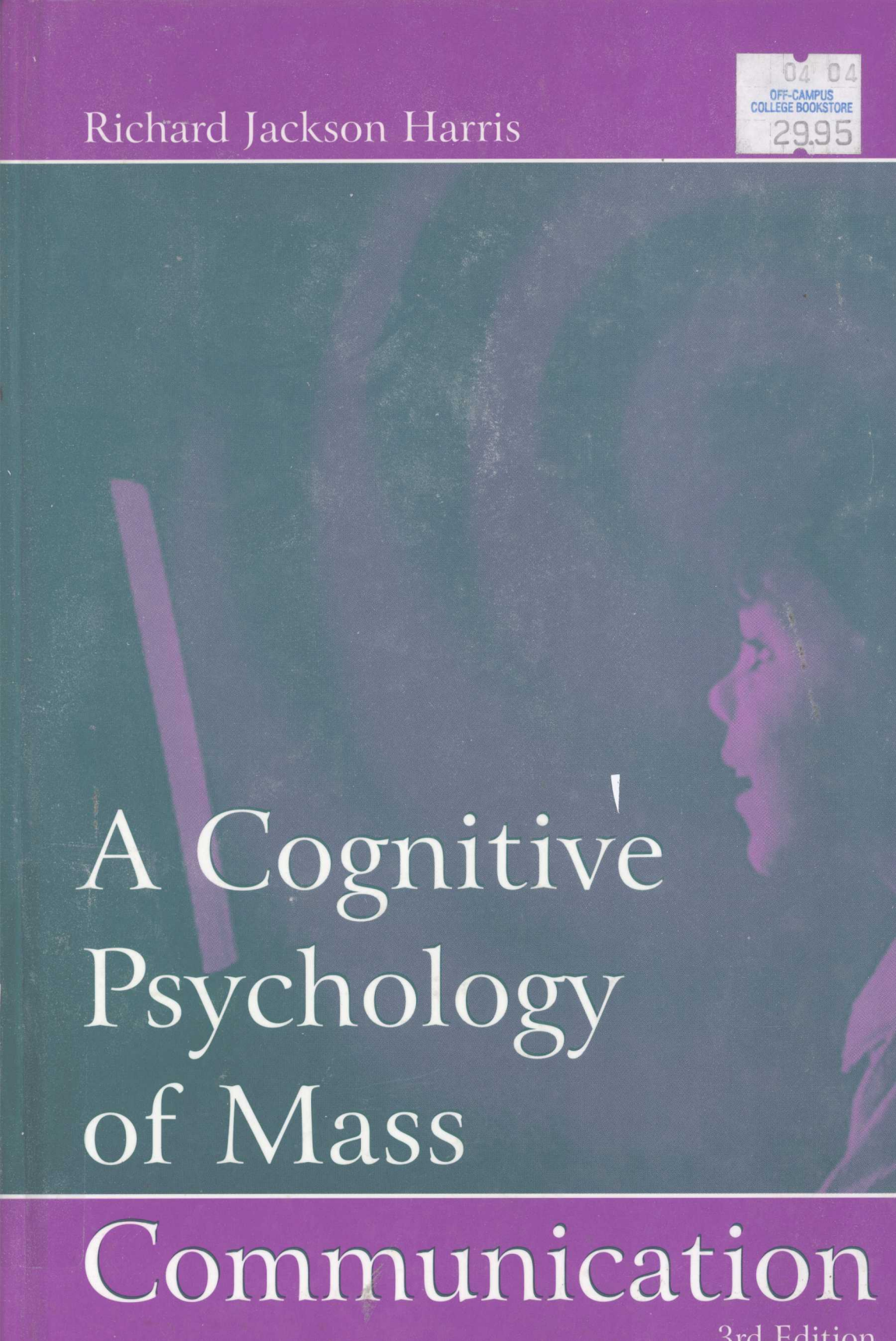


Richard Jackson Harris

The background of the cover is a dark, textured image. On the right side, there is a profile of a person's head and shoulders, looking towards the left. The person appears to be reading a book, which is visible as a light-colored rectangular shape. The overall color scheme is dark with a purple tint.

