Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the ways in which economic and political forces constrain the media industry. However, we must keep in mind that action does not follow inevitably and directly from structural constraint. At most, broad structural constraints will influence behavior by making some choices more attractive, some more risky, and some almost unthinkable. Despite working within certain constraints, professionals who help create media products make a series of choices about what to make and how to produce and distribute the final result. People—Hollywood directors, network television executives, book editors, news reporters, and so on—are not simply mindless cogs in a media machine. They do not churn out products precisely in accord with what our understanding of social structure tells us they should.

Our task, then, is to make sense of the dynamic tension between the forces of structure, which shape but do not determine behavior, and the actions of human beings, who make choices but are not fully autonomous. To adapt an often cited comment by Marx: Media professionals make their own products, but they do not make them just as they please; they do not make them under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past.

This chapter focuses on the structure–agency dynamic within media organizations. We explore how professionals create media products, the ways in which media work is
organized, the norms and practices of several media professions, the social and personal networks that media professionals cultivate, and the ways the organizational structure of media outlets shape the methods of media work. We also consider the growing volume of user-generated content—media products created by nonprofessionals.

THE LIMITS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

As we have seen in earlier chapters, economic and political forces can be powerful constraints. As we examine below, media personnel actively respond to these constraints when making decisions, often limiting their impact.

Working Within Economic Constraints

Let’s briefly return to our discussion in Chapter 2 of the commercial logic of prime-time television. Recall that profit demands shape programming decisions in network television. Profits result from high ratings and desirable demographics, which lead to strong advertising sales. Network executives, facing severe pressure to schedule programs that will attract large audiences, select programs that are safe, trying not to offend any significant constituency. It is the commercial logic of network television then that leads to the fact that programs on different networks look so much alike.

In Chapter 2, we emphasized the constraining power of the commercial organization of network television. However, Gitlin’s (2000) classic study provides a nuanced analysis of the tension between these economic constraints and the agency of network programmers, producers, and writers. The people who actually create and select television programs work in an environment in which the decisions they make carry real costs. If you write too many scripts that are considered to be commercially unviable, your future as a television writer may be in jeopardy. Likewise, if you choose unorthodox programs for your network’s prime-time lineup, and they are ratings flops, you will be looking for a new job in short order. The economics of prime-time television, then, may shape the decision-making environment, but decisions are still made at various stages by various players. And because audience tastes are both dynamic and unpredictable, these decisions cannot use any one simple formula to determine which programs will be profitable and which will not. As a result, people who work in the world of television must try to interpret both the current mood of the audience and the appeal of particular programs if they are to create and select shows that will meet profit requirements.

Here the structure–agency dynamic is quite clear: Economic forces identify the goals and shape the terrain of the decision-making process, but human actors must assess both program and audience in their effort to deliver the “correct” product. The fact that the vast majority of programs do not succeed tells us that this is not easy terrain to master. Despite the difficulty of the field, however, players within the television world still try to navigate it safely; along the way, they adopt certain rules or conventions to smooth out and routinize the decision-making process. Imitation, for example, has been routinized in the television world. One basic rule of thumb is to create programs that look like those that are
currently popular. Throughout this chapter, we will give attention to the conventions that media professionals adopt, because they provide an insightful window on production processes within media industries.

Responding to Political Constraints

Political forces, particularly government regulations, also play a significant role in shaping the environment within which media organizations operate. Even here, where federal laws require or prohibit specific actions, the constraints of government regulation do not determine what media organizations will do. Sometimes media organizations comply with government regulations, but sometimes the media preempt, ignore, reinterpret, or challenge regulations.

Compliance is the easiest strategy for media organizations because it avoids conflict with regulators, thereby enabling them to shape the actions of media organizations. As we saw in the previous chapter, since Vietnam, the Pentagon has been quite adept at influencing the content of news reports using various strategies. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the government regulated access to information through a press pool system and required journalists to submit their battle coverage stories for approval by military censors. During the Iraq War that began in 2003, the government took a different approach, cultivating favorable coverage by embedding reporters with troops with whom they built relationships. In both cases, the Pentagon was largely successful in achieving press compliance. The popular belief in supporting troops during war, coupled with widespread public skepticism about the media, likely made press criticism of Pentagon restrictions difficult.

A second strategy used by the media in dealing with government regulation is preemption. Media industries can preempt external regulation by engaging in a public form of self-regulation. As we saw in the previous chapter, this is the strategy that the motion picture, television, music, and video gaming industries used in their voluntary adoption of age-appropriate content ratings and warning labels for their products to stave off more direct government regulation.

A third often-used strategy is rooted in the fact that government regulations are almost always subject to interpretation, giving media organizations the power to read regulations in ways that match their broader agendas. In a classic example, the 1990 Children’s Television Act required stations to include educational television in their Saturday morning lineups but left a good deal of room for interpretation of the meaning of “educational” programming. As a result, broadcasters were willing to define almost anything as educational, including old cartoons such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. While regulations were on the books, broadcasters found innovative ways to respond, demonstrating that regulation is, at best, only a partial constraint.

Fourth, media industries can simply ignore regulations. Passing laws is one thing, but enforcing regulations is another. The FCC historically has been reluctant to be a firm enforcer, in large part because of the complexities of its relationship to the U.S. Congress and to the media industries it is supposed to regulate. As a result, communications regulations can often simply be ignored with few consequences.

Finally, if they have the resources, media organizations can challenge regulations to try to alter them or rescind them altogether. Media organizations can adopt legal strategies,
challenging the constitutionality of specific regulations, or they can use political strategies, lobbying potentially supportive politicians and threatening opponents in an effort to win new legislation more to the liking of the industry. The relaxation of ownership rules, described in Chapter 3, was one example where this tactic was successful.

Ultimately, just as economic forces do not fully determine the actions of media professionals, media organizations are not passively compliant in the face of political constraints. In both cases, media personnel are active agents, making decisions and pursuing strategies within particular economic and political frameworks. Their actions sustain, and sometimes help change, the basic structural constraints, but they are not determined by them.

So far, we have focused our attention primarily on the broad environment within which media producers and consumers exist. We now move more directly into the world of those who produce media to examine the processes involved in their decision making and how their work is organized.

DECISION MAKING FOR PROFIT: IMITATION, HITS, AND STARS

The broader political and economic environment sets the stage for the work of media personnel. In the United States and other democratic societies, political pressures on most types of media workers are modest. However, commercial mainstream media workers within these societies face enormous economic pressures to make decisions that will translate into profits for company owners. While the details of these decision-making processes are different across media industries, individuals working in media fields almost all have to contend with two basic problems: the high cost of producing media and the unpredictability of audience tastes.

High Costs and Unpredictable Tastes

Deciding to turn a manuscript into a book or a pitch into a movie is a difficult and risky financial decision. The upfront cost to create and promote media is usually quite high, and there is no guarantee that this investment will be recouped. A television studio must spend millions of dollars to create a pilot before they know if anybody will be interested in watching their new TV show. A book manuscript has to be written, edited, and published before the publishing house knows if enough people are willing to spend money to read it. Even media products that are relatively inexpensive to create—such as a basic music recording—must then be packaged and promoted if they stand any chance of finding a broad mainstream audience. Such promotion is expensive.

The high cost of creating and promoting media products is accompanied by a second problem: the unpredictability of audience tastes. We tend to assume that “good” media have an intrinsic value that makes them so popular. We think best-selling songs sell so well because they are the catchiest or that a best-selling novelist achieves fortune and fame because his or her writing is the most interesting and engaging. But research suggests that success is more complex than we often assume.
For example, Salganik, Dodds, and Watts (2006) created multiple music websites on which more than 14,000 participants were allowed to listen to and download songs from the same unknown bands. If songs have an inherent quality that makes them widely popular, then the same songs should become popular on each website. Instead, the researchers found that songs that were highly rated by the earlier listeners on a particular site would go on to become increasingly popular on that site—but not necessarily on the other sites. The study showed that listener decisions about what was good and worth downloading were influenced by the judgments of earlier visitors to the site. Those early judgments were more important than any intrinsic value in the individual songs.

Because popularity is not necessarily based on the intrinsic quality of a media product, predicting success can be extremely difficult. However, media producers don’t just give up. Instead, they rely on a different set of techniques to try to predict and create popular hits, including imitating success and relying on stars.

**Art Imitating Art**

Perhaps the most common strategy mainstream commercial media companies use to increase the odds of success is to imitate products that have already been successful. Variations on this strategy include copying the sound of current hit bands, remaking hit movies, making sequels to previous film hits, and signing producers of recent hits. The underlying assumption in these cases is that hits and their makers beget more hits.

We saw in Chapter 2 how the commercial dynamic of network television helps create the conditions for rampant imitation on the small screen. We can see this dynamic in other media industries. The commercial success of New Edition and New Kids on the Block in the 1980s and Backstreet Boys, Boyz II Men, and ’N Sync in the 1990s prompted the big music labels to look for other “boy bands” that might ride the same wave. A stream of imitators saturated the market. Heavily promoted on the Disney Channel, the Jonas Brothers achieved success in the 2000s but most later boy band efforts resulted in failure. In the absence of any other major boy band hits in recent years, a group of young men wanting to sing together today would have considerable difficulty in getting a major record deal.

In book publishing, authors of popular mass-market books, such as Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, Anne Rice, Nora Roberts, and James Patterson, are paid huge sums of money for the rights to their future works. Virtually every hit movie seems to produce a sequel, and when a new hit television program emerges, each network rushes to develop its own version—or extension—of the latest hit. For example, following the success of *The Osbournes* and *The Anna Nicole Show* in 2002, television producers developed a remarkable number of new “reality” programs throughout the rest of the decade that focused on the lives of marginal and former celebrities, from *Living Lohan* to *The Celebrity Apprentice*. The cable channel VH1 even organized most of its prime-time programming schedule around its “celebreality” series of shows.

Even when using formulas for hits, however, there is no guarantee for popularity or economic success. Many products that were supposed to be popular failed to meet expectations. Witness the remarkable failure of Will Ferrell’s 2009 film, *Land of the Lost*, a movie that was designed to be a blockbuster hit. A movie remake of a cult-classic TV
show, starring a proven box office draw, ended up being a multimillion-dollar dud. In 2004 and 2005, two would-be blockbusters failed to capitalize on previously successful formulas. Despite heavy promotion, *The Alamo* and *Sahara*—vehicles for star Mathew McConaughey—were two of the biggest box office disappointments in the history of the film industry, with the films each losing over $130 million for their respective studios. In 2006, *Basic Instinct 2*, a long-awaited sequel to the 1992 blockbuster *Basic Instinct*, opened in 10th place at the box office and made back only $6 million of its $70 million production budget during its short run in U.S. theaters. Thus, imitation does not guarantee economic success; but as a kind of informal operating assumption, it is one way for media organizations to try to maximize the likelihood of success.

