



CHAPTER

3

The Mass Media

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The Mass Media



KEY ISSUES

- The traditional and the 'new' media
- The significance of the new media in contemporary society
- The postmodernist view of the media
- Globalization, popular culture and high culture
- The power of the media: key questions
- Formal controls on the media
- Ownership of the mass media
- The mass media and ideology
- Control of the mass media
- The effects of the mass media
- Violence and the media
- The social construction of the news
- Media representations and stereotyping

The term 'mass media' is used in a number of ways, and may refer to:

- 1 The technology involved in communicating with large mass audiences without any personal contact, such as televisions, computers, DVD players/recorders, MP3 players, mobile phones, games consoles and satellites.
- 2 The institutions and organizations concerned with mass communication in which people work, such as the press, cinema, broadcasting, advertising and publishing industries.
- 3 The products of those institutions, such as the news, movies, television soaps, newspapers, magazines, websites, books, films, tapes, CDs and DVDs.

The main media of mass communication include terrestrial (earth-based), cable and satellite television, radio, newspapers and magazines, books, cinema, videos/DVDs, advertising, CDs, video games, the Internet, MP3 players and mobile phones.

The traditional and the 'new' media

The mass media is now often divided into the 'traditional' and the 'new'.

Traditional media

The traditional media refers to those media that communicated uniform messages in a one-way process to very large mass audiences, which were assumed to be homogeneous (all possessing much the same characteristics and interests). This is the type of communication associated with traditional broadcasting, like the terrestrial television channels (BBC 1 and 2, ITV 1, Channel 4 and 5), and BBC Radios 1 and 2, and mass circulation national and Sunday newspapers. There was little consumer choice, beyond a few TV channels, radio stations or newspapers.

New media

The new media refers to the screen-based, digital (computer) technology involving the integration of images, text and sound, and to the technology used for the distribution and consumption of the new digitized media content which has emerged



Examples of the new media – Apple's iPhone, BBC News website, satellite receivers, and the website of *Radio Times*. Identify as many ways as you can that these new media differ from traditional media like terrestrial television channels, magazines and newspapers.

in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These include computers and the Internet, digital cable and satellite TV, Sky boxes and DVD recorders enabling customized, individualized television viewing with a choice of hundreds of channels, digital media like CDs, DVDs and MP3, Internet downloads of films, videos and music onto mobile phones and MP3 players, user-generated media content through websites like MySpace, and interactive video/computer games through Play Stations and X-boxes.

Differences between the traditional and new media

Lister et al. (2003) suggest what distinguishes the 'new' from traditional forms of mass media are five main concepts: digitality, interactivity, hypertextuality, dispersal and virtuality:

- 1 *Digitality*. Essentially, this means 'using computers', where all data (text, sound and pictures) are converted into numbers (binary code), which can then be stored, distributed and picked up via screen-based products, like mobile phones, DVDs, digital TVs and computers.
- 2 *Interactivity*. Consumers have an opportunity to engage or interact with the media, creating their own material, customizing viewing to their own wishes, with much greater choice compared with the passive consumption and 'take it or leave it' features of the traditional media.
- 3 *Hypertextuality*. This refers to the links that form a web of connections to other bits of information, which give users a way of searching, interacting with and customizing the media for their own use.
- 4 *Dispersal*. This refers to the way the media have become less centralized and more adapted to individual choices, with a huge growth of media products of all kinds, which have become a part of everyday life. The routine use of the Internet for information, shopping and entertainment, email, laptop computers, interactive digital TV, social networking sites like Facebook, downloadable content onto mobile phones, and podcasts to MP3 players all show how the media have penetrated into the fabric of everyday life. The production of media content itself is now becoming more generally dispersed throughout the population, rather than restricted to media professionals. For example, people are now making their own videos and posting them on the Internet. According to Chad Hurley (*Guardian*: 3/12/07), Chief Executive of YouTube, there were eight hours of new consumer-generated video uploaded to YouTube every minute in 2007. Internet diaries – 'blogs' – are beginning to rival traditional journalism as sources of information and news, and in 2006 Technorati, a blog-tracking service, was claiming to be monitoring 47.6 million of them.
- 5 *Virtuality*. This refers to the various ways people can now immerse themselves in wholly unreal interactive experiences in virtual worlds created by new technology (as in computer games), and also create for themselves imaginary identities in online communication and networking sites, like MySpace, Bebo, YouTube and Facebook.

