TAKING SIDES

Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Mass Media and Society

Jarice Hanson • Alison Alexander

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PREFACE

Comprehension without critical evaluation is impossible.

Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)
German philosopher

Mass communication is one of the most popular college majors in the country, perhaps emerging from a belief in the importance of our communications systems as much as from a desire to work within the communications industry. This book, which contains thirty-six selections, presented in a pro and con format, addresses eighteen 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 naive acceptance of all media and a cynical disregard for any positive benefits it may offer.

The media today reflect the evolution of a nation that has increasingly seized on the need and desire for more leisure time. Technological developments have increased our range of choices—from the number of broadcast or cable channels we can select to the publications we can read that cater specifically to our individual interests and needs. New and improving technologies allow us to choose when and where to see a film (through the magic of the VCR), to create our preferred acoustical environment (by stereo, CD, or portable headphones), and to communicate over distances instantly (by means of computers and electronic mail). Because these many forms of media extend our capacities to consume media content, the study of mass media and society is the investigation of some of our most common daily activities. Since many of the issues in this volume are often in the news (or even *are* the news!), you may already have opinions on 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. For we believe that thinking seriously about mass media is an important goal.

Plan of the book Our book is primarily designed for students in the 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 thirty-six selections have been taken from a variety of sources—books, journals, magazines, legal briefs, Senate testimony—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 postscripts 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. At the back of the book (beginning on page 356) 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.

Supplements An *Instructor's Manual with Test Questions* (multiple-choice and essay) is available through the publisher. And a general guidebook, called *Using Taking Sides in the Classroom,* which discusses methods and techniques for integrating the pro-con approach into any classroom setting, is also available.

Acknowledgments We wish to acknowledge the encouragement and support given to this project. We are particularly grateful to Mimi Egan, program manager of the Taking Sides series. And we thank our families (David, James, Katie, Jaime, and Tracy) for their patience and understanding during the period in which we prepared this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Ways of Thinking About Mass Media and Society

Alison Alexander
and Jarice Hanson

Individuals in our society now spend over three hours a day viewing television, which is turned on in the average home over seven hours a day. Politics has emerged from the smoke-filled back room and is played out today in the media. Communications is now a multibillion-dollar industry. From these and other simple examples, we know that media have changed our society. We know that media have an impact, but our understanding of how and why is incomplete.

The dynamic relationship of media and society is very complex. As a result, there are no easy answers to understanding the web of relationships that ties media industries, content, production technologies, and meaning together. Furthermore, the media are not monolithic but are an enormously diverse set of messages, images, and ideas that can be said to originate *in* society and be sent back *to* society.

Many different groups are trying to understand the nature and impact of media systems, each from their own particular perspective. Practitioners must decide on a daily basis what the public will like, will buy, will find offensive, or will simply ignore. Critics are the informal watchdogs of the media and are committed to careful observation and evaluation of the content, practices, and potential influence of media. Social scientists are engaged in the attempt to test theoretical explanations against the observed realities, and each proceed from their own assumptions and goals, and with their own methods. Each provide different, and often contradictory, answers to the puzzling questions that are the focus of this book. Questions of media impact often cause heated debate; some defend, others criticize the media. By including selections from all of these perspectives, we have tried to provide a balanced approach to these debates, an approach that will allow you, the reader, to make an educated evaluation of the issues discussed.

DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

Communication media are such integral components of our lives that it is easy to take them for granted. *Mass media* is not just a synonym for print,

television, radio, or other electronic technologies. Mass media is a particular and special kind of communication that uses sophisticated secondary techniques to extend communication to situations in which face-to-face contact is impossible; that is, mass media provide indirect (or mediated) means by which the primary process of communication is carried out. In an attempt to understand the nature of the mass communication process, we seek to better comprehend both the nature of communication—such as who creates and sends the message, what is communicated, how, and with what result—and the role of the media as agents of the distribution of special types of messages—such as what changes as media "comes between" the sender(s) and the receiver(s) of the messages.

The United States today is rich in media technology. Government statistics report that at the end of 1989, 97.7 percent of American homes had at least one telephone; 98 percent of the homes had access to at least one television set; and 99.2 percent had at least one radio (although the average home had at least five different radio receivers!). Added to these forms of media that have traditionally been included in types of "mass" distribution technologies, we can consider as well the growth of cable television (68 percent of the population in 1989) and the video cassette recorder (VCR) market (55 percent at the end of 1989). Even satellite dishes and cellular phones are increasing in number and augmenting traditional distribution technologies.