**Stars and the “Hit System”**

Another strategic asset in the media industry’s pursuit of success is fame or stardom. Stardom is such an important resource that the media industry relies on marketing research firms to measure it. The best known of these measures is the “Q Score” (Q for quotient), developed by Marketing Evaluations, Inc. (qscores.com), which indicates the familiarity and appeal of anything from a Hollywood actor to a fast-food chain. The more people know about and like something, the higher its Q Score. In early 2010, for example, the performers with the highest Q Scores were well-known, long-time favorites Tom Hanks and Morgan Freeman along with Pauley Perrette (of television’s *NCIS* program), who was much less well-known but who scored exceptionally high on likeability measures, suggesting her star was on the rise.

In its initial stages, fame is fleeting. The public’s attention shifts often and minor celebrities come and go frequently. But this initial attention can take on a “snowball” quality for some; a modest incident of notoriety is parlayed into more fame that, in turn, grows cumulatively (Cowan 2000). Only a small percentage of celebrities who obtain some initial fame are able to build that notoriety into major stardom. However, once major stardom has been achieved, fame tends to endure and is relatively stable (van de Rijt et al. 2013). This small group of major stars is crucial to the hit system.

In a media-saturated society, popular and well-liked stars can seem almost omnipresent because a large celebrity-producing apparatus promotes them incessantly. We can see them on TV talk shows advertising their latest projects, we know about their personal lives through magazines and gossip blogs, and we can follow their daily musings on Twitter accounts.

The principal reason why stars are so visible and seem to dominate our mass media is that they are the physical embodiment of hits. Just as producers imitate already successful movies, television programs, and books in an effort to produce new successes, producers seek out stars and promote them heavily to increase the odds of successful projects. The presence of stars is a significant inducement in the public’s selection of films to attend, television programs to view, music to buy, magazines to read, and so on. In turn, stars can draw higher salaries because the odds of producers recouping those expenses are greater than they would be with a relatively unknown artist. Therefore, it is in the interest of aspiring stars to maximize their exposure to the public—to become well-known and well-liked—as this translates into financial clout in signing new project deals. At the same time,
it is in the interest of the producers to ensure that the stars they use remain in the public limelight, attracting attention to their projects. The result is a popular media system infused with star power.

Stars increase the chances of producing hits. Publishers want best sellers; record labels are looking for top 40 songs and platinum albums; movie studios seek blockbuster films. But most movies, songs, and books lose money. That makes hits all the more important because they more than compensate for the losses incurred by other projects. In short, the hit system is the underlying operating principle of most major media companies. And if hits are the goal, then producers see a star who can attract audiences as one of the keys to success.

This star principle is so widely adopted as a basic norm of the media world that we see its manifestation in unlikely places. Broadcast journalism, with its heavy promotion of network anchors, such as Brian Williams, Scott Pelley, and Diane Sawyer, vies for the news audience by selling the appeal of the big names. These anchors and a handful of other network reporters are full-fledged celebrities who make appearances on talk shows, are the subjects of high-stakes bidding wars, and have programs created for the purpose of giving them even more exposure. The college textbook industry also adopts the star system, seeking well-known professors as authors of high-volume introductory texts, even when unknown coauthors do most of the writing. Given a market that is dominated by a small number of standard-bearing texts—the equivalent of the hit song or blockbuster film—it is no surprise that textbook publishers seek the prestige and visibility that come with academic stars.

Because acquiring already existing stars is both expensive and difficult, most media organizations will try to create their own. One popular approach in recent years has been through talent search shows like Fox’s America Idol or NBC’s America’s Got Talent. The vast majority of the shows’ contestants quickly return to obscurity, but a few survive to create hits and become stars, including American Idol’s Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood, and Chris Daughtry.

Creating Hits and Producing Stars

We might think that all new media products have equal chances to be hits and that their main players have equal chances at stardom—especially in the age of instant Internet access. After all, audiences are the only true judges; they make hits and stars. This view suggests that hits succeed and stars rise to the top because audiences love them, but this is a misleading view.

All media products do not have the same chance for hit status, nor do all media personalities have the same chance at stardom. Hits and stars are rare, and the resources to produce them are limited. So before audiences ever get to see them, media organizations make advance decisions about which products and people have the best chance of success. It is virtually impossible to be a star if the firm that produces and distributes your work has already decided that you do not have what it takes to be a huge hit. On the other hand, you have a chance—though no guarantee—of stardom if media professionals deem you a possessor of star quality. Thus, media professionals, rather than audiences, make the initial judgments crucial for achieving success.
Films that are seen as potential hits, for example, are slotted for heavy promotion. This might include full-page newspaper ads, frequent television commercials, talk show appearances by the stars-to-be, cross-promotional campaigns with fast-food restaurants and other outlets, and release of the film to theaters all over the country. Movies not seen as potential hits will receive much less promotion and will be released to a much smaller number of theaters, virtually guaranteeing they will not reach hit status. The next time you browse Netflix or Amazon Instant Video, take note of the large number of films that you have never heard of; many come and go from the theaters so fast, with so little advertising, that only true film enthusiasts know they exist. Some never even make it to the theater but instead are released directly to DVD. As a result, only those films that the movie studios identify as potential hits will ever get the visibility to have a chance to become blockbusters.

The same dynamic is at work in the music industry. Acts are split into potential earning divisions, with some being classified as big time and others as possessing only minor or specialized appeal (Frith 1981). The first hurdle for musicians, then, is to get through the initial classification process, which occurs before the first album is even released. Those who are identified as potential big timers will have much more opportunity, and many more resources, than those who are categorized as minor players. Such support, though, comes at a cost; artists who receive heavy promotional support must typically conform to standardized formulas that have been identified for “success.” A band with a hit record is likely to be pressured by their label to produce something very similar for their next record rather than branching out to embrace new sounds or styles.

We can see a similar process in the book industry, where publicity and marketing resources are concentrated on the most likely best sellers, while mid-list authors frequently see their books disappear from the shelves relatively unnoticed. Publishers decide how to package a book, how many copies to print, what to price the book at, how to promote it, and where to distribute it based on advance judgments of sales capability. These judgments are often made before the final draft is completed. Likewise, the key decision for television programs, once they are selected for the prime-time lineup, is where they will be scheduled. Will the program be slated to pick up the tailwind of an already successful show or be dropped into a Friday night time slot where ratings are low and fewer viewers are at home? What will the competition be on the other networks during the time slot chosen for broadcast? Some time slots are more favorable than others, and programs that are predicted unlikely to attract top-level ratings are generally scheduled in a way that practically guarantees they will fail to find an audience and be canceled in short order.

Using Stars to Combat Uncertainty

Media organizations are attempting to produce popular and profitable hits, and they see stars as one key way to do this. In a media world in which uncertainty is a constant, executives seek rules to make their decisions less arbitrary. The deep commitment to stars and to the importance of reputation more generally is one of the principal ways that the fluidity and ambiguity of the media industry are brought under control.

Moviemaking, for example, is a very uncertain business. Without any method for ensuring commercial success and with so many players involved in the production and distribution of a film, the presence of a star helps reduce the perception of risk. Stars make people
more comfortable with the risks they are taking, even if they are not demonstrably less risky. The presence of a star, in essence, rationalizes the entire process by providing an agreed-on currency for assessing potential projects. The star system is a useful coping mechanism in such an uncertain industry (Prindle 1993).

The dynamic in television is similar. Producers rely on producers of prior hits as a strategy for legitimizing their decisions (Bielby and Bielby 1994). In much the same manner as the film industry, network programmers operate in a situation in which hits are hard to come by and even harder to predict. Programmers have to satisfy various constituencies—advertisers, local station managers, and network executives—and they have to demonstrate that their programming decisions are not arbitrary. In this case, reputation—the result of the prior production of a hit—is the key currency. The various players within the television industry agree that past hit production is a legitimate criterion for selecting programs. They even try to sell viewers on this notion when promotional commercials emphasize that a new series is brought to you by the producers of a previous hit.

However, the stars = hits = success formula is not as accurate a description of media products as industry common sense would suggest. For example, pretend you were the head of a movie studio during the 2000s and wanted to rely on the star power of Eddie...
Murphy to sell a family-friendly comedy. You could look at *Daddy Day Care* (U.S. box office: $104.3 million) in 2003 or *Norbit* ($95.7 million) in 2007 and feel reasonably safe moving forward with your new movie. Then again, you could also look at *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (U.S. box office: $4.4 million) in 2002 or *Meet Dave* ($11.8 million) in 2008 and have substantial reasons for concern. What's the best decision to make when you know that a family-friendly comedy starring Eddie Murphy might make anywhere between 4 and 104 million dollars in the theaters? Of course, there are other sources of revenue for major motion pictures—in particular, DVD sales, TV broadcast rights, and foreign markets—and some genres of films that do not break even at the domestic box office tend to find substantial revenue elsewhere. These factors, however, create a whole additional set of variables to manage and consider.

Television networks regularly try to attract and keep celebrities on the small screen, but building a program around a star personality is also no guarantee of success. Perhaps you want to create a spin-off with a character from a wildly popular show, as was the case with the *Cheers* spin-off *Frasier* (episode run: 264), but also the case with the *Friends* spin-off *Joey* (episode run: 46). You could also try to lure a less popular movie star into a role on TV, like Kiefer Sutherland in *24* (episode run: 192) or Jerry O'Connell in a show by the creators of *Ugly Betty* and *The Office*, as was the case with *Do Not Disturb* (episode run: 2). These examples suggest that the stars = hits = success formula is far from reliable. But the organization of production in the film and television industries and the ambiguities of these creative businesses help explain why the hit-star relationship continues to shape decision making—even in the face of conflicting evidence.

**Beyond Stars to a Universe of Products**

Compared to Pixar Animation’s other wildly popular films, the 2006 children’s movie *Cars* received the worst reviews and was among the company's poorest performers at the box office. But that didn’t stop a sequel, *Cars 2*, from being released in 2011. That’s because *Cars* was a huge merchandising hit, generating nearly $10 billion in product sales over five years. Its anthropomorphic automobiles—sold as toys and emblazoned on an endless variety of products—were so successful that *Cars 2* was developed to do the same, only this time with planes, trains, and boats, too. In fact, *Cars 2* spawned over 300 toys and countless other merchandising products from children’s clothes and backpacks to bedding and Spaghetti-O’s. Coupled with video games, a 12-acre *Cars*—land attraction at the Disney theme park in California, and TV programs, *Cars* was developed to be a massive commercial franchise, not just a movie. To maximize the appeal abroad of both the film and its spin-off products, the lead character, Lightning McQueen, competes in a World Grand Prix in Japan, France, England, and Italy (Chmielewski and Keegan 2011).

*Cars* represents the emergence of a type of media product that is not limited to a single form. Henry Jenkins defines *convergence culture* as a “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006: 2–3). While, in the past, media organizations tended to rely only on the power of a good story (say, a novel or a single movie) or the power of a celebrity (say, a hit novelist or blockbuster star), they now work to create entire
fictional universes that can be extended and sold across a range of media platforms—films, television shows, video games, comic books, websites, and more.

