

# TAKING SIDES



Clashing Views in  
**Mass Media  
and Society**

NINTH EDITION

Allison Alexander  
Jarice Hanson

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**Mass Media and Society**  
NINTH EDITION

Selected, Edited, and with Introductions by

**Alison Alexander**  
*University of Georgia*

and

**Jarice Hanson**  
*University of Massachusetts at Amherst*



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## Preface

**M**ass communication is one of the most popular college majors in the country, which perhaps reflects a belief in the importance of communications systems, as well as students' desires to work in one of the media or communications industries. This book, which contains 36 selections presented in a pro and con format, addresses 18 different controversial issues in mass communications and society. The purpose of this volume, and indeed of any course that deals with the social impact of media, is to create a literate consumer of media—someone who can walk the fine line between a naïve acceptance of all media and a cynical disregard for any positive benefits that they may offer.

Media today reflect the evolution of industries that have spread their reach to multiple types of media, and indeed, to more nations of the world than ever before. In the United States we have seen the impact of entertainment media on many forms of public discourse—news, politics, education, and more. We have also seen communication technologies rapidly enter the home in a number of ways: through the Internet, and personal devices such as iPods, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and cell phones. These many forms of media extend our capacities to communicate and to consume media content, and therefore, the study of media and society is very much a part of the way in which we now live our lives by blending technologies and services, public and private media uses, and public and private behaviors. In the near future, many of the technologies we use today may be subsumed by yet newer technologies, or greater use of those we already use. Film, television, radio, and print already reach us through the Internet. Traditional wired telephones may soon become a thing of the past. Since many of the issues in this volume are often in the news (or even are the news!), you may already have opinions about them. We encourage you to read the selections and discuss the issues with an open mind. Even if you do not initially agree with a position or do not even understand how it is possible to make the opposing argument, give it a try. Remember, these problems often are not restricted to only two views; there may be many, and we encourage you to discuss these topics as broadly as possible. We believe that thinking seriously about media is an important goal.

**Plan of the book** This book is primarily designed for students in an introductory course in mass communication (sometimes called introduction to mass media or introduction to mass media and society). The issues are such that they can be easily incorporated into any media course regardless of how it is organized—thematically, chronologically, or by medium. The 36 selections have been taken from a variety of sources and were chosen because of their usefulness in defending a position and for their accessibility to students.

Each issue in this volume has an issue *introduction*, which sets the stage for the debate as it is argued in the YES and NO selections. Each issue concludes with a *postscript* that makes some final observations about the

selections, points the way to other questions related to the issue, and offers suggestions for further reading on the issue. The introductions and post-scripts do not preempt what is the reader's own task: to achieve a critical and informed view of the issues at stake. In reading an issue and forming your own opinion you should not feel confined to adopt one or the other of the positions presented. Some readers may see important points on both sides of an issue and may construct for themselves a new and creative approach. Such an approach might incorporate the best of both sides, or it might provide an entirely new vantage point for understanding. Relevant Internet site addresses (URLs) that may prove useful as starting points for further research are provided on the *On the Internet* page that accompanies each part opener. At the back of the book is a listing of all the *contributors to this volume*, which will give you additional information on the communication scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and media critics whose views are debated here.

**Changes to this edition** The ninth edition represents a considerable revision, and the topics are perhaps more controversial than in past editions. This may be a reflection of the world in which we live—or perhaps it is a result of a greater awareness of media literacy and the impact of the media in our lives. We have edited Part 1 to include only three issues, and have expanded other areas in which there is currently more controversy. We now call Part 2 “A Question of Content” and broaden our scope from traditional mass media to more personal uses of questionable materials as applied in video games and alcohol advertising (Issues 4 and 5). Part 3 has three new issues: Issue 7, “Should the White House Control the Press?”, 9, “Should Images of War Be Censored?”, and 10, “Is Blogging Journalism?”. Part 4 on Regulation is entirely new: 11, “Should We Still Believe in the First Amendment?”, 12, “Is Big Media Business Bad for Democracy?”, and 13, “Has Industry Regulation Controlled Indecent Media Content?”. Part 5 on Media Business also has three new issues: 14, “Are Legacy Media Systems Becoming Obsolete?”, 15, “Does the Rise of Faith-Based Media Encourage Tolerance?”, and 16, “Is Radio Dying?”.