Activity

The best way to discover the features of the new media, if you're not already familiar with them, is to use them.

- 1 Go to www.en.wikipedia.org and look up digital media, interactivity, hypertext and virtual reality. Follow the hypertext links given in Wikipedia and give two examples of contemporary media that use each of these.
- 2 Use Wikipedia to find out what a wiki is, and explain in what senses Wikipedia is an example of a wiki, and what problems this might pose for the validity of the information given.
- 3 Using Wikipedia, find out who Jean Baudrillard was, what he meant by a 'media-saturated society' and what he said about the first Gulf War.
- 4 Go to <http://uk.youtube.com/>, do a search on sociology, and report your findings on any two sociology videos.
- 5 Go to <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> and watch the UK news headlines online, making a note of the latest headline stories. Now do the same with www.sky.com. Compare the two sets of news stories, and whether they seem to be covering the same material. What might this suggest to you about how the media influences our views of the world?

The significance of the new media in contemporary society

There are very wide debates about the new media and their significance in contemporary society. Some have an optimistic view, seeing the new media as playing a positive role in society, while others are more pessimistic. The following sections summarize these two sides of the discussion, followed by postmodernist views of the role of the media.

Optimistic views of the new media

Widening consumer choice

There are now hundreds of digital cable and satellite TV channels, websites, and online newspapers for people to choose from.

More media user participation

Interactive digital TV, blogging and citizen journalism, video and photo-sharing websites like YouTube, and social networking sites like MySpace are all giving consumers more opportunities to participate in using and producing media content.

Greater democracy

There is now a far wider range of news sources, and a vast ocean of information available to all. More people, not just large media corporations, have the opportunity to communicate with vast numbers of people. New social movements and campaigns can now use the Internet, through blogging, email and websites, to spread their ideas

and build support, like a kind of rolling conversation that can build up over time. Such campaigners can make it increasingly difficult for traditional media newspapers and news channels to ignore stories they might have dropped in the past.

More access to all kinds of information and ‘high culture’ entertainment
Everyone now has access to huge amounts of information and high culture which were formerly limited to educated elites. This is discussed later in this chapter.

The world becomes a global village

A **global village** refers to the way that the mass media and electronic communications now operate on a global scale so that the world has become like one village or community.

The **global village** is a term used by McLuhan (1962) to describe how the electronic mass media collapse space and time barriers in human communication. For example, satellite technology and the Internet globalize communication, and allow users from around the world to connect and interact with each other instantaneously. The way the electronic mass media enables people to interact on a global scale means the world has become like one village or community. In this global village, the new media promote cultural diversity, national barriers are reduced, the boundaries between the local and the global are blurred and different peoples and cultures are brought together, promoting greater understanding between different cultures.

Social life and social interaction is enhanced

The new media have opened up new channels for communication and interaction, enhancing or supplementing existing face-to-face interactions. Factors like gender, age, ethnicity and social class might once have meant that some conversations in the ‘real world’ would have been avoided, but alternative identities can be constructed in cyberspace or virtual worlds, and the media may become part of the means by which people express themselves. People can stay in touch via email when they are away, or meet anonymously in chat rooms or social networking sites, which may develop into face-to-face meetings. Social networking and sharing sites like MySpace, Bebo, YouTube, Facebook and Flickr, and ‘Googling’ friends, can enhance social networks, re-establish lost contacts between old friends, create online communities and bring people together. Figures from comScore (comscore.com), which do not include users under the age of 15, gave MySpace 109 million users each month worldwide in 2006, Facebook 86 million and Bebo 21 million. Boyle (2007) argues that for young people ‘the media – in terms of music, fashion and popular culture more generally – have all been cultural and symbolic battlefields over image, identity, difference and being “cool”’. Boyle argues that the new media, particularly the Internet, have changed the patterns of media consumption among young people, with 16–24-year-olds making more mobile calls, sending more texts and spending more time online than ever before, and more than any other social group; the Internet is now an integral part of their entertainment and social networking through various user-generated sites and online communities. According to the marketing firm Alloy, 96 per cent of teens and tweens (8–12-year-olds), 70 per cent of 16–24-year-olds, and 40 per cent of adults with Internet access were using social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook and MySpace in 2007. Ofcom found that in 2007 one in four Britons logged onto such websites at least

23 times each month, making the UK the most 'digital' nation in Europe, and second only to Canada among world users of these websites.

