes to global cities, working as nannies, maids, domestics, and restaurant workers to serve the consumption practices of high-income professionals (eating out regularly, weekends away, regular trips abroad, etc.).

Much of this labor is part of a large informal economy where many of the workers are illegal immigrants. As such, they have little recourse when it comes to poor treatment by employers, and, in addition, much of the work tends to be temporary and unpredictable. Susan Cheever (2003), for example, provides a poignant depiction of the life of a nanny in New York City. “Dominique” emigrated from the Caribbean and was lucky enough to get a green card through one of the first families she worked for. However, she still has had eight jobs in 8 years and must commute from her apartment in Brooklyn to Manhattan, where her various employers live. Cheever also describes nannies facing the “attachment factor,” in which both nannies and children become strongly attached to each other. However, nannies are often let go when children begin school, and both children and nannies can be devastated by the separation. As Nikki Townsley (2003) points out, the “commodification of love” is a basic feature of the global child-care industry, where children are portrayed as gaining experience of another culture and nannies are portrayed as exotic and maternal.

But as Sassen’s description of the second dynamic indicates, this picture is not as rosy as suggested. Sassen argues that in conjunction with the global city, there is what she calls the dynamic of the “survival circuit.” In this feature of globalization there has been a “feminization of survival” in which households, communities, and even nations are increasingly dependent on women’s migration and subsequent income for survival. Given the stagnation and shrinking of many southern economies, alternate ways of making a living and generating revenue become essential for the countries from which these women migrate. Frequently, the migration system is organized by third parties, including government and illegal traffickers (the latter specializing in trafficking women and girls for the global sex tourism industry). Governments frequently develop programs to encourage women to migrate to more affluent countries, reasoning that women are more likely than men to return their earnings to their home countries. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) report on a Sri Lankan government program that even commissioned a song to encourage migration, the first two and the last lines of which are, “After much hardship, such difficult
times / How lucky am I to work in a foreign land. . . . I promise to return home with treasures for everyone” (p. 7).

Currently, about half of the estimated 191 million legal and illegal migrants are women and girls, and women migrants outnumber men in developed countries. According to the United Nations, the most recent (2005) estimate of money sent home by migrants to developing countries is $167 billion, although given the “multiplier effect” of this money on local economies, the total money sent home by migrants is equivalent to about $500 billion.

It is important to note that many of these women are not simply looking for adventure and an exciting life in a foreign land. Rather, they are typically forced to migrate because of conditions in their home countries. Sometimes this is because of war, but many times it is because of difficult economic situations often caused by debt-reduction programs put in place by the IMF. As Sassen (2003) indicates, often the first things to be cut in such austerity measures are education and health care programs, which heavily affect women and children. Women, then, frequently migrate to find work so they can provide for their families.

In the next section we will examine some of the research on organizational communication and democracy. In some ways, the process of globalization makes such an examination even more imperative, given the preeminence of the corporation in a globalizing world. If commentators such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck are correct in arguing that the nation-state is playing a decreasing role in people’s lives, then it seems especially important to explore how organizations and corporations can potentially function as sites of democracy and participation in decision making. Indeed, scholars and practitioners have argued that if they are to survive in a more volatile and unstable global climate, organizations need to move beyond the old, bureaucratic hierarchy and develop structures and processes that are flexible, decentralized, and adaptive (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Critical Technologies 13.1

Work, Technology, and Globalization in the Call Center

In some ways the call center is the quintessential global worksite—it is the place where communication technology, organization, and globalization processes converge. There was even a short-lived situation comedy based in a call center. Called Outsourced, the “comedy” focused on the trials and tribulations of a U.S. manager in an India-based call center and his efforts to navigate the intercultural pitfalls of life in a foreign country. While the call center was the primary location for the comedy, not much time was spent on the work itself, except when comic mileage could be extracted from conversations between operators and customers.

The reality of work in the global call center is, of course, quite different. Call centers “are emblematic of the uncertainties created by globalization” (Batt, Holman, & Holtgrewe, 2010, p. 454). They are located in remote parts of the world, offer services via a combination of phone and computer technology, and have heavily displaced face-to-face service in local communities. Moreover, call centers require relatively little capital investment, other than a rented building and computer/phone equipment, so they can be relocated fairly easily in response to shifts in the global economy. Finally, call centers embody the post-Fordist shift to a service economy with a heavy use of emotional labor; while call centers do not involve face-to-face service, they depend on the ability of workers to provide customer satisfaction while handling a high volume of calls. In the United States alone, more than 4 million
people (3% of the workforce) work in call centers. It’s no wonder, then, that a number of organization and management researchers have focused on call center work (Brophy, 2011; Fleming, 2007; Taylor & Bain, 1999, 2003).

