Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted the ways in which economic and political forces constrain the media industry. However, we must keep in mind that action does not follow inevitably and directly from structural constraint. At most, broad structural constraints will influence behavior by making some choices more attractive, some more risky, and some almost unthinkable. Despite working within certain constraints, those who help create media products make a series of choices about what to make and how to produce and distribute the final result. People—Hollywood directors, network television executives, book editors, news reporters, and so on—are not simply mindless cogs in a media machine. They do not churn out products precisely in accord with what our understanding of social structure tells us they should.

Our task, then, is to make sense of the dynamic tension between the forces of structure, which shape but do not determine behavior, and the actions of human beings, who make choices but are not fully autonomous. To adapt an often cited comment by Marx: Media professionals make their own products, but they do not make them just as they please; they do not make them under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past.

This chapter focuses on the structure–agency dynamic within media organizations. We explore how professionals create media products, the ways in which media work is organized, the norms and practices of several media professions, the social and personal networks that media professionals cultivate, and the ways the organizational structure of media outlets shape the methods of media work.

THE LIMITS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

As we have seen in earlier chapters, economic and political forces can be powerful constraints. As we examine below, media personnel actively respond to these constraints when making decisions, often limiting their impact.
Working Within Economic Constraints

Let’s briefly return to our discussion in Chapter 2 of the commercial logic of prime-time television. Recall that profit demands shape programming decisions in network television. Profits result from high ratings and desirable demographics, which lead to strong advertising sales. Network executives, facing severe pressure to schedule programs that will attract large audiences, select programs that are safe, trying not to offend any significant constituency. It is the commercial logic of network television then that leads to the fact that programs on different networks look so much alike.

In Chapter 2, we emphasized the constraining power of the commercial organization of network television. However, Gitlin’s (2000) study provides a nuanced analysis of the tension between these economic constraints and the agency of network programmers, producers, and writers. The people who actually create and select television programs work in an environment in which the decisions they make carry real costs. If you write too many scripts that are considered to be commercially unviable, your future as a television writer may be in jeopardy. Likewise, if you choose unorthodox programs for your network’s prime-time lineup, and they are ratings flops, you will be looking for a new job in short order. The economics of prime-time television, then, may shape the decision-making environment, but decisions are still made at various stages by various players. And because audience tastes are both dynamic and unpredictable, these decisions cannot use any one simple formula to determine which programs will be profitable and which will not. As a result, people who work in the world of television must try to interpret both the current mood of the audience and the appeal of particular programs to create and select shows that will meet profit requirements.

Here the structure–agency dynamic is quite clear: Economic forces identify the goals and shape the terrain of the decision-making process, but human actors must assess both program and audience in their effort to deliver the “correct” product. The fact that the vast majority of programs do not succeed tells us that this is not easy terrain to master. Despite the difficulty of the field, however, players within the television world still try to navigate it safely; along the way, they adopt certain rules or conventions to smooth out and routinize the decision-making process. Imitation, for example, has been routinized in the television world. One basic rule of thumb is to create programs that look like those that are currently popular. Throughout this chapter, we will give attention to the conventions that media professionals adopt because they provide an insightful window on production processes within media industries.

Responding to Political Constraints

Political forces, particularly government regulations, also play a significant role in shaping the environment within which media organizations operate. Even here, where federal laws require or prohibit specific actions, the constraints of government regulation do not determine what media organizations will do. Sometimes media organizations comply with government regulations, but sometimes the media preempt, ignore, reinterpret, or challenge regulations.
Compliance is the easiest strategy for media organizations because it avoids conflict with regulators, thereby enabling them to shape the actions of media organizations. As we saw in the previous chapter, since Vietnam, the Pentagon has been quite adept at influencing the content of news reports using various strategies. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the government regulated access to information through a press pool system and required journalists to submit their battle coverage stories for approval by military censors. During the Iraq War that began in 2003, the government took a different approach, cultivating favorable coverage by embedding reporters with troops with whom they built relationships. In both cases, the Pentagon was largely successful in achieving press compliance. The popular belief in supporting troops during war, coupled with widespread public skepticism about the media, likely made press criticism of Pentagon restrictions difficult.

A second strategy used by the media in dealing with government regulation is preemption. Media industries can preempt external regulation by engaging in a public form of self-regulation. As we saw in the last chapter, this is the strategy that the motion picture, television, music, and video gaming industries used in their voluntary adoption of age-appropriate content ratings and warning labels for their products to stave off more direct government regulation.

A third often-used strategy is rooted in the fact that government regulations are almost always subject to interpretation, giving media organizations the power to read regulations in ways that match their broader agendas. In a classic example, the 1990 Children's Television Act required stations to include educational television in their Saturday morning lineups but left a good deal of room for interpretation of the meaning of “educational” programming. As a result, broadcasters were willing to define almost anything as educational, including old cartoons such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*. While regulations were on the books, broadcasters found innovative ways to respond, demonstrating that regulation is, at best, only a partial constraint.

Fourth, media industries can simply ignore regulations. Passing laws is one thing, but enforcing regulations is another. The FCC historically has been reluctant to be a firm enforcer in large part because of the complexities of its relationship to the U.S. Congress and to the media industries it is supposed to regulate. As a result, communications regulations can often simply be ignored with few consequences.

Finally, if they have the resources, media organizations can challenge regulations to try to alter them or rescind them altogether. Media organizations can adopt legal strategies, challenging the constitutionality of specific regulations, or they can use political strategies, lobbying potentially supportive politicians and threatening opponents in an effort to win new legislation more to the liking of the industry.

Ultimately, just as economic forces do not fully determine the actions of media professionals, media organizations are not passively compliant in the face of political constraints. In both cases, media personnel are active agents, making decisions and pursuing strategies within particular economic and political frameworks. Media personnel try both to control the environment as much as possible and to operate most effectively given specific constraints. Their actions sustain, and sometimes help change, the basic structural constraints, but they are not determined by them.
So far, we have focused our attention primarily on the broad environment within which media producers and consumers exist. We now move more directly into the world of those who produce media to examine the processes involved in their decision making and how their work is organized.

DECISION MAKING FOR PROFIT: IMITATION, HITS, AND STARS

The broader political and economic environment sets the stage for the work of media personnel. In the U.S. and other democratic societies, political pressures on most types of media workers are modest. But commercial mainstream media workers within these societies face enormous economic pressures to make decisions that will translate into profits for company owners. While the details of these decision-making processes are different across media industries, individuals working in media fields almost all have to contend with two basic problems: the high cost of producing media and the unpredictability of audience tastes.

