

Media in SOCIETY

Readings in Mass Communication

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Preface

In virtually every country in the world today, national debates on the role of mass media occur frequently. Leaders in developed and emerging nations alike recognize that the operations and content of the media are too important to ignore. In some countries, such as the United States, these debates are confined largely to agencies and individuals in government and to groups with financial interests in the media industries. In other countries, citizens, concerned about the future of their society and recognizing that neither government nor industry adequately represents them, also are deeply involved in the debate. A major purpose of this collection of readings is to stimulate such involvement by those whose futures will be affected most by the outcomes—the young, educated citizens of this country.

No one collection can adequately cover all of the important issues related to phenomena so complex, varied, and far-reaching in their implications as the mass media. What we have tried to do in this collection is to provide a range of articles that students will find interesting and challenging, that will provoke them to think about the media in ways they have not done before, and that will get them involved in debate. Inside and outside the classroom, students should consider the roles the media are and should be playing in our society and, equally important, the roles audience members are and should be playing in the mass communication process.

Although the authors represented here look at the media from a variety of perspectives, the dominant approach is interpretive. That is, they see the functions and effects of the media as greatly dependent on the ways audience members, as well as journalists and other media creators, process or interpret the "realities" with which they are confronted. Collectively, these authors believe that Walter Lippmann's insights about "the world out there and the pictures in our heads" apply equally to reporters, editors, entertainers, and producers on one side and readers, viewers, and listeners on the other. Therefore, when students read about the ethical dilemmas of editors or about mass media stereotyping, they should be encouraged to think about the analogous issues involving all of the participants in the mass communication process, including audience members. They should be forced to confront the issue of the audience's influence on the choices editors and other gatekeepers make, as well as the ways in which audiences stereotype and create other "realities" from the media they experience. The more students get away from conceiving of audience members as "receivers" and begin thinking of them as "participants" in the communication process, the more sophisticated and insightful will be their understandings of mass media and the more they will be able to contribute to the national debate on the topic.

As you will see, some of the articles in this collection are not easy to understand on first reading. Some, such as McLuhan's essay, may even be confusing to students—at least we hope so. We believe it is from being forced to struggle with difficult material, to make sense from material that at first glance seems confusing, that students learn. Few things that are worth learning come easily. Thus we hope that students will not only gain useful knowledge about mass media from studying the readings in this book, but that they also will increase substantially their skills at interpretation and analysis. In this way, both the content and the process of your course will help students become better citizens.

The articles in Media in Society: Readings in Mass Communication are organized, roughly, according to eight major functions of mass communication: informing, entertaining, expressing, selling, shaping perceptions, shaping behavior, shaping institutions, and shaping our future. However, this is not necessarily the best organization for every class. The order in which the readings are assigned should depend on the goals of the particular course and the other material being covered. A topical table of contents is provided for those who wish to follow the sequence of an introductory textbook such as Becker's Discovering Mass Communication, Second Edition (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1987). The essays in Media in Society may be used as counterpoints for sections of any textbook, as supplements where issues are ignored or too lightly treated, and as stimulators for discussion and student papers. They can serve to remind students that no one has all of the right answers to the questions raised by mass media in our society, that in many cases we are not yet agreed even on what the right questions are, and that in all cases it is important that they—the students—develop their own questions and their own answers about these mass media that are so much a part of their lives.

Our thanks to the professionals at Scott, Foresman who have contributed much to the development and production of this work. Although we have not always agreed with them, or with each other, their questions, suggestions, and general support have made this a better book than it otherwise would have been. We acknowledge especially the help of Barbara Muller, Louise Howe, and Kay Bartolo.

Caren J. Deming and Samuel L. Becker

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION		1
SECTION 1	MEDIA AS PROVIDERS OF INFORMATION	4
	"Here, There, and Everywhere: Where Americans Get Their News" Evans Witt	7
	"Can the Press Tell the Truth?" Lewis Lapham et al. "Privacy and the Press:	16
	Is Nothing Sacred?" Nat Hentoff "Readers 'in the Editor's Chair' Squirm Over	20
	Ethical Dilemmas" Richard A. Oppel and	24
	"Editors Shouldn't Fear Ethical Thinking—They Do It Naturally All the Time"	
	Arthur L. Caplan "Harvest of Sham" Daniel Schorr	35 37
SECTION 2	MEDIA AS PROVIDERS OF PLEASURE AND ENJOYMENT	44
	"Tube Rock: How Music Video Is Changing Music" Richard Goldstein "Talvisian and March College School and ""	47
	"Television and Moral Order in a Secular Age" Victor Lidz "Understanding Television"	53
	David Marc "Jackpot! The Biggest, Shrewdest,	69
	Moneymakingest Little Show on Earth" Michael Pollan "Padio: The Companion Medium"	81
	"Radio: The Companion Medium" Robert P. Snow	88