Pessimistic views of the new media

Media imperialism

Media imperialism (or **cultural imperialism**) is the idea that the new media, particularly satellite television and global advertising, have led to the Westernization of other cultures, as Western, and especially American, cultural values are forced on non-Western cultures, leading to the undermining of local cultures (this is discussed later in this chapter).

A threat to democracy

Transnational corporations like Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Vodafone and News Corporation control the Internet technology, the satellite channels and mobile networks. This poses a threat to democracy and enhances the power of the already powerful, as more and more of what we know is dominated and controlled by global corporations.

The lack of regulation

The global nature of the new media, such as the Internet and satellite broadcasting, means there is a lack of regulation by national bodies like Ofcom. This means that undesirable things like bias, Internet crime, paedophilia, pornography, violence and racism can thrive virtually unchecked.

There is no real increase in consumer choice

There is poorer quality media content, with 'dumbing down' to attract large audiences, much of the same content on different TV channels, and endless repeats. Celebrity culture will replace serious programming, and 'infotainment' (information wrapped up to entertain) will replace hard news reporting to encourage people to consume media.

The undermining of human relationships and communities

There will be an increase in social isolation, with people losing the ability to communicate in the real world as they spend less quality time with family and friends, and become more wrapped up in solitary electronic media. There will consequently be a loss of **social capital** or the useful social networks which people have, as they spend less time engaging with the communities and neighbourhoods in which they live.

The digital divide

Not everyone has access to the new media, and there is a **digital divide** between those who can and those who can't afford, or don't have the infrastructure to support, access to such media as pay-to-view satellite channels, computers and broadband Internet access. This creates national and global inequalities, and a new digital

Media imperialism (sometimes called **cultural imperialism**) is the suggestion that the new media, particularly satellite television and global advertising, have led to the Westernization of other cultures, as Western, and especially American, cultural values are forced on non-Western cultures, leading to the undermining of local cultures and cultural independence.

Social capital refers to the social networks of influence and support that people have.

The **digital divide** refers to the gap between those people with effective access to the digital and information technology making up the new media, and those who lack such access.

underclass, whose members are excluded from the alleged benefits of the new media. The box below illustrates this.

The digital divide

According to www.Internetworldstats.com, between 2000 and 2007, Internet usage grew by 244 per cent, and in 2007, there were 1,244,449,601 people using the Internet. This is only 18.9 per cent of the world's population. Europe and North America made up 46 per cent of the world's Internet users, even though these areas comprise just 17.4 per cent of the world's population. This contrasts with 3.5 per cent of the world's Internet users in Africa, which makes up 14.3 per cent of the world's population. This evidence suggests a clear global digital divide in terms of access to the new media.

Figure 3.1 shows the digital divide in Internet access in September 2007; even in Europe, there are divisions between the 75.6 per cent of people in Sweden having Internet access compared to 11.5 per cent in the Ukraine. In 2007, according to the Office for National Statistics, well over a third (39 per cent) of households in Great Britain did not have Internet access, and 70 per cent of households did not possess a mobile phone that could access the Internet.

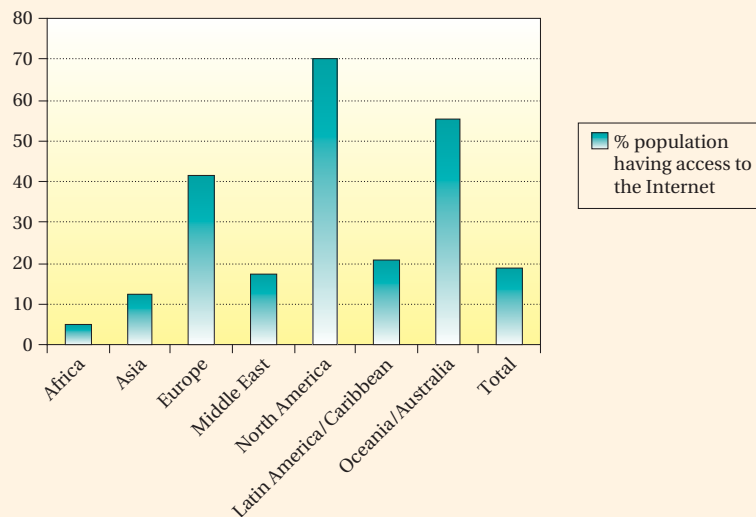


Figure 3.1 Worldwide Internet access
Source: www.internetworldstats.com

The postmodernist view of the media

The huge explosion of the new media is seen by some as part of the change to a post-modern society. Postmodernists argue that we inhabit a world shaped by the media. Media imagery and representations themselves become our reality, with computer technology creating virtual realities that potentially replace their real-life counterparts. Our view of reality is increasingly formed through media imagery and media interpretations rather than through personal experience.