High Costs and Unpredictable Tastes

Deciding to turn a manuscript into a book or a pitch into a movie is a difficult and risky financial decision. The upfront cost to create and promote media is usually quite high, and there is no guarantee that this investment will be recouped. A television studio must spend millions of dollars to create a pilot before they know if anybody will be interested in watching their new TV show. A book manuscript has to be written and published before the publishing house knows if enough people are willing to spend money to read it. Even media products that are relatively inexpensive to create—such as a basic music recording—must then be packaged and promoted if they stand any chance of finding a broad mainstream audience. Such promotion is expensive.

The high cost of creating and promoting media products is accompanied by a second problem: the unpredictability of audience tastes. We tend to assume that “good” media have an intrinsic value that makes them so popular. We think best-selling songs sell so well because they are the catchiest or that a best-selling novelist achieves fortune and fame because his or her writing is the most interesting and engaging. But research suggests that success is more complex than we often assume.

For example, Salganik, Dodds, and Watts (2006) created multiple music websites on which over 14,000 participants were allowed to listen to and download songs from the same unknown bands. If songs have an inherent quality that makes them so popular, then the same songs should become popular on each website. Instead, the researchers found that songs that were highly rated by the earlier listeners on a particular site would go on to become increasingly popular on that site—but not necessarily on the other sites. The study showed that listener decisions about what was good and worth downloading were influenced by the judgments of earlier visitors to the site. Those early judgments were more important than any intrinsic value in the individual songs.
Because popularity is not necessarily based on the intrinsic quality of a media product, predicting success can be extremely difficult. However, media producers don’t just give up. Instead, they rely on a different set of techniques to try to predict and create popular hits.

Art Imitating Art

Perhaps the most common strategy mainstream commercial media companies use to increase the odds of success is to imitate products that have already been successful. Variations on this strategy include copying the sound of current hit bands, remaking hit movies, making sequels to previous film hits, and signing producers of recent hits. The underlying assumption in these cases is that hits and their makers beget more hits.

We saw in Chapter 2 how the commercial dynamic of network television helps create the conditions for rampant imitation on the small screen. We can see this dynamic in other media industries. The commercial success of New Edition and New Kids on the Block in the 1980s and Backstreet Boys and ’N Sync in the 1990s prompted the big music labels to look for other “boy bands” that might ride the same wave. A stream of imitators saturated the market, producing numerous failures. In the absence of any major boy band hits in recent years, a group of young men wanting to sing together today would have considerable difficulty in getting a major record deal.

In book publishing, authors of popular mass-market books, such as Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, Anne Rice, Nora Roberts, and James Patterson, are paid huge sums of money for the rights to their future works. Virtually every hit movie seems to produce a sequel, and when a new hit television program emerges, each network rushes to develop its own version—or extension—of the latest hit. For example, following the success of The Osbournes and The Anna Nicole Show in 2002, television producers developed a remarkable number of new “reality” programs throughout the rest of the decade that focused on the lives of marginal and former celebrities (see Exhibit 4.1). The cable channel VH1 even organized most of its prime-time programming schedule around its “celebreality” series of shows.

Even when using formulas for hits, however, there is no guarantee for popularity or economic success. Many products that were supposed to be popular failed to meet expectations. Witness the remarkable failure of Will Ferrell’s 2009 film, Land of the Lost, a movie that was designed to be a blockbuster hit. A movie remake of a cult-classic TV show, starring a proven box office draw, ended up being a multimillion-dollar dud. In 2004 and 2005, two would-be blockbusters failed to capitalize on previously successful formulas. Despite heavy promotion, The Alamo and Sahara—vehicles for star Mathew McConaughey—were two of the biggest box office disappointments in the history of the film industry, with the films each losing over $130 million for their respective studios. In 2006, Basic Instinct 2, a long-awaited sequel to the 1992 blockbuster Basic Instinct, opened in 10th place at the box office and only made back $6 million of its $70 million production budget during its short run in U.S. theaters. Thus, imitation does not guarantee economic success, but as a kind of informal operating assumption, it is one way for media organizations to try to maximize the likelihood of success.
Exhibit 4.1 Select Celebrity-Based Reality Television Programs

A central strategy of mainstream commercial media companies to achieve success is to imitate past hits. In response to the WB and E!’s success with *The Osbournes* and *The Anna Nicole Show* in 2002, broadcast and cable networks developed a remarkable number of programs that copied the basic formula of relying on the draw of marginal and former celebrities. Here is a selection of some of those programs from 2003–2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show Title</th>
<th>Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>I’m a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here!</em></td>
<td>ABC/NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Celebrity Apprentice</em></td>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Celebrity Fit Club</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Celebrity Rehab With Dr. Drew</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sex Rehab With Dr. Drew</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sober House</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Surreal Life</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Strange Love</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Flavor of Love</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rock of Love</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>For the Love of Ray J</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>My Fair Brady</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Newlyweds</em></td>
<td>MTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Simple Life</em></td>
<td>FOX/E!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Rich Girls</em></td>
<td>MTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paris Hilton’s My New BFF</em></td>
<td>MTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Breaking Bonaduce</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hogan Knows Best</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Scott Baio is 45 and Single</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Run’s House</em></td>
<td>MTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Keeping up With the Kardashians</em></td>
<td>E!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gene Simmons Family Jewels</em></td>
<td>A&amp;E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Snoop Dogg’s Fatherhood</em></td>
<td>E!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Luke’s Parental Advisory</em></td>
<td>VH!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Living Lohan</em></td>
<td>E!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The T.O. Show</em></td>
<td>VH1</td>
</tr>
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Stars and the “Hit System”

Another strategic asset in the media industry’s pursuit of success is fame or stardom. Stardom is such an important resource that the media industry relies on marketing research firms to measure it. The best known of these measures is the “Q Score” (Q for quotient), developed by Marketing Evaluations, Inc. (qscores.com), which indicates the familiarity and appeal of anything from a Hollywood actor to a fast-food chain. The more people know about and like something, the higher its Q score. In early 2010, for example, the performers with the highest Q Scores were well-known, long-time favorites Tom Hanks and Morgan Freeman along with Pauley Perrette (of television’s NCIS program), who was much less well-known but scored exceptionally high on likeability measures, suggesting her star was on the rise.