For example, think of the six hit movies in the *Star Wars* film franchise (with three more on the way). While these movies have all been huge economic successes, they make up only a small portion of the media content that constitutes the vast universe of *Star Wars* products. To truly grasp the impact of *Star Wars*, we must also consider the five different animated *Star Wars* television programs, the 15 licensed *Star Wars* cell phone games, over 75 additional *Star Wars* video games, hundreds of serialized *Star Wars* novels, hundreds of serialized *Star Wars* comic books, multiple lines of *Star Wars* toys, Halloween costumes, and so on. We can see similar developments in Marvel’s expansion of a multiple-platform fictional universe of superheroes and the Wachowskis’ multiple-platform fictional universe of *The Matrix*. Of course, developing an entire universe of fictional characters that are compelling enough for viewers to follow across multiple media platforms is no small feat; but if a media organization is able to do so, it provides good security against the largely unpredictable success or failure of a specific media product.

Media professionals are not only constrained by continued uncertainty in the quest for producing hits or by finding a fictional universe that will connect over time with consumers out in the marketplace. Media workers must also navigate through the long-standing roles and conventions that exist within the media industries themselves. While they have some agency in choosing which media to bring to market, they face the structural constraints of their industry traditions, to which we now turn.

**THE ORGANIZATION OF MEDIA WORK**

In a classic study, sociologist Howard Becker (1982) observes that “producing art requires elaborate cooperation among specialized personnel” (p. 28). We can make the same statement about the production of media content. Whether we are talking about films, books, music, radio, magazines, newspapers, or television, the production and distribution of the message become the work of many people. Even the most apparently individualistic media presentation—a solo album by a singer-songwriter—still requires many other actors, including the music producer, the representatives of the music label, the designer of the album cover, the publicists who promote the music, and so on. One line of research, therefore, has been studying the organization of media work, examining how media workers collaborate to produce media products.

**Conventions**

Becker (1982) asks an important question about the many people who do media work: “How do they arrive at the terms on which they cooperate?” Some researchers have argued that the behavior of media personnel is shaped by the “needs” of an organization (Epstein 1973). In other words, maintaining the existence of the organization points different individuals within that organization in the same direction. In its strongest application, this approach is usually too constraining to account for the independent action of media personnel. Another way we might account for the collaboration of media workers is to suggest
that they must negotiate the terms of their cooperation before each new endeavor. This approach emphasizes the capacity for independent action, but it ignores the constraints under which media personnel labor.

In contrast to these approaches and consistent with what sociologists who study occupations have found, Becker (1982) focuses on the tension between structure and agency. He tells us that “people who cooperate to produce a work of art usually do not decide things afresh. Instead, they rely on earlier agreements now become customary, agreements that have become part of the conventional ways of doing things” (p. 29).

A convention is a practice or technique that is widely used in a field. It is much easier to identify something as conventional than it is to explain the source and meaning of the convention. All of us could likely identify some of the conventions that govern news reporting, pop music, or advertising. For example, the sound of top 40 music rarely surprises us since it follows broad conventions regarding what instruments are used, the length of the song, the verse/chorus structure, and so on. We could ask how radio programmers learn to follow these conventions and how they know which songs will fit their stations. The answer is that radio programmers see themselves as middlemen between record producers and listeners, develop an understanding of the genres their stations represent, and establish a set of repertoires for action to ensure that both listeners and record companies feel supported and understood. Without these conventions, radio programmers couldn’t do their jobs (Ahlkvist and Faulkner 2002).

Hollywood agents must also learn to casually perform the social conventions of their industry in order to be taken seriously as players. These conventions include hosting meetings in and around Beverly Hills in modernist buildings; coming off as confident, casual, and hip; and giving creative gifts with a personal touch (Zafirau 2008). Industry conventions also take forms that are more easily recognizable to consumers. You don’t need to be a graphic designer to know that magazine covers have the publication’s name in large letters at the top and will almost always feature a large, dominating graphic, or that an evening news broadcast will take place in a studio with a broadcaster behind a desk. Even “fake” news programs like The Daily Show and “Weekend Update” on Saturday Night Live follow these conventions. If Jon Stewart told jokes about the day’s politics while standing up, we might assume The Daily Show was just another late-night comedy show and not actually a comedic re-creation of a news broadcast. Even media products that break from convention appear striking and innovative only because both producers and audiences are accustomed to conventional forms.

Conventions are not arbitrary, even though they may often seem to be. They are the result of the routinization of work by media professionals and partially a consequence of professional education and job training. To understand media content on the basis of its conventions, we need to consider where conventions originate, how they are followed in the work process, and how they lead to the production of media that we perceive as conventional.

**News Routines and Their Consequences**

News production is one type of media work that has been studied extensively, not only for its reliance on conventions but also for the distinctive dynamics associated with the field.
that illustrate the interaction of structure and agency. A series of classic studies from the 1970s and 1980s laid the groundwork for our understanding of news production that is still applicable today (Epstein 1973; Fishman 1980; Gans [1979] 2004; Sigal 1973; Tuchman 1978; and, for a review, see Cottle 2007). This work has since been supplemented by more recent studies that examine some changes in newsrooms, including those brought on by technological innovation and economic pressures (see Powers 2011 for a review). Together, they illustrate some of the dynamics involved in the organization of media work.

These studies help us consider a simple question: What is news? At first, the answer seems self-evident: News is information about recent important events beyond our direct experience. But how do we know what makes an event important? How do we know what information about an important event is relevant? We leave it to professional journalists to handle these questions. As a result, we rely on journalists to act as “gatekeepers” (White 1950)—to make judgments about what is or is not important, or newsworthy—and to provide us with factual accounts about these newsworthy events. Ultimately, if we are to understand what news really is, we need to understand how journalists form their judgments and construct their accounts. In other words, we need to examine the day-to-day work of the professional journalist because this is where news is defined and news stories are written.

Let’s look at the process from the perspective of people within a news organization. A news staff must generate content for a website, broadcast, or newspaper regardless of what did or did not happen that day. This means that editors and reporters must find news. At the same time, literally thousands of things are happening: People eat meals, walk their dogs, buy and sell goods, commit crimes, announce new policies, argue court cases, participate in sporting contests, lie on the beach, fight wars, campaign for elected office, and so on. The list is virtually endless. News outlets, however, cannot report on all the things that happen; only some happenings are defined as important enough to be news. For reporters, the difficulty is determining which events are newsworthy and gathering enough information to cover these newsworthy events.

On the face of it, news reporting may seem to be an impossible job. How can journalists know which events to report and which to ignore? They cannot go to dozens of different events before deciding which one to cover; they would never meet their deadlines. How do reporters find out about relevant happenings in the first place?

Two classic sociological studies (Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978) argue that we can find answers to these questions in the routine practices of journalism. Because news organizations cannot constantly reinvent the wheel, the processes of news gathering and news reporting must be rationalized. In other words, news organizations must be able to anticipate where news will happen—before it happens—and structure their reporters’ assignments accordingly. Within news organizations, reporters follow routines that tell them where to look for news and how to gather it efficiently. When the same basic routines are adopted as professional norms, as they are in contemporary American journalism, different news outlets will make similar judgments about newsworthiness. This state of affairs makes it difficult to see that any judgments are being made at all.

What are these journalistic routines? Tuchman (1978) adopts the metaphor of the “news net” to explain the standard practice for gathering news. News organizations cast a net—made up of wire services, full-time reporters, and stringers—to catch newsworthy happenings. The
net, however, does not catch everything; like all nets, it is full of holes and catches only the “big fish.” This serves as an initial filter, sorting out those happenings that do not meet the standard criteria for news.

The organization of news gathering shows which criteria determine how the news net is constructed. News organizations will have staff or bureaus in places they define as important. For example, news outlets typically have bureaus in Washington, DC, and London, England, but not Houston, Texas, and Nairobi, Kenya. As a result, happenings in and around these predefined important places are more likely to become news, while happenings outside of these areas are more likely to be ignored.

News organizations also establish “beats” at prominent organizations where news can be expected to occur. In practice, this means that a series of official locations—police stations, courthouses, city halls, state houses, Capitol Hill, the White House—become sites where reporters are stationed. Each day, the reporter on the city hall beat will be responsible for providing one or more stories about the happenings there. It is likely that the city government will have a media relations staff who will be more than happy to provide the beat reporter with daily doses of news in the form of press releases, public announcements, press conferences, and so forth. Finally, areas such as sports, business, and the arts are topical beats that are expected to produce news each day, so reporters establish relationships with key players in these areas to guarantee a regular supply of news.

Beats are central to how reporters “detect” events, but each beat covers so much potential territory that reporters have to develop strategies for detecting the newsworthy events. Fishman (1980) uses the example of a local paper’s “justice” beat, which included, among other things, “three law enforcement agencies: city police, county sheriffs, and an FBI office; four penal institutions . . . two juvenile facilities; two entire court systems; an extensive drug subculture” (p. 33). With such a vast terrain to cover, Fishman notes, reporters develop complex work routines that he calls “rounds.”

The round structures the workday and defines what events the reporter will be exposed to in the first place. In essence, the round is a process by which beat reporters develop schedules for visiting locations and talking to sources that are likely to produce news. Such work routines are built around the bureaucratic organization of the institutions that make up the beat. For example, a justice reporter will build a work routine around the schedules of the courthouse, police department, and district attorney’s office to be on hand for meetings, press conferences, and prescheduled events and to gain access to official records. The reporter may also check in on a regular basis—perhaps hourly—with a range of sites to see if anything is “happening.” For example, a beat reporter might call each prison, juvenile facility, law enforcement agency, and courthouse to make sure that important events do not go undetected.

The definition of what is a relevant beat and whether what happens there deserves coverage is not universal. Rather, it changes according to a given media outlet’s target audience and, more generally, its mission. For example, TMZ, a celebrity gossip–based website and television program owned by Time Warner, covers “news” that traditional news outlets typically do not consider to be newsworthy. TMZ stands for Thirty Mile Zone, and their beat encompasses the 30-mile radius around the intersection of West Beverly and North La Cienega in Los Angeles, in which all of the major U.S. production studios are headquartered. Sometimes tipped off by celebrities and their publicists seeking media attention,
reporters and celebrity photographers prowl luxury stores, restaurants, and other locations seeking candid pictures and brief interviews with stars. The result is very different from a daily newspaper, but the process involved in creating the content is similar.

Because reporters on deadline must produce a news story for their employers, we should not be surprised that news work is routinized in this way. How else could reporters gather news in an efficient, consistent manner while meeting the needs of their news organizations? The problem, however, is that we rarely talk about the news in these terms, nor do we take note of the consequences.

For example, when we consider news beats, we can see that, before anything even happens on a given day, news organizations have already made decisions about where they intend to look for news. The flip side, of course, is also true: The routine practices associated with news gathering virtually ensure that certain happenings will be excluded from the news. News from Africa and South America, for example, is notoriously scarce in the U.S. media, in large part because reporters are less likely to be assigned there. The example of news beats shows that, rather than being an inherent characteristic of events, newsworthiness is typically constructed each day by professional journalists and news organizations.

Another consequence of routine journalistic practices is a reliance on official sources to feed journalists a steady diet of information to use in their stories. This dependence upon official sources for “news” means that these sources have routine access to media coverage, while outsiders or critics have a more difficult time gaining entrée to the news. The result is that news tends to reflect the views and opinions of those already in power.