SECTION 3	MEDIA AS MEANS OF EXPRESSION	102
	"Publish Ads for X-Movies and Such?" Edward D. Miller and Michael Gartner	105
	"They Never Told Me About Laugh-In"	100
	Herminio Traviesas "It's Time to Excise the Pornographic Cancer"	109
	Reo Christenson "Cable's 'New Obnoxiousness' Tests the First	114
	Amendment"	100
	Michael I. Meyerson and	122
	"Austin Gets an Eyeful: Sacrilege and the Klan" John Schwartz	127
	"Everyman TV"	
	Jeremy Weir Alderson	129
	"Form and Female Authorship in Music Video" Lisa A. Lewis	136
SECTION 4	MEDIA AS ECONOMIC AGENTS	152
	"U.S. Communications Policy in the New Decade	,,
	Richard E. Wiley and Richard M. Neustadt	155
	"The Myth of the Marketplace" Nicholas Johnson	166
	"The Media Grab"	100
	Ben H. Bagdikian	169
	"The Day the Ads Stopped"	
	George G. Kirstein	174
	and Advertising Stopped at 10 O'clock	
	National Association of Broadcasters	180
	"Literature as Big Business"	100
	Frank Packard	186
	"The Production of Cultural Change: The Case	
	of Contemporary Country Music"	
	Richard A. Peterson	194
SECTION 5	MEDIA AS SHAPERS OF PERCEPTION	206
	Public Opinion	
	"The World Outside and the Pictures	
	in Our Heads"	
	Walter Lippmann	210

	"Mass Media Stereotyping and Ethnic and	
	Religious Groups"	
	Bernard Rubin	215
	"Beyond the Pale"	
	Mel Watkins	227
	"The Messages Behind the News"	
	Herbert J. Gans	236
	"Reality According to Television News: Pictures	
	from El Salvador"	
	Denise Kervin	247
	"The Press and Morality"	2
	Herbert Schmertz	255
	"How to Clean Up America: The Press"	
	Cal Thomas	259
SECTION 6	MEDIA AS SHAPERS OF BEHAVIOR	264
	"Beyond Demographics: How Madison Avenue	
	Knows Who You Are and What You Want"	
	James Atlas	267
	"Teenage Drinking: Does Advertising Make a	
	Difference?"	
	Charles Atkin, John Hocking, and Martin Block	279
	"The Hot Sell: How TV Turns on the Viewers"	
	Jim Mintz	290
	"The Effects of Multiple Exposures to Filmed	
	Violence Against Women"	
	Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Steven	
	Penrod	300
SECTION 7	MEDIA AS SHAPERS OF INSTITUTIONS	318
	"CBS: The Power and the Profits"	
	David Halberstam	901
	"Direct Mail: The Underground Press of the	321
	Eighties"	
	Ralph Whitehead, Jr.	220
	"Should TV Stop Projecting Election Winners?"	339
	Timothy Wirth and George Watson	344
	"Morgan Fairchild, VP?"	344
	Donald Kaul	348
	and	340
	"Asner: Too Hot for Medium Cool"	
	Mark Dowie and David Talbot	350
		$\sigma \sigma \sigma$

	"How Religious Is Religious Programming?" Robert Abelman and Kimberly Neuendorf "The Changing Face of Sports: The Television Dollars Foster New Perceptions" Neil Amdur	357 370
SECTION 8	MEDIA AS SHAPERS OF THE FUTURE	378
	"So You Think TV Is Hot Stuff? Just You Wait"	200
	Erik Barnouw	382
	Understanding Media "The Medium Is the Message"	
	Marshall McLuhan	391
	"Can Magazines Find Happiness with Cable?"	331
	Gail Pool	398
	"Yank TV: A Nice Place to Visit, But"	000
	Leslie Woodhead	405
	"The Fascist Guns in the West"	
	J. Hoberman	409
	"From What? To What?"	
	L. S. Harms	417
ACKNOWLEI	OGMENTS	432

Topical Table of Contents

Mass Communication Processes	
Public Opinion "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads," Walter Lippmann	210
Understanding Media "The Medium Is the Message," Marshall McLuhan	391
"Here, There, and Everywhere: Where Americans Get Their News," Evans Witt	7
"The Hot Sell," Jim Mintz	290
"Harvest of Sham," Daniel Schorr	37
"Mass Media Stereotyping and Ethnic and Religious Groups," Bernard Rubin	215
"Beyond the Pale," Mel Watkins	227
"Reality According to Television News: Pictures from El Salvador," Denise Kervin	247
Print Media	
"Literature as Big Business," Frank Packard	186
"Readers 'in the Editor's Chair' Squirm Over Ethical Dilemmas," Richard A. Oppel	24
"Editors Shouldn't Fear Ethical Thinking—They Do It Naturally All the Time," Arthur L. Caplan	35
"The Messages Behind the News," Herbert J. Gans	236
"Can Magazines Find Happiness with Cable?" Gail Pool	398
Visual and Aural Media	
"The Fascist Guns in the West," J. Hoberman	409
"Tube Rock: How Music Video Is Changing Music," Richard Goldstein	47
"Form and Female Authorship in Music Video," Lisa A. Lewis	136
"The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music,"	
Richard A. Peterson	194
"Radio." Robert P. Snow	00