Why are stars so important to the media industries, and how does this reputational resource shape decision making in the media world? In a media-saturated society, a popular and well-liked star can seem almost omnipresent because a large celebrity-producing apparatus promotes them incessantly. We can see them on TV talk shows advertising their latest projects, we know about their personal lives through magazines and gossip blogs, and we can follow their daily musings on Twitter accounts. Media stars are so prevalent that it is difficult to imagine what our media would look like without them.

The principal reason why stars are so visible and seem to dominate our mass media is that they are the physical embodiment of hits. Just as producers imitate already successful movies, television programs, and books in an effort to produce new successes, producers seek out stars and promote them heavily to increase the odds of successful projects. The presence of stars is a significant inducement in the public’s selection of films to attend, television programs to view, music to buy, magazines to read, and so on. In turn, stars can draw higher salaries because the odds of producers recouping those expenses are greater than they would be with a relatively unknown artist. Therefore, it is in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show Title</th>
<th>Network</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T.I.’s Road to Redemption</td>
<td>MTV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britney &amp; Kevin: Chaotic</td>
<td>UPN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy Lee Goes to College</td>
<td>NBC/VH1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Bobby Brown</td>
<td>Bravo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Jacksons</td>
<td>A&amp;E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Antonio</td>
<td>VH1</td>
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</table>

Source: Created with assistance of Clayton Childress.
interest of aspiring stars to maximize their exposure to the public—to become well-known and well-liked—as this translates into financial clout in signing new project deals. At the same time, it is in the interest of the producers to ensure that the stars they use remain in the public limelight, attracting attention to their projects. The result is a popular media system infused with star power.

Stars increase the chances of producing hits. Publishers want best sellers; record labels are looking for top 40 songs and platinum albums; movie studios seek blockbuster films. But most movies, songs, and books lose money. That makes hits all the more important because they more than compensate for the losses incurred by other projects. In short, the hit system is the underlying operating principle of most major media companies. And if hits are the goal, then producers see a star who can attract audiences as one of the keys to success.

This star principle is so widely adopted as a basic norm of the media world that we see its manifestation in unlikely places. Broadcast journalism, with its heavy promotion of network anchors, such as Brian Williams, Katie Couric, and Diane Sawyer, vies for the news audience by selling the appeal of the big names. These anchors and a handful of other network reporters are full-fledged celebrities who make appearances on talk shows, are the subjects of high-stakes bidding wars, and have programs created for the purpose of giving them even more exposure. The college textbook industry also adopts the star system, seeking well-known professors as authors of high-volume introductory texts, even when unknown coauthors do most of the writing. Given a market that is dominated by a small number of standard-bearing texts—the equivalent of the hit song or blockbuster film—it is no surprise that textbook publishers seek the prestige and visibility that come with academic stars.

Because acquiring already existing stars is both expensive and difficult, most media organizations will try to create their own. One popular approach in recent years has been through talent search shows like Fox’s America Idol: The Search for a Superstar or NBC’s America’s Got Talent. This is, of course, a difficult task, and even the best publicists miscalculate who has star quality.

Creating Hits and Producing Stars

We might think that all new media products have equal chances to be hits and that their main players have equal chances at stardom. After all, audiences are the only true judges; they make hits and stars. This view suggests that hits succeed and stars rise to the top because audiences love them, but this is a misleading view.

All media products do not have the same chance for hit status, nor do all media personalities have the same chance at stardom. Hits and stars are rare, and the resources to produce them are limited. So before audiences ever get to see them, media organizations make advance decisions about which products and people have the best chance of success. It is virtually impossible to be a star if the firm that produces and distributes your work has already decided that you do not have what it takes to be a huge hit. On the other
hand, you have a chance, though no guarantee, of stardom if you are deemed a possessor of star quality.

Films that are seen as potential hits, for example, are slotted for heavy promotion. This might include full-page newspaper ads, frequent television commercials, talk show appearances by the stars-to-be, cross-promotional campaigns with fast-food restaurants and other outlets, and release of the film to theaters all over the country. Movies not seen as potential hits will receive much less promotion and will be released to a much smaller number of theaters, virtually guaranteeing they will not reach hit status. The next time you go to the video store or browse Netflix, take note of the large number of films that you have never heard of; many come and go from the theaters so fast, with so little advertising, that only true film enthusiasts know they exist. Some never even make it to the theater but instead are released directly to DVD. As a result, only those films that the movie studios identify as potential hits will ever get the visibility to have a chance to become blockbusters.

The same dynamic is at work in the music industry. Acts are split into potential earning divisions, with some being classified as big time and others as possessing only minor or specialized appeal (Frith 1981). The first hurdle for musicians, then, is to get through the initial classification process, which occurs before the first album is even released. Those who are identified as potential big timers will have much more opportunity, and many more resources, than those who are categorized as minor players. Such support, though, comes at a cost; artists who receive heavy promotional support must typically conform to standardized formulas that have been identified for “success.” A band with a hit record is likely to be pressured by their label to produce something very similar for their next record rather than branching out to embrace new sounds or styles.

We can see a similar process in the book industry, where publicity and marketing resources are concentrated on the most likely best sellers, while mid-list authors frequently see their books disappear from the shelves relatively unnoticed. Publishers decide how to package a book, how many copies to print, what to price the book at, how to promote it, and where to distribute it based on advance judgments of sales capability. These judgments are often made before the final draft is completed. Likewise, the key decision for television programs, once they are selected for the prime-time lineup, is where they will be scheduled. Will the program be slated to pick up the tailwind of an already successful show or dropped into a Friday night time slot where ratings are low and fewer viewers are at home? What will the competition be on the other networks during the time slot chosen for broadcast? Obviously, some time slots are more favorable than others, and programs that are predicted unlikely to attract top-level ratings are generally scheduled in a way that practically guarantees they will fail to find an audience and be canceled in short order.

**Using Stars to Combat Uncertainty**

Media organizations are attempting to produce popular and profitable hits, and they see stars as one key way to do this. In a media world in which uncertainty is a constant, executives seek rules to make their decisions less arbitrary. The deep commitment to stars and
to the importance of reputation more generally is one of the principal ways that the fluidity and ambiguity of the media industry are brought under control.