Finally, routine journalistic practices result in an emphasis on events at the expense of processes. Reporters look out for what is new in the world around them (the event) and often have few resources (time, money, and expertise) to spotlight the long-term developments that may have been at the origin of the event. As a consequence, news coverage is often fleeting, shining a momentary spotlight on some event and then moving on to a new and unrelated event. This focus on events at the expense of processes likely has an impact on whether and how people understand complicated issues, such as wars, financial crises, crime trends, and budget decisions.

Technology and the New News Routines

As a result of industry changes and new technology, journalists have altered their routines significantly since the classic studies of newsrooms were done. As Powers (2011: 12) summarizes, “Compared to the time of the classic studies, today there exist more outlets, more formats, more interactions across both, and more uncertainty over who and what counts as a journalist and as journalism, respectively.” Many of the basic insights about the social construction of news remain valid today, but the specifics of how this process works have changed as the structural context within which journalists’ work has changed.

The rise of media conglomerates described in Chapter 2 has meant increased economic pressure on news organizations, with dubious consequences for the quality of news (Klinenberg 2007; McChesney 1999, 2004). Economic pressures in the field have led to downsizing and increased competition for jobs, less secure employment, and management demands that journalists be more efficient and productive in their work as news organizations seek to cut costs (Deuze 2007; Majoribanks 2000). At the same time,
increased pressures to attract audiences to sell to advertisers have meant that ratings and readership numbers (easily measured on news websites) have grown in importance. Taking the audience into account is a growing part of determining what does or does not become news, resulting in more content that is entertaining or oriented toward broad “lifestyle” topics (Boczkowski 2010).

Technological changes have also facilitated dramatic changes in how journalists do their work. Journalism is now often a multimedia enterprise, incorporating print, video, and graphics, changing how journalists tell their stories (Boczkowski 2004). The need for print outlets to also produce video and other content for their corresponding websites influences what is identified as newsworthy.

The expansion of news to cable and the Internet has dramatically altered the volume of news-related material that is available. Instead of a need to whittle down content to fit the space available in a daily newspaper or half-hour television news broadcast, news organizations today must produce an almost endless amount of “content” to fill 24-hour cable news channels and websites that have no limits. This need to fill a vastly expanded news hole led to the growth of cable news talk programming, featuring pundits, commentators, and advocates. It has also led to the expansion of what is treated as legitimate news sources. One study of content from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* found that traditional news organizations increasingly use blogs as source material, especially in covering politics.

Technology has changed the look and substance of the contemporary newspaper newsroom, as with *The Wall Street Journal*’s, pictured here. Flanked by always-on television screens, journalists at newspapers create web content that is frequently updated and produce video reports as a routine part of their work.
In turn, the study found that blogs depend heavily upon traditional news outlets as sources, thereby creating a “news source cycle” (Messner and DiStaso 2008).

The era of newspapers, newsmagazines, and broadcast evening news—the subject of the classic newsroom studies—was characterized by a daily news cycle with a single deadline. In the era of 24-hour cable news and news websites, this predictable news cycle has been replaced by an unending and erratic “news cyclone” (Klinenberg 2005) in which journalists must constantly rewrite and update news stories. The need to constantly update websites has meant the time frame for making decisions about news is tightly compressed, compared to earlier times. Journalists often complain this leads to more stress and less time to make informed news judgments.

Ever since the rise of CNN, newsrooms constantly monitor 24-hour cable news organizations to follow what stories are being covered. Newspapers preview the next day’s content on their websites, and editors and reporters at competing new organizations scrutinize these sites closely. If one outlet covers a story, others are likely to follow quickly. This has contributed to further homogenization of mainstream news. Imitation of other news outlets means journalists don’t have to consider newsworthiness as closely (Boczkowski 2009, 2010). If a competing news outlet is covering a story, then it is automatically deemed newsworthy. In fact, some news stories are simply rewritten versions of news from other outlets. As Philips (2010: 96) notes, “There is now a widespread practice across the news media, of reporters being asked to rewrite stories appearing elsewhere, in some cases without a single additional telephone call, and to lift quotes and case histories without any attribution.” As a consequence of such practices, news from different outlets tends to be more similar today than it was in the past, even though there are many more outlets available today (Boczkowski 2010; Schudson 2011).

The authority of journalists to make judgment calls about newsworthiness has also been challenged by the rise of new types of news outlets on the Internet that vary by the degree to which they are moderated by professionals and by the extent to which they focus on editorial content versus commentary and debate from the public (Deuze 2003). Not only do websites offer alternatives to professional news production but the ability of nonjournalists to gather information, take pictures, and capture videos has often meant that coverage of breaking news in mainstream news outlets includes content created by nonprofessionals.

Whether classic studies or contemporary updates, a sociology of news work gives us insight into the making of news by demonstrating the significance of the ways in which journalists respond to the demands of news organizations. The standard practices for gathering news, the shared definition of where news is likely to happen, and the increasing likelihood that cash-strapped news organizations imitate other outlets help explain why so much of our daily news across so many news outlets looks so similar and focuses on the activities of official institutions. The news we get is the end result of professional routines, which generally focus on the activities of legitimate, bureaucratic institutions.

**News Wire Services**

While news gathering is done by journalists, only major newspapers and television networks can afford a significant staff to gather original news stories on a full range of topics. As we have seen, imitation and recycling of news from other outlets has become common.
But even more important, most news organizations subscribe to news agency services that supply a steady stream of stories (Fenby 1986). (News agencies originally delivered their news via telegraph and are still sometimes referred to as newswires or wire services.) These agencies have correspondents in many locations, varying according to their reach and linguistic, geographic, and thematic specialization. They prepare news, feature stories, pictures, and videos that can be republished by the subscribing media outlet with little or no modification. The world news in your local newspaper is likely to come from a news agency.

The first news agency was created in France in 1835, and still exists: Agence France-Presse (AFP) has 200 bureaus in 150 countries and, on a typical day, produces about 5,000 stories, 3,000 photographs, 200 videos, and 100 graphics in six different languages (AFP.com). Together with Reuters (United Kingdom) and Associated Press (AP, United States), AFP is one of the three largest wire services in the world. Most news agencies are private corporations (Reuters). Others are government-chartered public corporations, such as AFP, and are directly owned by the government (Canadian Press, China’s Central News Agency), whereas others are cooperatives of smaller contributing media organizations (Associated Press, Australian Associated Press).

However they are structured, news agencies can be considered the backbone of modern journalism. They scout and produce the news that we read daily in newspapers and watch on television. They are the fundamental source of reporting on national and international news for the large majority of local and regional media outlets, which largely reproduce or rebroadcast news agency products. As a result, news agencies have a significant impact on the selection of what constitutes relevant news. But like all newsgathering organizations, news agencies themselves follow standardized news routines and staff-recognized beats that ensure they produce sufficient material to supply to subscribing news outlets.

**Objectivity**

We have seen that the specific definitions of news and newsworthiness are, in large measure, the result of the ways reporters organize their work. However, there is more to be learned by exploring the profession of journalism. Consider the concept of objectivity. Most contemporary evaluations of the performance of the American mainstream news media begin or end with claims about their adherence (or lack thereof) to the standard of objectivity and related notions of impartiality, balance, and fairness. Politicians and other public figures routinely criticize the press for its supposed lack of objectivity, charging journalists with taking sides, being too opinionated, or having a routine bias. Even popular discussions of news media often focus on the question of objectivity. The central position of objectivity in American journalism is something we take for granted. We all seem to “know” that the news is supposed to be objective; the problem is that the news often does not live up to this widely shared expectation.

But where did the value of objectivity come from? Why are we so concerned with it? How does the ideal of objectivity affect the daily practice of journalism? Michael Schudson’s (1978) important study, *Discovering the News*, treats the ideal of objectivity as something to be explained rather than something to be taken for granted. It is a perfect example of how studying professional norms and practices can help us better understand the media.
The Origins of Objectivity

What do we mean by objectivity? Schudson (1978) provides a useful definition: “The belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust of ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation” (p. 6). Objectivity is a doctrine that perceives the separation of fact and value as a messy business that requires the use of a method, or set of practices, to ensure their separation. This method is objective journalism. According to Schudson, the concept of objective journalism is a relatively recent development. Only in the years after World War I did objectivity become the dominant value in American journalism.

Prior to World War I, reporters did not subscribe to a belief in what we now term objectivity. The AP—one of the first wire services—tried to present news in a way that would be acceptable to many different papers, and the New York Times used an “information” model of reporting to attract an elite audience. But journalists did not think about the separation of facts and values, nor did they believe that facts themselves were at all problematic. Rather, to journalists before World War I, the facts spoke for themselves. The goal of fact-based journalism was simply to uncover these facts, and doing so did not require a method of objective reporting. The task was straightforward: Find and report the truth. In this era, journalists were confident of their ability to identify the relevant facts and to report them accurately.

This faith in facts held by American journalists was thrown into doubt in the 1920s. Many American reporters had participated in wartime propaganda efforts during World War I. The success of such efforts made them uncomfortable with any simple understanding of “facts.” Having seen how easily facts could be manipulated, journalists became more cynical. They began to mistrust facts, realizing that facts could be made to serve illusion as well as the truth.

At the same time, the field of public relations (PR) emerged, and professional publicists became early “spin doctors.” They fed information to reporters, carefully controlling access to their powerful clients, and they staged events such as the press conference or photo opportunity expressly for the media. With PR professionals spinning the facts, dispensing information strategically, and shaping a good deal of news content through the use of official handouts or press releases, journalists’ emerging cynicism became even more pronounced.

The recognition that information could be manipulated and the rise of a profession—PR—expressly dedicated to the shaping of public attitudes left journalists with a crisis of confidence about their own ability to report the “facts” in a neutral way. In Schudson’s (1978) account, objectivity emerged as a “scientific” solution to this crisis of confidence—in other words, “a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted” (p. 122). By training would-be reporters in the “scientific” method of objectivity, journalists transformed their fact-based craft into a profession with a particular method. Objectivity, therefore, can be seen as a set of practices or conventions that the professional journalist is trained to follow.

What practices make up this method? W. Lance Bennett (2009), synthesizing the research on the professional norms of journalism, identifies six key practices: (1) maintaining political neutrality; (2) observing prevailing standards of decency and good taste; (3) using documentary reporting practices, which rely on physical evidence; (4) using standardized formats
to package the news; (5) training reporters as generalists instead of specialists; and (6) using editorial review to enforce these methods. The practical implication of belief in the ideal of objectivity is adherence to these basic practices.

**Objectivity as Routine Practices and Their Political Consequences**

The day-to-day routine practices of journalism, more than some abstract conception of objectivity, are key to understanding the news media. News accounts have a tendency to look similar because reporters all follow the same basic routines. They talk to the same people, use the same formats, observe the same basic dos and don’ts, and watch one another closely to make sure that they are not out of step with the rest of the profession. If we understand objectivity to be a set of routine journalistic practices, we can see why all news coverage is pretty much the same. Journalists adhere to the same methods and monitor each other’s work so they produce similar news. In fact, if news differed substantially from outlet to outlet, questions would be raised about the method of objective reporting, likely signaling a new crisis for the profession.