Call centers are an example of what some Marxist thinkers have called “cognitive capitalism” (Brophy, 2011), in which language is “put to work” and labor involves the production of knowledge and communication. In this sense, call centers are a classic example of “the production of communication by means of communication” (Virno, 2001, quoted in Brophy, 2011, p. 412). Brody argues that call centers are an essential communication apparatus for managing the relationship between the corporations of cognitive capitalism and its consumers. Call centers act as the tools for selling various products, manage concerns and complaints about those products, and then act as long-distance digital debt collectors when consumers fail to maintain payments for those products.

But while call center work is often classified as “knowledge work,” it is also largely deskilled labor exemplifying the “Taylorization” of white-collar work. Workers are constantly monitored, have to follow scripts carefully in interacting with customers, and are under constant pressure to meet quotas and move on to the next customer in the “queue” on their computer screens. Indeed, Phil Taylor and Peter Bain (1999) have described call center work as “an assembly line in the head” (p. 109)—a phrase that fits nicely with the idea of cognitive capitalism and also captures how white-collar work can be every bit as soul destroying as factory work. Indeed, the image of the call center operator desperately trying to catch up with the callers stacked up in her or his queue is eerily reminiscent of the early scene in Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times, where the “little tramp” flips out trying to keep up with the machine parts passing in front of him (later parodied in an episode of I Love Lucy set in a chocolate factory).

Taylor and Bain (1999) provide a compelling and poignant description of the typical call center employee:

The typical call centre operator is young, female and works in a large, open plan office or fabricated building. . . . Although probably full-time, she is increasingly likely to be a part-time permanent employee, working complex shift patterns which correspond to the peaks of customer demand. . . . In all probability, work consists of an uninterrupted and endless sequence of similar conversations with customers she never meets. She has to concentrate hard on what is being said, jump from page to page on a screen, making sure that the details entered are accurate and that she has said the right things in a pleasant manner. The conversation ends and as she tidies up the loose ends there is another voice in her headset. The pressure is intense because she knows her work is being measured, her speech monitored, and it often leaves her mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. (p. 115)

You might want to think about this description the next time you need to talk to someone in a call center.

COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEMOCRACY

Addressing questions of organizational democracy and participation takes us back to the central theme of this book regarding the relationships among communication, organization, and control. In essence, this section addresses the question, “What would organizations look like if they focused less on processes of control and practiced participatory democracy?”

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the problems and possibilities surrounding globalization raise important issues regarding the nature of democracy in the 21st century. Anthony Giddens (2001), for example, argues that “globalisation lies behind the expansion of democracy” (p. 5). He reasons that in a world based on active communication processes, where people have access to huge amounts of information, “hard power” (i.e., coercive, repressive forms of power) loses its edge. Certainly, as we have seen recently in the case of the so-called “Arab Spring,” the hard power of the regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya was
ultimately no match for the ability of ordinary people to organize collectively for greater
democracy and freedom, with communication in the form of various social media playing
a central role in this democratizing effort.

However, Giddens also claims that a paradox exists at the center of this global tendency
toward democratic reform and revolution. That is, while democracy is an increasingly
global phenomenon, there is greater disillusionment among citizens in the older democra-
cies in North America and Europe regarding democratic processes. Certainly, the recent
emergence of various movements in the United States and Europe, such as the Tea Party,
Occupy Wall Street, and UK Uncut (http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/), suggest that people are
looking for alternatives to the traditional forms of representative democracy that have been
in place in the older nation-states for 150 years or more.

