

Andrea L. Press  
Bruce A. Williams

# The New Media Environment

An Introduction



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Andrea L. Press and Bruce A. Williams



**WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### *Modern Life Is a Media Experience*

Why study the media? The answer is so obvious that many academics and educators overlook its paramount importance. Media are key to everyday life in the twenty-first century. But more than that, media are the lens through which we experience the world and what we take to be the reality of that world.

Any quick observation of today's children will uncover the central importance of media in constituting, not simply influencing, their lives. Our 15-year-old daughter gets up in the morning and turns on her computer and radio at the same time. While text messaging her friends before school, she downloads new songs to her MP3 player. When she comes home and turns to homework, it is done on the computer while she keeps track of her friends on the social-networking site Facebook.

Our 11-year-old son rises early so that he has a couple of hours to play his computer games before the structure of school keeps him from them for at least a few hours. When we ask him why he loves to play with computers, he says that playing with other kids is more fun, but when they are not around, computers are almost as fun and almost as interactive, especially when he plays games online. They are much more fun, in fact, than the possibilities that old media hold for him. Watching TV or reading books is too passive, in his opinion. It scarcely needs pointing out that both children will often see video or watch TV as part of their daily school routine. And so their day goes.

For both of us, often the first act in the morning is to check e-mail and see what has come in. This act of turning on a computer also lets us check the day's *New York Times*. In the interim we might turn on the radio and listen to National Public Radio, either the news or the music station. A walk to the front door gets us the print version of *The Washington Post*. Before any of the four of us are fully awake, we are immersed in

media: old and new, print and electronic, audio and video, passive and interactive, and synchronous and asynchronous.

This is only one family's habits, but habits that are increasingly common in the United States. Internet service providers (ISPs), which used to see traffic increase only with the start of the workday, now find that it takes off "like a rocket ship" at 7 a.m. as adults and children go online as soon as they wake up (Stone 2009). The experience of living life betwixt and between media use is quickly becoming one of the universal conditions of life, certainly in the developed and developing worlds, crossing cultural, social class, and racial lines.<sup>1</sup> It is this ubiquity of the media in the modern world that we seek to show to our readers, as we describe the new academic field of media studies and what it has to offer to all of us as we negotiate modern life. We address both how the ever-presence of the media affects all dimensions of our lives, and how the *way* media are always present has changed dramatically over the last few decades.

A short comparison helps us to move beyond our particular family and our particular moment in the history of media to emphasize in a very general way how media operate to structure our experience, and how dramatically the role of media has changed over the last century.

## A Tale of Two Hurricanes

The hurricane slammed into the United States packing winds of over 145 mph, slightly down from the Category 5 levels it registered over open water. While evacuation warnings had been circulating for days and wealthy neighborhoods emptied, other residents, predominantly poor and black, stayed behind. Hours later, when the storm had passed, it seemed at first that the damage from wind and rain would be serious, but far from catastrophic. Sadly, that was not to be the case. Earthen dikes erected to contain a huge lake gave way. As floodwaters rose, desperate people sought safety in the attics and on the rooftops of their submerged homes. Thousands of people died in one of the worst natural disasters in American history.

Government response was slow and insufficient, as state and local authorities were rapidly overwhelmed and the federal government seemed nowhere to be found. The fact that the dead were disproportionately poor and black raised questions of racism in both evacuation and rescue efforts. While these issues were quickly forgotten by the white community

and the wider society, they remain a source of bitterness in the black community.

This description might be about Hurricane Katrina hitting the Gulf Coast in 2005, with which we are all familiar (because most of us followed it in the media), but it actually describes a hurricane that hit Florida in 1928.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes called the “Forgotten Hurricane,” it left 2,500 dead and is the second deadliest hurricane in American history, behind only the 1900 Galveston hurricane, which killed 8,000. By way of contrast, the death toll for Katrina is estimated at around 1,600. Considering the similarities and differences between the hurricanes of 2005 and 1928 helps introduce many of the central points we want to make about media studies in the rest of this book.