A Cognitive Psychology of Mass

Communication

3rd Edition

**A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY
OF MASS COMMUNICATION**
Third Edition

Richard Jackson Harris
Kansas State University



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PREFACE

As I completed the final version of the third edition of this textbook, a hot new movie had just hit the theaters. *The Truman Show* features Jim Carrey as a man whose entire life has been a television show, filmed constantly under a huge bubble that is his whole world. His gradual discovery of this fact is personally devastating, and Truman knows he can never be the same again. In a sense, Truman is a very exaggerated but apt metaphor for this entire book. Our lives and all that we know are far more heavily influenced by the media than most of us realize, even if our entire lives are not completely reducible to a TV show. Although you will not, like Truman, find out in reading this book that you have no identity except as an entertainment figure, you may discover that an amazing amount of what you know and how you behave is a direct product of your interaction with television, radio, print, and computer-mediated communications. In any event, you will probably never look at media the same again! At least, that is my hope.

In a way some real people are as much media creations as Carrey's Truman. Mourners around the world cried over the death of Britain's young Princess Diana in late summer 1997. These were not fake tears; the loss was real. Diana's death was a true personal loss for millions of people who had never met her but knew her through the media as a friend. A few years earlier, people were stunned at the arrest and trial of football great and actor O.J. Simpson for the murder of his ex-wife. Many people were truly shocked and disbelieving that he could have done what he was charged with. Simpson argued that the saturation tabloid-like coverage of his trial painted a false media picture of him with no relation to reality. Even though he was acquitted, many refused to accept that he had not done the crime. The irony, however, was that the "brutal O.J." picture created by the prosecution was no less a media creation than the original, positive image of the football hero, which was also entirely a media

image. *Where* was the real O.J. Simpson? *Was* there even a real O.J. Simpson? Does anybody know? The media picture became the reality.

This book initially evolved from developing and teaching a course, "The Psychology of Mass Communication," at Kansas State University in the early 1980s. I am grateful to the many students who participated in this class for their enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge; their ideas and dialogue with my material have positively affected the book throughout. More and more, I am convinced that the area of mass communication is a marvelous area in which to apply theory and research methodology from experimental psychology and other fields. Media research deals with some of the major activities that occupy our time and addresses problems that people are vitally interested in, such as media violence, values in media, and images of different groups.

Trained in the 1970s as a rigorous experimental psychologist studying language, I became interested in applying what I knew about text processing to studying the sort of language that people encounter every day. Some research on the cognition of deceptive advertising in the late 1970s first challenged me to think seriously and more broadly about mass media consumption as information processing. It is through this work that the current cognitive perspective on the media came to influence my thinking.

This is the third edition of this text, and, as in the last edition, much has changed. Seldom does the content of a textbook become obsolete so fast as when it deals with the media. Of course there are the predictable changes in what television shows are popular and what changes the latest telecommunications technology has brought. Readers familiar with the last edition will here notice more references to computer-mediated communications like the Internet and World Wide Web. Throughout the book, I have introduced new boxes with updated material, and reference to many new research studies. If I have omitted some of your favorites, forgive me; the amount of literature on the media is staggering. Based on comments from adopters of the second edition, I have tried to integrate theoretical perspectives more strongly throughout the entire book, particularly improving the articulation of the cognitive perspective. Although that point of view has driven my own thinking most strongly, I think you will find the book quite eclectic in theoretical perspective, as I think one needs to be. All theories have something of use to offer.

Beyond that, however, public events in the world have changed our ways of thinking. The end of the Soviet Empire and the Cold War in 1989–1991 initiated a massive realignment of nations and a revolution in the way we all need to learn to think of the world. No longer can the world be divided into communist and "free" nations, and some world leaders have struggled to figure out how to navigate this new world without such well-defined "bad guys." In 1992 we saw the election of the first U.S. president (Bill Clinton) born after World War II; perhaps even more significantly, he is the first U.S. president to grow up with television from his childhood. Clinton looks at the world differently than any of his predecessors. Some of that is due to the fact that his young adult formative experience was the Vietnam War (not World War II), but some is also due to the fact that TV has always been a part of his life.

My hope is that reading this book is both a great pleasure and the source of much learning. It will amuse you in places and probably disturb you in others. Students and teachers, please let me have your comments about reading this book. You can reach me by e-mail at *rjharris@ksu.edu*. Your reactions are always helpful in improving future editions of the book. Also, please feel free to send me interesting examples to illustrate the principles discussed; maybe I can use them in the fourth edition.