Yet many of the questions about media and society remain the same, whatever technology is used. For example: How do audiences use a medium, and what is its influence? To answer that question, we begin by conceiving of groups of "receivers" or "users" as audiences. Audiences are involved in a dual task: receiving messages and producing meaning. The art of receiving is complex, for audiences as receivers of messages do not always perceive or comprehend a message in the exact way that the senders intended it to be received. Also, the audience *produces* meaning, and understanding the role of media in shaping the social reality of audiences (for example, the meanings they produce) is one of the key questions motivating current media research.

Surprisingly, we cannot even agree on what audiences are like. There are a number of dualities in our thinking about audiences: Audiences may be conceived of as active or as passive; they may be seen as having preconceived ideas or as totally responsive to the information provided by media. They may be seen as homogeneous or as fragmented; they may be seen as too intellectually limited to see that television could be harmful or to recognize the limitations of the medium in some cases (i.e., fantasy is entertainment) but not in others (i.e., believing that news is fact); or, on the other hand, they may be seen as critical and evaluative and not easily persuaded or influenced. You will see all these different characterizations of what "audiences" are in this volume.

These conceptions of audience are only part of an attempt to analyze the communication experience. We must also address the unique characteristics

of how the medium is used to get a better perspective on the social character of the audience experience. For example, television is primarily a domestic medium. Much of television consumption is in the presence of others and will be discussed with others often in an informal setting such as the home. In realizing the special considerations of each medium, the environment in which it is used, and the conditions surrounding it, we can better understand how media consumption is integrated with everyday life.

NOTIONS Of MASS MEDIA AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The term *mass* implies much more than large numbers and has positive as well as negative connotations. A negative connotation is that of a "mob": unruly, ignorant, easily swayed, lacking in culture, intelligence, and rationality. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) describes a *mass* as an aggregate in which individuality is lost. On the other hand, the term also supports a concept that denotes the solidarity of people organized to achieve important goals.

Traditional definitions of *mass media* maintained that the messages were created for the consumption of a large, heterogeneous, anonymous audience. Perhaps this definition has become dated because of the nature and amount of media today. Although much of the technology is still capable of catering to a mass audience, it can also be consumed in more intimate surroundings and is often programmed for specific functions by individuals. Video cassette recorders alter the nature of mass media somewhat by allowing the user to record a program in order to view it at a time of one's own choice. The added technology of the "fast forward" VCR button allows viewers to zap commercials or parts of a program not considered important or interesting. Where, then, does the "mass" nature of media fit?

The *mass society* perspective examines not only the nature of the audience as groups of people but also investigates the production of messages that reflect the interests of the dominant elite and provides what senders believe the mass audience will consume or at least tolerate. The mass society perspective has long held a bleak view of large audiences, which are described as acted upon (reactive rather than active) and heterogeneous (large numbers of different people are in the audience) but becoming increasingly homogeneous (in their susceptibility to persuasion). Because of the power of the producers of media messages, the mass society paradigm developed to understand better the political and economic implications of media created by few for the consumption of many. The saying "people only get what they want" is far too simplistic to address the dimensions of what constitutes media content. Decisions about what will be funded, produced, distributed, and marketed call into play a myriad of factors—from moral to economic. If indeed "people only got what they wanted," if only this one-dimensional agenda prevailed, then there would be no such phenomena as the flop, "the sleeper," or the cult media. The relationship of individuals,

society, media industries, and time in history all play a part in acceptance or rejection of media content.

HOW MEDIA HAS BEEN STUDIED: FROM THE MAGIC BULLET TO THE INDIRECT EFFECT

Much of media research has been in search of theory. Theory is an organized common-sense refinement of everyday thinking, 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. So, for example, a researcher might notice that what is covered by news outlets is very similar to what our citizens say are the important issues of the day. From such observation came agenda setting (the notion that media confers importance on the topics it covers, directing public attention to what is considered important).

Media researchers were faced with an initial view of the nature of humankind that was fundamental to the freedom of the press granted under the First Amendment. Libertarian theory undergirds press freedom and reflects normative and philosophical principles concerning the relation of press to society. These principles are used to evaluate how media, particularly the press, ought to operate: Media should promote a free marketplace of ideas from which rational individuals will come to know the truth. In our system, we assume that freedom of the press should follow the libertarian ideal—that is, to discover truth, check on government, and never be censored by that government. Our sense of social responsibility to that ideal suggests that media should encourage and promote a free and informed discussion of ideas.