However, following a common set of practices does not ensure the achievement of the ideal of objectivity, that is, the separation of values from facts. Indeed, it can be argued that adherence to the practices associated with objectivity directly benefits particular political interests.

As we have seen, things that happen in and around established institutions, especially official agencies, are defined as news. Happenings outside of these boundaries are likely never to be detected by professional journalists. Even if they are detected, they are not likely to be defined as newsworthy by the established definitions of importance. This is one of the principal reasons why so much news is about the world of officialdom, even when such stories are often routine and predictable. Journalists and news organizations rely on and build their work around the routine and predictability of these established institutions. Newsworthiness, then, is socially constructed. It is not a property inherent in events but is instead something that is attached to happenings by journalists. Once we realize this, the traditional ways we talk about news begin to seem inappropriate. In particular, the metaphor of news as a “mirror”—a simple reflection of events—no longer works. Even a mirror cannot reflect the whole world. It must be facing a particular direction, including some subjects in its reflection and excluding others. Thus, the image propagated by the media is far from complete. At best, it reflects only a small part of society.

In addition, the objects being reflected in the media are not passive. Instead, people holding different interests, wielding different amounts of power and enjoying different relationships to those producing the news, actively attempt to influence the content of the news. Thus, the resulting images often reflect the relative power of actors in our society rather than some “objective” reality.

News, therefore, is the product of a social process through which media personnel make decisions about what is newsworthy and what is not, about who is important and who is not, about what views are to be included and what views can be dismissed. None of these decisions can be entirely objective. The ideal of objectivity—separating values from facts—is ultimately unobtainable, although some would argue it is a valuable goal. Furthermore, the practices associated with objectivity are tilted in one direction; they give those in power
enormous visibility in the media, while those outside the centers of power are largely ignored. The reliance on “appropriate,” available, and preferably authoritative sources means journalists talk mostly to government and corporate officials and end up reproducing their view of the world. Thus, “objective” journalism, by highlighting the views and activities of officials, can be seen on balance to favor those in power.

Rejecting Objectivity: Alternative Journalism

As we have seen, objectivity as a standard of U.S. journalism is a fairly recent phenomenon. When the nation’s founders protected the freedom of the press, they were referring to publishers of what were mostly highly partisan pamphlets and periodicals. Through the 19th century, newspapers were often affiliated with political parties, openly arguing from a particular perspective rather than trying to retain a neutral stance on the issues. While “objective” journalism has displaced this older tradition, “advocacy” or “alternative” journalism has survived and can be found in many forms today.

Atton and Hamilton (2008) argue that alternative media “seek to challenge objectivity and impartiality from both an ethical and a political standpoint.” They challenge the very notion that “it is possible in the first place to separate facts from values and that it is morally and politically preferable to do” (Atton and Hamilton 2008: 84). Alternative journalists not only reject the idea of not getting involved in the story, they seek to play an active role in advancing their causes.

Alternative journalism projects span a wide range of media, including newspapers, magazines, websites, radio programs, and television shows. In recent years, the Internet has made alternative journalism more easily accessible and more visible while enabling its unprecedented global expansion (Lievrouw 2011).

There is a broad range of work that might be called alternative journalism. Some of it is in the muckraking tradition—fact-based reporting aimed at exposing a social ill or wrongdoing that is being ignored by mainstream media—that dates back to the 19th century. For example, founded in 1976, the nonprofit magazine (and now website) Mother Jones is named after an early labor movement leader and bills itself as “a nonprofit news organization that specializes in investigative, political, and social justice reporting” (Motherjones.com 2011). It has won numerous awards for its investigative reporting.

Other efforts are aimed at broadening the range of perspectives available in the news. Democracy Now! is a syndicated radio program that features “people and perspectives rarely heard in the U.S. corporate-sponsored media, including independent and international journalists, ordinary people from around the world who are directly affected by U.S. foreign policy, grassroots leaders and peace activists, artists, academics and independent analysts” (Democracynow.org 2011).

Some efforts take advantage of the Internet to build international links. For example, the global network Indymedia offers what it bills as “grassroots, non-corporate coverage... a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth” (Indymedia.org 2001). Indymedia activists do not aim at being objective; they take sides, presenting a typically left or progressive view on issues of the day.

Conservative activists have also created their own media forms that blend news and opinion. Websites like Townhall—a commercially owned operation—assemble what it
describes as “political commentary and analysis from over 100 leading columnists and opinion leaders, research from 100 partner organizations, conservative talk-radio and a community of millions of grassroots conservatives” (Townhall.com 2011). The site links to hundreds of conservative bloggers. Conservative media activist Brent Bozell and his Media Research Center argue for a liberal bias in mainstream media and have created the Cybercast News Service (CNS) (cnsnews.com), which presents a distinctly right-wing spin on the news or, as the site’s slogan puts it, “The Right News. Right Now.”

At their best, efforts that—through well-reasoned, fact-based reporting—broaden the range of perspectives or tackle issues overlooked by mainstream commercial media can make a substantial contribution to keeping people informed and engaged, even when they clearly approach the issues from a particular political viewpoint. But at their worst, some partisan media—whether bitter cable talk shows on mainstream media or alternative websites—can also contribute to political polarization and the propagation of falsehoods. If people immerse themselves only in media that confirm their preexisting beliefs and play to their prejudices, it is unlikely that they will understand the arguments of opponents, be able to productively discuss issues with people who hold different opinions, or find the kind of common ground necessary for a healthy functioning democracy. Instead, relying solely on such media may contribute to the entrenched and bitterly divisive politics of recent years.

As we have seen, news media production is the result of a series of conventions and routines that enable professionals collectively to do their jobs and meet the demands of the organizations for which they work. These conventions incorporate fundamental professional norms (e.g., objectivity) and basic organizational goals (e.g., gathering news). Routine media practices shape, to a great degree, the final media products.

We have also seen that some media reject some of these conventions—most notably the idea of objectivity—to create new forms of reporting and opinion. Another alternative to traditional mainstream commercial news can be seen in the growing number of experiments involving user-generated content, some of which bypass traditional journalists, while others involve collaboration with them.

THE RISE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT

With the exception of alternative journalism, most of our discussion so far has focused on mainstream professional journalism. However, the Internet has enabled the creation of a growing number of news sites that use amateur producers and user-generated content rather than professional journalists. User-generated content is produced by the end user. It has become increasingly popular, thanks to the availability of broadband Internet access, multifunction smartphones, easy-to-use blogging platforms, and wiki software. (Wiki software allows users to collectively create and edit web pages such as those at Wikipedia.)

Various forms of user-generated media overlap and often go by different names, but we can loosely group user-generated journalism into four different types, each with a different degree of amateur participation and control over content. First, some traditional news sites invite audiences to submit content in various forms; second, “pro-am” efforts involve the pairing of traditional professional journalists with input from amateurs to create news
content; third, some all-amateur sites make use of collaborative wiki platforms; and fourth, some amateur sites involve the submission of “citizen journalism” projects.

**Users and Mainstream Media: iReport**

The first category of user-generated content piggybacks on existing traditional news websites. For example, in 2006, CNN launched iReport, its platform for user-generated content, with the aim of “paint[ing] a more complete picture of the news” (iReport.cnn.com 2011). Users can “take part in the news” by producing and uploading their own stories, which are published on the website. In doing so, contributors give CNN the right to edit and use their work in any way without payment. A small number of stories that are vetted by the CNN staff are marked with a special badge, and may be used in other CNN platforms. Otherwise, as the CNN site warns, iReport stories are “not edited, fact-checked, or screened.” Similar initiatives include Fox’s UReport and MSNBC’s FirstPerson.

The “comments” section on news websites provide another way for users to contribute by commenting on the facts reported in an article. Unlike a traditional letter to the editor, these comments appear instantaneously, unscreened, sometimes moments after a story appears. According to Robert Quigley, the social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*, comments on stories are a “living, breathing thing with people jumping into a breaking story with live updates and thoughts” (quoted in Lavrusik 2009).

Traditional news outlets often encourage the use of platforms that enable audience feedback, a sign of the convergence of these various media forms (Quandt and Singer

![CNN’s iReport feature](https://ireport.cnn.com)

CNN’s iReport feature invites readers to submit material for publication on their website and, possibly, for use on air. Those who contribute are not compensated in any way. Here, CNN asks for reactions to everyday racism following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, charged with murdering Trayvon Martin.
2008). Often anchors on news broadcasts suggest that you also follow their Twitter feed, or they show some of the tweets or e-mails from their viewers about the topics covered during the evening’s broadcast. In such cases, audience perspectives are more visible in the news, but professional journalists still select and approve the contributions.

**Professionals and Amateurs Together: Pro-Am Efforts**

A number of mainstream news organizations have launched efforts to enlist the assistance of amateurs in creating news stories while maintaining control and employing professional journalistic standards of fact-checking. These can involve professional journalists soliciting information from readers about a topic they are investigating. For example, the Florida *Fort Myers News-Press* newspaper announced an investigation into the high cost home buyers were being charged for simple water- and sewer-line connections, asking readers to supply stories and information about their experiences. Bids, contracts, blueprints, and other documents were submitted by readers and posted on the paper’s website for examination and discussion. The paper learned of cases where home owners were charged up to $30,000 for a simple hookup; eventually, it exposed illegal price-fixing in some bids. The paper now has a “Team Watchdog” feature, which regularly solicits input from readers and uses volunteers to “serve as consultants, research data, work side by side with the professional reporting staff and interact with readers” (News-press.com/watchdog 2011).

Another pro-am approach is to enlist the help of nonjournalists to sort through mountains of information, a process sometimes referred to as “crowd-sourcing.” In the United Kingdom, *The Guardian* newspaper asked readers to help them review over 700,000 expense reports from members of Parliament. Over 20,000 readers took part, tagging reports in a range of categories from “not interesting” (involving routine documents and cover sheets) to “investigate this!” (involving suspicious, high-ticket items). Many other crowd-sourcing experiments, using various formats, have followed (Anderson 2009).

**Collaborative Content Creation: Wikinews**

A third form of user-generated content involves all-amateur collaborative creations. Wikipedia is a well-known collaborative online encyclopedia. Wikinews is its spin-off project, where stories are written as news articles as opposed to encyclopedia entries. Unlike mainstream news sources and the professional journalists who work for them, anyone with Internet access can write or edit a Wikinews article.

So what have Wikinews users done in a totally new media platform? Ironically, they have largely re-created the conventions of traditional news media. Most notably, in defining “what is news,” Wikinews—like Wikipedia (Wales 2001)––insists that articles be written from a “neutral point of view.” This foundational operating principle guides much of the decision making on the site. In addition, like traditional news, Wikinews separates fact from opinion, noting in its guidelines that “news is factual. Opinions should be sourced from qualified sources.” Without using the term, the site even lists criteria for newsworthiness,
noting that “news is relevant. . . . Stories should appeal to a large number of people” (Wiki-
news.org 2011). In fact, Wikinews users have adopted an elaborate set of official policies
regarding both content and style that serve as the conventions for one of the latest news
platforms—but which echo the conventions of traditional news media.