Television and Moral Order in a Secular Age,"	
Victor Lidz	53
"Understanding Television," David Marc	69
"Austin Gets an Eyeful: Sacrilege and the Klan,"	
John Schwartz	127
"Everyman TV," Jeremy Weir Alderson	129
"Yank TV: A Nice Place to Visit, But ," Leslie Woodhead	405
Media of the Future	
"So You Think TV Is Hot Stuff? Just You Wait," Erik Barnouw	382
"From What? To What?" L. S. Harms	417
Controlling the Media	
"Publish Ads for X-Movies and Such?"	
Edward D. Miller and Michael Gartner	105
"The Press and Morality," Herbert Schmertz	255
"The Media Grab," Ben H. Bagdikian	169
"The Day the Ads Stopped ," George G. Kirstein	174
Advertising Stopped at 10 O'clock, National Association of Broadcasters	180
"Beyond Demographics," James Atlas	267
"Direct Mail: The Underground Press of the Eighties," Ralph Whitehead, Jr.	339
"It's Time to Excise the Pornographic Cancer,"	
Reo Christenson	114
"Cable's 'New Obnoxiousness' Tests the First	
Amendment," Michael I. Meyerson	122
"U.S. Communications Policy in the New Decade," Richard E. Wiley and Richard M. Neustadt	155
"How to Clean Up America: The Press," Cal Thomas	259
"CBS: The Power and the Profits," David Halberstam	321
"Can the Press Tell the Truth?" Lewis Lapham et al.	16
"Privacy and the Press," Nat Hentoff	20
"They Never Told Me About Laugh-In,"	
Herminio Traviesas	109
"The Myth of the Marketplace," Nicholas Johnson	166

Functions and Effects of the Media

"Jackpot!" Michael Pollan	81
"How Religious Is Religious Programming?" Robert Abelman and Kimberly Neuendorf	357
"Teenage Drinking: Does Advertising Make a Difference?" Charles Atkin, John Hocking, and Martin Block	279
"The Effects of Multiple Exposures to Filmed Violet Against Women," Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Steven Penrod	nce 300
"Should TV Stop Projecting Election Winners?" Timothy Wirth and George Watson	344
"Morgan Fairchild, VP?" Donald Kaul	348
"Asner: Too Hot for Medium Cool," Mark Dowie and David Talbot	350
"The Changing Face of Sports." Neil Amdur	370

INTRODUCTION

mericans inhabit a mediated world: our lives are saturated with information and images delivered by a wealth of media technologies. Because the media are so prominent in contemporary life, they inevitably arouse questions about how well they serve different individuals and societies, why they operate as they do, and how they might be structured or regulated to serve people better. The debate is multitudinous, both in the sense that the issues are numerous and varied and in the sense that many people have a stake in the outcomes. As an educated citizen, it is important that you participate in this debate.

Communication media are such integral parts of our world that it is easy to take them and their present modes of operation for granted. To do so is a serious mistake. Their proper operation is too vital to our lives to be disregarded. It is essential that all who care about the kind of society we inhabit become as knowledgeable as possible about the media. This knowledge will help us to influence their operation and, hence, their usefulness to us and their impact upon us. Toward that end, we need to become aware of the questions we ought to address and to acquire analytical skills for answering those questions intelligently.

The readings in this book set before you a range of viewpoints on a variety of issues pertinent to today's media. The purpose of the book is to help you sharpen your analytical skills as you weigh the various authors' arguments on behalf of their viewpoints. At the same time, the editors hope to increase substantially your awareness of the various questions about the media that you, as a citizen in the world of mediated communication, should be able to answer.

Those questions tend to fall into three general categories. There are questions relating to the functions that television, newspapers, radio, books, motion pictures, magazines, and the rest serve in our private lives and in the public life of our society. Examples of questions about function are: Why do Americans watch so much television? Which media do we rely upon most for news? What role do media play in elections? Questions about function lead immediately to questions about impact or influence: Does watching violent television or movies make people more violent? Has an increase in televangelism contributed to a decline in church attendance? Third, there are questions of policy: Should sexually explicit material be banned from the media? Should advertising aimed at children be controlled? Should projections of election winners be printed or broadcast before all of the polls have closed?