First and perhaps most significantly, consider the vast differences in the state of the media in 1928 compared to 2005. Katrina was tracked from satellites and searcher planes in continuous contact with the US Weather Service, which then almost instantaneously transmitted storm information to the public via radio, television, the Internet, and other forms of communication. Updates on the direction and intensity of the storm were continuous and close to real time. Directions on preparing for the storm and, ultimately, evacuation orders could easily be communicated from authorities to the anxious citizens in Katrina’s path.<sup>3</sup> Information about the storm and preparations for its landfall were not limited to those living in Katrina’s path, but rather were instantly transmitted to a worldwide audience.

Consider the very different state of telecommunications in 1928. Information about the 1928 storm was sporadic, often inaccurate, and usually hopelessly outdated. Ships at sea transmitted wireless information about the storm when they could (i.e., when not being swamped or sunk). Most data came from telegraph and wireless ground stations based on reports from local weather stations on the Atlantic islands that were devastated by the storm before it hit Florida. At one point, the Weather Service “lost” the storm when communication facilities were destroyed in Puerto Rico. The inability to accurately track the storm greatly increased the number of dead and injured in Florida. When the hurricane did not appear for hours after people expected it (based on outdated and inaccurate warnings), they left their places of shelter so that when the storm did hit, many were in vulnerable positions.

Even the notion of “warning” must be examined in light of the vast differences in media between 1928 and today. We take it for granted that

once vital information is known to authorities, it will be rapidly disseminated via widely available media channels. In 1928, such channels either did not exist (e.g., television, mobile phones, and the Internet) or were available to only a very few (e.g., telephone and radio). Hurricane warnings were sent through newspapers (as a result, they came hours or even days too late), telephone (in one Florida town, there was only one phone, whose owner had to go from house to house trying to warn his 400 neighbors), radio (again, only available to a small proportion of Floridians), or flags flown from the tops of public buildings. Most Floridians, especially those who were poor and lived in rural communities, were outside the reach of any channels of mass communication and had to rely on word of mouth spread from family to family.

Organizing prompt relief to a stricken area is a life-and-death issue: the more rapid the response, the more lives can be saved. In 1928 local governments ceased to operate due to the storm, and no information about its impact was available to the Florida state government for over a day. The federal government was in the dark for longer than that.<sup>4</sup>

Information about the storm was slow to reach any kind of wider audience. The first article about the storm did not appear in *The New York Times* until September 18, two days after it hit Florida. Even then, the initial facts reported were highly inaccurate (it was first estimated that 24 had drowned around Lake Okeechobee). In subsequent days, the estimated death toll continued to rise (it reached 800 in a front-page *Times* story on September 21). Somewhat ironically, by the time accurate information about the magnitude of the catastrophe became available, the story had ceased to be front-page news. A *Times* story reporting that an estimated 2,500 might have died (close to what we now believe was the storm's toll) appeared on September 22, but was printed on page 10 of the newspaper. By September 28, a story about the storm's aftermath was on page 38.

In general, newspaper coverage of this enormous catastrophe was sporadic outside of the stricken area. This could not contrast more with the extended focus on Hurricane Katrina in all the forms of media we take for granted today – television, radio, the Internet, and print. While in 1928 someone who lived outside the stricken area might pay virtually no attention to the event, this was not so for the media event that took place in 2005. By a “media event,” we mean an occurrence that commands the attention of all of the media – print and electronic, including the Internet. Such an event calls a virtual “time-out” from ordinary life,

more or less requiring that we pay attention. September 11, the death of Princess Diana, and the invasion of Iraq were all media events. The concept of a media event is essential to understanding the role of media in modern life and is a key concept in the media studies literature.<sup>5</sup>

Although comparing the 1928 and 2005 hurricanes highlights dramatic improvements in the way information is produced and disseminated, this does not mean that changes in telecommunications led to improvements in other areas of American society. When, for example, it came to issues of race and class, many aspects of the two hurricanes were remarkably similar and illustrate important continuities in American society between 1928 and the present. These continuities, despite dramatic changes in specific features of telecommunications technology, illustrate how media *both* influence and are influenced by the structures that shape society.

Like the rest of US society, the American media have, at best, a checkered record when it comes to dealing with issues of racial and economic inequality. Yet, one of the most striking aspects of media coverage of Katrina was that with cameras and journalists reporting live from the scene, powerful images and stories of the degree to which most victims were poor and black were unavoidable. As CNN commentator Jack Cafferty said, race has become “the big elephant in the room” (Daily Kos 2005).