**A word to the instructor** An *Instructor's Manual With Test Questions* (multiple-choice and essay) is available through the publisher for the instructor using *Taking Sides* in the classroom. And a general guidebook, *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom*, which discusses methods and techniques for integrating the pro-con approach into any classroom setting, is also available. An online version of *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom* and a correspondence service for *Taking Sides* adopters can be found at <http://www.mhcls.com/usingsides/>.

*Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Mass Media and Society* is only one title in the *Taking Sides* series. If you are interested in seeing the table of contents for any of the other titles, please visit the *Taking Sides* Website at <http://www.mhcls.com/takingsides>.

**Acknowledgments** We wish to thank Nichole Altman for her continued watchful eye over the preparation of this book. Many thoughtful instructors at

many institutions across the country provided feedback to help us incorporate new ideas into this edition. We also thank Keisha Hoerner for her help in preparing the Instructor's Manual, and Margaret Griffith of Temple University for her valuable assistance in researching topics and articles.

Finally we would like to thank our families and friends (James, Katie, James Jr., Torie, Frank, Dewey and Xena) for their patience and understanding during the period in which we prepared this book. And of course, we would like to thank all of our students for bringing their interests to our classrooms.

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# Introduction

## Ways of Thinking About Mass Media and Society

Alison Alexander and Jarice Hanson

**M**edia are everywhere in our industrialized world today. It is likely that anyone reading this book has access to more forms of media than their grandparents could have ever dreamed of. Many readers are probably adept at multitasking—a term unheard of when this book series began. With access to telephones (both land and cell), radio, tv, films, CDs, videotapes, DVDs, personal computers and the Internet—which has the ability to transfer any of the messages formerly confined to the discrete forms just mentioned, our sense of our world, and our relationship to it, has become a complex web of real messages as well as mediated messages.

Media are often scapegoats for the problems of society. Sometimes, the relationship of social issues and media seem too obvious *not* to have some connection. For example, violence in the media may be a reflection of society, or, as some critics claim, violence in the media makes it seem that violence in society is the norm. But in reality, an important reason the media is so often blamed for social problems is because the media are so pervasive. Their very ubiquity gives them the status that makes them seem more influential than they actually are. If one were to look at the statistics on violence in the United States, it would be possible to see that there are fewer violent acts today than in recent history—but because of violences depicted in the media, through reportage or fictional representation, violence appears more prevalent.

There are many approaches to investigating the relationships that are suggested by media and society. From an organizational perspective, the producers of media must find content and distribution forms that will be profitable, and therefore, they have a unique outlook on the audience as consumers. From the perspective of the creative artist, the profit motive may be important, but the exploration of the unique communicative power of the media may be paramount. The audience also, has different use patterns, such as desires for information or entertainment, and demonstrates a variety of choices in content offered to them. Whether the media reflect society, or shape society, has a lot to do with the dynamic interaction of many of these different components.

To complicate matters, even our terms and definitions have evolved. The “mass” media have changed in recent years. Not long ago, “mass” media referred to messages that were created by large organizations for broad, heterogeneous audiences. This concept no longer suffices for the contemporary



media environments. While the “mass” media still exist in the forms of radio, television, film, and general interest newspapers and magazines, many media forms today are hybrids of “mass” and “personal” media technologies that open a new realm of understanding about how audiences process the meaning of the messages. Digital technologies and distribution forms have created many opportunities for merging (or *converging*) media. Time-shifting, memory, storage of information, and truth all play important roles in the use of Internet communication, and call our attention to aspects of the communicative process that need fresh examination.

Still, most of the new services and forms of media rely, in part, on the major mass media distribution forms and technologies of television, radio, film, and print. The challenge, then, is to understand how individuals in society use media in a variety of formats and contexts, and how they make sense of the messages they take from the content of those media forms.

As we look at U.S. history, we can see that almost every form of media was first subject to some type of regulation by the government, or by the media industry itself. This has changed over the years, so that we now have a virtually unregulated media environment in which the responsibility for the content of media no longer rests with higher authorities. We, as consumers, are asked to be critical of that media which we consume. This requires that we be educated consumers, rather than relying on standards and practices of industry, or government intervention into questionable content. While this may not seem like a big problem for adult consumers, the questions and answers become more difficult when we consider how children use the media to form judgments, form opinions, or seek information.