For example, Wikinews explicitly emulates mainstream media, defining news as “stories
like those you read in the newspaper, or see on the television news.” Its policies encourage
writers to cite sources, avoid copyright infringement, and follow standard grammatical
rules—policies familiar to any professional journalist. Wikinews relies on many volunteer
contributors to crowd-source its content—including checking facts and correcting errors—
and provides a nonprofit service to Internet users, but it does not employ professional
journalists to enforce these rules.

Citizen Journalists: OhmyNews

A fourth form of user-generated news content can be broadly labeled “citizen journalism”
and includes examples such as OhmyNews. OhmyNews is a South Korean online news
outlet with the motto “Every Citizen Is a Reporter.” Founded in 2000 (with an English ver-
sion appearing in 2004), it was the first in the world to publish articles by its readers, which
account for about 80 percent of the total content that goes online. Its declared aim is to
“help correct the imbalance in the Korean media environment” (OhmyNews 2010). Unlike
CNN’s iReport, stories are fact-checked by the site’s editorial team before publication.

Some observers worry that some forms of citizen journalism serve as cheap labor for
the benefit of profit-making multinationals (Deuze 2008). Demotix (demotix.com), a user-
generated content website and 15,000-strong online community, seeks to address this by
collecting news content to sell to commercial media. As such, it seeks to bridge the gulf
between amateurism and professionalism.

These various user-generated news efforts have produced a variety of models, none of
which have yet proven their long-term viability. It seems certain, however, that user-generated
news—in one form or another—is here to stay. Taking a broader perspective on media orga-
nizations and conventions, we can see that these new efforts are, in some ways, a return to
older types of media that were neither centrally owned nor produced by commercial media
conglomerates. In fact, to a large extent, citizen journalism has emerged out of dissatisfaction
with the existing commercial news media.

As these new forms of media continue to evolve, they will follow in the footsteps of older
media in developing conventions and routines that enable people to work together—
whether in amateur journalism or in professional-amateur collaborations.

OCCUPATIONAL ROLES AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Journalists are not the only media professionals who follow routine practices. Analyzing
work practices and professional norms can help us understand other media as well. Let’s
turn to two additional examples—photographers and book editors—and place them in the
context of roles.
Roles

The concept of role has a long history in sociological theory and research. It has helped clarify the relationship between society and individuals, and the relationship between the forces of structure and agency. We also use the term in everyday conversation: We know that actors play specific roles, we might refer to a member of a basketball team as a role player, and on learning of a recent dispute at the local bar, we might ask our friends what role they played in the squabble. Sociologically, roles can be thought of as the bundles of expectations that are associated with different social positions. For example, students know the basic requirements of their role: attend class, complete assignments, show a certain measure of respect for teachers, and so on. We rarely think about the specific content of roles because we have largely internalized them. In fact, roles become part of our sense of self. You would say, “I am a student,” not “I play the role of a student.”

However, sometimes the socially constructed nature of roles becomes apparent, for example, when role expectations are obviously breached. Take the classroom as an example. If a student were to fall into a deep sleep in class, begin snoring loudly, and perhaps even slide onto the carpeted floor to get a bit more comfortable, others in the class would feel a bit uneasy because the snoring student had rather blatantly violated a key component of the student role. Students are expected not only to attend class but to show some interest—even if feigned—in what goes on there. These kinds of situations clarify role norms; seeing what we shouldn’t be doing reaffirms what we should be doing.

Another time when we become aware of roles is when we have to learn a new one. Think about starting a new job that involves a kind of work you have never done. During the first few days, the bundle of expectations associated with this new role—whether it be waitress, teacher, or stockbroker—is likely to be a bit unclear, even confusing. Eventually, though, you must learn the ropes to be successful in your new job. You do this by following instructions, watching others do the work, and getting feedback on your own efforts.

The process by which we learn the basic ground rules of a role is called socialization. Every media occupation that we will encounter in this book—journalist, photographer, writer, filmmaker, musician, and so on—requires a kind of socialization into that role. We tend to think of this kind of work as creative, done by people who have a special talent. However, we need to keep in mind that even these creative media jobs are performed by people who must fulfill the expectations of their role and must fit into the expectations of the organizations with which they work.

On one hand, the concept of role highlights the significance of external social controls. Specific roles, we might say, serve as a social control mechanism by clarifying what is expected of us. Because other members of a social group also know the norms of the role, the expectations are enforced by our interaction with others. We generally do not consider role expectations oppressive because the social control is not simply imposed on us. We internalize, to varying degrees, the components of the role, often so thoroughly that we hardly acknowledge any social control. The role concept, then, explains how individual behavior is both patterned by and influenced by broader social forces.

This is, however, only half of the story. Roles are not rigid; they do not dictate specific behaviors. On the contrary, individuals often have a good deal of room for negotiation within the framework of the roles they occupy. Parents, for example, can relate to their
children in a variety of ways—as friend, strict disciplinarian, or hands-off monitor—without violating the norms of the parent role. However, there are limits. Certain actions will be widely perceived as violating basic norms, and some actions may even lead to the removal of children from the home, an effective termination of the parent role.

Roles also are not static. The parent example illustrates the dynamic nature of roles. What is expected of parents today is different from what was expected 50 years ago. Nor are roles permanent. Changing social conditions both create and eliminate the need for particular roles. In the following sections, we explore how roles and socialization apply to media professionals and how changing social conditions have affected these roles.

Photography

We see photographs everywhere, and to most people they are not much of a mystery. Digital cameras are our companions at outings with friends, family gatherings, or on vacations. We can use our cell phone to take pictures, Instagram to share our images, and Photoshop for more elaborate manipulations. Amateur photographers use these pictures to tell stories, remember distant friends or places, or display their artistic talent. So what separates those of us who take photos from someone who is a professional photographer?

The easiest answer is to note that photographers get paid for their pictures, but many of us know people whose amateur photographs rival anything that is published, making this distinction a mere technicality. Another answer to this question is talent. Professional photographers have a vision for their pictures that the rest of us typically lack. There is undoubtedly something to this distinction, but we would be hard-pressed to put it to practical use. Who should define this talent or vision? How do we decide who is worthy of the status of photographer, and who is just a weekend picture taker?

Instead, it is more useful to think about photographers as people who take on the role of photographer and behave according to the norms of that role. Indeed, Battani (1999) demonstrates how a specific occupational role of the photographer emerged in the mid-19th century, as early photographers sought to institutionalize their emerging field as a legitimate profession. To enhance their reputations, attract wealthy customers for portraits, and build favorable relationships with the suppliers of photographic materials, the early photographers worked to promote “an image of their studios and practices as places of refined culture” (p. 622).

Of course, there are different types of photography and, therefore, different versions of this role. For example, the photojournalist and the advertising photographer may use similar basic equipment, but each has a different role—with different sets of tasks, expectations, and norms. Rosenblum’s (1978) classic study Photographers at Work shows that role expectations and organizational demands are central to explaining the different styles of photography in newspapers and advertising as well as the different conceptions of creativity held by photographers in the two settings.

News photos and advertising photos draw on distinct stylistic conventions that make the images quite different from each other in ways that are readily apparent even to the untrained eye. Photo images selling jeans or perfume in Vanity Fair, for example, are usually easily distinguishable from a front-page photo illustrating the lead story in the New York Times. If the photo styles and their associated conventions are different, the sources
of these differences can be found in the socialization of photographers, their work roles, and the organizational goals the pictures need to meet.

**Socialization of Photographers**

Socialization refers to the process by which people learn the expectations of a particular role. It is likely that young news and ad photographers begin with similar sets of skills. Each knows the basic technical requirements of taking pictures. Socialization allows the beginning to move beyond the technical aspects of the work and learn how to conceptually see images in ways that are distinct to the professional photojournalist or the ad photographer. This distinct vision must be learned in order for each photographer to produce suitable pictures. One underlying assumption here is that ways of seeing images are socially constructed. Photojournalists and ad photographers must learn to see images in ways that are in line with their professional and organizational roles.

Entry-level photographers have to learn and internalize the basic norms of the organizations they work for and, at the same time, learn the culture of their profession. A beginning photojournalist learns the kind of news that the paper and its website feature and, more important, becomes acquainted with the picture selection process at that news organization. If you have ever seen photojournalists on assignment, you have probably noticed that they are likely to take a large number of pictures of various aspects of the scene. When you pick up the paper in the morning, however, only one of these shots will have made it into print, and even the paper’s website is likely to feature only a few of the many pictures taken. The photo editor is responsible for selecting which pictures to use. Part of the process of socialization, then, is learning the norms of the selection process to be able to produce the kind of pictures that the photo editor will select. After all, one of the principal goals of photojournalists is getting their pictures published.

It is one thing to know what your editors expect; it is another to be able to produce it. The beginner must learn the role of the press photographer. To produce suitable news photos, press photographers usually believe that they should not behave in such a way that

Both of these photos show people eating. Which is from the news and which is the sort used in an advertisement? The obvious differences illustrate the different level of control that news and ad photographers have over their pictures.
their presence changes the unfolding of events. This is one of the fundamental professional norms of photojournalism: Pictures should document happenings, not transform them. While pictures inevitably provide selective snapshots of complex phenomena, the commitment to unobtrusiveness is central to the ideology of photojournalism. News photographers, then, have to learn techniques to stay out of the way yet still get good pictures.

Taking pictures that are suitable for publication while remaining unobtrusive is no easy task. Because the events that photographers cover are almost all either prescheduled (e.g., press conferences, parades, sporting events) or fit into standard story formats (e.g., fires, accidents, crimes), photographers learn that they will be successful if they can anticipate what they will see to plan the kinds of shots they will take. This anticipation allows photographers to locate themselves in strategic spots, use the appropriate lenses, focus on the setting or people that are central to the event, and produce the kinds of pictures that will be acceptable to their editors. Thus, the socialization of the photojournalist involves learning how to anticipate action and plan shots in advance.

Advertising photographers must learn a set of organizational and professional norms that are different from those of photojournalism. One difference is that advertising photographers learn to leave nothing to chance; every aspect of each photo is the responsibility of the photographer. We are exposed to so many ad images each day that we can easily forget that everything about an ad photo has been staged. This staging is most obvious in respect to lighting and setting, but it extends to every last detail: the hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry of the models; items that sit in the background of the picture; and the specific nature of any key props for the shot. Should the woman in the lingerie ad wear a wedding ring? If so, how will she hold her hand to both look natural and display the ring? The ad photographer must learn how to exert precise control and develop the technical skills required to accomplish it.

Advertising photographers learn that ad photography is a collective process; managing relationships with art directors and representatives of the advertiser is a key part of the job. The ad photographer learns that success requires not only vision or skill in creating compelling images but also the ability to negotiate with—even please—those who have creative control over the advertisements. In practice, this means that photographers learn that there is little room for individualists who perceive themselves as pure artists. The profession requires that ad photographers see their role as just one part of a collective process driven by the logic of commerce.

