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Questioning The Media

A Critical Introduction

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Contents

Chronology of Communications Media

This chronology lists the dates of major technological breakthroughs in communications, first media applications, and establishment of major media institutions. Such a list seems to reproduce the "great men" syndrome; for a critique of this, see Chapter 3. Toward the end, the focus is very much on the United States. (Sources for compiling this list include Wilbur Schramm's *The Story of Human Communication* and Frederick Williams's *The Communications Revolution*.)

35000	B.C.	Cro-Magnon period; speculation that language existed
22000		prehistoric cave paintings
4000		Sumerian writing on clay tablets
3000		early Egyptian hieroglyphics
1800		Phoenician alphabet
323		Library of Alexandria built in Egypt
350	A.D.	books replace scrolls
600		book printing in China
676		paper and ink used by Arabs and Persians
1200		paper and ink art in Europe
1453		Gutenberg Bible printed
1535		first press in the Americas set up in Mexico
1555		Della Porta projects light
1639		first printing press in British colonies
1640		*The Whole Book of Psalmes* is first book printed in British colonies
1665		newspapers first published in England
1690		*Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* is first American newspaper
1719		Samuel and John Adams publish *Boston Gazette*
1741		*American Magazine* and Ben Franklin's *General Magazine* start
1776		Tom Paine publishes revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*
1783		*Pennsylvania Evening Post* is America's first daily newspaper
1790		first federal copyright statute passed by Congress
1791		First Amendment to the Constitution
1817		Harper Brothers establish publishing company

1828	*Freedom's Journal* is first Black newspaper in the United States
1833	*New York Sun* ushers in the penny press
1835	Samuel Morse develops the telegraph
1837	Niepce and Daguerre create the daguerreotype
1848	first news agency/wire service, Associated Press, formed
1851	*New York Times* established
1865	*The Nation* magazine founded
1866	first transatlantic cable completed
1876	Alexander Graham Bell completes telephone
1888	Eastman produces Kodak camera
1892	Edison develops kinetoscope
1895	Guglielmo Marconi develops radio telegraphy
1895	Lumiere brothers develop motion picture camera
1910	first alternative movie produced (*The Pullman Porter*, by African-American William Foster)
1912	*Pravda* begins; restarted 1917
1923	Zworykin demonstrates iconoscope, patents television camera tube
1927	British Broadcasting Corporation founded—model of public service broadcasting authority
1929	Zworykin invents kinescope
1929	Motion Picture Authority formed; Hays Office founded to vet movie content
1931	Workers Film and Photo League established
1933	FM radio demonstrated for RCA executives
1939	paperback books start publishing revolution
1941	FCC authorizes commercial television; WNBT first on the air
1942	first electronic computer in the United States
1943	wire recorders used in World War II by Nazi military
1943	duopoly ruling forces NBC to sell a network; start of ABC
1947	transistor invented; Bell Laboratories established
1947	Hollywood Ten jailed for defying communist witch-hunt
1948	*TV Guide* founded
1949	Pacifica Radio begins broadcasting
1950	CATV developed; cable TV begins, to boost microwave signal
1954	McCarthy hearings on television
1954	first color television sets; color broadcasting begins
1956	Ampex demonstrates videotape recording
1957	Soviets launch first earth satellite, *Sputnik*
1960	Nixon-Kennedy debates televised
1962	*Telstar* television satellite launched by United States
1965	International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (INTELSAT) begins to relay transatlantic communications
1967	Public Broadcasting Act passed by Congress
1968	portable video recorders introduced
1968	MPAA ratings replace Hays Office

1970	Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) established
1975	HBO starts satellite-based pay network
1975	*Wall Street Journal* publishes via satellite
1977	AT&T tests fiber-optic transmission
1977	Qube interactive cable television starts in Ohio
1980	home computer available for less than $500
1981	videodisc systems marketed
1982	cable television grows at varying speeds; 13% of British households have it
1983	FCC allows broadcasters to offer teletext
1985	cellular mobile telephones marketed
1985	PeaceNet established; first alternative national computer network in United States
1986	Deep Dish TV Satellite Network established; first alternative satellite network
1989	first private satellite launched in United States
1989	camcorders used in popular movements in Poland and Hungary
1989	fax used in the Chinese student revolt to communicate internationally
1990s	high-definition television (HDTV)

Acknowledgments

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Preface:
A Letter from the Editors
to the Beginning Student

This preface provides a way for us to explain the thinking behind this book, the issues and perspectives that are introduced, and why we think a *critical* approach is vital for the study of *communication*.

It thus orients you as to what to expect, how to read and think about the material, the central issues in certain critical approaches, and how you might integrate a critical orientation into your own work and life.