These sorts of comments and the emotional stories coming out of New Orleans highlighting the plight of the black and poor residents left behind in the city’s evacuation prompted a national dialogue (if only a brief one) about the plight of the black underclass in many American inner cities. It raised questions about how even evacuation plans, by relying primarily on residents owning their own automobile, inevitably left many poor city residents behind. Likewise, those forced to rely on the increasingly overwhelmed and horrific public facilities, like the New Orleans Superdome, were almost entirely poor and black. No such national conversation was sparked by media coverage of the 1928 storm.

Although this blatant disparity in the treatment of the rich and poor seemed shocking to journalists and many viewers in 2005, had the hurricane of 1928 not been forgotten, it would have been much clearer that such inequality in the face of natural disaster has a long history. In the 1928 storm, race and class were important determinants of who survived and who perished. Of the 2,500 fatalities, an estimated three quarters were black (mostly farmers and migrant farm workers who worked and

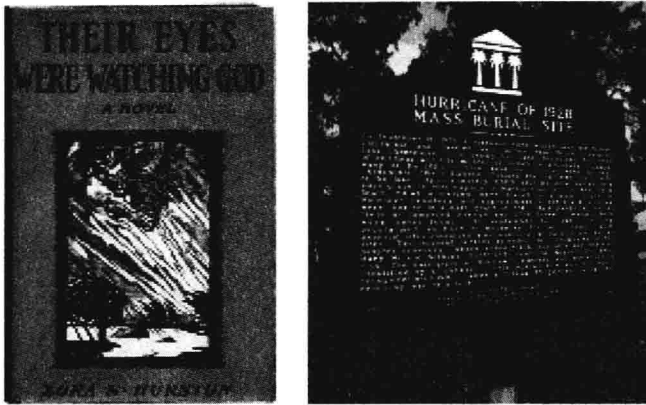
lived north and south of the dike that gave way). In contrast, the overwhelmingly rich and white community of Palm Beach suffered few fatalities due to, among other things, better access to what information was available (not a digital divide, but a communications–information divide).

In both cases, rescue and recovery efforts similarly raised questions about race and class. In the Katrina case, many accused the federal government of responding slowly due to the poverty and race of the victims. In 1928, coffins were reserved for white victims, while most black victims were buried in unmarked mass graves. Similarly, many black survivors were forced at gunpoint to work at recovery efforts. Given the magnitude of the storm and the horrors of its aftermath, Eliot Kleinberg (2003), author of a definitive book about the 1928 hurricane, asks whether this catastrophe would have faded so completely from public memory had the victims been overwhelmingly white.

One reason for the degree to which the 1928 hurricane was “forgotten” has to do with the ways in which the media system has been and continues to be dominated by issues of concern to middle-class white Americans. This is true for the news as well as the myriad forms of popular entertainment that help shape the consciousness and attention of most Americans. Given the ways in which issues of race and class are addressed— or, more accurately, ignored— it is not surprising that the conditions of poor black Americans could be ignored as easily in 2005 as they had been in 1928.

At the same time, popular culture in some of its forms can serve as a repository for the memories and concerns lost to the mainstream media (Lipsitz 2001). While much media attempt to construct a picture of white, middle-class life as the norm for America, some forms of popular culture can also reflect and appeal to smaller ethnic, racial, gendered, or classed audiences. For instance, memories of the forgotten hurricane remain for readers of the celebrated 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, an acclaimed black writer who was born in Florida. And, as mentioned above, although the memory of the 1928 storm has faded for the general public, bitterness about the differential treatment of blacks lingers in the black families who still live in the devastated towns. Evidence of the longevity of this bitterness is evidenced by protests that led mass gravesites to be marked with memorials in 2002. (See Figure 1.1.)