The growing media landscape is changing our habits. The average American still spends over three hours a day viewing television, and in the average home the television is on for over seven hours a day. Politics and political processes have changed, in part, due to the way politicians use the media to reach voters. A proliferation of television channels has resulted from the popularity of cable, but does cable offer anything different from broadcast television? Videocassettes deliver feature-length films to the home, changing the traditional practice of viewing film in a public place, and video distribution via the Internet is now a practical option for anyone with transmission lines large enough to download large files. The recording industry is still reeling over the impact of MP3 and free software that allows consumers to sample, buy, or steal music on line. Communications is now a multibillion-dollar industry and the third fastest-growing industry in America. From these and other simple examples, it is clear that the media have changed American society, but our understanding of how and why remains incomplete.

## **Dynamics of Interaction**

In recent years, the proliferation of new forms of media have changed on a global scale. In the U.S., 98% of homes have at least one traditional wired-telephone, while cell phone use continues to rise. Still, there are places in the world where traditional wired-phone lines may be limited, or where access to telephones is rare. There are some countries that have more cell phone use, per



capita, than people in North America. In the U.S., over 98% of the population has access to at least one television set, but in some parts of the world, televisions are still viewed communally, or viewed only at certain hours of the day. The use of home computers and the Internet has grown annually in the U.S., with a majority of home computer users accessing their messages over high speed systems. And yet, less than half of the people of the world have access to the Web. These figures demonstrate that the global media environment is still far from equitable, and they suggest that different cultures may use the media in different ways.

But apart from questions of access and available content, many fundamental questions about the power of media remain the same. How do audiences use the media available to them? How do message senders produce meaning? How much of the meaning of any message is produced by the audience? One increasingly important question for discussion is how do additional uses of media change our interpersonal environments and human interactions?

In the early years of the 21st century, many of the institutions we have come to depend upon are undergoing massive changes. The recording industry is perhaps one of the most rapidly changing fields, with micro-radio, web-streaming, and subscription services offering different alternatives for message distribution. We have branched from the ethical and legal issues of music downloading to issues of copyright ownership and peer-to-peer file transfer protocols. Many of the industries that you've grown up with are undergoing massive changes due to new ownership rules, competition, and industry change. We can expect to continue to see threats and challenges to our traditional media systems in the future. Even the ubiquitous personal computer could become obsolete with personal desk assistants (PDAs) offering cheaper, more portable forms of computing, and the ability to store information at remote locations.

## **Progress in Media Research**

Much of media research has been in search of theory. Theory is an organized, commonsense refinement of everyday thinking; it is an attempt to establish a systematic view of a phenomenon in order to better understand that phenomenon. Theory is tested against reality to establish whether or not it is a good explanation. For example, a researcher might notice that what is covered by news outlets is very similar to what citizens say are the important issues of the day. From such observations comes agenda setting (the notion that the media confers importance on the topics it covers, directing public attention to what is considered important).

Much of the early media research was produced to answer questions of print media because print has long been regarded a permanent record of history and events. The ability of newspapers and books to shape and influence public opinion was regarded as a necessity to the founding of new forms of governments—including the U.S. government. But the bias of the medium carried certain restrictions with it. Print media was limited to those individuals who could read. The relationships of information control and the power of these forms of communication to influence readers contributed to a belief that reporting should be objective and fair and that a multiple number of viewpoints should be available to readers.

The principles that emerged from this relationship were addressed in an often—quoted statement attributed to Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” But the next sentence in Jefferson’s statement is equally as important, and often omitted from quotations. “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

Today, media research on the relationships of media senders, the channels of communication, and the receivers of messages is not enough. Consumers must realize that “media literacy” is an important concept as well. People can no longer take for granted that the media exist primarily to provide news, information, and entertainment. They must be more attuned to what media content says about them as individuals and as members of a society. By integrating these various cultural components, the public can better criticize the regulations or lack of regulation that permits media industries to function the way they do. People must realize that individuals may read or understand media content in different ways, and that different cultures act as important components of understanding messages, as well as controlling access to some forms of media.

The use of social science data to explore the effects of media on audiences strongly emphasized psychological and sociological schools of thought. It did not take long to move from the “magic bullet theory”—which proposed that media had a direct and immediate effect on the receivers of the message, and the same message intended by the senders was the same when it was “shot” into the receiver, to other ideas of limited, or even indirect means of influencing the audience.