So how can we think about organizations and organizational communication processes
in the context of this apparent shift in how we think about democracy? What role might
organizations play in this movement? In reviewing various approaches to organizational
communication, from scientific management through human relations and human
resource management to the postmodern/post-Fordist organization, we have seen how
management theories have tried various methods to get workers to participate in the work
process. However, most of these efforts were less about increasing worker participation and
more about developing increasingly sophisticated forms of workplace control. What, then,
would genuine organizational participation and democracy look like? Scholars in a number
of different fields, including organizational communication, have recently begun to exam-
ine this question (Ashcraft, 2001; Cheney, 1995, 1999; Deetz, 1995; Mason, 1982;

In the rest of this section we will examine three approaches to organizational democ-

Mason’s Theory of Workplace Participatory Democracy

A good starting point is Mason’s theory of workplace participatory democracy. Political
scientist Ron Mason (1982) argues that

what distinguishes a system as democratic is the way in which decisions are
reached. . . . Democracy is a type of community rule in which the process of
decision making generally entails widespread and effective participation of
community members. (p. 153)

Mason argues that community refers to “a group of people bound into self-conscious units
by common interests, concerns and problems” (p. 153). A community, then, is not limited
to formal organizations such as workplaces, government agencies, and so forth but can
include families, neighborhoods, voluntary groups, and social movements, for example.
Indeed, a community can even be geographically dispersed, given the availability of mod-
ern forms of communication technology; the social movement UK Uncut is undoubtedly
a community but organizes almost exclusively via social media.
According to Mason (1982, pp. 154–156), the degree of participation in a community (and, for our purposes, an organization) can be assessed along five dimensions:

1. **Extensity** is the proportion as well as the absolute number of members who participate in decision making in their community or workplace. The greater the percentage or number of members participating in decision making, the more democratic a community is. If a few élite members of an organization make all the important decisions, then democracy is not an integral part of that organization’s philosophy.

2. **Scope** is the number and type of issues available for the members of the workplace community to determine. If most organization members’ participation in decision making is limited to issues such as the color of the cafeteria walls or where the annual holiday party will be held, the level of participation and scope of decision making are low. If, however, organization members participate broadly in issues that are central to the organization’s function, such as developing organizational philosophy and mission, setting production targets, deciding on systems of remuneration, and so forth, then the level of participation is high.

3. **Mode** is the form that participation assumes. If members are limited to placing ideas in a suggestion box that is opened once a month (or never!), then the mode of participation is not very democratic. On the other hand, if all major decisions are made on the basis of face-to-face discussion with all members present and a complete consensus required for decisions to be implemented, then levels of democratic participation are very high (this form of decision making is adopted by The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers). Of course, once a community gets larger than around 15 members, such a high degree of participation is difficult, but it is still possible to develop structures that maximize participation, including decentralized decision making, flatter hierarchies, and so forth.

4. **Intensity** refers to the degree of psychological involvement of individuals in the act of participation. Mason argues that as the mode of participation becomes more direct, the level of intensity increases. Thus, members of organizations that make decisions based on consensus developed in face-to-face meetings are likely to have a strong psychological involvement in these decisions. On the other hand, organizations that make decisions with little member input are likely to discover that their members have little psychological investment in those decisions or, indeed, in the organization itself.

5. **Quality** involves the extent to which participation actually has an impact on decisions made in the workplace. Organizations that solicit members’ input on decisions and then fail to take such input into consideration are engaged in “pseudo-participation,” according to Mason. On the other hand, if members are able to witness ways in which their participation changes how the organization operates, then the quality of participation is high.

As a political scientist, however, Mason does not directly address the role of communication in creating organizational participation and democracy. Given this omission, let’s
examine two approaches to participation that not only address communication but see it as an essential feature of what it means to develop democratic and participatory organizational forms.

Stohl and Cheney’s Paradoxes of Participation

Organizational communication scholars Cynthia Stohl and George Cheney (2001) provide an interesting, communication-centered perspective on organizational participation and democracy. Their approach is useful and insightful because they explore the inherent complexities and, indeed, paradoxes involved in efforts to develop participatory organizational forms. Stohl and Cheney argue that a communication perspective sees participation as “constituted by the discretionary interactions of individuals or groups resulting in cooperative linkages that permeate traditional worker/manager boundaries” (p. 356). Participation, then, ideally transcends normal worker–manager distinctions and goes beyond typical workplace interaction tied to formal job descriptions and work activities.

Given this conception, Stohl and Cheney (2001) define worker participation as comprising “organizational structures and processes designed to empower and enable employees to identify with organizational goals and to collaborate as control agents in activities that exceed minimum coordination efforts normally expected at work” (p. 357). As “control agents,” then, workers do not simply occupy roles in an organizational hierarchy but participate actively in creating an empowering organizational environment. Moreover, Stohl and Cheney argue that “participation is a special case of organizational communication,” in that it is more than simply an attitude toward work or a particular organizational structure that facilitates workplace involvement. Rather, participation is communicative because it involves a set of interactions that go well beyond what is typically expected of workers in the routine performance of their jobs.