In short, the story of these two hurricanes highlights several of the points we shall emphasize throughout this book. First, and most



**Figure 1.1.** Two different ways the “Forgotten Hurricane” is remembered. On the left, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and on the right, the plaque erected in 2002 to honor the African-American flood victims buried in mass graves.

significantly, the media matter. The contours of the media environment in which we live determine what we know about the world; indeed, in large part they determine our understanding of reality. In the extreme, access to media can be a matter of life or death. It is clear that access to telephones and radio in 1928 determined who would live and who would die. The vast differences between the plights of poor blacks and wealthy whites in 1928 were at least partially because the latter had access to the newest communication technologies. This is no less true today. As we increasingly organize modern life on the assumption that everyone will have access to the newest forms of media, lack of access can have dire consequences.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the new media environment within which we live has fragmented audiences in ways that were unimaginable even 25 years ago – the mass audience of the heyday of television is a thing of the past. New forms of communications technology mean that we increasingly consume a media diet unique to each of us – what we watch, listen to, and think about (and when) differs widely across different segments of the public (Turow 1997, 2006; Sunstein 2001). While there may be groups of people who were concerned with the plight of inner-city blacks, or the impact of climate change on hurricanes, these folks could attend to media

meeting their interest without ever encountering the much broader public, who knew little and (perhaps) cared less about these issues. Consequently, when media events occur that focus all the myriad forms of media on the same subject – whether Hurricane Katrina, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or a presidential campaign – they become rare moments of public dialogue about vital questions usually ignored by the vast majority of media outlets and the audiences who use them.

Finally, although media matter, it is important to see that they are not all that matters. By focusing on issues of racial, class, and gender inequality, we are reminded that some social problems and issues endure, despite the dramatic changes in media with which we all live. Before moving on to a closer examination of today's media and the ways in which they differ from the media of the recent and distant past, we first highlight several of the key concepts we will be using throughout the book.

## **What Is a Media Environment?**

In media studies, we define the “media environment” as both the specific communications technology in use (e.g., personal computers, newspapers, and television) and the social, political, and economic structure within which these technologies are used (e.g., how media outlets are owned, how individuals actually use them for a wide range of purposes, and the government regulations that affect them). This is vital, since to understand media, we need to know much more than the characteristics of the specific technologies available and in use. As we saw from the example of the 1928 hurricane, knowing that both radio and telephone were available tells us little about the ways they were used in a crisis, since they were differentially available to segments of the population depending on economic and racial inequalities.

So media studies scholars draw from other fields in both the social sciences and humanities. Sociology, political science, and economics help us discuss the different types of contexts within which media operate. For example, sociologists help us to define the social context of the media by giving us a theoretical and empirical understanding of institutions like the family, schools, the government, and the church; media operate within and on all of these social structures. In addition, these institutions are the source of values and attitudes that affect the way we think about and use media in our everyday lives. Issues like what television shows are



considered appropriate for children, whether the Internet is safe or dangerous, and who should buy Internet access at home – all of these issues are affected by social attitudes and values, which sociologists study.

Political science focuses on the institutions of government and the play of power, examining how political decisions are made and the forces that affect the political system, like voting, political activism, campaigning, political parties, and so on. The political process affects the working of media institutions in that it determines regulations and laws within which they operate. At the same time, media also play a leading role in bringing information to the public about the political process itself, in enabling participation and organization, and in other ways as well. When it comes to elections, for example, Americans receive virtually all of their information about the long campaign – from information during the primary season to each party's convention to the actual campaign itself to the outcome of voting on Election Night – through media of one sort or another, from older forms like television, radio, and newspapers to newer forms like the Internet and cell phones.

At the same time, policy decisions made by the political system shape the nature of those various media channels and the types of information that flow through them. So, for example, since policy makers in the 1930s created a privately owned and advertiser-driven media system, in contrast to the public broadcasting models of many western democracies, candidates are forced to raise large amounts of money to pay for campaign ads, with obvious consequences for the role of money in politics (McChesney 1993; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Economics gives us the tools to analyze the financial structure of media organizations, and a critical perspective on the way the government chooses to allow them to make profits (e.g., through advertising or subscription), how much concentration of ownership will be allowed, and so on. The comparative economic perspective that media studies offers is particularly useful in making sense of the constraints and possibilities characterizing different approaches to ownership and control of media in different nations.

Media studies scholars also draw on disciplines like English, film studies, and anthropology to understand the meaning that might be attached – by authors, critics, and viewers/readers – to any particular media text. They do this to grasp the complexity of analyzing and understanding these issues. Especially influential have been those scholars working in the interdisciplinary tradition defined as “cultural studies.” Most generally, we