Moviemaking, for example, is a very uncertain business. Without any method for ensuring commercial success and with so many players involved in the production and distribution of a film, the presence of a star helps reduce the perception of risk. Stars make people more comfortable with the risks they are taking, even if they are not demonstrably less risky. The presence of a star, in essence, rationalizes the entire process by providing an agreed-on currency for assessing potential projects. The star system is a useful coping mechanism in such an uncertain industry (Prindle 1993).

The dynamic in television is similar. Programmers rely on producers of prior hits as a strategy for legitimizing their decisions (Bielby and Bielby 1994). In much the same manner as the film industry, network programmers operate in a situation in which hits are hard to come by and even harder to predict. Programmers have to satisfy various constituencies—advertisers, local station managers, and network executives—and they have to demonstrate that their programming decisions are not arbitrary. In this case, reputation—the result of the prior production of a hit—is the key currency. The various players within the television industry agree that past hit production is a legitimate criterion for selecting programs. They even try to sell viewers on this notion when promotional commercials emphasize that a new series is brought to you by the producers of a previous hit.

However, the stars = hits = success formula is not as accurate a description of media products as industry common sense would suggest. For example, pretend you were the head of a movie studio during the 2000s and wanted to rely on the star power of Eddie Murphy to sell a family-friendly comedy. You could look at Daddy Day Care (U.S. box office: $104.3 million) in 2003 or Norbit ($95.7 million) in 2007 and feel reasonably safe moving forward with your new movie. Then again, you could also look at The Adventures of Pluto Nash (U.S. box office: $4.4 million) in 2002 or Meet Dave ($11.8 million) in 2008 and have substantial reasons for concern. What’s the best decision to make when you know that a family-friendly comedy starring Eddie Murphy might make anywhere between 4 and 104 million dollars in the theaters? Of course, there are other sources of revenue for major motion pictures—in particular, DVD sales, TV broadcast rights, and foreign markets—and some genres of films that do not break even at the domestic box office tend to find substantial revenue elsewhere. These factors, however, create a whole additional set of variables to manage and consider.

Television networks regularly try to attract and keep celebrities on the small screen, but building a program around a star personality is also no guarantee of success. Perhaps you want to create a spin-off with a character from a wildly popular show, as was the case with the Cheers spin-off Frasier (episode run: 264), but also the case with the Friends spin-off Joey (episode run: 46). You could also try to lure a less popular movie star into a role on TV, like Kiefer Sutherland in 24 (episode run: 192) or Jerry O’Connell in a show by the creators of Ugly Betty and The Office, as was the case with Do Not Disturb (episode run: 2). These examples suggest that the stars = hits = success formula has holes in it. But the organization of production in the film and television industries and the ambiguities of these creative businesses help explain why the hit–star relationship continues to shape decision making—even in the face of conflicting evidence.
Beyond Stars to a Universe of Products

While the star system remains a powerful if not always effective tool for media industries, in the 21st-century, a reliance on convergence culture has been more fully developed. Henry Jenkins defines *convergence culture* as a “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006: 2–3). While, in the past, media organizations tended to rely only on the power of a good story (say, a novel or a single movie) or the power of a celebrity (say, a hit novelist or blockbuster star), they now work to create entire fictional universes that can be extended and sold across a range of media platforms.

For example, think of the six hit movies in the *Star Wars* film franchise. While these movies have all been huge economic successes, they only make up a small portion of the media content that constitute the vast universe of *Star Wars* products. To truly grasp the impact of *Star Wars*, we must also consider the five different animated *Star Wars* television programs, the 15 licensed *Star Wars* cell phone games, over 75 additional *Star Wars* video games, hundreds of serialized *Star Wars* novels, hundreds of serialized *Star Wars* comic books, multiple lines of *Star Wars* toys, Halloween costumes, and so on. We can see similar developments in Marvel’s expansion of a multiple-platform fictional universe of superheroes, the Wachowski’s multiple-platform fictional universe of *The Matrix*, and ABC’s multiple-platform fictional universe of *Lost*. Of course, developing an entire universe of fictional characters that are compelling enough for viewers to follow across multiple media platforms is no small feat, but if a media organization is able to do so, it provides good security against the largely unpredictable success or failure of a specific media product.

Media professionals are not only constrained by continued uncertainty in the quest for producing hits or by finding a fictional universe that will connect over time with consumers out in the marketplace. Media workers must also navigate through the long-standing roles and conventions that exist within the media industries themselves. While they have some agency in choosing which media to bring to market, they face the structural constraints of their industry traditions, to which we now turn.

THE ORGANIZATION OF MEDIA WORK

In a classic study, sociologist Howard Becker (1982) observes that “producing art requires elaborate cooperation among specialized personnel” (p. 28). We can make the same statement about the production of media content. Whether we are talking about films, books, music, radio, magazines, newspapers, or television, the production and distribution of the message become the work of many people. Even the most apparently individualistic media presentation—a solo album by a singer–songwriter—still requires many other actors, including the music producer, the representatives of the music label, the designer of the album cover, the publicists who promote the music, and so on.

Becker (1982) goes on to ask an important question about the many people who do media work: “How do they arrive at the terms on which they cooperate?” Some researchers
have argued that the behavior of media personnel is shaped by the “needs” of an organization (Epstein 1973). In other words, maintaining the existence of the organization points different individuals within that organization in the same direction. The difficulty in such an analysis is that it relies on the sticky concept of “organizational need.” How are we to assess what organizations need to sustain themselves, especially in a rapidly changing media environment? Is it really appropriate to assert that organizations have needs in the first place? In its strongest application, this approach is usually too constraining to account for the independent action of media personnel.

Another way we might account for the collaboration of media workers is to suggest that they must negotiate the terms of their cooperation before each new endeavor. This approach emphasizes the capacity for independent action, but it ignores the constraints under which media personnel labor.

In line with what sociologists who study occupations have found, Becker (1982) pursues a more practical approach that recognizes the tension between structure and agency. He tells us that “people who cooperate to produce a work of art usually do not decide things afresh. Instead, they rely on earlier agreements now become customary, agreements that have become part of the conventional ways of doing things” (p. 29).