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The support of the Psychology Department at Kansas State University and the editors at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates during the writing of all three editions has been tremendous. I cannot imagine a more supportive department in which to teach and do research, nor a more helpful publisher to work with. Linda Bathgate has been an excellent editor for this edition. I also greatly appreciate the Fulbright Visiting Lectureships I held in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 1982 and Montevideo, Uruguay in 1994; these experiences gave me an internationalist perspective that I have tried to bring to this book. Contemporary media are part of an international culture. Although this book relies heavily on U.S. media, since that is what I know best and that is what has been studied the most, the principles are equally applicable elsewhere, as I try to suggest with frequent examples from other nations' media.

Although countless students have influenced the ideas on these pages, particular thanks are due to Steven Hoekstra, J. Andrew Karafa, and Sherry Wright for their helpful reactions and conversations about this material. Also, I thank my parents, Dick and Helen Harris, for modeling incredibly effective media use in the home I grew up in, long before people were talking about media literacy. Our family media use was often very positive family time. My own media literacy started early with my parents' questioning of what we saw on television and encouraging me to do the same. Many conversations over the television or the evening newspaper provided some intellectual seeds that have borne fruit in this book. I remember them commenting on negative values, unfair stereotyping, and excessive violence from my earliest days of watching TV. Although TV was a part of our household, so were print media, whose use my parents faithfully modeled.

CONTENTS IN BRIEF

Preface	xv
1 Mass Communication in Society: The Textbook for Our Lives	1
2 Research and Theory in Mass Communication: How We Study Media Scientifically	14
3 Portrayals of Groups: Distorted Social Mirrors	41
4 Advertising: Food (and Everything Else) for Thought	71
5 Communication of Values: Media as Parent and Priest	96
6 Sports: Marriage of Convenience or Conquest by Television?	119
7 News: Setting the Agenda About the World	141
8 Politics: Using News and Advertising to Win Elections	167
9 Violence: Does All That Mayhem Matter?	189
10 Sex: Turning On, Turning Nasty	211
11 Prosocial Media: Helpful Media Helping People	233
12 Living Constructively With Media: Taking Charge in the New Millennium	251
References	271
Author Index	319
Subject Index	333
	vii

CONTENTS

Preface	xv
1 Mass Communication in Society: The Textbook for Our Lives	I
WHAT IS MASS COMMUNICATION?, 4	
MEDIA USE, 6	
<i>Television, 6 / Other Media, 8</i>	
OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK, 10	
2 Research and Theory in Mass Communication: How We Study Media Scientifically	14
MEDIA RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS, 15	
<i>Looking at Content, 15 / Looking at Exposure, 17 / Looking for Effects, 17</i>	
THEORIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION, 20	
<i>Social Learning Theory, 20 / Cultivation Theory, 21 / Socialization Theories, 22 / Uses and Gratifications Theory, 23 / Agenda Setting, 25 / Cognitive (Constructionist) Theory, 26</i>	
THE EMOTIONAL SIDE OF EXPERIENCING MEDIA, 30	
<i>What Is Emotion?, 30 / Media as Vicarious Emotional Experience, 30 / Emotional Expression and Media, 32 / Suspending Disbelief, 32 / Identification, 34 / Empathy, 34 / Suspense, 35 / Humor, 35</i>	
MEDIA AS PERCEIVED REALITY, 38	
<i>The Reflection Myth, 38 / The Study of Perceived Reality, 38</i>	
CONCLUSION, 40	

3 Portrayals of Groups: Distorted Social Mirrors**41**

PORTRAYALS OF THE SEXES, 42

The View of Women, 42 / The View of Men, 47 / Effects of Gender Stereotyping, 49

THE FOUR STAGES OF MINORITY PORTRAYALS, 50

AFRICAN AMERICANS, 51

How Are They Portrayed?, 51 / Blacks as Viewers, 53 / Effects of African American Portrayals, 54

LATINOS, 55

NATIVE AMERICANS, 56

ASIAN AMERICANS, 58

ARABS AND ARAB AMERICANS, 59

OLDER ADULTS, 61

GAY AND LESBIAN PEOPLE, 63

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND DISORDERS, 65

Physical Disabilities, 65 / Psychological Disorders, 66

OCCUPATIONS, 67

Police Officers, 67 / Lawyers and Courtroom Trials, 67 / Farmers and Rural Life, 69 / College Students, 69

