CHAPTER 7

LANGUAGE, MEDIA, AND CULTURE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

7.1 Understand the role of language and its connection to culture.

7.2 Explain how the media is an institution in society and its role in socialization.

7.3 Examine the role of corporate concentration in shaping the demographic and idea diversity of the media we consume.

7.4 Explain the concepts of new media and social media and illustrate how the rise of these new forms of media alter social interactions and society.

7.5 Critically assess the effects of media on society and how we can distribute some of the unintended consequences of unequal access to the media.

7.6 Assess issues in modern media, such as media violence and media literacy.

Sociology is centrally concerned with the role of institutions in our society, such as the family, the education system, or the government. We focus on the important ways that these institutions can shape us as individuals and alter society. However, we tend to see the institution of the media in a different way. When studying the media, the focus is on how individuals consume the media and the messages that it relays. We are less likely to think of the important implications this media, and our exposure to it, has on society. This chapter examines the role of the media in society. We assess how the mass media has developed and how changes in the media have fundamentally shaped society. We also consider how the ownership of the media and differential access to the media can shape what we see and the implications this has for our understandings of the world around us.

LANGUAGE

The media is fundamentally related to language. Both language and the media are constantly evolving to represent changes in culture. Each year dictionaries add a list of new words to reflect these changes. In 2018 the word of the year, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* was "toxic" (Yancey-Bragg, 2018). The word "toxic" has many different meanings in modern times. While it is often paired with words like chemical and waste, it is just as likely to be tied to more abstract ideas such as toxic relationships, toxic masculinity, or toxic culture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also added the following words in 2018: "nothingburger," "alt-right," "Antifa," "idiocracy," "assclown," "fam," "prepper," and "bonified" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Do you know what all these words mean? Do you think your parents would? Are you surprised by any of these additions? Are there any words on this list that you thought were already in the dictionary?

The word "squadgoals"—a person or thing seen as a model to aspire to or emulate, especially with one's friends (often as a hashtag in social media)—was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2017.

The world is filled with language; there are roughly 7,000 languages spoken around the world today. Sociologists have long been interested in language because, as Durkheim argued, every language "represents a certain articulation of thought" (Durkheim quoted in Traugott, 1978, 102). Languages differ significantly, not just in words but also in ways of making sense of the social world. Attempting to translate poetry or humor from one language to another is often problematic and meanings can be lost in translation. It is not enough to simply translate the words—translators need to understand how both the language and culture work so the joke or poem will make sense in another language.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Durkheim's understanding of the connection between language and thought was partly influenced by the work of anthropologists who studied languages in North America. One such anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), compared indigenous languages with the European languages with which he was familiar. He thought that these languages were so dissimilar because they are based in cultures that understand the world in very different ways. Based on this idea, Sapir and Benjamin Whorf developed the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, which argues that language impacts thought. Whorf (1956) describes this relationship in the following way:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language . . . all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (Whorf, 1956, 212–214)

An example of the connection between language and thought is the use of **honorifics** (a linguistic means of conveying respect to a person). Honorifics are not often used in English. When you address another person—no matter if he is your best friend, grandparent, teacher, or the president—you use the word "you."

The Spanish language, however, has multiple levels of formality based on sex, age, and education. In addition, when you initially meet someone or speak to someone older or to whom you owe respect, you often address them as *usted* (a formal or respectful form of "you"). You do not use this formal way of saying "you" for your friends, family members, and others with whom you have a more informal relationship. Many people who learn Spanish later in life find it hard to understand when they should use each term and, especially, when they can move from *usted* to more casual terms. When does your relationship transition into a more informal one? This question is not simply a linguistic issue; it is also related to a cultural understanding of whom you should respect and how relationships change.

The Korean language has seven levels of respect, which are used to mark the formality of the conversation as well as elements of the relationship between the speaker and the listener. For example, you can use noun or verb endings to indicate clearly if your conversation partner has a higher or lower status than you. With these language rules, you would speak to an older relative, your boss, or your teacher differently than you would to a younger person or your employee. These rules of speech are quite complicated but are very important. If you refer to someone too casually (or too impersonally), you could cause offense.

Sapir and Whorf would argue that these differences in the use of honorifics illustrate something about these cultures, and, in turn, the languages represent the cultures in which they are created. Because North American or English culture (i.e., in places where English is spoken) tends to pride itself on individualism and equality, there is less need to differentiate people in language based on their status. In cultures that value the role of the collective, respect for authority, and hierarchy (such as the culture in Korea), the need to distinguish speakers based on their status and to defer to authorities is a cultural element that is built into the language.

Our language is filled with gendered terms and there is a lot of discussion about the importance of gendered language. Does it matter if we use the term "mankind," "chairman," or "freshman" when we really mean "humankind," "chair," or "first-year student"? These terms are changing over time, illustrating the changing nature of our culture and changing ideas about men and women's appropriate roles in society. We now, for example, refer to police officers (instead of policemen), or fire fighters (instead of firemen). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would argue that simply using these gender-neutral terms can change how we think about gender roles and thus make us more egalitarian.

READING: "RACISM IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE"

By Robert B. Moore

In this article, Moore illustrates the relationship among language, thought, and culture. Moore argues, "Language not only *expresses* ideas and concepts but actually *shapes* thought" (emphasis in original). In this way, Moore furthers the argument of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis by arguing that language shapes thought and thought shapes language. His article highlights the use of racist terms and expressions in English and the ways this language reflects an underlying racism in our culture. Consider how we are evolving in our use of these terms over time and how this reflects larger change in society.

Language and Culture

An integral part of any culture is its language. Language not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic, and political evolution; it also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only *expresses* ideas and concepts but actually *shapes* thought.[1] If one accepts that our dominant white culture is racist, then one would expect our language—an indispensable transmitter of culture—to be racist as well. Whites, as the dominant group, are not subjected to the same abusive characterization by our language that people of color receive. Aspects of racism in the English language that will be discussed in this essay include terminology, symbolism, politics, ethnocentrism, and context. . . .

Depending on one's culture, one interacts with time in a very distinct fashion. One example which gives some cross-cultural insights into the concept of time is language. In Spanish, a watch is said to "walk." In English, the watch "runs." In German, the watch "functions." And in French, the watch "marches." In the Indian culture of the Southwest, people do not refer to time in this way. The value of the watch is displaced with the value of "what time it's getting to be." Viewing these five cultural perspectives on time, one can see some definite emphasis and values that each culture places on time. For example, a cultural perspective may provide a clue to why the negative stereotype of the slow and lazy Mexican who lives in the "Land of Manana" exists in the Anglo value system, where time "flies," the watch "runs," and "time is money."

A Short Play on "Black" and "White" Words

Some may blackly (angrily) accuse me of trying to blacken (defame) the English language, to give it a black eye (a mark of shame) by writing such black words (hostile). They may denigrate (to cast aspersions; to darken) me by accusing me of being blackhearted (malevolent), of having a black outlook (pessimistic, dismal) on life, of being a blackguard (scoundrel)—which would certainly be a black mark (detrimental fact) against me. Some may black-brow (scowl at) me and hope that a black cat crosses in front of me because of this black deed. I may become a black sheep (one who causes shame or embarrassment because of deviation from the accepted standards), who will be blackballed (ostracized) by being placed on a blacklist (list of undesirables) in an attempt to blackmail (to force or coerce into a particular action) me to retract my words. But attempts to blackjack (to compel by threat) me will have a Chinaman's chance of success, for I am not a yellow-bellied Indian-giver of words, who will whitewash (cover up or gloss over vices or crimes) a black lie (harmful, inexcusable). I challenge the purity and innocence (white) of the English language. I don't see things in black and white (entirely bad or entirely good) terms, for I am a white man (marked by upright firmness) if there ever was one. However, it would be a black day when I would not "call a spade a spade," even though some will suggest a white man calling the English language racist is like the pot calling the kettle black. While many

may be niggardly (grudging, scanty) in their support, others will be honest and decent—and to them I say, that's very white of you (honest, decent).