However, Stohl and Cheney (2001) recognize that while the implementation of a participatory model of organizational decision making leads to greater worker commitment to decisions and a higher-quality work experience, it also leads to a more complex communication environment—as they put it, “more people talking to more people about more things more of the time” (p. 358). As such, participation as enacted through communication processes tends to involve many complexities and paradoxes that shape how the dynamics of workplace participation unfold. Stohl and Cheney discuss numerous paradoxes of participation but argue that they fall into four main categories: (1) paradoxes of structure, (2) paradoxes of agency, (3) paradoxes of identity, and (4) paradoxes of power. Let’s briefly examine each of these.

A paradox is a situation in which two apparently conflicting views have to be reconciled. For example, if someone states, “I always lie,” we are faced with a paradox: is the statement itself a lie, therefore negating itself? Or do we believe the statement at its face value, thus negating the speaker’s self-declared status as a serial liar? The paradox is irreconcilable. In discussing various paradoxes Stohl and Cheney focus on what are called “pragmatic paradoxes”—that is, paradoxes that are the product of human relationships and interactions. For example, in ordering someone to “be spontaneous!” the command function of the message negates the possibility of actually being spontaneous and produces a paradoxical social context. Organizationally speaking, an example of a pragmatic paradox
would be the implementation of a new communication technology designed to increase work efficiency that ends up consuming lots of work time.

**Paradoxes of Structure**

Stohl and Cheney characterize structure as the “architecture” of organizational participation—that is, the rules, procedures, and guidelines for the participative process. Stohl and Cheney argue that sometimes the attempt to put in place organizational structures that encourage worker participation actually ends up defeating its purpose. For example, the paradox of design involves situations in which upper-level management design a participatory organizational structure but do not seek input from the very people who will be asked to implement and participate in this structure. When they do not have a say, workers often do not feel part of the system and, indeed, simply view it as a manipulative effort on the part of management to get them to work harder.

For example, David Collinson’s (1988) study of a group of truck factory workers showed how the new U.S. owners’ efforts to implement a more friendly and participative work culture by personalizing worker–manager relations was met with suspicion and hostility by the shop-floor workers. The workers saw such an effort as an attempt to co-opt them, calling it a “let’s be pals act” (p. 187). Thus, an effort to loosen the traditional organizational hierarchy had the paradoxical effect of increasing worker–manager tensions and intensifying the hierarchical difference between workers and management.

**Paradoxes of Agency**

Paradoxes of agency refer to the tension between individuals and groups in participative contexts. As Stohl and Cheney indicate, many participatory workplaces are rooted in group or team structures (Barker, 1999; Sinclair, 1992), which complicate the role of the individual worker in the organization. For example, in the sociality paradox members who are highly committed to the participatory process often find themselves so involved in various activities and projects that they get burned out and are unable to perform their work to the best of their ability. The paradox of agency suggests that when workers are empowered and control their own work lives, other aspects of their lives (e.g., family and social life) frequently suffer.

On the other hand, the paradox of agency also points to the way that, particularly in an individualistic culture such as that of the United States, workers often have a hard time dealing with the fact that group or team, rather than individual, performance is often the focus of the reward system in a participatory structure. Some of you may have experienced this in the context of class group projects. While you may feel that your performance in the group had the biggest impact on the final evaluation, you receive the same grade as another group member who was simply along for the ride. Thus, in a paradox of agency, workers are required to give up a certain degree of autonomy, or agency, in order to serve the broader goals of the team and organization.

**Paradoxes of Identity**

Paradoxes of identity concern “the fundamental challenges of establishing selfhood and individuality while being part of groups” (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 379). For example, the paradox
of commitment details organizational contexts in which participatory values require full commitment and conformity such that voices of dissent are minimized or eliminated. This is paradoxical given that one of the purposes of participatory organizations is to encourage forms of communication in which diverse opinions and perspectives are expressed, maximizing the full range of member skills and resources. Under such circumstances, as Stohl and Cheney indicate, participatory work teams can simply become rubber stamps for management policy.