Electronic communication challenged these notions of philosophy and individualism in decoding the content of message. The "magic bullet" theory was an early concept stating that media had a major direct effect on the receivers of the message, that the message intended by the senders was indeed injected into the passive receiver. In retrospect, this model seems simplistic, but when it was formulated, society had little experience with mass distribution of messages. The dominant modes of media at that time were print (a very individual experience from the perspective of the user), telephone (also an individual experience), film (viewed in confined environments), and radio (which was the "massest" of all media to that date but still consumed by the extension of the auditory sense rather than the more pervasive all-encompassing experience of watching television). The electronic media challenged past theories of the primacy of the written word and confused researchers seeking a linear, logical explanation for the impact of these new nonlinear, nonlogical media technologies.

The use of social science data to explore the effects of media on audiences strongly emphasized psychological schools of thought. It did not take long to

see the limitations of the "magic bullet" theory, and researchers downshifted from this all-powerful model of direct effect to a more reasonable belief in media's limited effects. How—and how much—then *did* media messages influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of audiences? The answer seemed to be that media primarily reinforced the status quo. Researchers concluded that media was not a primary cause of human action because more fundamental factors—patterns of thought, culture, and behavior having deep social and historical roots—prevailed.

As media research has matured, the theoretical and conceptual perspectives have increased. But in reevaluating media's influence on how an individual sees reality, one common factor is undeniable: the individuals within the "mass audience" each receive media messages subjectively. While some overarching characteristics of "mass" phenomena may be apparent, we can no longer say with certainty that every member of the audience will act, perceive, or internalize the same message in the same way.

Media research, then, has shifted from addressing specifically effects-oriented paradigms to exploring the nature of the institutions of media production themselves as well as the unique characteristics of each form of media as it contributes to what we know and how we use mediated information. Much of this research has provided a knowledge about the multidimensional aspects of media that transcends traditional social and behavioral methodologies.

Applying this knowledge to policy and personal decisions has served to integrate other fields of psychology, sociology, and popular culture with the perspectives provided by communication studies.

Other levels of analysis have focused on individual, family, group, social, cultural, and societal interpretations of frames of meaning, as well as economically and structurally derived positions of power, held or exercised by specific individuals within social frameworks. These concepts of power have become increasingly important as media becomes more pervasive throughout the world and various societies experience inequities in technologies, resources, and production skills.

Today we 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 noted the importance of media in carrying out developmental tasks within nations that have not had the economic and social benefits of industrialized countries, and it noted that emerging nations had different priorities that reflected indigenous cultures, which would sometimes be at odds with western notions of a free press. Their concerns dealt with power as imposed upon a nation from outside, using media as a vehicle for cultural dependency and imperialism.

THEMES OF CURRENT MASS MEDIA THEORY

In his text *Mass Communication Theory,* Dennis McQuail offers several themes that are currently at issue in mass media theory. Based on his list, we offer the following questions for debate about the influence of media:

1. Is media fragmenting or unifying? The central issue is whether media act as a central or unifying force for society or whether they fragment or decentralize. Beyond that are concerns as to whether these forces are positive or negative. For example, media may be seen as building national identity, political cohesion, or group solidarity. Alternatively, that centralizing force may be seen as promoting a stifling homogenization of taste and class. Fragmentation may be associated with privatization and loneliness (i.e., parasocial interaction—the substitution of mediated for real companionship) but may also be seen as promoting diversity, a cosmopolitan perspective, and providing opportunities for personal growth.

2. Is media a unique force for social change or does it primarily react to social forces? Here the question is whether media is an independent, unique force in social change (as such technological determinists such as Marshall McLuhan argue) or subordinate to evolving society and essentially reactive.

3. Whose interests do the media represent? The opposite poles of this issue can be described as concerns of dominance versus pluralism. Those who view media as an instrument in the hands of the dominant class see media as centralized, standardized, and controlled by a very few. A pluralistic position sees media as responding to demand from many groups in society, diverse and fragmented, with many different voices representing audiences or publics that freely choose which messages they are to receive.

SUMMARY

As the media have grown from infancy to maturity, we have developed numerous theories that seek to explain certain phenomena. We have improved our ability over time to unravel the complex set of interactions that ties the media and society together, but we need to continue to question past results, new practices and technologies, and our own evaluative measures. Theory helps us understand similarities, patterns, and generalizations, but we must not consider theory to be an easy answer for any of the difficult questions we encounter. All issues should be evaluated with regard to their time in history to better develop continuity in not only what we know but in how we come to know it.

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YES: Michael Novak, from "Television Shapes the Soul," in Sellars and Rivers, eds., *Mass Media Issues* 4

NO: Walter Karp, from "Where the Media Critics Went Wrong," *American Heritage* 12

Social critic Michael Novak argues that television shapes the soul by affecting our perceptions of reality and that this reality is produced by an intellectual elite. Historian Walter Karp asserts that fears that media would result in a mass society are unfounded and that the messages the media offer us are not quite as oriented toward the status quo as the media critics would have us believe.