The preceding is of course a white lie (not intended to cause harm), meant only to illustrate some examples of racist terminology in the English language. . . .

Color Symbolism

The symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture, with the black/white words used in the beginning of this essay only one of many aspects. "Good guys" wear white hats and ride white horses, "bad guys" wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white, and devils are black. The definition of *black* includes "without any moral light or goodness, evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful," while that of *white* includes "morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil intent." . . .

Three of the dictionary definitions of white are "fairness of complexion, purity, innocence." These definitions affect the standards of beauty in our culture, in which whiteness represents the norm. "Blondes have more fun" and "Wouldn't you really rather be a blonde?" are sexist in their attitudes toward women generally, but are racist white standards when applied to Third World women. . . .

Passive Voice

Another means by which language shapes our perspective has been noted by Thomas Greenfield,[2] who writes that the achievements of black people—and black people themselves—have been hidden in . . .

> . . . the linguistic ghetto of the passive voice, the subordinate clause, and the "understood" subject. The seemingly innocuous distinction (between active/passive voice) holds enormous implications for writers and speakers. When it is effectively applied, the rhetorical impact of the passive voice—the art of making the creator or instigator of action totally disappear from a reader's perception—can be devastating.

For instance, some history texts will discuss how European immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and expanded opportunities, but will note that "slaves were *brought* to America." Not only does this omit the destruction of African societies and families, but it ignores the role of northern merchants and southern slaveholders in the profitable trade in human beings. Other books will state that "the continental railroad *was built*," conveniently omitting information about the Chinese laborers who built much of it or the oppression they suffered.

Politics and Terminology

"Culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged," and "underdeveloped" are other terms which mislead and distort our awareness of reality. The application of the term "culturally deprived" to Third World children in this society reflects a value judgment. It assumes that the dominant whites are

cultured and all others are without culture. In fact, Third World children generally are bicultural, and many are bilingual, having grown up in their own culture as well as absorbing the dominant culture. In many ways, they are equipped with skills and experiences which white youth have been deprived of, since most white youth develop in a monocultural, monolingual environment. Burgest[3] suggests that the term "culturally deprived" be replaced by "culturally dispossessed," and that the term "economically disadvantaged" be replaced by "economically exploited." Both these terms present a perspective and implication that provide an entirely different frame of reference as to the reality of the Third World experience in US society.

Similarly, many nations of the Third World are described as "underdeveloped." These less wealthy nations are generally those that suffered under colonialism and neo-colonialism. The "developed" nations are those that exploited their resources and wealth. Therefore, rather than referring to these countries as "underdeveloped," a more appropriate and meaningful designation might be "over exploited." . . . Transpose this term next time you read about "underdeveloped nations" and note the different meaning that results.

Terms such as "culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged," and "underdeveloped" place the responsibility for their own conditions on those being so described. This is known as "Blaming the Victim."[4] It places responsibility for poverty in the victims of poverty. It removes the blame from those in power who benefit from, and continue to permit, poverty.

Still another example involves the use of "non-white," "minority," or "Third World." While people of color are a minority in the US, they are part of the vast majority of the world's population, in which white people are a distinct minority. Thus, by utilizing the term minority to describe people of color in the US, we can lose sight of the global majority/minority reality—a fact of some importance in the increasing and interconnected struggles of people of color inside and outside the US.

"Loaded" Words and Native Americans

Many words lead to a demeaning characterization of groups of people. For instance, Columbus, it is said, "discovered" America. The word *discover* is defined as "to gain sight or knowledge of something previously unseen or unknown; to discover may be to find some existent thing that was previously unknown." Thus, a continent inhabited by millions of human beings cannot be "discovered." For history books to continue this usage represents a Eurocentric (white European) perspective on world history and ignores the existence of, and the perspective of, Native Americans. "Discovery," as used in the Euro-American context, implies the right to take what one finds, ignoring the rights of those who already inhabit or own the "discovered" thing.

Eurocentrism is also apparent in the usage of "victory" and "massacre" to describe the battles between Native Americans and whites. *Victory* is defined in the dictionary as "a success or triumph over an enemy in battle or war; the decisive defeat of an opponent." *Conquest* denotes the

"taking over of control by the victor, and the obedience of the conquered." *Massacre* is defined as "the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a number of human beings, as in barbarous warfare or persecution, or for revenge or plunder." *Defend* is described as "to ward off attack from; guard against assault or injury; to strive to keep safe by resisting attack."

Eurocentrism turns these definitions around to serve the purpose of distorting history and justifying Euro-American conquest of the Native American homelands. Euro-Americans are not described in history books as invading Native American lands, but rather as defending *their* homes against "Indian" attacks. Since European communities were constantly encroaching on land already occupied, then a more honest interpretation would state that it was the Native Americans who were "warding off," "guarding," and "defending" their homelands.

Native American victories are invariably defined as "massacres," while the indiscriminate killing, extermination, and plunder of Native American nations by Euro-Americans is defined as "victory." Distortion of history by the choice of "loaded" words used to describe historical events is a common racist practice. Rather than portraying Native Americans as human beings in highly defined and complex societies, cultures, and civilizations, history books use such adjectives as "savages," "beasts," "primitive," and "backward." Native people are referred to as "squaw," "brave," or "papoose" instead of "woman," "man," or "baby." . . .

Speaking English

Finally, the depiction in movies and children's books of Third World people speaking English is often itself racist. Children's books about Puerto Ricans or Chicanos often connect poverty with a failure to speak English or to speak it well, thus blaming the victim and ignoring the racism which affects Third World people regardless of their proficiency in English. Asian characters speak a stilted English ("Honorable so and so" or "Confucius say") or have a speech impediment ("rots or ruck," "very solly," "flied lice"). Native American characters speak another variation of stilted English ("Boy not hide. Indian take boy."), repeat certain Hollywood-Indian phrases ("Heap big" and "Many moons") or simply grunt out "Ugh" or "How." The repeated use of these language characterizations functions to make Third World people seem less intelligent and less capable than the English-speaking white characters.

Wrap-Up

A *Saturday Review* editorial[5] on "The Environment of Language" stated that language . . .

> . . . has as much to do with the philosophical and political conditioning of a society as geography or climate. . . . People in Western cultures do not realize the extent to which their racial attitudes have been conditioned since early childhood by the power of words to ennoble or condemn, argue or detract, glorify

or demean. Negative language infects the subconscious of most Western people from the time they first learn to speak. Prejudice is not merely imparted or superimposed. It is metabolized in the bloodstream of society. What is needed is not so much a change in language as an awareness of the power of words to condition attitudes. If we can at least recognize the underpinnings of prejudice, we may be in a position to deal with the effects.

To recognize the racism in language is an important first step. Consciousness of the influence of language on our perceptions can help to negate much of that influence. But it is not enough to simply become aware of the effects of racism in conditioning attitudes. While we may not be able to change the language, we can definitely change our usage of the language. We can avoid using words that degrade people. We can make a conscious effort to use terminology that reflects a progressive perspective, as opposed to a distorting perspective. It is important for educators to provide students with opportunities to explore racism in language and to increase their awareness of it, as well as learning terminology that is positive and does not perpetuate negative human values.