Baudrillard argues that we now live in a media-saturated society, in which media images now dominate and distort the way we see the world. For example, media



Postmodernists suggest we are now living in a media-saturated society, in which our view of reality is formed through media imagery and interpretations, and we increasingly live media-led virtual lives rather than real ones. What arguments might you give to support or oppose this view?

images replace reality to such an extent that laser technology and video reportage have eliminated the blood, the suffering and the corpses from war, and the TV news presents a sanitized version of events, with battles shown as media-constructed spectacles, which have such an air of unreality about them that we are unable to distinguish them from Hollywood movies or video games. Baudrillard calls this distorted view of the world 'hyperreality', with the media presenting what he calls 'simulacra' – artificial images or reproductions/copies of real events viewed simultaneously across the globe.

The twenty-first century is likely to see an enormous increase in the power and influence of already powerful media companies. With global satellite, cable and digital television, and the huge growth of the Internet and other new media, postmodernists argue that the media no longer reflect reality but actively create it. Garrod (2004) suggests that Reality TV shows like *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here*, *Wifeswap*, *Fear Factor* and *Big Brother* are blurring the distinction between 'reality' and 'hyperreality'.

Strinati (1995) emphasizes the importance and power of the mass media in shaping consumer choices. Popular culture – like the culture of celebrity – and media images and messages bombard us daily, through books, magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, advertising and computers, and form our sense of reality and increasingly dominate the way we define ourselves. In this media-saturated society, the mass media create desires and pressures to consume, and many of us actually define our identities – how we see and define ourselves and how we want others to see us – in terms of media imagery. Colour, form and media-induced trends become more important than the content of products: it is not the quality of the clothes, drink or mobile phones we buy that matters, but whether they conform to media-induced images, styles, brand names and trends. The media-promoted designer labels of popular culture become more important than the quality of the products. In films, it is not the story that matters

so much as how good the special visual and sound effects are; not the script or the writing, more the icon and the big-name 'stars'. There are any number of people who are famous for no reason at all except for being made into 'celebrities' by the media.

We are now bombarded with so much information, imagery and ideas from the mass media that there is increasing uncertainty in the world: people no longer know what to believe as international media networks steadily loosen our grip on, and challenge our notions of, 'the truth'.

In this media-saturated postmodern world, we identify more with media images than we do with our own daily experiences, and we increasingly live media-led virtual lives rather than real ones. We are more likely to identify with the lives and communities of television soap characters than we are with our nextdoor neighbours and the communities we actually live in. An example of this hyperreality was found in the TV soap *Coronation Street* in 1998, when the character Deirdre Barlow was sent to prison *in the show* for a crime she did not commit. The British public started a big grassroots campaign, pleading with Granada Television to 'free the Weatherfield One'. Even more bizarrely, the real-world Home Secretary even involved the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, with only a touch of irony, attempted to intervene in this unreal world on Deirdre's behalf.

Such postmodernist views of the new media are controversial, and assume that people approach the media without any prior experiences of their own, and that they do not discuss, interpret, ignore or reject media imagery and messages. The mass media are only one element – albeit an important one – in shaping our lives. For many of us, our gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age and social class, whether we are able-bodied or disabled, our experiences of school, college, work, friends and family, our political or religious beliefs – all these are likely to influence how we select, interpret and respond to the mass media. These issues will be considered further as we go through this chapter.

Activity

- 1 Identify all the changes you can imagine might occur in the mass media over the next century. How do you think the relationship between the media and audiences might change?
- 2 How do you think the changes you imagine might affect our daily lives?
- 3 List all the ways you think the mass media influence you in your life, such as your knowledge about current affairs, your opinions, your tastes in music and fashion, and your views of different social groups, such as women and men, minority ethnic groups, the disabled and the elderly.
- 4 Do you think the media have a large effect on your beliefs and values, your sense of identity and your consumer choices? What other influences on your beliefs and values might also be important?