CONCLUSION, 70

4 Advertising: Food (and Everything Else) for Thought**71**

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, 73

TYPES OF ADS, 73

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEALS IN ADVERTISING, 74

Informational Appeals, 75 / Emotional Appeals, 75 / Patriotic Appeals, 77 / Fear Appeals, 77 / Achievement, Success, and Power Appeals, 78 / Humorous Appeals, 78 / Testimonials, 78

ADS AS INFORMATION TO BE PROCESSED, 79

Stages of Processing, 80 / A Cognitive Constructionist Theory Approach to Understanding Advertising, 80

DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING, 81

Miscomprehension Versus Deceptiveness, 81 / True-but-Deceptive Ads, 83 / Studying Deception Scientifically, 86

CHILDREN'S ADVERTISING, 86

Differentiating Ads and Programs, 87 / Disclaimers, 88 / Program-Length Commercials and the Toy-Program Connection, 89 / Tobacco Advertising, 89 / Violence, 90

SEX IN ADVERTISING, 91

	<i>Classical Conditioning, 91 / Subliminal Advertising, 92</i>	
	CONCLUSION, 93	
5	Communication of Values: Media as Parent and Priest	96
	FAMILY VALUES, 98	
	<i>Models of Family, 98 / Family Solidarity, 100 / Sexuality, 103 / The Influence of Television on Family Life, 107</i>	
	RELIGION, 108	
	<i>Religion in TV Series, 108 / Portrayals of Religious Professionals, 111 / Religion in the News, 112 / Religious Television, 114 / Effects of Television on Religion, 115</i>	
	CONCLUSION, 116	
6	Sports: Marriage of Convenience or Conquest by Television?	119
	HISTORY OF SPORTS IN MEDIA, 120	
	<i>Sports in Print, 120 / Sports on Radio and Television, 121 / Social Changes Affecting the Growth of Sports and Media, 123</i>	
	HOW TELEVISION HAS CHANGED SPORTS, 124	
	<i>The New Look of Games, 124 / Reorganization of Leagues, 125 / Football, 127 / The Olympics, 128</i>	
	PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES IN SPORTS AND MEDIA, 131	
	<i>Sports Media Consumption as a Social Event, 131 / Competitiveness and Cooperation, 131 / Emotional Benefits, 134 / Gender Roles and Bias, 135 / Racial Bias, 137 / Hero Worship, 138</i>	
	CONCLUSION, 140	
7	News: Setting the Agenda About the World	141
	WHAT IS NEWS?, 144	
	<i>Qualities of a Newsworthy Event, 144</i>	
	NEWS MEDIA AS CREATING A PERCEIVED REALITY, 147	
	<i>Manipulation of News, 148 / Consolidation of News-Gathering Organizations, 152 / The Persian Gulf War News Coverage: Case Study, 153</i>	
	EFFECTS OF NEWS COVERAGE, 156	
	<i>The Impact of Different Points of View, 156 / Memory for the News, 157 / Effects of News on Attributions and Decision Making, 159 / Suicides: Triggered by News?, 159 / How Media Affect Foreign Policy, 160</i>	

CONCLUSION: FICTION BECOMES REALITY, 163	
<i>The Docudrama: Fact or Fiction?, 164 / Limits of Media Influence, 165</i>	
8 Politics: Using News and Advertising to Win Elections	167
CLOSING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE CANDIDATE AND THE PUBLIC, 169	
COVERAGE OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, 170	
<i>What Is Heavily Covered, 170 / What Is Lightly Covered, 172 / The U.S. Presidential Debates, 175</i>	
CANDIDATES' USE OF NEWS MEDIA, 177	
<i>Setting the Agenda, 177 / Creating Pseudo-Events, 178 / Dealing With Attacks from the Opponent, 179 / The Need to Be Taken Seriously, 180</i>	
POLITICAL ADVERTISING, 180	
<i>Purposes, 181 / Appeals in Political Advertising, 183 / Negative Advertising, 183 / Effects of Political Ads, 184</i>	
TELEVISION AS CULTIVATOR OF POLITICAL MODERATION, 185	
CONCLUSION, 186	
9 Violence: Does All That Mayhem Matter?	189
EFFECTS OF MEDIA VIOLENCE, 191	
<i>Fear, 191 / Modeling, 192 / Reinforcement, 197 / Sensitization, 198 / Desensitization, 199 / Cultivation, 202 / Catharsis, 202</i>	
WHO WATCHES MEDIA VIOLENCE AND WHY?, 203	
<i>Social Factors, 204 / Individual Differences, 204</i>	
LONGITUDINAL STUDIES, 205	
HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH VIOLENT TELEVISION, 206	
<i>The V-Chip, 206 / Discussion and Other Intervention, 207 / Systematic Desensitization, 208 / Personality Variables, 208</i>	
CONCLUSION, 209	
10 Sex: Turning On, Turning Nasty	211
THE NATURE OF SEX IN MEDIA, 212	
<i>Definitional Issues, 212 / History of Sex in Media, 213 / Media Sex Today, 213</i>	
EFFECTS OF VIEWING MEDIA SEX, 214	
<i>Arousal, 214 / Attitudes and Values, 215 / Behavioral Effects, 217 / Catharsis, 219 / Prevailing Tone, 220</i>	