Notes

1. Podiat, S. (1967, March). How bigotry builds through language. *Negro Digest*.

2. Greenfield, T. (1975, April). Race and passive voice at Monticello. *Crisis*.

3. Burgest, D. R. (1973, July). Racism in everyday speech and social work jargon. *Social Work*.

4. Ryan, W. (1971). *Blaming the victim*. Pantheon Books.

5. The environment of language. (1967, April 8). *Saturday Review*.

Reading Questions

1. According to Moore, what is the relationship between language and culture?

2. How does Moore explain the relationship between language and culture with reference to the use of the terms "Black" and "White," "Native Americans," and terms about developing countries?

3. How could this argument be extended to terms about gender? How are gendered terms used in the English language? How do these terms perpetuate sexist ideas?

4. To what extent and where have you heard these terms before? How much has changed since this article was written in our use of racist, sexist, and other types of discriminatory language?

Credit: Reprinted by permission from Council on Interracial Books for Children, c/o The Lawrence Jordan Agency, 885 Saint Nicholas Avenue, New York, NY 10032.

Methods in Depth: News Coverage of Refugees

The media is clearly an important way that we learn about the world around us. As such, it has considerable power to shape the ways that we see and understand social issues. Hoewe (2018) was interested in how the news media covers the topic of refugees and how that coverage influences what we, as viewers, think about this issue. In particular, she examines the media coverage of refugees affected by three major wars: wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. She compares how the media uses the terms "immigrant" and "refugee" in this coverage. Immigrants, by definition, are people who leave their home country by choice whereas refugees are people who leave when they are forced to do so due to political or civil unrest or natural disaster. By using one term over the other, the news media is shaping how we think about the people who have fled their homes because of civil unrest and, potentially, the ways that we think the United States should (or should not) welcome these people.

This research uses content analysis, a research method that is based on the analysis of documents. These documents could be newspaper articles, tweets, Facebook posts, television advertisements, letters between historical figures, images, or many other documents. Through systematic analysis, we can understand the meanings of these documents and compare how these meanings change over time, across contexts, or in other ways. For example, you can design a study of how images of men's and women's bodies in advertisements have changed over time by analyzing magazine ads. Or, we could conduct a content analysis of the ways that slavery is covered in high school textbooks over time to assess changing ideas about race.

In this research, Hoewe uses content analysis to compare how U.S. and international newspapers use the terms "immigrant" and "refugee." She finds that U.S. newspapers are much more likely to misuse or confuse the two terms, calling individuals who have fled the three war-torn countries immigrants when they are, by definition, refugees. She also found that, when the term "immigrant" was used, it was often paired with the term "terrorist" or "terrorism." This pairing was much less likely when the term "refugee" was used. These findings are significant because the association of a group of people with terrorism tends to increase support for more-restrictive policies toward the group, such as limiting their numbers in the United States and more hostile attitudes toward them.

Hoewe's research is based on content analysis of news stories published in four newspapers. Two of these newspapers are based in the United States: *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* and two are based in other countries: *Al Jazeera* (Qatar) and *The Daily Telegraph* (United Kingdom). She selected the newspapers based on both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, she wanted to compare newspapers inside and outside the United States, so she picked two newspapers from each category. She also needed to find international newspapers that would have enough coverage of these issues. She selected *Al Jazeera* because it is headquartered in Qatar and focuses its coverage on the Middle East, guaranteeing a lot of coverage of this issue. *The Daily Telegraph* is a UK newspaper that has a substantial amount of international news coverage and an international audience. In addition, all four of these newspapers are considered major influential publications in their regions, meaning that their coverage and tone of coverage would be more likely to shape the opinions of people than smaller or more isolated newspapers. From a practical perspective, all these newspapers are published in English and are accessible through a large database called LexisNexis, which is

available through many university libraries. This made the content accessible to the researcher.

Hoewe began by searching for all articles in these newspapers that had the term "refugee" or "immigrant" in the headline with mentions of the following countries in the story: Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. She collected all articles in the time frame of each conflict (Syrian Civil War—March 2011 to June 2016; War in Afghanistan—October 2001 to June 2016; and the conflicts in Iraq—March 2003 to June 2016). This resulted in 416 stories from *The Washington Post*, 542 stories from *The New York Times*, 578 stories from *Al Jazeera*, and 340 stories from *The Daily Telegraph*.

There are many ways that one could code articles in content analysis. Remember from Chapter 1 that there are qualitative and quantitative research methods in sociology. Quantitative methods use large amounts of data and focus on counting patterns. Qualitative methods use a smaller number of cases and focus on process and meaning. Traditionally, content analysis tended to be a more qualitative method—researchers read all the articles or documents on a topic and create codes for the main themes that they see. In more recent research, some academics have chosen to combine this qualitative hand coding with quantitative computer-assisted coding. Computer software is very good at the quantitative elements of coding. For example, a computer can count the number of mentions of each word, such as "refugee" or "immigrant." And, it can be used to see how these two words appear in relation to other concepts, such as terrorism.

This computer-assisted coding is very useful. It allows the researcher to analyze a much larger body of articles—in this case 1,876 articles. This is much more than a researcher could hand code. It is important to note, however, that the ways in which these stories talk about immigrants and refugees is not clear from this coding. It is much more difficult for computer-assisted software to code the tone used in the article. Hand coding could be more useful to get at these meanings and tones in a more nuanced way.

MEDIA AND CULTURE

Media, the plural of the Latin word *medius* (middle), refers to the technological processes that facilitate communication between a sender and a receiver. **Mass media** sends a message from one source to many people. Modern society has many types of mass media, including radio, television, books, the Internet, movies, music, and magazines. Using a telephone or e-mailing is not normally understood to be mass media because the contents involve private communication between two people and are not intended for a large audience.

Media are important socializing agents in our society: They teach us about the norms and expectations for different people and situations. The significance of the media is, in part, a result of our very high level of exposure to it. According to a recent study, the average American adult watches more than 28 hours of television a week (Marketing Charts, 2017). Americans also spend an average of about 36 hours per week on online digital media (Marketing Charts, 2017). In addition, Americans spend considerable amounts of time listening to the radio and reading newspapers and magazines. In this section, we examine changes in the media and the important role the media plays in our society.

The Medium Is the Message

One of the most important scholars of media was Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), a Canadian academic who worked at the University of Toronto and founded the Centre for Culture and Technology. McLuhan (1964) is most famous for the statement, "**The medium is the message.**" He argued that the content of the medium, such as the words on an Internet news site, is not as important as the physical or psychological effects of that medium. Different media have different effects because of the form of their messages. These various forms alter how we experience the world, how we interact with others, and how we process and communicate information. For example, in print media our visual sense rules; in radio, our aural; in television, both. McLuhan argued that the medium's properties (not just the messages' content) affect us as individuals, as well as our social world. The media can shape and change us; as we develop new technologies, those technologies change us as a result.

The development of the printing press illustrates how changing mediums can affect individuals and society. The printing press was invented in China in 1041, but the version developed by Gutenberg in 1450 in Europe was particularly efficient and easy to use. This new press led to the production of the first mass-produced Bible in 1455. Previously, monks copied Bibles by hand, which took a long time. Not surprisingly, copies were scarce and very expensive.

The invention of the European printing press had significant (and, in some cases, unintended) effects on society. A major consequence was the challenge to the elite's ability to hoard information and knowledge. Before the printing press, only very wealthy and well-connected individuals had books. The printing press made it possible for more people to purchase books. It increased the number of books available, and in a relatively short period of time they were being mass-produced. When only monks transcribed books, it was easy for the powerful to control what was printed. The printing press effectively opened a massive communication channel, allowing many groups and interests to promote their messages. One of the first things printed on the printing press in Europe was Martin Luther's *The 95 Theses*—a list of complaints about the Catholic Church that led to the creation of Protestantism. This work certainly challenged the status quo.