Media research has shifted from addressing specifically effects-oriented paradigms to exploring the nature of the institutions of media production themselves, as well as examining the unique characteristics of each form of media. What most researchers agree upon today, is that the best way to understand the power and impact of media is to look at context specific situations to better understand the dynamics involved in the use of media and the importance of the content.

Still, there are many approaches to media research, from a variety of interdisciplinary fields: psychology, sociology, linguistics, art, comparative literature, economics, political science, and more. What each of these avenues of inquiry have in common is that they all tend to focus attention on individuals, families, or other social groups; society in general; and culture in the broad sense. All of the interpretations frame meaning and investigate their subjects within institutional frameworks that are specific to any nation and/or culture.

Today’s researchers question the notions of past theories and models as well as definitions of *mass* and *society*, and now place much of the emphasis of media dynamics in the perspective of global information exchange. A major controversy erupted in the early 1970s when many Third World countries disagreed with principles that sought to reify the industrialized nations’ media. The New World Information Order (NWIO) perspective advanced the importance of the economic and social benefits of industrialized countries, and it noted that emerging nations had different priorities that reflected indigenous

cultures, which were sometimes at odds with Western notions of a free press. The Third World countries' concern dealt with power as imposed upon a nation from outside, using media as a vehicle for cultural dependency and imperialism.

Many of the questions for media researchers in the 21st century deal with the continued fragmentation of the audience, caused by greater choice of channels and technologies for both traditional, and new communication purposes. The power of some of these technologies to reach virtually any place on the globe within fractions of a second will continue to pose questions of access to media, and the meaning of the messages transmitted. As individuals become more dependent upon the Internet for communication purposes, the sense of audience will further be changed as individual users choose what they want to receive, pay for, and keep. For all of these reasons, the field of media research is rich, growing, and challenging.

## Questions for Consideration

In addressing the issues in this book, it is important to consider some recurring questions:

1. Are the media unifying or fragmenting? Does media content help the socialization process or does it create anxiety or inaccurate portrayals of the world? Do people feel powerless because they have little ability to shape the messages of media?
2. How are our basic institutions changing as we use media in new, and different ways? Do media support or undermine our political processes? Do they change what we think of when we claim to live in a "democracy"? Do media operate in the public interest, or do media serve the rich and powerful corporations' quest for profit? Can the media do both simultaneously?
3. Whose interests do the media represent? Do audiences actively work toward integrating media messages with their own experiences? How do new media technologies change our traditional ways of communicating? Are they leading us to a world in which interpersonal communication is radically altered because we rely on information systems to replace many traditional behaviors?

## Summary

We live in a media-rich environment where almost everybody has access to some forms of media, and some choices in content. As new technologies and services are developed, are they responding to the problems that previous media researchers and the public have detected? Over time, individuals have improved their ability to unravel the complex set of interactions that ties the media and society together, but they need to continue to question past results, new practices and technologies, and their own evaluative measures. When people critically examine the world around them—a world often presented by the media—they can more fully understand and enjoy the way they relate as individuals, as members of groups, and as members of a society.

## **Communication Studies: General Communication Resources**

An encyclopedic resource related to a host of mass communication issues, this site is maintained by the University of Iowa's Department of Communication Studies. It provides excellent links covering advertising, cultural studies, digital media, film, gender and media studies.

[http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/  
resources/gemeral.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/gemeral.html)

## **Kaiser Family Foundation**

The Kaiser Family Foundation site provides articles on a broad range of television topics, including the v-chip, sexual messages, and media and children. "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year Olds" may be of particular interest.

<http://www.kff.org>

## **Wikipedia**

This is an online encyclopedia written and edited by users. You will find useful information on many topics, and will get to watch the encyclopedia evolve through the efforts of its users. Perhaps you'll even write for it!

<http://www.wikipedia.com>

## **Writer's Guild of America**

The Writer's Guild is the union for media entertainment writers. The non-member areas of their Web site have information useful for aspiring writers. Their Research Links Page is a particularly useful resource.