Conventions

A convention is a practice or technique that is widely used in a field. It is much easier to identify something as conventional than it is to explain the source and meaning of the convention. All of us could likely identify some of the conventions that govern news reporting, pop music, or advertising. For example, the sound of top 40 music rarely surprises us. We could ask how radio programmers learn to follow these conventions and how they know which songs will fit their stations. The answer is that radio programmers see themselves as middlemen between record producers and listeners, develop an understanding of the genres their stations represent, and establish a set of repertoires for action to ensure that both listeners and record companies feel supported and understood. Without these conventions, radio programmers couldn’t do their jobs (Ahlkvist and Faulkner 2002).

Hollywood agents must also learn to casually perform the social conventions of their industry in order to be taken as serious players. These conventions include hosting meetings in and around Beverly Hills in modernist buildings; coming off as confident, casual, and hip; and giving gifts with a personal touch (Zafirau 2008). Industry conventions also take forms that are more easily recognizable to consumers. You don’t need to be a graphic designer to know that magazine covers have the publication’s name in large letters at the top and will almost always feature a large, dominating graphic, or that an evening news broadcast will take place in a studio with a broadcaster behind a desk. Even “fake” news programs like The Daily Show and “Weekend Update” on Saturday Night Live follow these conventions. If Jon Stewart told jokes about the day’s politics while standing up, we might assume The Daily Show was just another late-night comedy show and not actually a comedic recreation of a news broadcast. Even media products that break from convention appear striking and innovative only because both producers and audiences are accustomed to conventional forms.
Conventions are not arbitrary, even though they may often seem to be. They are the result of the routinization of work by media professionals and partially a consequence of professional education and job training. To understand media content on the basis of its conventions, we need to consider where conventions originate, how they are followed in the work process, and how they lead to the production of media that we perceive as conventional.

**News Routines and Their Consequences**

What is news? This is not a question we ask ourselves with great frequency. The answer seems self-evident: News is information about recent important events. We visit a news website, read the newspaper, or watch the evening news to find out what of significance has happened beyond our direct experience.

We usually do not explore the definition of news. How do we know what makes an event important? How do we know what information about an important event is relevant? We leave it to professional journalists to handle these questions. As a result, we rely on journalists to make judgments about what is or is not important, or newsworthy, and to provide us with factual accounts about these newsworthy events. Ultimately, if we are to understand what news really is, we need to understand how journalists form their judgments and construct their accounts. In other words, we need to examine the day-to-day work of the professional journalist because this is where news is defined and news stories are written.

Let's look at the process from the perspective of people within a news organization. Every day, a news staff must generate enough copy to fill a newspaper regardless of what did or did not happen that day. (We use the example of newspapers here, but similar dynamics underlie news delivered via television, radio, or the Internet.) This means that editors and reporters must find news each and every day. At the same time, literally thousands of things happen each day: People eat meals, walk their dogs, buy and sell goods, commit crimes, announce new policies, argue court cases, participate in sporting contests, lie on the beach, fight wars, campaign for elected office, and so on. The list is virtually endless. News outlets, however, cannot report on all the things that happen; only some happenings are defined as important enough to be news. For reporters, the difficulty is determining which events are newsworthy and gathering enough information to cover these newsworthy events.

On the face of it, news reporting may seem to be an impossible job. How can journalists know which events to report and which to ignore? They cannot go to dozens of different events before deciding which one to cover; they would never meet their deadlines. How do reporters find out about relevant happenings in the first place? We rely on journalists to tell us about the important things that have happened, but how do they find out about these events?

Two classic sociological studies (Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978) argue that we can find answers to these questions in the routine practices of journalism. Because news organizations cannot start afresh each day, the processes of news gathering and news reporting must be rationalized. In other words, news organizations must be able to anticipate where
news will happen—before it happens—and structure their reporters’ assignments accordingly. Within news organizations, reporters follow routines that tell them where to look for news and how to gather it efficiently. When the same basic routines are adopted as professional norms, as they are in contemporary American journalism, different news outlets will make similar judgments about newsworthiness. This state of affairs makes it difficult to see that any judgments are being made at all.

What are these journalistic routines? Tuchman (1978) adopts the metaphor of the “news net” to explain the standard practice for gathering news. News organizations cast a net—made up of wire services, full-time reporters, and stringers—to catch newsworthy happenings. The net, however, does not catch everything; like all nets, it is full of holes and catches only the “big fish.” This is not an error on the part of news organizations. The netlike nature of news gathering serves as an initial filter, sorting out those happenings that do not meet the standard criteria for news.

The organization of news gathering shows which criteria determine how the news net is constructed. Newspapers will have staff or bureaus in places they define as important. For example, news outlets typically have bureaus in Washington, DC, and London, England, but not Houston, Texas, and Nairobi, Kenya. As a result, happenings in and around these predefined important places are more likely to become news, while happenings outside of these areas are more likely to be ignored.

News organizations also establish “beats” at prominent organizations where news can be expected to occur. In practice, this means that a series of official locations—police stations, courthouses, city halls, state houses, Capitol Hill, the White House—become sites where reporters are stationed. Each day, the reporter on the city hall beat will be responsible for providing one or more stories about the happenings there. It is likely that the city government will have a media relations staff who will be more than happy to provide the beat reporter with daily doses of news in the form of press releases, public announcements, press conferences, and so forth. Finally, areas such as sports, business, and the arts are topical beats that are expected to produce news each day, so reporters establish relationships with key players in these areas to guarantee a regular supply of news.

Beats are central to how reporters “detect” events (Fishman 1980). They are structured to bring reporters in contact with news and newsmakers by focusing the reporters’ attention on a specific set of institutions or locations. But even within this structure, each beat covers so much potential territory that reporters have to develop strategies for detecting the newsworthy events. Fishman (1980) uses the example of a local paper’s “justice” beat, which included, among other things, “three law enforcement agencies: city police, county sheriffs, and an FBI office; four penal institutions . . . two juvenile facilities; two entire court systems; an extensive drug subculture” (p. 33). With such a vast terrain to cover, Fishman notes, reporters develop complex work routines that he calls “rounds.”

The round structures the workday and defines what events the reporter will be exposed to in the first place. In essence, the round is a process by which beat reporters develop schedules for visiting locations and talking to sources that are likely to produce news. Such work routines are built around the bureaucratic organization of the institutions that make up the beat. For example, a justice reporter will build a work routine around the schedules of the courthouse, police department, and district attorney’s office to be on hand for meetings,
press conferences, and prescheduled events and to gain access to official records. The reporter may also check in on a regular basis—perhaps hourly—with a range of sites to see if anything is “happening.” For example, a beat reporter might call each prison, juvenile facility, law enforcement agency, and courthouse to make sure that important events do not go undetected.