The printing press also led to the rise of individualism. Individuals became less reliant on others (especially elites) for information. People gained more access to books, pamphlets, and newsletters on a wide variety of subjects. This shift effectively helped to democratize access to information on, for example, how to cure illnesses, build machines, or start a political movement. Moreover, literacy rates among different groups of people, including the poor, women, and children, improved.

How has technology changed during your life? Did you have access to any computer devices—such as a tablet or smartphone—when you were a child? How would you have grown up differently if you had or had not had access to these devices?

The invention of the printing press was not simply a change in media:

It fundamentally changed the nature of society. Centuries later, the rise of the Internet has done the same. The Internet further democratizes access to information and content. Anyone can now read an almost unlimited number of books, magazines, and newspapers online as well as watch videos, movies, and TV shows. However, as we will discuss later in this chapter, there is still inequality regarding who has access to and knowledge about using computers and the Internet.

CORPORATE CONCENTRATION AND THE MEDIA

One key concern with modern mass media is the extent to which it is controlled by a limited number of people. Recent decades have seen an increase in the **corporate concentration** of media ownership. In other words, the media is increasingly owned and controlled by fewer huge media corporations and conglomerates. The United States has a fairly high level of corporate concentration in the media. In 1983 50 companies owned 90% of all media in the United States. By 2012 only 6 companies owned 90% of the U.S. media (Lutz, 2012). The concentration has increased even further since 2012. In television ownership, for example, a small group of five companies has been buying local TV stations and increasing their overall hold of television (Masta, 2017). These five companies owned 179 stations in 2004 but had increased their ownership to 443 stations by 2016—meaning that 37% of all local television stations in the country are owned by five companies. Such concentration could lead to fewer viewpoints being expressed in the media. Certainly the situation in the United States is not the same as it would be if there were a single state-run newspaper, but how much competition is enough to ensure a free and independent press?

This pattern of media control has long historical roots. The town newspaper was once a family-owned business, as was the dairy, hardware store, and grocery store. Today, provision of these basic items is controlled by large firms—for example, News Corp (newspaper), Nestlé (dairy), Home Depot (hardware), and Publix (groceries). Family-owned businesses have not disappeared, but they are now far less powerful and face continual threat, whether from Walmart, Amazon, or other big-box stores or online retailers. It may not be significant that we all get our milk or our light bulbs from the same store. However, we may be more concerned that our news and, as a consequence, our information about the world, is filtered by a smaller and smaller group.

READING: FROM *THE POWER ELITE*

By C. Wright Mills

The issue of corporate concentration is at the core of C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956). In this book, Mills argues that the **power elite,** a group of leaders in the military, corporate, and political spheres of society, have interwoven and complementary interests. He also found an interchangeability of top positions within these three institutions. As a result, the most powerful people in each institution develops a class consciousness and a similar set of interests.

The Nature of the Power Elite

We study history, it has been said, to rid ourselves of it, and the history of the power elite is a clear case for which this maxim is correct. Like the tempo of American life in general, the long-term trends of the power structure have been greatly speeded up since World War II, and certain newer trends within and between the dominant institutions have also set the shape of the power elite. . . .

I. In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the political order, that clue is the decline of politics as genuine and public debate of alternative decisions—with nationally responsible and policy-coherent parties and with autonomous organizations connecting the lower and middle levels of power with the top levels of decision. America is now in considerable part more a formal political democracy than a democratic social structure, and even the formal political mechanics are weak.

The long-time tendency of business and government to become more intricately and deeply involved with each other has, in the fifth epoch, reached a new point of explicitness. The two cannot now be seen clearly as two distinct worlds. It is in terms of the executive agencies of the state that the rapprochement has proceeded most decisively. The growth of the executive branch of the government, with its agencies that patrol the complex economy, does not mean merely the "enlargement of government" as some sort of autonomous bureaucracy: it has meant the ascendancy of the corporation's man as a political eminence. . . .

III. In so far as the structural clue to the power elite today lies in the economic order, that clue is the fact that the economy is at once a permanent-war economy and a private-corporation economy. American capitalism is now in considerable part a military capitalism, and the most important relation of the big corporation to the state rests on the coincidence of interests between military and corporate needs, as defined by warlords and corporate rich. Within the elite as a whole, this coincidence of interest between the high military and the corporate chieftains strengthens both of them and further subordinates the role of the merely political men. Not politicians, but corporate executives, sit with the military and plan the organization of war effort. . . .

The power elite is composed of political, economic, and military men, but this instituted elite is frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of "crisis": In the long peace of the nineteenth century, the military were not in the high councils of state, not of the political directorate, and neither were the economic men—they made raids upon the state but they did not join its directorate. During the thirties, the political man was ascendant. Now the military and the corporate men are in top positions.

Of the three types of circle that compose the power elite today, it is the military that has benefited the most in its enhanced power although the corporate circles have also become more explicitly entrenched in the more public decision-making circles. It is the professional politician that

has lost the most, so much that in examining the events and decisions, one is tempted to speak of a political vacuum in which the corporate rich and the high warlord, in their coinciding interests, rule.

It should not be said that the three "take turns" in carrying the initiative, for the mechanics of the power elite are not often as deliberate as that would imply. At times, of course, it is—as when political men, thinking they can borrow the prestige of generals, find that they must pay for it, or, as when during big slumps, economic men feel the need of a politician at once safe and possessing vote appeal. Today all three are involved in virtually all widely ramifying decisions. Which of the three types seems to lead depends upon "the tasks of the period" as they, the elite, define them. Just now, these tasks center upon "defense" and international affairs. Accordingly, as we have seen, the military are ascendant in two senses: as personnel and as justifying ideology. That is why, just now, we can most easily specify the unity and the shape of the power elite in terms of the military ascendancy. . . .

Neither the idea of a "ruling class" nor of a simple monolithic rise of "bureaucratic politicians" nor of a "military clique" is adequate. The power elite today involves the often uneasy coincidence of economic, military, and political power.

The Composition of the Power Elite

Despite their social similarity and psychological affinities, the members of the power elite do not constitute a club having a permanent membership with fixed and formal boundaries. It is of the nature of the power elite that within it there is a good deal of shifting about, and that it thus does not consist of one small set of the same men in the same positions in the same hierarchies. Because men know each other personally does not mean that among them there is a unity of policy; and because they do not know each other personally does not mean that among them there is a disunity. The conception of the power elite does not rest, as I have repeatedly said, primarily upon personal friendship.

As the requirements of the top places in each of the major hierarchies become similar, the types of men occupying these roles at the top—by selection and by training in the jobs—become similar. This is no mere deduction from structure to personnel. That it is a fact is revealed by the heavy traffic that has been going on between the three structures, often in very intricate patterns. The chief executives, the warlords, and selected politicians came into contact with one another in an intimate, working way during World War II; after that war ended, they continued their associations, out of common beliefs, social congeniality, and coinciding interests. Noticeable proportions of top men from the military, the economic, and the political worlds have during the last 15 years occupied positions in one or both of the other worlds: between these higher circles there is an interchangeability of position, based formally upon the supposed transferability of "executive ability," based in substance upon the co-optation by cliques of insiders. As members of a power elite, many

of those busy in this traffic have come to look upon "the government" as an umbrella under whose authority they do their work. . . .

Given the formal similarity of the three hierarchies in which the several members of the elite spend their working lives, given the ramifications of the decisions made in each upon the others, given the coincidence of interest that prevails among them at many points, and given the administrative vacuum of the American civilian state along with its enlargement of tasks—given these trends of structure, and adding to them the psychological affinities we have noted—we should indeed be surprised were we to find that men said to be skilled in administrative contacts and full of organizing ability would fail to do more than get in touch with one another. They have, of course, done much more than that: increasingly, they assume positions in one another's domains. . . .