The way people answer such questions—indeed, the very questions raised or not raised—depends upon people's values. In other words, valid answers to questions about the media depend ultimately upon your beliefs and ideals, upon your vision of the kind of world in which you want to live. Are the media providing the kinds of information and entertainment that Americans ought to have? Is it good or bad that the media stimulate consumption? Empirical research, such as surveys of people's habits of media use and experiments designed to test the influence of advertising on individuals' buying decisions, may be helpful in answering these questions. Ultimately, however, your answers must depend on your analysis of the issues in terms of the values you hold.

No single book can cover adequately a topic as vast and complex as media in society. The articles in this collection were selected to provide you with diverse opinions on some important current issues. A few of the essays first were published a long time ago. They are included because they provide historical perspective on these issues. Because change occurs so rapidly in the media, even some of the articles published recently may contain details that are no longer current; but this fact does not hamper materially the articles' usefulness. Indeed, the questions raised by the authors represented in this volume are all the more striking for this reason: despite all of the recent changes in the media and in our society, these important questions remain unanswered.

Although selected for their diversity and, in many cases, for the controversial opinions they contain, the articles in this book are not as representative of interested constituencies as the editors would like them to be. We would have preferred more articles by representatives of minority groups and by women, for example. Just as the media have not manifested the heterogeneity of the American population, white men have been overrepresented in published writing about the media.

The language used by the contributors to this book is sometimes controversial as well. Although patently offensive material was avoided, the Scott, Foresman guidelines for references to gender and ethnicity were not applied to the reprinted material as stringently as they normally are applied to original material. In this case, our interest in diversity took precedence over our interest in gender- and bias-free language. As you read this collection of essays by media practitioners, academics, regulators, and others, you should consider how authors representative of other constituencies might talk about the issues raised here or how they might even raise other issues altogether.

Some articles in this book were selected because they reveal sophisticated or profound understandings of media and society. Thus, you will find challenging reading here. Some of the vocabulary and abstract ideas you encounter will require effort to comprehend. Your effort will be re-

warded, though, with new depths of understanding and enhanced ability to describe and evaluate your media world.

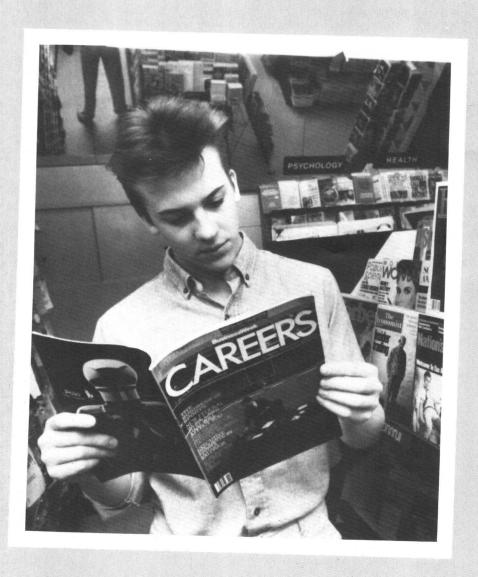
The book is organized around some basic functions and effects of communication media. The first half focuses on functions. Sections 1 and 2 are about the roles media play in providing information and entertainment to audiences. Section 3 highlights ways in which media provide avenues of expression for people and ideas. Section 4 provides analysis of the roles that media play in our economic system.

The second half of the book focuses on different kinds of effects the media probably have. Section 5 focuses on the most basic of these—media influences on our perceptions. Section 6 is about various kinds of behavior influenced by the media, from teenage drinking to rape. Section 7 contains articles on institutions influenced by communication media, including politics, religion, and sports. Unlike the first seven sections, which emphasize the present and the recent past, Section 8 deals directly with the future and the options that new and existing communications media offer to us.

The articles in each section should cause you to think about various aspects of each function or effect and about various points of view. Those ideas will be the jumping off points for your own analyses and the development of your personal points of view. To help you in this endeavor, the editors have provided you with an introduction to each section containing an overview of the readings and a set of issues or questions pertaining to the entire section. As the sections progress, these general questions get tougher, asking you to think more deeply and more carefully as you increase your knowledge of the media.

Each reading is preceded by an additional series of questions. These questions are designed to guide your study, to help you see relationships between each author's ideas and the more general questions raised in the section introductions. You should read the questions before you read each article and then return to the questions and formulate your answers. Among the study questions you will find many ideas for papers your instructor may assign.

As you read this book the question you should be asking constantly is why...? Why do these authors and other people believe what they do about the media and their proper role in society? Why do you believe what you do? To the extent that you read carefully and answer these questions and the ones in the book thoughtfully, your class discussion will be stimulating and—more importantly—you will increase your power to exercise your rights and responsibilities as a citizen in the mediated world.



Section 1

MEDIA AS PROVIDERS OF INFORMATION