This book presents some new ways of looking at the media, and provides some new tools to help you understand your media environment. So, before you start reading, we want to draw your attention to an especially useful part of this book to which you may often want to refer: the Glossary. All the terms introduced in italics in this preface, and many other, sometimes new, sometimes difficult, terms used throughout the chapters, can be found in the Glossary that appears at the end of this book. There you will find a definition—often many definitions—for each term, and frequently an indication of the chapters in which you can find a lengthier discussion and illustrative examples.

Why Media Studies?

Communications media are everywhere. Video screens, car radios, Walkman-type personal cassette players and televisions, audio and video recorders, compact discs, photographs, newspapers, magazines, newsletters—all play a major part in the way people live in industrially advanced countries. Their role in so many people's lives is why they are often called *mass media*. Behind the media we see and hear are *satellites* hundreds of miles above the earth's surface, ocean *cables* deep beneath the waters of the planet, computers both simple and sophisticated, and increasingly complex telephone systems.

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In addition to visual images and the human voice, huge volumes of data can now flow immense distances in the twinkling of an eye, such as electronic transfers of funds between banks or scientific and military information gathered from observation satellites. We could describe these media collectively as the world's nervous system.

These media make increasing demands on our time, help to define our patterns of leisure, and play a role in our social lives. These media present us with often overwhelming amounts of information and images, about ourselves and other people. They serve to define what is of political concern, of economic importance, of cultural interest to us. In short, we live in what is often described as a "media culture."

A media culture is the product of an industrialized society, where much of the culture is mass produced in a way quite similar to boots and shoes. While footwear is produced in factories, with supplies such as leather, glue, and eyelets, media culture is produced by large organizations that depend on trained personnel with journalistic skills, technical know-how, and career commitment. With fashion footwear, there are, of course, many different manufacturers and many different styles, and by the time we are adults we have developed tastes, know what suits us and what is appropriate to wear, and are able to discriminate among the great variety of footwear available.

It is much harder to learn to discriminate about media and their contents, although that is clearly a far more important process than deciding about what color shoes to buy. The purpose of this book is to encourage you to ask some basic questions about the media, to criticize their content, and to become more discriminating and critical viewers, listeners, and readers. Of course, people make many kinds of critical comments about the media—for example, that there are too many reruns, or that the

formats are repetitive, merely repackaging old themes. People are concerned that programs with "adult" content are scheduled too early in the evening; parents worry about the effects of "antisocial values" and violence on their children. Many are concerned about whether the media reflect and help foster a tolerant multiracial, multiethnic society, while others worry about the lack of real debate about politics and social issues.

And each of these problems raises a host of further questions about how media are organized and controlled, how they maintain and change our culture, how they alter our way of life in numerous ways. Take the images of women in advertising, for example, a topic of considerable concern to many. Women in advertising have been depicted mainly in domestic situations, the "traditional" role of women in American society, or represented sexually, as tools to sell products. The first depiction tends to ignore the millions of women in the workplace at many levels of responsibility and decision making. The second reduces women to objects, sometimes just to legs or torsos to be consumed in the same way that the beer or the clothing or the car is to be consumed. We could ask, What do such images do to the self-esteem of women? How do girls, continually surrounded by such images, think of themselves and their future place in society? What does it mean to have working women represented in programming yet omitted from advertising? What effects do such omnipresent images have on men and how they think of women?

We could further examine the kinds of images of women and the definitions of beauty, slenderness, age, and ethnicity that are shown; the limited range of images suggests a culture that values women only if they conform to a limited range of types and roles, hardly the "open society" that our culture prides itself on being. It is little wonder that women get angry, but what can they do? There are far fewer women than men working as advertising executives, few "alternative" images; no wonder women deface sexist advertising (for example, see the photograph at the opening of this preface). But the increasing use of men in advertising is no great triumph, subjecting male models to indignities similar to those that women have long endured. We also need to step further back to examine the purpose and function of advertising as a whole in our society, and again to ask critical questions about the consumer society we so often take for granted (see Chapter 17, by Douglas Kellner).

Asking questions is perhaps the first step toward developing a critical stance toward the media, and toward society as a whole. It is legitimate to ask whether the media, and our society, are as good as they could be. A critical stance is really nothing new in the United States; a critical tradition is at the root of American life.

A Critical Tradition in the United States

Rebelling against the English autocracy in 1776, the citizens of what was to become the United States were already prepared 200 years ago to defy authority and change a whole system of government. A certain diversity of opinions was tolerated, largely because of the different waves of settlement up to 1776—first Puritans, then refugees from England's civil war, then Quakers, then poor farmers from Scotland and Ireland, not to mention the Dutch. The federal structure of government, inspired in part by the Iroquois Confederacy of six Indian nations, also enshrined the importance of debate, criticism, and openness to new perspectives. Open and participatory communication, therefore, were absolutely necessary if this new society was to survive.