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, 222

Erotica as Stimulator of Aggression, 222 / Effects Depend on How the Woman Is Portrayed, 223 / Slasher Movies, 224 / Mitigating the Negative Effects of Sexual Violence, 227 / Press Coverage of Sexually Violent Crimes, 227

CONCLUSION, 230

11 Prosocial Media: Helpful Media Helping People 233

PROSOCIAL CHILDREN'S TELEVISION, 234

Sesame Street, 234 / Other CTW Projects, 237 / Changing Gender-Role Attitudes, 237 / Commercial TV Contributions, 238 / Channel One, 239

PROSOCIAL ADULT TELEVISION, 240

MEDIA USE IN SOCIAL MARKETING, 242

Obstacles to Social Marketing, 242 / Considering the Audience, 244 / Characteristics of Effective Campaigns, 246 / Positive Effects of Social Marketing, 246 / Public Health Media Campaigns, 247

CONCLUSION, 250

12 Living Constructively With Media: Taking Charge in the New Millennium 251

COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT MEDIA, 252

Mental Effort and Social Interaction, 252 / Information Extraction and Memory, 253 / The Medium and Imagination, 254

MEDIA LITERACY, 255

Curriculum Development, 257 / What Can Be Done in the Home, 258

INFLUENCING THE MEDIA, 259

Individual Efforts, 259 / Group Efforts, 262

REPORTING MEDIA RESEARCH TO THE PUBLIC, 263

THE FUTURE AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES, 265

The Reach of Media, 265 / New Technologies, 266 / What Is Mass Communication? (Revisited), 267

CONCLUSION, 270

References 271

Author Index 319

Subject Index 333

1

MASS COMMUNICATION IN SOCIETY: THE TEXTBOOK FOR OUR LIVES

- Q: What is the most popular leisure activity in the world?
- A: Watching television. Every week residents of the United States spend 15 out of their average 39 hours of free time watching television, making it by far the most popular leisure activity. Only work and sleeping take more of our time, and we spend only 2.8 hours reading. Every day people worldwide spend over 3.5 billion hours watching television (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; "Numbers," 1997)
- Q: What event led to massive protests in the troubled city of Banja Luka, Bosnia, in the fall of 1997?
- A: The most popular TV show in Bosnia, the Venezuelan soap opera *Kassandra*, was taken off the air. It took the intervention of the United Nations and the U.S. State Department to bring *Kassandra* back to the airwaves. In so doing, it was discovered that the Banja Luka TV station was showing pirated copies that they had never purchased. However, everyone took pity on the residents of that war-torn nation, and the Miami-based distributor donated copies of all 150-plus episodes (*CNN Headline News*, 11/10/97).
- Q: What was the most popular U.S. television export of the mid-1990s?
- A: *Baywatch*, seen by about 1 billion people in 150 countries every week! ("Most Famous Canadian," 1996). Although culturally irrelevant, or even considered offensive in many places, such exports do come

cheap. According to one estimate, one episode of syndicated *Baywatch* costs \$450 to the Namibian Broadcasting Company, compared to \$1,200 for a local soccer match and over \$2,000 for a locally produced drama (Wresch, 1996).

In 1993 a 5-year-old set fire to a bed with a cigarette lighter, killing his 2-year-old sister, allegedly after watching an episode of "Beavis and Butthead," where the irreverent cartoon teens said that "fire is cool" (J. R. Wilson & S. L. R. Wilson, 1998).

People very frequently take portable radios, or even televisions, to the stadium with them when they attend a sports event. When asked why they listen to the play-by-play when the game is going on right in front of them, a common response is, "So I can know what's really happening."