Another paradox of identity, the representation paradox, pays lip service to the idea of participation in that employees are often given trendy names such as “associate” or “self-manager” while being given little actual access to organizational decision making. On the other hand, paradoxes of representation can also develop in contexts where employees participate with managers in making important decisions. However, such employees often stop identifying themselves as workers and fail to represent their fellow employees’ voices adequately, thus undermining the reason for establishing the participatory structure.

Paradoxes of Power

Paradoxes of power address questions of access to organizational resources, opportunities for voices to be heard, and shaping of employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, the control paradox illustrates situations in which the very system of participation and decentralized decision making ends up exercising more control over workers than traditional hierarchical forms. As we saw in Chapter 8 in our discussion of Jim Barker’s work on concertive control, the implementation of autonomous work teams created a system of control that was more oppressive than in the old supervisory system.

In a similar analysis that Cynthia Stohl and I conducted, we found that workers in teams in a New Zealand tire company were far more demanding of one another in conforming to rules (e.g., regarding absenteeism) than were supervisors under the traditional organizational hierarchy (Mumby & Stohl, 1992). Of course, from a managerial perspective employee internalization of such control mechanisms is largely seen as unproblematic. However, such control hardly reflects the spirit of genuine participation. Moreover, the fact that concertive control often proves to be more constraining than bureaucratic forms does little to take advantage of the employee creativity and knowledge that participatory models are meant to explore.

Stohl and Cheney, then, enable us to reflect on the complexities of participatory models of organization. The strength of their analysis lies in its exploration of participation as a communicative process that frequently produces paradoxical outcomes. But, as they indicate, paradox is not necessarily a bad thing; indeed, it can actually function as a generative mechanism to get us to think creatively and innovatively about organizing processes.

Deetz’s Stakeholder Model of Organizational Democracy

A final model we will address is Deetz’s stakeholder model of organizational democracy (Deetz, 1995; Deetz & Brown, 2004). Deetz’s model is important because it frames the issue of organizational democracy in a broader context, making it about more than simply democracy in organizations. Instead, organizations are seen as the site of competing stakeholder interests from the wider society that must be coordinated. As such, Deetz’s model takes an explicitly political turn, recognizing that the framing of organizational and
corporate life in largely economic terms severely limits our understanding of the ways corporations affect people’s lives at an everyday level.

As we saw in discussing Deetz’s work in an earlier chapter, he views the modern corporation as eclipsing the government, family, and community in terms of its effects in shaping human identities, decision making, and meaning formation. As such, everyday life suffers from a process of “corporate colonization” (Deetz, 1992a). One of the products of this process of colonization is that the corporate model of instrumental rationality and economic logic comes to pervade society as a whole. As such, people view themselves less as citizens in a nation-state and more as consumers in a market system, families become extensions of corporations or are run like corporations, and education is viewed as an instrumental means to an end in which the “student as consumer” and research dollars are the primary products (McMillan & Cheney, 1996).

Deetz’s stakeholder model is thus an effort to rethink the role of the modern corporation in society. He expands the definition of the corporation to include a wider array of stakeholders with wider outcome interests. Rather than viewing the corporation through a purely market, economic lens, Deetz (1992a) positions it as a political actor that shapes perceptions and interests through the “money code”—that is, as constructing all stakeholders in terms of how they affect the bottom line. As he states, “The politics of representation is fully hidden in economic representation” (p. 45). In other words, corporations disguise their political role by framing every stakeholder group—employees, community, shareholders, and so on—economically. On the other hand, “If modern corporations are political bodies that make significant decisions for the public, we must consider how they relate to the various groups that they affect and how, if at all, these groups are represented in decision making” (p. 43). Such a perspective is directly opposed to Milton Friedman’s position, discussed earlier, that a corporation’s only role is to make a profit for its shareholders.

Deetz (1995) argues that if we reframe the role of corporations in society they can be seen as “positive social institutions providing a forum for the articulation and resolution of important social conflicts regarding the use of natural resources, the production of meaningful goods and services, and the development of individuals” (p. 36). Through this frame, the various stakeholder groups (listed below) are seen as internal (rather than external) to the corporate system; stakeholder interests are not seen as limits to the corporation but as part of its goals. However, stakeholders don’t have fixed goals to be won but are rather part of a deliberative process in which corporate goals are codetermined. In this context, the development of a strong stakeholder model positions managers as coordinators of conflicting stakeholder interests rather than controllers of organizational goals that stakeholders must adapt to or oppose. Thus, each stakeholder makes an important claim on the organization, in that each invests in and is affected by corporate decisions.