These men are not necessarily familiar with every major arena of power. We refer to one man who moves in and between perhaps two circles—say the industrial and the military—and to another man who moves in the military and the political, and to a third who moves in the political as well as among opinion-makers. These in-between types most closely display our image of the power elite's structure and operation, even of behind-the-scenes operations. To the extent that there is any "invisible elite," these advisory and liaison types are its core. Even if—as I believe to be very likely—many of them are, at least in the first part of their careers, "agents" of the various elites rather than themselves elite, it is they who are most active in organizing the several top milieu into a structure of power and maintaining it. . . .

The Interests of the Power Elite

The conception of the power elite and of its unity rests upon the corresponding developments and the coincidence of interests among economic, political, and military organizations. It also rests upon the similarity of origin and outlook, and the social and personal intermingling of the top circles from each of these dominant hierarchies. This conjunction of institutional and psychological forces, in turn, is revealed by the heavy personnel traffic within and between the big three institutional orders, as well as by the rise of go-betweens as in the high-level lobbying. The conception of the power elite, accordingly, does *not* rest upon the assumption that American history since the origins of World War II must be understood as a secret plot, or as a great and coordinated conspiracy of the members of this elite. The conception rests upon quite impersonal grounds.

There is, however, little doubt that the American power elite—which contains, we are told, some of the greatest organizers in the world—has also planned and has plotted. The rise of the elite, as we have already made clear, was not and could not have been caused by a plot; and the tenability of the conception does not rest upon the existence of any secret or any publicly known organization. But, once the conjunction of structural trend and of the personal will to utilize it gave rise to the power elite,

then plans and programs did occur to its members and indeed it is not possible to interpret many events and official policies of the fifth epoch without reference to the power elite. "There is a great difference," Richard Hofstadter has remarked, "between locating conspiracies in history and saying that history is, in effect, a conspiracy." . . .

So far as explicit organization—conspiratorial or not—is concerned, the power elite, by its very nature, is more likely to use existing organizations, working within and between them, than to set up explicit organizations whose membership is strictly limited to its own members. But if there is no machinery in existence to ensure, for example, that military and political factors will be balanced in decisions made, they will invent such machinery and use it, as with the National Security Council. Moreover, in a formally democratic polity, the aims and the powers of the various elements of this elite are further supported by an aspect of the permanent war economy: the assumption that the security of the nation supposedly rests upon great secrecy of plan and intent. Many higher events that would reveal the working of the power elite can be withheld from public knowledge under the guise of secrecy. With the wide secrecy covering their operations and decisions, the power elite can mask their intentions, operations, and further consolidation. Any secrecy that is imposed upon those in positions to observe high decision-makers clearly works for and not against the operations of the power elite.

There is accordingly reason to suspect—but by the nature of the case, no proof—that the power elite is not altogether "surfaced." There is nothing hidden about it, although its activities are not publicized. As an elite, it is not organized, although its members often know one another, seem quite naturally to work together, and share many organizations in common. There is nothing conspiratorial about it, although its decisions are often publicly unknown and its mode of operation manipulative rather than explicit.

Conclusion

The idea of the power elite rests upon and enables us to make sense of (1) the decisive institutional trends that characterize the structure of our epoch, in particular, the military ascendancy in a privately incorporated economy, and more broadly, the several coincidences of objective interests between economic, military, and political institutions; (2) the social similarities and the psychological affinities of the men who occupy the command posts of these structures, in particular the increased interchangeability of the top positions in each of them and the increased traffic between these orders in the careers of men of power; (3) the ramifications, to the point of virtual totality, of the kind of decisions that are made at the top, and the rise to power of a set of men who, by training and bent, are professional organizers of considerable force and who are unrestrained by democratic party training. . . .

As a result, the political directorate, the corporate rich, and the ascendant military have come together as the power elite, and the expanded and

centralized hierarchies which they head have encroached upon the old balances and have now relegated them to the middle levels of power. Now the balancing society is a conception that pertains accurately to the middle levels, and on that level the balance has become more often an affair of entrenched provincial and nationally irresponsible forces and demands than a center of power and national decision.

Reading Questions

1. Who are the power elite? What are the three types of institutions that make up the power elite?

2. How do the interests of these three groups coincide and how do they conflict? How do they share commonalities?

3. Does Mills think that the power elite has control because of a conspiracy? How does the power elite continue to exist?

Credit: From C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956). New York: Oxford University Press.

Consequences of Media Ownership

As mentioned in the previous section, corporate concentration in the media and other areas can limit the free exchange of ideas and the diversity of content we receive as media consumers. The two main types of media diversity that can be affected are idea diversity and demographic diversity.

Idea diversity refers to the range of viewpoints expressed in the media marketplace of ideas. Media conglomerates have the power to censor information according to their interests. In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (2002) argue that wealthy and powerful people control the mass media. Because the mass media are one of the primary means of socialization and persuasion in our society, elites are able to create news that reflects their own interests. Herman and Chomsky also argue that elites can use this media control to legitimize the class system and other inequalities in our society.

Demographic diversity refers to how the media represents and addresses the interests of a diversity of people from a variety of races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and classes. One might argue that a way to ensure demographically diverse content is to support demographically diverse ownership (J. Gamson & Latteier, 2004). Less than 5% of the media is owned by women or ethnic minorities (Byerly, 2006). This lack of diversity in ownership could limit the variety of characters and shows

Orange Is the New Black attempts to show demographic diversity both in front of and behind the camera. Is it important to depict diversity in television shows? Can this lead to more inclusiveness in society?

PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

presented. However, it is possible that a homogeneous group of media owners could be showing a range of characters.

A recent study of the top 100 films of the year found that only 31.4% of the speaking roles in movies were female in 2015. LGBTQ characters had less than 1% of the speaking roles. Notably, there were no transgender characters with speaking roles among that group (S. Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016). A GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) study of diversity on U.S. television found that although ethnic minorities make up 28% of the country's population, they account for only 23% of characters on American television (Elber, 2013). In addition, only 1% of the characters on television are people with disabilities (Mitovich, 2015).

This lack of diversity has many serious implications for viewers. For example, it can have negative effects on the self-esteem of various groups. Martins and Harrison (2012) surveyed 396 Black and White preteens in the United States to examine television's effect on children's self-esteem. They found that television exposure led to decreased self-esteem for White and Black girls and for Black boys. However, it was associated with increased self-esteem among White boys.

The study shows that children from certain groups (females and ethnic minorities) suffer lower self-esteem when they are not exposed to TV role models who look like them. When individuals who share their racial and gender characteristics are shown, they are often engaging in negative behaviors, which can also cause the viewer's feelings of self-worth to decline. The researchers found that White male characters are usually portrayed as powerful, strong, rational, and central to the storyline. Female characters are more likely to appear emotional, sensitive, and to have a role as a sidekick or love interest. Black male characters are shown as threatening or unruly, Black female characters as exotic and sexually available (Martins & Harrison, 2012). As a result, young White boys had a better set of positive media representation than the children in the other groups.

A University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) study found that there are benefits to having more diversity in the media. Hunt (in Lee, 2013) analyzed more than 1,000 television shows across 67 networks. Shows with a more diverse cast tended to have higher ratings than other shows—in fact, shows with casts that were between 31% and 40% minority did the best in ratings measures. Shows with very low levels of diversity (10% or less) tended to have lower ratings. Clearly, diversity is not important only for audiences, but could also benefit media corporations.

One area where a lack of diversity has been highlighted is at the Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars. In 2016, after the list of Oscar nominees was released, there was a pronounced backlash. For the second year in a row, all 10 of the nominees in the four top acting categories were White actors. There was no racial or ethnic diversity in the best actress, best actor, best supporting actress, or best supporting actor categories. The reaction led to the #OscarsSoWhite campaign. Many actors and directors refused to attend the ceremony and articles appeared in the media criticizing the Academy for their lack of diversity.