A young news reporter from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was sent to cover the Vietnam War in 1969. Not being very experienced or knowledgeable about what he was observing, he led off his first televised report of an American attack of a Vietcong stronghold with "My God! It's just like watching television" (Bogart, 1980).

Sandy Charles, a 14-year-old boy, killed and skinned a 7-year-old friend and then boiled the victim's flesh. In the subsequent murder trial, the teen's attorney argued that Sandy believed that he would be able to fly if he drank boiled fat from his victim. He apparently had been influenced by the horror film *Warlock*, which he had seen at least 10 times ("Canadian Case," 1996).

In different ways, these four examples suggest the major theme of this book: that our experience with media is a major basis for acquiring our knowledge about the world. We may call this a *cognitive* approach to mass communication because the emphasis is on the way that our minds create knowledge—indeed, even a mental reality—about the world based on our experience with the media. This mental reality then becomes the basis for all sorts of attitudes and behaviors and has numerous effects on our lives. Instead of television being a more or less accurate reflection of some external reality, it has *become* the reality against which the real world is compared. The media view of the world has become more real to many people than the real world itself.

Mass communication in the form of print media has been with us almost since Gutenberg's invention of movable type and the printing press in 1456. However, the nature of mass communication—indeed, of life in general—has been radically changed in the 20th century by the advent of electronic media, especially television. Television has transformed the day-to-day life of more people in the last 60 years than has perhaps any invention in human history. Radio and print media have been greatly changed by TV as well, although they have by no means been replaced. Watching television is most often reported as people's main source of pleasure, followed only distantly by spending time with friends, helping others, and taking vacations. Besides changing the way that we spend our time, television has also revolutionized the way that we think and the way that we view the world. These effects on our perception and our cognition are particular emphases of this book. The media are not only the

“magic window” through which we view the world, but also the “door” through which ideas enter our minds.

Media are far more than mere conduits of knowledge, although their role as such is not trivial. The act of transmitting that knowledge may itself become the event of note. When the U.S. and Saudi Arabian governments and military forces blocked press access to the war front during the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the nature of the war coverage became one of the major news stories of the war. The media were not merely communicating the news; they had become the news. In the case of the Vietnam War, scholars, heads of state, and the general public are still debating the role of the media in the declining public acceptance of that war between 1965 and 1973.

We have come a long way from Gutenberg to the thousands of daily newspapers, magazines, television stations, and radio stations in the world today. (See Box 1.1 for further background on print and electronic media.) In this chapter we introduce the concept of *mass communication* and our use of the media from a cognitive psychological perspective. We conclude with an overview of the rest of the book.

BOX 1.1 A PRIMER ON ELECTRONIC AND PRINT MEDIA

Mass media have traditionally been divided into two basic types: print and electronic (or broadcast). Print media (newspapers and magazines) provide information through the production and distribution of copies. In contrast to electronic media, print media tend to be more permanent (at least before the advent of widespread video- and audiotaping) and depend on the literacy of the audience. There are also no channel limits in print media, whereas there has traditionally been a finite number of possible radio frequencies and television channels (today, rapidly increasing in number). There is no inherent limit to the number of newspapers or magazines that may be published. In general, print media lend themselves better to a detailed treatment of subjects than do electronic media.

In contrast to print media, electronic media are technologically more recent, less permanent, and less dependent on formal literacy or accessibility to urban infrastructure. This last point becomes especially crucial in more isolated regions of the world. One can have a portable radio without any access to electricity, schooling, or urban life. Because of their limited channel capacity, radio and television typically are more tightly regulated by governments than are print media (e.g., assignment of television channels by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission [FCC]). The more authoritarian the society, the easier it is for the government to control radio and (especially) television in times that it deems to be unduly threatening. Although television networks, both private and government owned, tend to be national in scope, they often have influence far beyond their country's borders. One of the major influences in the 1989 democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe was exposure to Western television.

WHAT IS MASS COMMUNICATION?

What makes mass communication mass? First, the audience is large and anonymous, and often very heterogeneous (C. R. Wright, 1986). Individual viewers, listeners, readers, or even groups of individuals can be targeted, but only with limited precision. Second, the sources of the communication are institutional and organizational (C. R. Wright, 1986). Some, such as television networks, newspaper chains, wire services, or the conglomerates that own such businesses, are among the largest and richest private corporations. Third, and perhaps most important, the basic economic function of most media in most nations is to attract and hold as large an audience as possible for the advertisers. In one way or another, advertising pays a high percentage of the costs of newspapers, magazines, local TV and radio stations, and commercial television networks like CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox in the United States; even public television and government-subsidized networks like the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), or the BBC are not immune from commercial pressures.