Yet, at the same time, from the very beginning there were limitations, not so readily noticed then, when the struggle against the English took center stage. There were the obvious early limitations to the notion of "the people" in whose name the Constitution was written. The people did not include the Native Americans who occupied the territory before the English settlers. The people did not include Africans, imported as commodities into America to labor on the plantations. Nor did the people really include women; there were no women among the Founding Fathers. Thus, from the start, exclusion and struggles to rectify it have been part of the fabric of American political life, with the numerous amendments to the Constitution reflecting changing circumstances and changing awareness of needs and rights.

Similarly, with public communication, the media, there were powerful ideals established early on—most obviously in the First Amendment—that became embattled ideals as time wore on. The comparative ease of printing a leaflet or pamphlet in the revolutionary period or of maintaining a workers' newspaper was already disappearing by the 1840s. The clamor of numerous voices gave way to the market-oriented newspapers of those select entrepreneurs who could afford to buy the expensive new presses and run a newspaper. While there were brief periods of locally based experimentation with radio and television, both media were very quickly organized into big national networks, and again the potential clamor of many voices was muted.

Censorship and news distortions have also operated, for example, in the limits on the reporting of the various wars the United States has been involved in, from 1812 to the Central American conflicts of the 1980s, even though American lives were at stake and the public had an urgent need for honest reporting. Thus, from the beginning, the noble ideals of the "right to know" and the right to free expression have been embattled

ones, pressured by big business and big government, and thus have always been in need of defense. Communication for the people and by the people gave way to media dominated increasingly by the drives for profit and power.

Nonetheless, being critical continues to be a fundamental part of American culture, a healthy feature of American history. It is this tradition that we want to encourage you to call upon and maintain as your own in regard to the media.

Critical Approaches to the Media

Being critical clearly involves posing questions. It means not merely taking information for granted, at face value, but asking how and why the media came to be, why they have the shape and organization that they do, how they work and for whose benefit. Thus thinking about something in a careful, reflective way is the start of a critical orientation. But in regard to the media there are already some well-developed critical frameworks that have names and histories.

Let's take television as an instance. Harold Lasswell, a political scientist and one of the "founding fathers" of the discipline of communications, constructed a basic formula of the process of mediated communication that is quoted in many textbooks: "Who says what to whom through which channel and to what effect?" Clearly this asks some basic questions, and it can be a useful starting point. But in this formulation—a rather typical approach in communications—the communications media are examined in isolation. Other spheres of society, such as the economic, the political, and the cultural, do not get included. Communications is defined as a segregated act, rather than as part and parcel of all social action and all areas of activity. Thus we must expand on Lasswell's list by adding some broader questions. The perspectives that pose many of these broader questions fall under the general label of *critical* perspectives. One of the merits of critical perspectives is that they typically include these other dimensions in their analysis.

Among the most widely used critical perspectives in media studies are *political economy, cultural studies,* the *critical theory* of the Frankfurt school, and *feminism. Reception theory* and the focus on how *audiences* make sense of the media, analysis of how *myths* develop and circulate in society, and *semiotics*—the analysis of *signs* as units of meaning in a culture—are also represented in this volume. What do these approaches entail, and what makes them "critical"?

Political Economy

From an economic perspective, we might ask questions such as the following: Who owns the media? Do financial assets control access to various media and/or media output? How do people make money through the media? How effective is advertising (Does it persuade us to buy things we otherwise wouldn't?) and who benefits? Such issues are the typical concerns of those people who use the framework of political economy to examine how the media function in society. And, of course, as the media, like many other businesses, become more and more *transnational* in operations, these kinds of questions come to have more of an international flavor. How large a part of media corporate profit stems from exporting programming and advertising? How are media exports priced? Do media help to open up new international markets for both cultural products (such as television shows, magazines, cassettes, and videos) and consumer products (television sets, VCRs, cars, refrigerators, and fashion styles)? This perspective views media in the United States as economic organizations designed to create profit as well as to foster a cultural climate in which profit making is honored. Most of their concerns stem from this orientation.

Karl Marx was one of the earliest critical political economists, although he had little to say specifically about media except for a famous dissection of *censorship*; Herbert Schiller and Dallas Smythe have pioneered North American studies of media and political economy, but it is a perspective more commonly used in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. The perspective of political economy is broadly reflected in this reader in the chapters by Herman (Chapter 4), Robinson (Chapter 5), Gandy (Chapter 11), and Hamelink (Chapter 15). Yet, as the name of the orientation suggests, it also refuses to examine the economic dynamics of media separately from their political dynamics.

Media, Politics, and Power

The basic issue underlying political questions is that of power. Critical scholars are all concerned about the relationship between power and communications. Here we should think of the term *political* in both narrow and broad senses. Politics in the narrower sense is the familiar terrain of parties, elections, and the presidency, in all of which the media play an increasingly influential role. The media package not only individual politicians but also policies, yet at the same time, skilled politicians can use the media to enhance their own images and advance their own interests. Critical approaches ask, How much can and do the media affect