The definition of what is a relevant beat and whether what happens there deserves coverage is not universal. Rather, it changes according to a given media outlet’s target audience and, more generally, its mission. For example, TMZ, a celebrity gossip-based website and television program owned by Time Warner, covers “news” that traditional news outlets typically do not consider to be newsworthy. TMZ stands for Thirty Mile Zone, and their beat encompasses the 50-mile radius around the intersection of West Beverly and North La Cienga in Los Angeles, in which all of the major U.S. production studios are headquartered. Sometimes tipped off by celebrities and their publicists seeking media attention, reporters and celebrity photographers prowl luxury stores, restaurants, and other locations seeking candid pictures and brief interviews with stars. The result is very different from a daily newspaper, but the process involved in creating the content is similar.

Because reporters on deadline must produce a news story for their employers, we should not be surprised that news work is routinized in this way. How else could reporters gather news in an efficient, consistent manner while meeting the needs of their news organizations? The problem, however, is that we rarely talk about the news in these terms, nor do we take note of the consequences.

For example, when we consider news beats, we can see that, before anything even happens on a given day, news organizations (and celebrity gossip sites) have already made decisions about where they intend to look for news. The flip side, of course, is also true: The routine practices associated with news gathering virtually ensure that certain happenings will be excluded from the news. News from Africa and South America, for example, is notoriously scarce in the U.S. media in large part because reporters are less likely to be assigned there. The example of news beats shows that, rather than being an inherent characteristic of events, newsworthiness is typically constructed each day by professional journalists and news organizations.

Another consequence of routine journalistic practices is the emphasis on events at the expense of processes. Reporters look out for what is new in the world around them (the event) and often have few resources (time, money, and expertise) to spotlight the long-term developments that may have been at the origin of the event. As a consequence, news coverage is often fleeting, shining a momentary spotlight on some event and then moving on to a new and unrelated event. This focus on events at the expense of processes likely has an impact on whether and how people understand complicated issues, such as wars, financial crises, crime trends, and budget decisions.

A sociology of news work gives us insight into the making of news by demonstrating the significance of the ways in which journalists respond to the demands of news organizations. The standard practices for gathering news and the corresponding definition of where news is likely to happen help explain why so much of our daily news focuses on the activities of official institutions. Television news, with its focus on the visual quality of events, requires different work routines than the print media, although it is likely to rely on
similar definitions of what is newsworthy. In either case, the news we get needs to be understood as the end result of these professional routines, which generally focus on the activities of legitimate, bureaucratic institutions.

The Role of News Wire Services

While news gathering is done by journalists, only major newspapers and television networks can afford a significant staff to gather original news stories on a full range of topics. Instead, most news organizations rely on other centralized sources, namely news agencies (Fenby 1986). (News agencies originally delivered their news via telegraph and are still sometimes referred to as newswires or wire services.)

A news agency is a news organization designed to supply news reports to other media outlets that subscribe to its services. It has correspondents in many locations, according to its reach and its linguistic, geographic, and thematic specialization. It prepares news, feature stories, pictures, and videos that, today, are distributed via the Internet and can be republished by the subscribing media with little or no modification. The world news in your local newspaper is likely to come from a news agency.

The first news agency was created in France in 1835, and still exists: Agence France-Presse (AFP) currently has bureaus in 110 countries and, together with Reuters (United Kingdom) and Associated Press (AP, United States), is one of the three largest wire services in the world. Most news agencies are private corporations (Reuters). Others are government-chartered public corporations, such as AFP, and are directly owned by the government (Canadian Press, China’s Central News Agency), whereas others are cooperatives of smaller contributing media organizations (Associated Press, Australian Associated Press).

However they are structured, news agencies can be considered the backbone of modern journalism. They scout and produce the news that we read daily in newspapers and watch on television. They are the fundamental source of reporting on national and international news for the large majority of local and regional media outlets, which largely reproduce or rebroadcast news agency products. As a result, news agencies have a significant impact on the selection of what constitutes relevant news. But like all newsgathering organizations, news agencies themselves follow standardized news routines, and staff-recognized beats that ensure they produce sufficient material to supply to subscribing news outlets.

Selecting Front-Page Stories

Once news stories have been written—either through original reporting or the news agencies—newspaper editors must decide which stories to feature on the front page. (Again, our example is newspapers, but similar processes are involved in choosing a story to lead a television or radio broadcast or the story featured at the top of a website.) The front page identifies the editors’ selection of the most important events of the day, influences which stories will be the most visible, and provides a key measure of success for reporters (who want their stories to be selected as front-page news). As a result, this daily decision is one of the most significant parts of a newspaper editor’s job. Like the initial definitions of newsworthiness that
identify the stories to cover each day, front-page assessments are not haphazard but are gov-
erned by norms that routinize this potentially conflict-ridden daily decision.

One way to identify these norms is to list the specific criteria that make a story front-
page material, such as the timeliness of a story, its impact on the community of readers,
the geographic or social proximity of the event, and the prominence of its participants.
Such criteria help editors to sift through stories and identify the most appropriate lead
stories. In addition, newspapers often follow conventions that produce a front page with
different types of stories—international, national, regional, and feature, for example—so
that the lead stories of various types make the front page.

This kind of rule-oriented approach, which identifies the factors that editors weigh in
making their selections, helps us to see the general principles that define page-one news.
But this approach tells us little about the actual process by which editors make these deci-
sions. Clayman and Reisner (1998) used “conversation analysis” techniques to study the
daily editorial conferences at which the front-page candidates are discussed and negotiated
by editors. Their research found that editorial meetings are governed by well-known group
norms, according to which individual editors try both to promote their reporters’ stories
and to adhere to the expectations of their colleagues and boss.