In spite of all the high-sounding rhetoric about serving the public, the bottom line of commercial mass media is money, which comes from advertisers at rates directly determined by the audience or readership size and composition, which in turn determines the content. Thus there are tremendous pressures for media to be as entertaining as possible to as many people as possible; this principle also holds for nonentertainment content like news. All of this is not to say that editors and programmers are not concerned about responsibly meeting the needs of the public. They are, but such needs must necessarily be considered within the constraints of the economic realities of the media industry.

Often, economic pressures, and sometimes political and ideological ones, influence the content of media. For example, magazines that accept tobacco advertisements print fewer stories about the health risks of smoking than those that have no cigarette ads (Lee & Solomon, 1991). See Box 1.2 for a further discussion of blatant and subtle censorship.

In spite of its mass nature, there is also *communication* in mass communication. In all communication there is a reciprocity, some kind of response from the audience. Although the media user, especially the TV viewer, is often characterized as being extremely passive, mindlessly absorbing the program content, such a picture is far from accurate. Although the meaning a particular program has certainly depends on the content of that program, it also depends on what is in the mind and experience of the viewer. A TV movie dealing with rape will have a very different effect on—indeed, a different meaning for—a viewer who has herself been a rape victim than on someone with no such personal experience. A violent pornographic video may incite one man to sexual violence because of the way his mind interprets and interacts with the content of the video, whereas another man who sees the same video may be repulsed by it and show no antisocial behavioral response.

The nature of the media consumption experience must also be considered. Watching television or listening to the radio may be done alone or in

BOX 1.2 THE ISSUE OF CENSORSHIP

A major philosophical and legal issue with regard to media is censorship, which varies greatly across different societies. Prior censorship (i.e., requiring approval of all content before broadcast or publication) occurs in some totalitarian societies, but more subtle forms of censorship exist in all nations. Even in democracies, press freedom has never been absolute, but rather operates within certain constraints. For example, one may not print or broadcast material that is libelous, classified, or obscene, or which incites people to violence or infringes on copyright laws.

In the United States, the FCC assigns channels and issues licenses. Although it has the power to deny renewal of licenses, it has very seldom done so in over half a century of operation. The FCC also enforces application of the Equal Time rule to insure that opposing points of view on controversial issues and political campaigns are aired.

There are pressures toward censorship, although it often is not called that, especially in the United States, where *censorship* is considered a very dirty word. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), a professional organization of radio and television stations, has a fairly rigorous ethical code that it expects its members to adhere to, although court challenges and appeals, an atmosphere of deregulation, and changing social standards weakened adherence to the NAB code in the 1980s. Some content that may not be illegal per se may nevertheless not appear on television because it is not in accord with NAB guidelines or because broadcasters fear public outrage (e.g., graphic and explicit sex, violence, or surgery). Also, certain words (e.g., "shit," "fuck," many racial epithets, and any religious expletives stronger than "Oh, my God!") seldom occur on U.S. prime-time network television. Incidentally, these standards change: Thirty years ago we did not hear the words "damn," "hell," or "pregnant," although we may have heard "nigger" and other ethnic slurs in the early days of radio or TV.

Real or feared reaction from advertisers is another subtle source of self-censorship. Television networks and stations are very loath to risk offending those who pay the bills for their livelihood. Advertisers occasionally threaten to withdraw their ads in protest. In 1979 General Electric was unhappy with ABC's Barbara Walters' plans to interview Jane Fonda about her antinuclear activism and pulled their ads in protest. However, ABC still aired the interview. Not so noble have been magazines' frequent failure to run articles on the health hazards of smoking for fear of alienating their lucrative tobacco advertisers (M. A. Lee & Solomon, 1991).

A democratic government may exert influence even in cases where it has no formal censoring authority. For example, the British government requested that the BBC not run a scheduled documentary on Northern Ireland in August 1985. This documentary included extensive interviews with IRA and Unionist extremists. The government argued that this gave those whom it called "terrorists" an undeserved platform and hearing. After extensive discussion, BBC management decided to honor the government's request, although this decision evoked a 1-day strike by BBC employees in protest.

(BOX CONTINUES...)