ISSUE 2. Media Images of Blacks: Does "The Cosby Show" Adequately Address Issues of Race? 18

YES: John D. H. Downing, from " 'The Cosby Show' and American Racial Discourse," in Smitherman-Donaldson and van Dijk, eds., *Discourse and Discrimination* 20

NO: Michael Dyson, from "Bill Cosby and the Politics of Race," *Z Magazine* 34

Professor John Downing states that "The Cosby Show" allows for the analysis of discourse about race in a racist society and he concludes that its treatment of sexism, the family, and social class has enabled it to convey positive messages to multiple audiences. Philosopher and media critic Michael Dyson argues that "The Cosby Show" has been successful in addressing major social problems, such as sexism, and so should not ignore the problems of racism, which he feels it currently does.

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NO: Daniel R. Anderson, from "How TV Influences Your Kids," *TV Guide* 51

Author and children's advocate Marie Winn argues that television has a negative influence on children and their families. Dan Anderson, a professor of psychology, does not find evidence that television turns children into "zombies." He believes that television, used properly, can be a source of positive education and entertainment.

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NO: Elayne Rapping, from "Liberation in Chains: 'The Woman Question' in Hollywood," *Cineaste* 65

Author and communications professor Diana Meehan notes that there have been some changes in the portrayal of female characters in the popular media. The image of a strong, autonomous female has emerged and is an encouraging sign for those who advocate more varied gender portrayals. Communications instructor Elayne Rapping sees in Hollywood a reactionary backlash against feminist ideals that has resulted in portrayals of career women as mostly unhappy and neurotic, or even insane.

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NO: Martin Gottlieb, from "Dangerous Liaisons: Journalists and Their Sources," *Columbia Journalism Review* 85

Janet Malcolm, *New Yorker* staff writer, investigates the relationship between Joe McGinniss, author of the nonfiction best-seller *Fatal Vision*, and his subject, Jeffrey MacDonald, and maintains that all journalists betray and manipulate their subjects. Martin Gottlieb, journalist and professor, argues against this claim by presenting his own interviews with prominent journalists—each of whom explores how he or she maintains professional distance from a subject.

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NO: David H. Flaherty, from *Protecting Privacy in Two-Way Electronic Services* 105

Sociology professor James Rule argues that a legal infrastructure for privacy currently exists and calls for adherence to both the spirit and the letter of the Privacy Act. David Flaherty, a Canadian professor, warns that the individuals or corporations who are responsible for using new technologies do little to consider individual privacy as a primary goal to be maintained.

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YES: Mark S. Fowler and Daniel L. Brenner, from "A Marketplace Approach to Broadcast Regulation," *Texas Law Review* 116

NO: Timothy E. Wirth, from "The Television Environment: Cultivating the Wasteland," in Stuart Oskamp, ed., *Television as a Social Issue* 125

Former FCC chairman Mark Fowler and his legal assistant, Daniel Brenner, here articulate the most complete rationale for the deregulation of the communications industries. Senator Tim Wirth views deregulation as "not a goal" but a "means to an end" and therefore calls for greater governmental responsibility toward broadcast media.

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NO: Frank Zappa, from a Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate 141

Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) requests in congressional testimony that Congress encourage the manufacturers of albums, cassette tapes, and compact discs to establish a rating system for their music. Musician Frank Zappa advocates protecting the musician's First Amendment right to free speech.

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gist James Dobson is convinced of the devastation inflicted on victims of pornography and lists the ways in which pornography does harm.

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NO: Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure, from *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Elections* 178

Author and reporter Joe McGinniss is convinced that political campaigning is merely a matter of projecting the right image on the television screen to sell the politician to the public. Political scientists Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure explore the effects of political ads on television and conclude that the public is better informed and better able to make decisions as a result of exposure to televised political commercials.

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NO: Michael J. Robinson and Maura E. Clancey, from "Network News, 15 Years After Agnew," *Channels* 201

William Rusher, publisher of the *National Review,* says that despite the number of media sources from which we have to choose, most information comes from "the media elite," a small corps reflecting a strongly liberal bias. Michael Robinson and Maura Clancey of the Media Analysis Project at George Washington University find little partisan bias in news reports, but do see a tendency to focus on negative issues.

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Professor J. Fred MacDonald investigates media content during the Vietnam War and concludes that society was given a war agenda that reduced the struggle to issues of good versus evil. Author T. D. Allman examines the television documentary that supposedly told the "real" story of Vietnam and concludes that television indeed showed the real story—that Vietnam was about devastation rather than politics.