It seems unlikely that there were no Oscar-worthy performances from non-White actors in the year. So what explains the all-White list of nominees? One thing that is important to consider is the availability of roles for people of different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, it is important to consider how the process by which actors—and others—are nominated structures the types of people who are selected for awards. Only members of the Academy vote for the winner of the Academy

awards, but how do you become a member? Two people who are already members must sponsor you, and then you must be approved by the Board of Governors (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2017). Given that only 7% of the members of the Academy were non-White in 2016, it is not surprising that there was so little diversity in the actors nominated. We can imagine that a group that is 93% White is also more likely to nominate other White people to join the Academy, perpetuating the inequality over time.

The Academy responded to the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, and committed to doubling the number of ethnic minorities in the Academy by 2020. If they meet this ambitious target, there would still only be 14% racialized minorities in the Academy, far below their representation in the population (38% in the United States) (Cox, 2017). Despite not yet reaching their targets or not yet reflecting the diversity that exists in the population, the drive toward equality has already yielded results. In 2018 the Academy nominated Black actors Daniel Kaluuya (for his lead role in *Get Out*), Denzel Washington (for his lead role in *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*), Octavia Spencer (for her supporting role in *The Shape of Water*), and Mary J. Blige (for her supporting role in *Mudbound* and for her original song in the film). *Get Out* also received nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay for Jordan Peele. This is certainly progress. However, activists are quick to note that, although there is a larger group of Black actors and directors nominated, there are no Latinos or Asians nominated. While it is important to note the achievements of the movement #OscarsSoWhite, we should remain critical of the general lack of diversity in these types of awards and the ways that institutions perpetuate inequality over time.

NEW MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The media environment has undergone widespread change over the past 20 to 30 years with the rise of new media. **New media** is accessible on demand, digital, and interactive, and encourages user comments and feedback. Wikipedia combines several features of new media: it is digitally based, incorporates images and video links, and allows interactive and creative participation among users. **Social media**, a type of new media, allows the creation and online sharing of information in communities and networks. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media technologies can be classified into six types: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., *Clash of Clans*), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Minecraft or *Second Life*). However, the boundaries between the different types of social media are increasingly blurred.

Social media is mainly used for social interaction. The high usage rates of these technologies indicate that they are filling important social functions for many people. In fact, many argue that technology is transforming how we engage with others and how we spend our time. More and more people are willing to make social connections and seek companionship through social media such as Tinder or Grindr. The Internet is also an effective way for users to connect with people across great distances, such as through Skype. Moreover, our expectations and norms about love, friendship, and identity are strongly informed by our use of social media. What it means to friend someone, for example, is very different in the Facebook era than it was 50 years ago.

With the largest concentration of Internet users in the world, state investment in technological infrastructure, and high use of technology, South Korea is often seen as the first digital democracy. Many commentators have credited the strong role of the Internet and television for changing Korean social norms. For example, previous taboos—including divorce, extramarital affairs, and cohabitation—are changing. In the past 10 years South Korea's divorce rate has increased by 250% (Onishi, 2003). Koreans' changing attitudes about issues like these are reflected in television programs, many of which are centered on the lives of women. The television show *The Woman Next Door* focuses on the marriages and affairs of three women in their 30s and challenges norms in Korean society, where traditionally men are allowed to engage in affairs and wives are expected to remain faithful.

We can also see that social media has created many large-scale changes in the United States. The biggest change is in the scale of our social networks—we can interact with many more people than was possible in the past. Traditionally, our social networks were limited by our geography, but physical presence is no longer a precondition for establishing a friendship or social tie. Think about how you show friends your vacation photos. Twenty years ago, you would have met your friends in person, flipped through printed photos, and explained them. Doing this with all your Facebook or Snapchat friends would take a long time. Now you can simply upload your photos to Facebook and add descriptions; your friends can view the photos at their leisure, increasing the photo-sharing. Although you can certainly share your photos with a larger group of people, the quality of the interaction is possibly lower. Not all your Facebook friends will commit the half hour they might have spent looking at your photos in the past. Lots of people might "like" your photos, but the nature of their interest in your vacation is surely lower.

Social media also places fewer restrictions on your communication. Previously, the only way to get your message to a large group of people was to talk with them face to face (perhaps in a speech to a large crowd); otherwise, you could be censored. For example, if you write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, the publication has the power to select (or not select) your letter for printing. If you want to air an advertisement on TV, the station could refuse your ad or require that you change its content. But with social media, you can distribute your message to a virtually unlimited number of people with very little censorship (at least in the United States). If you are upset with something the president or your governor does, you can post your opinions on Twitter or Facebook, where all your friends and followers can read it.

The Challenges of Social Media

There are obvious benefits to social media. However, we must not overestimate the diversity of social media networks. While it might seem that we can have contact and communication with virtually anyone, we know that individuals tend to create online communities of people who share similar characteristics and opinions. It is not surprising that, just as in face-to-face friendships, we tend to seek out others online who are similar to us. As a result, we are exposed to a limited number of views. People who hold very different beliefs or perspectives than we do are

unlikely to be in our online circle of friends. Perhaps you are part of a political or religious group online: These groups will likely only have other members who share your political or religious ideology, which could simply reinforce the opinions you already have instead of exposing you to new ideas and information.

There is also considerable debate about the efficacy of social interaction online. One example of this debate surrounds the Ice Bucket Challenge that first became a viral charity campaign in 2014. This campaign aimed to raise awareness about the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis

Justin Timberlake, Jimmy Fallon, and Mark Zuckerberg all dumped buckets filled with ice water over their heads to raise awareness of ALS. How can celebrity engagement in this type of campaign help increase awareness and lead to social change?

(ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. People filmed themselves dumping a bucket of ice water on their own head and challenged their friends to do the same within 24 hours or else donate to the ALS cause. Many celebrities participated, including Chris Pratt, Oprah, LeBron James, Amy Schumer, David Beckham, Macklemore, Lady Gaga, Selena Gomez, and Kerry Washington. Some dismissed this as a sensational campaign that would not lead to real social change. For example, people noted that many of the celebrities did not mention ALS in their videos. Was this simply a trend where people got involved just to participate in the latest thing?

Despite these complaints, this campaign did have some very real effects. According to the ALS Association, the campaign raised more than $100 million in a 30-day period. This money was able to fully fund several research projects. One of these projects, Project MinE, has identified a new gene associated with the disease that experts say could lead to new treatments (Woolf, 2016). The ALS Association of the United States is trying to keep this momentum going. They created a new Ice Bucket Challenge in 2018 with the hashtag #EveryAugustUntilACure. What can we learn from this campaign that could be applied to other social causes?

Social media's ability to spread information about ourselves and others so easily has created concerns about a lack of privacy, which can be a particular problem for young people. One implication of this lack of privacy is the rise of cyberbullying. **Cyberbullying** is defined as the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2016b). One in three Internet users between the ages of 12 and 17 have been cyberbullied or cyberstalked (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2016a). This type of harassment online can lead to serious consequences for victims, including depression, social withdrawal, and risk of suicide. It is very challenging to address cyberbullying and cyberstalking because of the hidden nature of the online world and the difficulty of identifying the perpetrators.

Using Your Sociological Imagination

The Reality of Reality TV

Another major change in the media over the past 20 years is the rise of reality programming. One of the first widely seen reality television shows was *Cops,* which has aired since 1989. This show uses actual video footage of police officers in their daily work and shows arrests, car chases, and investigations as they happen.