**Photographers’ Work Roles and Organizational Goals**

The division of labor within newsrooms shapes the kinds of pictures that photojournalists take. Newspaper photography involves various people in coordinated activities: the person who decides on the assignment, the photographer, the photo editor who selects the pictures, the printer, the editor who decides which stories to run, and the webmaster who manages the paper’s site. News organizations are highly developed bureaucracies that rely on clearly defined rules and classification systems. This kind of organization leads photographers to take standard pictures, the kinds of photos that we would be likely to recognize as news photos. The key is the system of classification, in which events are grouped into types: the disaster, the war, the political campaign, the court case. In producing news coverage, news
organizations impose a standard script—including images—on these basic types of stories. Photographers are expected to produce images that fit the standard scripts. When images that do not fit the script are routinely weeded out by the photo editors, photographers soon learn not to take these kinds of pictures in the first place.

Role expectations also provide the framework for definitions of creativity. Editors expect photographers to have good news judgment, to be willing to use initiative to get good pictures, and to produce pictures that can tell various aspects of the story. Moreover, photographers are expected to regularly provide the kind of standard pictures that can accompany standardized stories, which both editors and readers come to expect. This expectation does not leave much room for the independent creativity of the photojournalist. The subject matter is assigned, and the organizational norms suggest the kinds of pictures that are appropriate. As a result, photojournalists generally see themselves not as creative artists but as reporters who take pictures.

Ad photographers, in contrast, take on the role of merchants as they must sell their services to an ad agency and an advertiser, follow the lead of the art director, and produce pictures that are generally prescribed. Thus, much ad photography is reduced to technical work. The photographer must have the knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the wishes of those making the creative decisions. Much of the day-to-day work of the ad photographer involves creating scripted images and adding small variations—in angle or lighting, for example—so that art directors have several different versions of the picture from which to choose.

For the vast majority of ad photographers, creativity is not in the conception of the images but in the ability to capture the desired image. They often achieve this by devising solutions to technical problems in the photographic process. Creativity in ad photography, then, is being innovative enough to figure out how to get the image the art director wants when standard techniques do not work. The creativity of ad photography is not in the vision but in a kind of technical mastery (Rosenblum 1978). In the digital age, this technical mastery increasingly involves the skillful use of software to manipulate images to meet client needs.

Photographers, then, are not all the same. They work in different kinds of organizations that place different demands on them. They are socialized into different professional roles and take different kinds of pictures. Organizational and professional norms provide the context for understanding the pictures photographers take, the daily routines in the workplace, and the ways photographers evaluate their own work. One of the central lessons to be learned from our focus on photographers is that authority relations within the workplace can tell us a good deal about the kind of work that media professionals do. Photographers, in both news and advertising, have specific superiors whom they must satisfy by producing appropriate pictures. Most of the time, they carry out the creative wishes of others rather than conceptualizing on their own. What about media professionals who are higher in the organizational hierarchy? What norms or social forces affect how they organize their work? A look at the work of book editors will help us answer these questions.

**Editorial Decision Making**

Book publishing is a dynamic, multifaceted industry. Books are published on a wide range of subjects, packaged in various formats, sold in many different settings, and bought by many types of readers. In addition, there are several different kinds of publishing companies, from
large commercial houses that sign prominent authors to seven-figure, advance-payment contracts to small presses that publish scholarly monographs.

In all publishing firms, the key decision is which manuscripts to publish. Regardless of whether the house is aiming for the best-seller list, with sales in the millions, or for adoption by college professors as a classroom text, where success might mean only a few thousand copies sold, all publishers have to sift through many submissions and proposals and select the few that will become books. These selection processes take place in other media industries as well. Record labels sign a small number of musicians, Hollywood studios produce a limited number of films, and the television networks add only a handful of new programs to their prime-time schedules each year. In each of these industries, decision makers need to make a large number of choices for projects about which they have only partial knowledge. These decisions, of course, have substantial consequences—they dictate the books, music, films, and television programs that will be available.

Different industries and the various sectors within each industry have different rules that govern the decision-making process. The search for steady profits by commercial media companies makes evaluations of the potential for economic success a central feature of the decision-making process. Those in decision-making roles need to develop strategies for evaluating the potential profitability of a particular movie or book.

**The Work of the Book Editor**

In most publishing houses, the people who solicit, evaluate, and sign manuscripts are called acquisitions editors. It is their job to get high-quality books for the press, to weed out titles that do not fit, and to work with authors to produce books that will meet organizational goals. Acquisitions editors have varying degrees of autonomy and different editorial mandates at different presses, but they are ordinarily the principal filter through which the decision to publish is made.

One study of publishing (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982) found that a key factor in whether a manuscript is published is the channel that brings a potential author to a publisher's attention. Abstract measures of the quality or significance of a book manuscript are far less important—at least in determining whether a book is published—than the way the manuscript comes in the door. There are different “lines” of authors (perhaps a better image is piles of manuscripts) awaiting the eyes of editors. These different piles are organized according to how they were received. The longest, and by far least successful, line is made up of authors who send their unsolicited manuscript to a publishing house, hoping that it will be impressive enough to be accepted for publication. Unfortunately for aspiring authors, there is very little likelihood that this route will pay off. One large publisher estimated that only 1 out of 15,000 unsolicited manuscripts is published each year (Anand, Barnett, and Carpenter 2004).

Other avenues are more likely to lead to publication. Unsolicited manuscripts that are addressed to the appropriate editor by name are more likely to be considered seriously than those not directed at an individual. More important, personal contacts are what really facilitate the publication of a book. Manuscripts that come through informal networks—other authors, friends, or professional meetings—go into a much smaller pile that is taken more seriously. And authors who have agents are placed in yet another pile.
These piles are not likely to exist in any concrete form (although the volume of unsolicited manuscripts is so high that it is hard to believe they sit anywhere except in piles on an editorial assistant’s desk); the pile metaphor suggests that publishing houses organize work, even if unconsciously, along these lines. Organizationally, this system operates like a kind of obstacle course with different entry points. Depending on where each manuscript starts the course, it will face different hurdles, opportunities, time frames, and perhaps even personnel until it completes the course or is rejected. The specific nature of the obstacle course depends on the particularities of the organization of the publishing house.

While the basic factors influencing acquisition editors discussed by Coser and colleagues (1982) still hold true, more recent studies have found additional dynamics at play in today’s publishing industry. For example, acquisition editors today often feel increasing pressure to sign only books with blockbuster potential. Likewise, they struggle with reading submissions, as more of their time is dedicated to the marketing and publicity of books, and specialized marketing and publicity staff have an increasing say in which books are published (Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton 2007). Publishing houses often resort to working with authors who have their own ability to get their names out and cross-promote their books—through popular blogs they write, shows they host or appear on, or through newspapers and magazines to which they regularly contribute.

With an increased emphasis on potential blockbuster books—and the lucrative movie rights often associated with them—the growth of famous authors who command a loyal readership, and the rise of “super-agents” who advocate for their author/clients, the balance of power in this portion of the publishing industry has shifted in recent years away from the publishing houses to the celebrity authors and their agents. In his study of the trade book industry in the United States and Britain, John Thompson (2010) notes that these new super-agents thought of themselves less as intermediaries, mediating between author and publisher, and more as dedicated advocates of their client’s interests. They conceived of their task primarily in legal and financial terms, and they displaced the centrality of the publisher by asserting control over the rights of their client’s work and deciding which rights to allocate to which publisher and on what terms. In their eyes, the publisher was not the central player in the field but simply a means to get what they wanted to achieve on their clients’ behalf, which was to get their work in to the marketplace as effectively and successfully as possible. (p. 66)

Thompson stresses that this portion of the publishing world is unique and does not represent the vast number of smaller publishers who handle the work of authors without agents.

With some 250,000 titles published by U.S. houses each year, editors and publicity staff feel great strain in competing for the public’s attention—and new competition has appeared, as self-publishing has exploded in recent years. While firm numbers are difficult to determine, some estimates are that more than 600,000 new titles are now self-published each year in the United States (Morgan 2013). Most of these self-published books have tiny sales figures; but some have had moderate success, and a few have become best-sellers. The massive best-selling erotic romance novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, for example, began as
a self-published title before being bought by a traditional publisher. Publishing houses have taken notice, and some have even responded by launching their own self-publishing brands, such as Simon & Schuster’s Archway Publishing.

As you can see, there are far too many books published each year for any one bookstore to place on its shelves. Just as publishers follow a set of conventions as they determine which books to publish, brick-and-mortar bookstores adopt their own conventions to help them decide which books to sell. Advance reviews and publishers’ catalog descriptions help booksellers make selection decisions. As on the front pages of newspapers, publishers put their most promising books toward the front of the catalog and dedicate more space to their displays. In addition to these catalogs, according to Miller (2006), the buyers for booksellers (those who decide which books a bookstore will carry) consider past sales of the author’s previous work; the current popularity of the book’s genre; the publisher’s promotional budget and plans; whether the author will be touring or making any media appearances; the sales rep’s or editor’s enthusiasm and recommendations; the ease of ordering and receiving from the book’s supplier; the terms at which the book is being made available (discount, shipping costs, payment, and return policies); the book’s list price, production quality, and cover design; the book’s topicality; the buyer’s understanding of local tastes and habits; and the buyer’s personal tastes. Miller argues that both the independents and the chains employ routine conventions to sift through the vast array of potential books, but the independents give much more weight to local interest in their decisions.

Online sellers like Amazon don’t have to worry as much about which books to stock, as their store exists only in virtual space, with physical books stocked in relatively inexpensive, unadorned warehouses. While this gives them an advantage over bookstores who have to pay high prices for rent in foot-trafficked areas and who have to contend with not having an in-store copy of a book that a reader may want, online sellers face additional difficulties in allowing users to browse their selections. In response to this problem, online sellers use pictures of book covers on their websites, show similar and recommended books on the webpage of a book that a user has searched, and provide options like the “Look Inside!” feature on Amazon to try to give buyers the experience of browsing in a physical bookstore (Weedon 2007). The quickly growing popularity of e-books gives online retailers the additional competitive advantage of being able to provide books instantly—without the cost of storing and shipping a physical product. E-books made up about 20 percent of book sales in 2012 (Milliot 2013).

**Scholarly Publishing**

Walter Powell (1985) studied the operating procedures that govern the process of manuscript selection in two scholarly publishing houses. Scholarly publishing is a segment of the book industry that is not as clearly oriented to profitability. As a general rule, books need to be able to sell enough copies to pay for the costs of production and meet the house’s criteria for scholarly quality. However, editors do not have to focus their attention on signing best sellers. As a result, acquisitions editors at scholarly publishing houses have a more ambiguous goal than their counterparts at the large commercial houses, where sales potential is the dominant goal.
As is the case at commercial houses, scholarly editors follow a set of routines, governed by standard operating assumptions, that help them make decisions about what to publish. The volume of manuscripts is so high that it is impossible to attend to each project. Manuscripts from unknown authors who have never had contact with the publishing house do not receive much editorial attention and are, therefore, unlikely to be published. Manuscripts from an author with previous connections to the house or those solicited by an editor receive much more thorough and quicker attention. In addition, editors make use of prominent academics who serve as series editors to help attract new authors or evaluate manuscripts. In this way, editors can farm out evaluations to a stable, trusted group of scholars who may be more expert in the particular field. Most scholarly houses also use outside reviewers—people the editor selects to anonymously assess the quality of the manuscript. Editors use all these practices to manage their workload in ways that are consistent with their editorial goals and their obligations to their authors, colleagues, and friends. All of this suggests a good deal of autonomy for editors; they can draw upon series editors when they choose to, send manuscripts to an outside reviewer who is likely to be supportive (or not), and give closer attention to projects that involve scholars they already know.