To explore the actual process of selecting front-page stories—what they call “gatekeep-
ing in action”—Clayman and Reisner (1998) studied daily end-of-the-day editorial confer-
ces at eight newspapers. During such conferences, each department editor (city editor,
business editor, etc.) reviews his or her department’s main stories of the day, providing
colleagues and the managing editor with a brief summary of possibilities for the front page.
Clayman and Reisner’s most important finding is that editors generally do not enthu-
siastically promote one of their stories to be on the front page. Instead, when editors review
stories from their departments, assessments of newsworthiness are most likely to be only
“mildly favorable.” The authors find that this kind of positive, but restrained, evaluation is
not only the most common way that editors discuss their stories in editorial conferences
but also the tacitly agreed-on routine for offering stories for the front page. In fact, unfavor-
able or highly favorable evaluations of newsworthiness are likely to be offered more cau-
tiously than mildly favorable reviews.

If one of the primary goals of the story review process is the selection of lead stories,
why do editors generally refrain from enthusiastic advocacy of their stories’ newsworthi-
ness? Clayman and Reisner (1998) argue that front-page decision making is part of a social
process in which editors respond both to the expectation that they be judicious evaluators
and to their commitment to the reporters whose stories they represent. As editors, they are
both detached arbiters of story importance and advocates for their staff. The authors sug-
gest that this “tension between advocacy and detachment, rooted in editors’ competing
allegiances to their own reporters and to their editorial colleagues, may partly account for
the privileged status accorded to mildly favorable story assessments” (p. 194).

Instead of engaging in outright competition to convince the managing editor of a story’s
importance, editors are more likely to signal their preferences by, for example, introducing
their best story first in the informal story review or by subtly noting the novelty or impact
of a story. Because vigorous advocacy is relatively uncommon, those stories that editors
strongly endorse are the most likely to land on the front page. In fact, the authors find that
all of the stories in their sample that both are introduced first by the department editor and receive a strongly favorable assessment succeed in becoming front-page news. These strong endorsements become effective precisely because they are not standard operating procedure in editorial conferences.

This study provides us with a window on the daily activities that define newsworthiness. As we have seen previously, selecting news for the front page is shaped by economic constraints and the organization of news gathering. But these decisions have to be made each day by people who are engaged in more than just a technical, rule-based task. Daily definitions of newsworthiness are produced by editors, working together, who follow a shared set of conventions, have obligations to multiple constituencies, and know that this collective discussion will happen again the next day. As a result, front-page gatekeeping is about more than just the criteria of what is considered newsworthy; it is actively constructed each day by what editors say in the routine (but not predetermined) editorial conference.

However, technological change—especially the Internet—has dramatically altered the process by which editors determine the prominence of news stories. The luxury to deliberate once a day about the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper has been replaced by an endless series of lightning-fast decisions that must be made about what news should go online and the order of the items on the home page. Because news websites are updated continuously, these decisions must be done quickly and are now handled by a dedicated editor, or team of editors, whose job is to decide minute by minute. (Cable channels offering 24-hour news face similar decisions about what to highlight at any given point in the day.) As a result of these changes, compared to the print newspapers of yesteryear, the news selection process for a newspapers’ online editions is done with much less time for reflection and is more centralized.

**Objectivity**

We have seen that the specific definitions of news and newsworthiness are, in large measure, the result of the ways reporters organize their work. However, there is more to be learned by exploring the profession of journalism. Consider the concept of objectivity. Most contemporary evaluations of the performance of the American news media begin or end with claims about their adherence (or lack thereof) to the standard of objectivity. Politicians and other public figures routinely criticize the press for its supposed lack of objectivity, charging journalists with taking sides, being too opinionated, or having a routine bias. Sarah Palin, for example, frequently lashes out at the “lamestream media.” In one of the best-known invocations of the bias argument, the News Corporation launched its 24-hour cable news channel in 1996 with the slogan, “We Report, You Decide.” The campaign contrasted Fox News’ “fair and balanced coverage” with the “biased” reporting on other news outlets. Critics contend that Fox News—headed by, Roger Ailes, a Republican Party adviser and former producer for conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh—is itself a blatant example of biased news.

Liberal bias? Right-wing journalists? Out-of-touch elite? Even popular discussions of news media often focus on the question of objectivity. When we talk about the news with friends or family, an implicit (and sometimes explicit) basis for evaluation is whether or not we think the reporting is sufficiently objective. The central position of objectivity in
American journalism is something we take for granted. We all seem to “know” that the news is supposed to be objective; the problem is that the news often does not live up to this widely shared expectation.

But rather than ask whether the news is objective, sociological analysis of news media asks, where did the value of objectivity come from? Why are we so concerned with it? How does the ideal of objectivity affect the daily practice of journalism? Michael Schudson’s (1978) important study, Discovering the News, treats the ideal of objectivity as something to be explained rather than something to be taken for granted. It is a perfect example of how studying professional norms and practices can help us better understand the media.

The Origins of Objectivity

What do we mean by objectivity? Schudson (1978) provides a useful definition: “The belief in objectivity is a faith in ‘facts,’ a distrust of ‘values,’ and a commitment to their segregation” (p. 6). Objectivity is more than simply getting the facts straight; it is a doctrine that perceives the separation of fact and value as a messy business that requires the use of a method, or set of practices, to ensure their separation. This method is objective journalism. But where does this view of the world and this journalistic approach come from? According to Schudson, the concept of objective journalism is a relatively recent development. Even though we often talk about objectivity as if it has always existed, only in the years after World War I did it become the dominant value in American journalism.

Prior to World War I, reporters did not subscribe to a belief in what we now term objectivity. The AP—one of the first wire services—tried to present news in a way that would be acceptable to many different papers, and the New York Times used an “information” model of reporting to attract an elite audience. But journalists did not think about the separation of facts and values, nor did they believe that facts themselves were at all problematic. Rather, to journalists before World War I, the facts spoke for themselves. The goal of fact-based journalism was simply to uncover these facts, and doing so did not require a method of objective reporting. The task was straightforward: Find and report the truth. In this era, journalists were confident of their ability to identify the relevant facts and to report them accurately.

This faith in facts held by American journalists was thrown into doubt in the 1920s. Many American reporters had participated in wartime propaganda efforts during World War I. The success of such efforts made them uncomfortable with any simple understanding of “facts.” Having seen how easily facts could be manipulated, journalists became more cynical. They began to mistrust facts, realizing that facts could be made to serve illusion as well as the truth.

At the same time, the field of PR emerged, and professional publicists became early “spin doctors.” They fed information to reporters, carefully controlling access to their powerful clients, and they staged events such as the press conference or photo opportunity expressly for the media. With PR professionals spinning the facts, dispensing information strategically, and shaping a good deal of news content through the use of official handouts or press releases, journalists’ emerging cynicism became even more pronounced.