Technological advancements helped make reality TV possible. The availability of less expensive and smaller cameras allowed crew members to follow the action as it happened. In the case of *Cops,* cameras could be mounted on police cars to film police work in real time. This programming was very appealing to television stations and production studios because it was relatively inexpensive. There was no need to pay writers, actors, or costume designers. TV crews could simply film real people in the course of living their daily lives.

As other reality shows followed, people began to wonder how real these shows were. In many ways, *Cops* is real. The people are not actors: They are real police officers and real suspects. The show is based on real situations (e.g., actual arrests) that are not scripted. There is minimal narration and no host. In fact, it was originally seen by some as educational programming about the police and their work. However, its content and narratives are edited to fit into a 30-minute time slot (including commercial breaks). The editors use story-telling devices, such as featuring heroes and villains without ambiguity. They also select the most interesting and dramatic police work: There are no episodes of officers giving out parking tickets.

These manipulated aspects of the show have important consequences. They exaggerate the rate and severity of certain types of crimes in the public's mind. There is much more coverage, for example, of assault and other violent crimes than of white-collar crimes such as tax evasion. To keep viewership, the show also focuses on crimes that are committed by strangers and that are particularly dramatic, even though these crimes are relatively rare. *Cops* also distorts reality by depicting those who are arrested for crimes as violent, stupid, and poor, and as members of ethnic minorities. While some criminals fall into these stereotypes, many are nonviolent, smart, rich, and White. Police officers are depicted as heroes who are always doing the right thing, which ignores the reality of police brutality and excessive force. (Chapters 5 and 11 discuss these issues in more detail.)

In this activity, we will look at other types of reality programming, including shows based on survival (e.g., *Survivor, The Amazing Race*), biography (e.g., *Keeping Up With the Kardashians, The Real Housewives* franchise), competition (e.g., *Dancing With the Stars, America's Next Top Model*), and love (e.g., *The Bachelor*).

With these shows in mind, answer the following questions.

1. Access an interview with Troy DeVolld, a producer of *The Osbournes, The Surreal Life, The Bachelor,* and *Dancing With the Stars* (http://www.rd.com/culture/13-secrets-reality-tv-show-producers-wont-tell-you/), and an article about the secrets of reality television (http://www.rd.com/culture/13-secrets-reality-tv-show-producers-wont-tell-you/). Based on these accounts, how real are reality shows? How are they cast and scripted? What is a Frankenbite and how could it distort the reality of these shows?

2. To what extent does it matter that reality shows are scripted? How do reality shows distort our image of reality?

3. What types of values and behaviors do reality shows display? Should we be concerned about these shows purporting to represent reality? Why or why not?

The Digital Divide

Internet use has increased over time. More than 90% of Americans use the Internet, a dramatic increase from the 50% who were online in 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, use of the Internet and other communication technologies is not equally distributed across all groups. The **digital divide** is the inequality between groups with regard to their access to information and communication technologies and to their use of such technologies (OECD, n.d.). The divide within a country occurs between individuals, households, geographic areas, and socioeconomic levels. The divide between countries, referred to as the global digital divide, measures the gap between the digital access and use of technologies across countries.

Internet cafés like this one often provide people's only link to the Internet. What are the implications of having limited access to the Internet? How does accessing the Internet through a café, instead of at home, change the types of activities one can engage in online and the benefits of Internet access?

Age is a major dimension of the digital divide in the United States. People between the ages of 18 and 49 are almost universally online, with almost 100% having access to the Internet. And, while 87% of people from age 50 to age 64 are also connected, connection rates among those over 65 are quite low. In fact, only 66% of seniors have access to the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2018).

There is also a strong urban/rural digital divide. While 92% of people who live in urban centers in America are connected to the Internet, only 78% of those in rural areas are online (Pew Research Center, 2018). This is in part because of the lower level of Internet connectivity in rural areas and the difficulty of accessing high-speed Internet outside urban centers.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, there is a large digital divide between the richest and poorest Americans. While 98% of Americans who earn more than $75,000 a year are connected to the Internet, only 81% of those making $30,000 or less have this access (Pew Research Center, 2018). This could be true, in part, because of the relationship between income and education. College graduates are almost universally connected (98%), whereas those with less than a high school diploma have only a 65% rate of Internet access (Pew Research Center, 2018).
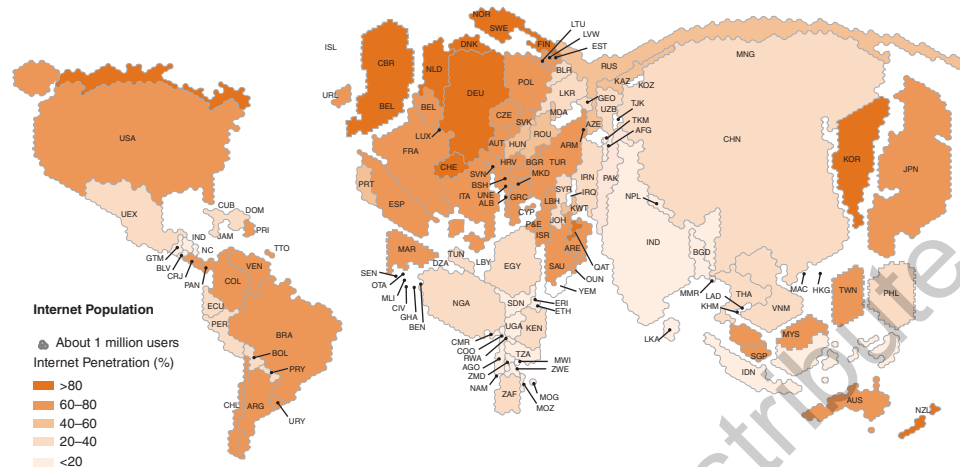
As illustrated in Figure 7.1, the digital divide is much more extreme across countries. While the United States, Europe, and Australia have almost universal access to computers and Internet technology (from 80–100% of all citizens), many areas of Africa and Asia have connection levels lower than 20%. The situation in Ghana, where the Internet is delivered through phone connections, illustrates the challenges of the global digital divide. Ghana has only 240,000 phones for its 20 million people, and the phone lines are spread across a nation the size of Oregon. A business phone line costs about $1,000, as much as office rent would cost for a year. Even if a person has access to a phone, about half of all calls do not go through because of system failures.

Figure 7.1 /// Population Using the Internet, 2017

Source: The World Bank, "Individuals using the Internet (% of population)"; CC BY 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Cellphones are available (300,000 in total), but they are very costly (about 10 times the cost of one in the United States) and also frequently drop calls because of the relatively few cellphone towers. This situation makes it clear that we cannot simply eliminate the digital divide in a country such as Ghana by sending computers. Even if there were staff that knew how to use them, computers are less useful without an Internet connection or stable power supply (Oppong-Tawiah & Boateng, 2011; Zachary, 2002).

The digital divide has important consequences, both within the United States and around the world. First, it creates unequal access to information. For example, in countries with limited access, schools must rely on expensive books that quickly become outdated instead of using Internet resources that are cheaper and more current. Access to the Internet and computers can also allow people to learn computer skills that are useful for employment and job training. Second, Internet access is important for commerce. Businesses with online access can sell their products to a larger group of people. Consumers with Internet access can purchase a larger variety of products, usually for less money, than those who can access only local businesses. Third, the Internet can be an important social outlet for people. For certain groups of Americans, such as the elderly, people living in rural areas, and those who have lower incomes, the lack of access can reduce feelings of social connection with others. Finally, the Internet can provide important means of political organizing. Especially in countries with nondemocratic political regimes, the Internet can provide access to information that the government might censor. It can also provide a way of organizing people into activism.