In his study, Powell (1985) first accepted editors’ explanations that they had wide discretion in acquiring books. However, he later noticed several things that made him skeptical: Editors had a clear sense of which authors deserved priority service and which could be put off for long periods; editors never proposed atypical books, demonstrating their sense of boundaries; and there was a high turnover rate among editors, yet stability in the kinds of decisions that were made. In addition, Powell found that his observation at the houses had made him an expert in predicting which manuscripts would be signed and which would be rejected. In essence, he had learned the informal rules so well that the decision-making process was no longer a mystery.

Scholarly publishing is similar to photography. Through a process of socialization, acquisitions editors learn the values and preferences of their publishing houses. This socialization process is one of the mechanisms by which organizations assert a kind of unobtrusive control. The key to the socialization of editors is learning about the types of books the press publishes. As part of their socialization, editors learn about the history and traditions of the house; they may already be familiar with the prominent books and authors that the house has published. In short, successful editors must understand the house’s “list”—its currently available books, including new releases and the backlist of older titles. New books must complement other titles. Editors understand this constraint and adopt it as a norm in their own editorial decisions. In this way, choices about new books are shaped in important ways by the types of books that a house has previously published. In addition, most outside reviewers are authors who have published with the house, thus reinforcing a similar set of norms for each new year’s crop of books.

Powell (1985) attributes his finding that editors rarely had their selections rejected by their superiors to their internalization of the basic norms of the publishing house. Editors do not have their projects rejected because they have already weeded out those that did not fit. The manuscripts that they send on for approval by superiors fit with the house list. This is what makes them good editors. They enjoy a good deal of autonomy in their work because they do not think too independently while doing it.

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A focus on the practices that editors use to organize their work and on the organizational premises that guide these decisions shows the dynamic relationship between human agency and structural constraint in media production. While organizational premises—structure—may make change more difficult, small changes in routine practices may help alter these premises, leading to the publication of new types of books. The backlist is the concrete embodiment of the relationship between agency and structure. It represents the accumulation of decisions made by prior editors, a tradition that shapes current decisions. But those current decisions will alter the backlist and, in turn, affect the framework for future decisions. In this example, we see both the stability and the potential dynamism of the socialization process.

NORMS ON THE INTERNET, NEW MEDIA, AND NEW ORGANIZATIONS

The three occupations we have explored—journalism, photography, and editorial work—are well-established professions with lengthy traditions. But what about more recent forms of media and online interaction? How does work in these media differ from—and in what ways does it resemble—the occupations and organizations found in traditional media?

The highly decentralized nature of the Internet makes it tempting for us to think that social activity in cyberspace is totally autonomous, free from the kinds of conventions that guide the production of traditional media forms. But while cyberspace permits new forms of interaction and challenges our assumptions about the nature of mass-mediated communication, anyone who has spent time surfing the Internet is likely to have a sense of a clear set of norms that govern behavior in cyberspace, as well as a set of potential consequences for violators. These norms and conventions are generated by both the creators of websites and the users who contribute to them.

The creators of many Internet websites are part of larger media organizations and are governed by the occupational norms and standards that predominate in their fields. For example, professional web developer associations promote norms and conventions regarding user-friendly web design, universal access standards, and other issues. These groups operate much like other traditional media professionals. Those who have constructed and are expanding the platforms and networks that connect us to one another—through discussion groups, instant messaging, microblogging, social networking sites, e-mail, and websites—are technological innovators who both draw on and create conventions that help structure our interaction within these networks.

For example, a search engine such as Google operates within a set of conventions that were created—and sometimes change—based on its design. The rankings of search results are produced by Google’s calculation of the number and importance of pages that link to each site, thereby steering users toward the sites with more links to them. As Vaidhyanathan (2011: 14) notes, “Through its power to determine which sites get noticed, and thus trafficked, Google has molded certain standards into the web.” For example, Google downplays the importance of porn sites to reduce the likelihood of unintentionally stumbling across such sites when posing ambiguous search terms. Placing the word “define:” before a word in a Google search produces definitions of that word. “Time” plus a name of a city
produces the local time there. These and many other features of a site are the structural
conditions produced by its creators. Every form of media has similar conventions, such
as Twitter’s 140-character limit or Facebook’s use of friends, likes, and pokes.

However, as noted earlier, one of the defining characteristics of the Internet as a medium
is that users are often the source of content. These users are not professionals, nor is con-
tent creation their occupation. As a result, different and more informal mechanisms have
developed to teach the conventions of the medium and guide appropriate behavior.

For example, over time, we have developed language that helps users understand the
technology. This language also imposes a kind of logic onto cyberspace by formalizing
conventional ways of perceiving, even behaving on, the Internet. Terms used to describe
behaviors in cyberspace—such as trolling, spamming, morphing, and lurking—characterize
some of the ways our virtual behavior is both predictable and patterned. Some cyberspace
terms, such as newbie/noob and moderator, even explicitly describe particular cyber roles
with accompanying expectations.

Another example of a common set of conventions involves the use of “emoticons” (a
composite of the words emotion and icon). Created in the 1980s, emoticons—such as the
smiley face :o) or wink ;o)—have become the most common way of supplementing e-mail
or text messages with facial cues that simulate the inflection of face-to-face talk. We use
emoticons to express emotion, to strengthen a message, and to express humor, usually in
informal communication and in a positive context rather than in a negative one (Derks,
Bos, and von Grumbkow 2008). Another linguistic convention of cyberspace is the use of
acronyms in chat conversations. Examples include LOL (Laughing Out Loud), ROFL (Rolling
on the Floor Laughing), BTW (By the Way), AFK (Away From Keyboard), BAK (Back at Key-
board), and WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). Such terms can seem perplexing
at first until a user is socialized into learning their meaning.

As we saw in our earlier discussion of user-generated news content, often the norms
that develop on new media platforms closely emulate the conventions that already exist in
traditional media. But new media forms also require new conventions. In one early study
of conventions on the Internet, McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith (1995) explored the “stan-
dards of conduct” in online discussion groups, or newsgroups. In effect, they examined the
expectations associated with the role of the online newsgroup participant. In particular,
they argue that there are specific types of “reproachable” network behavior, that is, actions
that violate the basic norms of the Internet, commonly referred to as “netiquette.”

What are the behaviors that elicit reproaches from other network users? One involves the
incorrect use of the technological apparatus and is generally associated with novices who
have not mastered the format. An example is a user who accidentally posts a message to an
entire newsgroup that was intended only for a single recipient. A second norm is not to write
messages in capital letters (which is equivalent to SHOUTING). A third is the violation of a
basic network convention, such as failing to include your electronic signature with your
message or neglecting to include a previous message about which you are commenting
(“quoting”). Users who behave in these reproachable ways are likely to be admonished
online by fellow users who are committed to the orderly functioning of the group. Such
admonishment may be, at least initially, gentle and intended to be educational in nature. But
admonishment can become rather venomous, referred to as “flaming.” Many violators likely
will learn from their mistakes, seek out help with the technology, and learn the conventions.
Those who persist in their reproachable behavior may be threatened with loss of access to the group, and repeat offenders will ultimately be expelled from the newsgroup.

Online norms are powerful shapers of virtual behavior. Perhaps that is why the vast majority of newsgroup subscribers are perpetual lurkers, reading messages but not posting their own. One widely held newsgroup norm, in fact, is to follow a group for some time before posting a message. This allows newcomers to become socialized into the ways of the group, to learn about the group's history and traditions, and to see the kinds of issues that are generally on the group's agenda. Additional practices help socialize new members of newsgroups. Upon subscribing, members receive an electronic how-to manual for participation in the group, which includes both technical advice on the workings of the system and instructions on appropriate conduct. Archives of previous group discussions are often available, and new group members are encouraged to read through them. In addition, a file of frequently asked questions (FAQs) is sent to new members so that they do not clutter up the network with the same questions.

Why do such standards of conduct develop in the first place? One answer is that they provide a foundation for the maintenance of the identity of the newsgroup. This identity is passed along to new members through socialization into the norms of the electronic community and is enforced when new members are admonished for not adhering to the ground rules. Where do these standards come from? Many are practical responses to the needs of the medium. For example, regular users are aware that certain conventions, such as using an appropriate subject line on a posting, enable users to follow threads over time or search and find them later on. Those who use subject lines inappropriately or leave the line blank make participation in the virtual community both more confusing and more time-consuming.

Technological conventions may seem trivial, and notes of reproach for violations may seem nasty, but the requirement of maintaining some kind of order in cyberspace is their driving force. Perhaps most important, McLaughlin and her colleagues (1995) argue that there are underlying social roots to cyber conventions. These conventions reinforce and protect the collective identities of the electronic communities and can be used to ward off newcomers who pose a threat to these identities or to the stability of the group. Like other producers of media, users of the Internet are part of a social world in which tradition, organizational history, group identity, and the routinization of daily activities help shape the norms and practices that pattern even our virtual behavior.

The lessons from these early Internet newsgroups apply to more recent media platforms. Large media sites—such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—each have their own official policies on acceptable behavior: Facebook’s Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, YouTube’s Community Guidelines, and the Twitter Rules. These policies define appropriate (and inappropriate) uses of these social media services, specifying rules on, for example, privacy, copyright, spam, pornography, and hate speech. These policies establish a framework for conduct on social networking sites, and provide guidelines for how to respond to those who violate established policies. However, such official policies are only a starting point. Regular users of social media are socialized into the conventions of these online spaces and are familiar with a wide range of norms that go beyond corporate policies, including the dos and don’ts of posting on friends’ Facebook walls or how to respond (or not) to Facebook friend requests.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has rounded out our discussion of media production by showing how professional norms, institutional premises, and organizational structures shape the day-to-day work of media producers—whether professionals or amateurs. We have seen that human agents—reporters, photographers, book editors, and Internet users—are active participants in the construction and reconstruction of production routines. These routines serve as conventions that help organize the collective work of media production.

Routines and conventions are shaped by economic, political, and organizational forces, as well as technological constraints, in each sector of the media industry. Conventions can change, although this change is likely to be slow. Ultimately, conventions become a form of structural constraint, producing guidelines for action and decision making by future media professionals.

A production perspective helps us understand the media messages that are part of our lives. In Part III, we turn to the content of mass media, focusing on questions of inequality and ideology.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do media producers respond to economic and political constraints? In what ways do these constraints shape media work? To what degree do media professionals have autonomy in the face of these constraints? Use examples to illustrate your analysis.

2. What are “conventions,” and how does this concept help us to understand the work of media professionals? Why do media professionals make use of conventions? Use examples to illustrate your discussion.

3. What is the relationship between news routines and the organization of newsgathering? Why do reporters and news organizations develop such news routines?

4. Explain how recent forms of media have developed conventions similar to those of more traditional media. What might this suggest about the “newness” of such media and the continuity found across different forms of media?