<http://www.wga.org>



# Contents In Brief

## **PART 1 Media and Social Issues 1**

- Issue 1. Are American Values Shaped by the Mass Media? 2
- Issue 2. Is Television Harmful for Children? 25
- Issue 3. Do African American Stereotypes Still Dominate Entertainment Television? 48

## **PART 2 A Question of Content 71**

- Issue 4. Do Video Games Encourage Violent Behavior? 72
- Issue 5. Does Alcohol Advertising Target Young People? 89
- Issue 6. Is Advertising Ethical? 105

## **PART 3 News and Politics 131**

- Issue 7. Should the White House Control the Press? 132
- Issue 8. Is Negative Campaigning Bad for the American Political Process? 156
- Issue 9. Should Images of War Be Censored? 178
- Issue 10. Is Blogging Journalism? 192

## **PART 4 Regulation 213**

- Issue 11. Should We Still Believe in the First Amendment? 214
- Issue 12. Should Freedom of Speech Ever Be Restricted? 238
- Issue 13. Has Industry Regulation Controlled Indecent Media Content? 260

## **PART 5 Media Business 281**

- Issue 14. Are Legacy Media Systems Becoming Obsolete? 282
- Issue 15. Will the Rise of Christian Media Significantly Change Media Content? 297
- Issue 16. Is Big Media Business Bad for Business? 314

## **PART 6 Life in the Digital Age 333**

- Issue 17. Can Privacy Be Protected in the Information Age? 334
- Issue 18. Are People Better Informed in the Information Society? 351



# Contents

Preface	v
Introduction	xvii

## **PART 1 MEDIA AND SOCIAL ISSUES 1**

### **Issue 1. Are American Values Shaped by the Mass Media? 2**

**YES:** Herbert I. Schiller, from *"The Mind Managers"* (Beacon Press, 1973) 4

**NO:** Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, from "Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Summer 1983) 12

Critical scholar of modern mass media Professor Schiller argues that mass media institutions are key elements of the modern capitalistic world order. Media, he argues, produce economic profits and the ideology necessary to sustain a world system of exploitative divisions of social and financial resources. It is the job of the citizenry to understand the myths that act to sustain this existing state of power relationships. Professors of communication Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch in their classic article counter that television serves as a site of negotiation for cultural issues, images, and ideas. Viewer selections from among institutional choices is a negotiation process as viewers select from a wide set of approaches to issues and ideas.

### **Issue 2. Is Television Harmful for Children? 25**

**YES:** W. James Potter, from *On Media Violence* (Sage Publications, 1999) 27

**NO:** Jib Fowles, from *The Case for Television Violence* (Sage Publications, 1999) 39

W. James Potter, a professor of communication, examines existing research in the area of children and television violence. Such research is extensive and covers a variety of theoretical and methodological areas. He examines the nature of the impact of television on children and concludes that strong evidence exists for harmful effects. Jib Fowles, a professor of communication, finds the research on children and television violence less convincing. Despite the number of studies, he believes that the overall conclusions are unwarranted. Fowles finds that the influence is small, lab results are artificial, and fieldwork is inconclusive. In short, he finds television violence research flawed and unable to prove a linkage between violent images and harm to children.

### **Issue 3. Do African American Stereotypes Still Dominate Entertainment Television? 48**

**YES:** Donald Bogle, from *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 50

**NO:** John McWhorter, from "Gimme a Break!" *The New Republic* (March 5, 2001) 58

## PART 5 MEDIA BUSINESS 281

### Issue 14. Are Legacy Media Systems Becoming Obsolete? 282

**YES:** Betsy Streisand and Richard J. Newman, from "The New Media Elites," *U.S. News & World Report* (November 14, 2005) 284

**NO:** Marc Fisher, from "Essential Again," *American Journalism Review* (October/November 2005) 290

In this selection, Streisand and Newman look at how traditional media systems have diversified to distribute content to an increasingly fragmented audience. While they think that eventually, all of the new services and content that are distributed worldwide may come to resemble legacy systems, the immediate situation is one of a rapidly shifting landscape. For now though, the legacy media are losing their audiences and having to find new ways of capturing advertising dollars. Fisher focuses specifically on Hurricane Katrina and the way the traditional press, including print and radio journalists, used their skills to mobilize as information sources for the victims of the hurricane. Citing the departure of the "big three" anchors of network news, and the rise of Internet journalism, Fisher discusses the range of responses during a crisis, and argues that the news produced during and after the hurricane proved that traditional journalists knew what they were doing when the situation became untenable.