Globalization, popular culture and high culture

The speed of technological change is now so great that the world is rapidly becoming a 'global village', with many people exposed to the same information and messages through mass media which cut across all national frontiers. This is part of what

is known as **globalization**, which refers to the way societies across the globe have become increasingly interdependent, and are exposed to the same cultural products across the world.

Popular culture

Popular culture, sometimes called **mass culture** and sometimes *low culture*, has also become increasingly globalized. It is highly commercialized, involving mass-produced, standardized and short-lived products, often of trivial content and seen by many as of no lasting 'artistic' value. These cultural products are designed to be sold on the global mass market to make profits for the large 'culture industry' corporations that produce them, especially the mass media.

Popular culture is everyday culture, aimed at popular tastes – simple, undemanding, easy-to-understand entertainment, rather than something 'set apart' and 'special'. Such products might include mass-circulation magazines, 'red-top' tabloid newspapers like the *Sun* or the *Mirror*; TV 'soaps' and reality shows; TV films, dramas and thrillers; rock and pop music; feature films for the mass market; thrillers bought for reading on the beach; and popular websites. Popular culture is largely linked to passive and unchallenging entertainment, designed to be sold to the largest number of people possible. Such products demand little critical thought, analysis or discussion, and rarely provide any challenge to the existing social structure or dominant cultural ideas.

High culture

Popular culture is generally contrasted with '**high culture**'. High culture is seen as something set apart from everyday life, something 'special' to be treated with respect and reverence, involving things of lasting value that are part of a heritage which is worth preserving. High culture products are often found in special places, like art galleries, museums, concert halls and theatres. High culture products, aimed at mainly middle-class and upper-class audiences with what might be viewed as 'good taste', might include 'serious' news programmes and documentaries, involving comprehensive detail, social and political analysis and discussion. Other products include classical music like that of Mozart or Beethoven, opera, jazz, foreign language or specialist 'art' films, and what has become established 'literature', such as the work of Dickens, the Brontës, Jane Austen or Shakespeare, and visual art like that of Monet, Gauguin, Picasso or Van Gogh.

The changing distinction between high culture and popular culture

Some argue that the distinction between high culture and popular culture is weakening. Postmodernist writers, particularly, argue that mass markets and consumption are making the distinction between high and popular culture meaningless. There has been a huge expansion of the media-based creative and cultural industries – such as advertising, television, film and music, and book, magazine and web publishing. This

Globalization refers to the growing interdependence of societies around the world, with the global spread of the same culture, consumer goods and economic interests.

Popular culture, sometimes called **mass culture** or *low culture*, refers to cultural products that are produced as entertainment for sale to the mass of ordinary people. These involve mass-produced, standardized, short-lived products of no lasting value, which are seen to demand little critical thought, analysis or discussion.

High culture refers to specialist cultural products, seen as of lasting artistic or literary value, which are particularly admired and approved of by intellectual **elites** and, predominantly, the upper and middle classes.

An **elite** is a small group holding great power and privilege in society.

Mass marketing has broken down the distinction between 'high culture' and 'popular culture'. As seen here, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting, an example of a high culture art form, is now available as popular culture, as a canvas reproduction, on playing cards, a shawl, greetings cards, a notebook, a book mark, a puzzle cube, a lunch box, a plate and a vase.

means there is now a huge range of media and cultural products available to all.

Technology – for example, the Internet, music downloads, cable, satellite and digital television, film and radio, printing for both mass production and personal use in the home, the global reach of modern mass media technology, the advertising and mass production of goods on a world scale, and easier international transportation – make all forms of culture freely available to everyone. Such technology enables the mass of people to consume original music and art and other cultural products in their own homes, without visiting specialized institutions like theatres or art galleries. High culture is no longer simply the preserve of cultural elites.

Strinati (1995) argues that elements of high culture have now become a part of popular culture, and elements of popular culture have been incorporated into high culture, and that there is therefore no longer any real distinction between the two, and it is ever more difficult for any one set of ideas to dominate in society. High culture 'art forms' are themselves increasingly being turned into products for sale in the mass market for consumption by the mass of ordinary people, and there is no longer anything special about art, as it is incorporated into daily life. Technology has made it possible for mass audiences to see and study high culture products, such as paintings by artists like Van Gogh, on the Internet or TV, and to have their own framed print hanging on their sitting-room wall. The originals may still only be on show in art galleries and museums, but copies are available to everyone. High culture images are now reproduced on everything from socks and T-shirts to chocolates and can lids, mugs, mouse mats, tablemats, jigsaws and posters.