As you can see from Deetz’s stakeholder model, depicted in Figure 13.3, the corporation is reconceived as a set of stakeholder groups whose conflicting interests are coordinated by a managing process, thus producing a set of potential outcomes that are much broader than the usual goods, services, and profits. According to Deetz, these various outcomes can serve as an expanded measure of corporate success. In terms of the various stakeholders,

- **consumers** have an interest in companies producing needed quality goods and services at a fair price, as well as an expectation that these goods and services are produced using ethical, non-exploitive practices;
workers desire a fair wage and safe working conditions, work that is meaningful, the chance to participate in organizational decision making, and a balance between work and private life;

investors have a stake in a reasonable return on their investment and an expectation that corporations are ethically stewarding their investments;

suppliers have an interest in a stable demand for their resource at a reasonable price;

host communities have a stake in a strong quality of life, including fair taxation, creation of jobs, responsible integration of the company into the life of the community rather than destruction of public resources, and so forth;

the general society has a vested interest in equitable treatment of its citizens, economic stability, the development of civility among its citizens, maintaining high-quality life, and so on; and

the world ecological community has a stake in the extent to which corporate decision making has a global impact, particularly with regard to its effect on environments, global climate, and vulnerable communities.

For example, under this stakeholder model corporations would not exclusively determine income distribution. Rather, they would be determined through a process of deliberation...
and codetermination among various stakeholders. Given that CEOs of large corporations currently earn around 500 times what the average worker earns and that many executives receive multimillion-dollar bonus packages even when their companies underperform or even fail, it is clear that the current unilateral decision-making model of managerial control is ineffective and counter-productive.

Indeed, we could argue that the current Occupy movement is in part a recognition that corporations, narrowly conceived, can no longer be permitted to frame unilaterally economic issues and how they have an impact on other stakeholders. Executives sometimes make decisions to downsize their companies, for example, not because they are unprofitable or poorly run but because they know that downsizing invariably strengthens company stock and pleases stockholders. Employees are thrown out of work not because they perform poorly but because they are victims of the pressure to produce a healthy quarterly report. Income distribution, then, is an outcome in which numerous stakeholders have a legitimate investment.

Deetz’s model is clearly the most ambitious and utopian, asking us as it does to rethink completely the role of the corporation in contemporary society. But, then, many ideas once considered utopian have come to pass, including democracy itself. If nothing else, it does get us to think in other ways about how we have multiple stakes in the way corporations function—not just as employees and consumers.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have discussed the phenomenon of globalization, examining its relationships with the economic, political, and cultural spheres. We also looked at some of the ways the globalization process has created gendered effects on work. Finally, we examined some of the research on organizational democracy, exploring some alternative ways to think about our relationship to the process of organizing.

So how do we connect globalization and organizational democracy? If it is indeed true that neoliberal economic policies and processes of globalization have created more powerful corporations while at the same time weakening the role of national governments in people’s lives, then it is important that we can understand, evaluate, and critique this expanding role of the corporation.

Anthony Giddens (2001) has argued that democracy is like a three-legged stool, with the government, corporations, and civil society (family, education, the media, public debate, etc.) each representing a leg. If one of those legs is broken, the stool isn’t functional. In some ways we live in a period when the corporation wields more power than any institution ever has. It has colonized every aspect of our lives in ways that are detrimental to who we are as people, citizens, family members, and so forth. Perhaps it is time for us to make efforts—large and small—to regain our sense of self from the ever-expanding influence of the corporation.

Speaking of selves, in the final chapter we will address how work and organizations have a profound impact—both positive and negative—on our sense of identity. We will address the question, “How do we find meaning in the context of work and organizational life?”
CRITICAL APPLICATIONS

1. Visit the Slavery Footprint website at http://slaveryfootprint.org/. Take the survey on your “slavery footprint” and have a discussion about the ways we are connected in invisible ways to abusive labor practices around the world.

2. Read the story on bottled water at the following link: www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jul/22/had-our-fill-of-water. How does it influence your view of bottled water consumption? What does this say about the relationship between the “upper” and “lower” circuits of capital that Saskia Sassen talks about?

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