### Issue 15. Will the Rise of Christian Media Significantly Change Media Content? 297

**YES:** Mariah Blake, from "Stations of the Cross," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 2005) 299

**NO:** Hanna Rosin, from "Can Jesus Save Hollywood?" *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 2005) 308

Though the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) group was formed in 1944, its membership has grown dramatically in recent years. Mariah Blake chronicles the growth of Christian television and radio, and discusses how religion has become entwined with politics, entertainment, and social values through the rise of Christian broadcasting. She cites broadcasters who feel that their viewers need a "family-friendly" alternative to regular news. Hanna Rosin describes the motivation behind the individuals of Act One, a Hollywood organization that cultivates Christian film and television writers to develop media content specifically for the Christian audience. She claims that even though many of these professionals have developed products with Christian themes, most of them also write for on-going programs and films that are currently on-air or in the marketplace.

### Issue 16. Is Big Media Business Bad for Business? 314

**YES:** Ted Turner, from "My Beef with Big Media: How Government Protects Big Media—and Shuts Out Upstarts Like Me," *Washington Post* (July/August 2004) 316

**NO:** Michael K. Powell, from "Yes, The FCC Should Relax Its Ownership Rules," *Congressional Digest* (October 2003) 325

Ted Turner, founder of CNN, argues that government protects big media, and shuts out upstarts like him. Throughout his career he has



seen regulations emerge that transfer power to larger corporations, making it impossible to survive as an independent. Important people, ideas, and innovations are lost with this model. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ex-Chairman Michael Powell, in testimony before the Senate Committee on Commercial, Science and Transportation, outlined the FCC proposal to relax ownership rules. He cites changes in the marketplace and argues that these changes will benefit the public interest through protecting viewpoint diversity, enhancing competition, and fostering localism.

## PART 6 LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE 333

### Issue 17. Can Privacy Be Protected in the Information Age? 334

**YES:** **Simson Garfinkel**, from "Privacy and the New Technology," *The Nation* (February 28, 2000) 336

**NO:** **Adam L. Penenberg**, from "The End of Privacy," *Forbes* (November 29, 1999) 344

Journalist Simson Garfinkel discusses how today's technology has the potential to destroy our privacy. He makes the case that the government and individuals could take steps to protect themselves against privacy abuse, particularly by returning to the groundwork set by the government in the 1970s and by educating people on how to avoid privacy traps. *Forbes* reporter Adam L. Penenberg discusses his own experiences with an Internet detective agency, and he explains how easy it is for companies to get unauthorized access to personal information. He specifically describes how much, and where, personal information is kept and the lack of safeguards in our current system.

### Issue 18. Are People Better Informed in the Information Society? 351

**YES:** **Wade Roush**, from "The Internet Reborn," *Technology Review* (October 2003) 353

**NO:** **Matthew Robinson**, from "Party On, Dudes!" *The American Spectator* (March/April 2002) 360

*Technology Review* senior editor Wade Roush reflects on the way we currently use the architecture of the web. She outlines the likely scenario for the future of the Internet, with global networks connected to "smart nodes" which will be able to store all of our files, and allow us to access them from remote sites with only small, handheld devices. The improvements in technology will then lead to a more dynamic use of the web, and will make the Internet more-user friendly, as well as more secure. Author Matthew Robinson warns that no matter what technologies we have available, human beings seem interested in fewer subjects and know even less about politics and current events. He warns that even though we may call it an "information" society, there is evidence to suggest that we actually know less than in earlier years. His examples are humorous as well as sobering.

Contributors 369

Index 373

# PART 1

## Media and Social Issues

*Do media reflect the social attitudes and concerns of our times, or are they also able to construct, legitimate, and reinforce the social realities, behaviors, attitudes, and images of others? Do they operate to maintain existing power structures, or are they a pluralistic representation of diverse views? The ways media help us to shape a sense of reality are complex. How much do media influence us, versus how we use media to fit our already preconceived ideas? Should concern be directed toward vulnerable populations like children? If we truly have a variety of information sources and content to choose from, perhaps we can assume that distorted images are balanced with realistic ones—but is this a likely scenario for every single person who lives in our society? Questions about the place of media within society, and within what many people call the “information age,” are important for us to understand, whether we use media, or whether media use us.*

- Are American Values Shaped by the Mass Media?
- Is Television Harmful for Children?
- Do African American Stereotypes Still Dominate Entertainment Television?