How do we address these significant inequalities? One way is through organizations such as Close the Gap, an international nonprofit organization that "aims to bridge the digital divide by offering high-quality, pre-owned computers donated by European companies to educational, medical, and social projects in developing and emerging countries" (https://www.close-the-gap.org/who-we-are). The organization also works with local groups to bring software and training to recipients.

MEDIA EFFECTS

The media has many important potential benefits. It helps to spread information, connects people, and is useful for education and trade. However, the vast spread of mass media also presents a number of challenges. The prevalence of violence in the media is one such challenge. Through media literacy and alternative media, we can all become more-educated consumers of media messages.

Violence in Modern Media

The prevalence of violence in modern media is a major concern. It seems intuitive that violence in the media would have a negative effect on viewers. However, how could we test the impact of violent media on individuals?

Should we be concerned about children playing violent video games? Are they just entertainment or are they also teaching lessons about how to interact with others?

Research has consistently shown that violent media content can have serious consequences. This is particularly true for young children who watch violent media content, since it can lead them to become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, increase their fear of the world around them, and make them more likely to engage in violent or aggressive ways toward others (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013). These effects can be long lasting. For example, Huesmann and Eron followed children over time and found that kids who watched a high level of violent television when they were 8 years old were more likely to be aggressive as teenagers and more likely to be arrested and prosecuted for criminal acts as adults (APA, 2013). Research on violent videogames in particular shows that playing these games can have a desensitization effect, lowering concern for others in need. In one study, researchers looked at 780 young adults (average age 20 years old) from four American universities. They found that those who played violent video games had lower levels of concern for others and were less likely to help strangers in need (Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2012).

Most research finds that viewing violence in the media can have serious implications for viewers' attitudes and behaviors (Murray, 2008). Viewing violence is associated with more aggressive behavior and a more accepting attitude toward the use of violence to solve problems. As we have just seen, being exposed to high levels of media violence may lead individuals to become desensitized to violence. Finally, exposure to media violence may lead viewers to overestimate their risk of victimization and be more fearful of crime. Considering the increased prevalence of media violence and its serious effects for individuals and society, these issues are of concern to the public as well as to policymakers.

Media Literacy

In light of the serious implications of the media in the socialization process, many critics have argued that we should increase **media literacy** in an effort to regain control over our media consumption. Media literacy is an educational tool that

helps individuals analyze and evaluate the messages they receive from the media. It works to empower people to examine and think more critically about the media messages they receive.

Media literacy programs can take place in schools, online, or at community centers. Even a parent who watches television with his or her child and talks critically about what they are seeing engages in media literacy training. There are three main stages in media literacy education. First, you must become aware of your media diet—the media that you consume. It is obvious to think about the television shows that you watch, the radio that you listen to, or the Internet news you read. However, it is also important to consider the more incidental media to which you are exposed— billboards on the street, advertisements on Google, or radio in the background at a store.

The second stage is to learn specific skills of critical viewing, which requires you to analyze both what is shown on television and what is left out. Perhaps you notice that the TV shows you watch feature a lot of upper-class characters and that very few poor or homeless characters are depicted. Or perhaps you notice a lot of White lead characters but few characters from other racial or ethnic groups in the movies you watch.

Finally, media literacy pushes you to question what is behind the media and why certain messages are relayed while others are not. For example, TV shows might focus on upper-class characters because producers think that audience members will find them more interesting and compelling. But seeing so many upper-class characters also distorts our idea of how much money most people in society have, what regular jobs and careers are, and what we should aspire to be. Seeing so many extremely thin women or muscular men on television might distort our idea of beauty and a regular or normal body shape. This can have severe implications for individual self-esteem and lead to eating disorders and other health issues. By thinking critically about who produces the media for what purpose and who benefits from media images, we can better understand what we see. This comprehension can help individuals to be more critical about the media messages they receive.

Alternative Media

As we have discussed in this chapter, one major concern with media concentration is a potential decline in the diversity of perspectives available to consumers. One way to address this issue is **alternative media**, which provides "alternative information to the mainstream media in a given context, whether the mainstream media are commercial, publicly supported, or government-owned" (Atton, 2002). Blogs, podcasts, websites such as Indymedia, community- or student-run newspapers, public broadcasting radio and television stations, and pirate stations are examples of alternative media.

Alternative media is defined by four main characteristics. First, the message is not corporately controlled and is not based on a profit motive, since alternative media is nonprofit. Second, the message's content tends to be antiestablishment, subversive, and change-centered. Third, alternative media is usually distributed in a creative way, focusing on being visually appealing and interesting. Finally, the relationship between the producer and consumer is fundamentally different in alternative media compared with traditional or corporate media. In the latter case, media

curvy thighs, bigger bums, rounder stomachs. What better way to test our firming range?

new Dove Firming Range

CASAMIGOS Tequila

George Clooney

Rande Gerber

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THOSE WHO DRINK IT

ENJOY RESPONSIBLY

These ads do not even mention the quality of the products they are trying to sell. Instead, they focus on ideas about the person you could be if you used these items. Why would companies use this type of lifestyle advertising to sell their products? What is the danger of this practice?

(Continued)

Using Media Literacy With Alcohol and Tobacco Ads

Advertising is all around us, and our exposure to it is increasing. The market research firm Yankelovich estimates that a person living in New York City was exposed to about 2,000 advertisements a day 30 years ago. Today, a New Yorker sees an average of 5,000 ads a day (Schroeder, 2016). Clearly, one of the primary purposes of these ads is to sell products or services, but they also communicate other messages and rely on certain techniques. Look at these alcohol and tobacco ads and answer the following questions:

1. What techniques are used in these ads? Do they focus on the quality of the products or on something else?

2. Do all these ads show the product that they are selling? How prominent is the product in the ad? Why would you show (or not show) a product in an ad?

3. What message are these ads trying to send about the products? What type of person do they suggest uses each product? What would the advertisers like you to associate their product with?

4. Research has shown that cigarette and alcohol ads, in particular, tend to exploit people's desire for freedom and/or adventure. Can you see the use of these concepts in the ads presented here? What other types of products focus on freedom or adventure?

5. The Dos Equis ads, the Dove Real Beauty campaign, and others either make fun of or challenge our conventional ideas of how advertising should be done. To what extent do you think these ads are effective? Why do you think advertisers would develop such ads?

6. *Adbusters* creates spoof ads that challenge advertising messages. Visit https://www .adbusters.org/spoof-ads (or access the direct link on this book's companion website) to see some of these ads. What do you think of them? Are they effective at pointing out some of the problematic messages in advertising? How could they be more effective?

is unidirectional—consumers simply receive the message, but do not have the opportunity to shape it. Alternative media has a two-way relationship: Consumers can comment on and shape the media they consume. Alternative media, then, provides an interesting way to exert power and control over the media messages and content you receive.

/// SUMMARY

Language is everywhere—without it you could not even read this book! We began this chapter by examining the importance of language and how language shapes thought and is shaped by culture. These connections were illustrated by examining racist terms in the English language. The chapter then discussed the mass media's role as a mode of communication. We looked at the evolution of the media, using Marshall McLuhan's famous idea that "the medium is the message," and we discussed the rise in corporate concentration and its effects on the diversity of ideas available to us as consumers of the media. C. Wright Mills's concept of the power elite illuminated how an increasingly small group of people holds power in the major political, military, and corporate institutions of society. This chapter also examined the rising importance of new media and social media, the digital divide, violence in the media, the need for media literacy, and alternative media.

/// KEY TERMS

alternative media 238

corporate concentration 224

cyberbullying 233

demographic diversity 229

digital divide 235

honorifics 214

idea diversity 229

mass media 222

media 222

media literacy 237

medium is the message, the 223

new media 231

power elite 224

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis 214

social media 231

/// FOR FURTHER READING

Chomsky, N., & Herman, E. S. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Whorf, B. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.