The recognition that information could be manipulated and the rise of a profession—PR—expressly dedicated to the shaping of public attitudes left journalists with a crisis of confidence about their own ability to report the “facts” in a neutral way. In Schudson’s (1978)
account, objectivity emerged as a “scientific” solution to this crisis of confidence—in other words, “a method designed for a world in which even facts could not be trusted” (p. 122). By training would-be reporters in the “scientific” method of objectivity, journalists transformed their fact-based craft into a profession with a particular method. Objectivity, therefore, can be seen as a set of practices or conventions that the professional journalist is trained to follow.

What practices make up this method? W. Lance Bennett (2001), synthesizing the research on the professional norms of journalism, identifies six key practices: (1) maintaining political neutrality; (2) observing prevailing standards of decency and good taste; (3) using documentary reporting practices, which rely on physical evidence; (4) using standardized formats to package the news; (5) training reporters as generalists instead of specialists; and (6) using editorial review to enforce these methods. The practical implication of belief in the ideal of objectivity is adherence to these basic practices.

Objectivity as Routine Practices

The day-to-day routine practices of journalism, more than some abstract conception of objectivity, are key to understanding the news media. For example, we have all probably noticed that news reports from different outlets look very much alike. Flip the channels during the evening news, and you will find the networks covering many of the same stories, often in a very similar way. Pick up a couple of daily newspapers, and you will probably notice many of the same stories prominently featured. Visit the websites of competing news organizations, and again, you are likely to find very similar coverage.

News accounts have a tendency to look similar because reporters all follow the same basic routines. They talk to the same people, use the same formats, observe the same basic dos and don’ts, and watch one another closely to make sure that they are not out of step with the rest of the profession. If we understand objectivity to be a set of routine journalistic practices, we can see why all news coverage is pretty much the same. Journalists adhere to the same methods, so they produce similar news. In fact, if news differed substantially from outlet to outlet, questions would be raised about the method of objective reporting, likely signaling a new crisis for the profession.

Most reporters do not consider the similarity in news coverage to be the result of following the standard practices of objectivity. Instead, they see similarity in coverage as a confirmation that they have lived up to the ideal of objectivity. However, following a common set of practices does not ensure the achievement of the ideal of objectivity, that is, the separation of values from facts. Indeed, it can be argued that adherence to the practices associated with objectivity directly benefits particular political interests.

The Political Consequences of Objectivity

Implicit in our discussion of news routines has been the argument that the content of the news is fundamentally shaped by these practices. News-gathering structure includes certain happenings as news and excludes others. In particular, things that happen in and around established institutions, especially official agencies, are defined as news. Happenings outside of these boundaries are likely never to be detected by professional journalists. Even if they are detected, they are not likely to be defined as newsworthy by the established definitions of importance. This is one of the principal reasons why so much news is about the world of
officialdom, even when such stories are often routine and predictable. Journalists and news organizations rely on and build their work around the routine and predictability of these established institutions. Newsworthiness, then, is socially constructed. It is not a property inherent in events but is instead something that is attached to happenings by journalists. Once we realize this, the traditional ways we talk about news begin to seem inappropriate. In particular, the metaphor of news as a “mirror”—a simple reflection of events—no longer works. Even a mirror cannot reflect the whole world. It must be facing a particular direction, including some subjects in its reflection and excluding others. The space and time constraints of the news media generally preclude a complete discussion of even the narrowest topic. The result is often the exclusion of some positions and the forgoing of historical context. Thus, the image propagated by the media is far from complete. At best, it reflects only a small part of society.

In addition, the objects being reflected in the media are not passive. Instead, people holding different interests, wielding different amounts of power and enjoying different relationships to those producing the news, actively attempt to influence the content of the news. Thus, the resulting images often reflect the relative power of actors in our society rather than some “objective” reality.

News, therefore, is the product of a social process through which media personnel make decisions about what is newsworthy and what is not, about who is important and who is not, about what views are to be included and what views can be dismissed. None of these decisions can be entirely objective. The ideal of objectivity—separating values from facts—is ultimately unobtainable, although some would argue it is a valuable goal. Furthermore, the practices associated with objectivity are tilted in one direction; they give those in power enormous visibility in the media, while those outside the centers of power are largely ignored. The reliance on “appropriate,” available, and preferably authoritative sources means journalists mostly talk to government and corporate officials and end up reproducing their view of the world. Thus, “objective” journalism, by highlighting the views and activities of officials, can be seen on balance to favor those in power.

Rejecting Objectivity: Alternative Journalism

As we have seen, objectivity as a standard of U.S. journalism is a fairly recent phenomenon. When the nation’s founders protected the freedom of the press, they were referring to publishers of what were mostly highly partisan pamphlets and periodicals. Through the 19th century, newspapers were often affiliated with political parties, openly arguing from a particular perspective rather than trying to retain a neutral stance on the issues. While “objective” journalism has displaced this older tradition, “advocacy” or “alternative” journalism has survived and can be found in many forms today.

Atton and Hamilton (2008) argue that alternative media “seek to challenge objectivity and impartiality from both an ethical and a political standpoint.” They challenge the very notion that “it is possible in the first place to separate facts from values and that it is morally and politically preferable to do” (Atton and Hamilton 2008: 84). Alternative journalists not only reject the idea of not getting involved in the story, they seek to play an active role in advancing their causes.

Alternative journalism projects span a wide range of media, including newspapers, magazines, websites, radio programs, and television shows. In recent years, the Internet has
made alternative journalism more easily accessible and more visible while enabling its unprecedented global expansion.

There is a broad range of work that might be called alternative journalism. Some of it is in the muckraking tradition—fact-based reporting aimed at exposing a social ill or wrongdoing that is being ignored by mainstream media—that dates back to the 19th century. For example, founded in 1976, the nonprofit magazine (and now website) *Mother Jones* is named after an early labor movement leader and bills itself as “a nonprofit news organization that specializes in investigative, political, and social justice reporting” (Motherjones.com 2011). It has won numerous awards for its investigative reporting.

Other efforts are aimed at broadening the range of perspectives available in the news. *Democracy Now!* is a syndicated radio program that features “people and perspectives rarely heard in the U.S. corporate-sponsored media, including independent and international journalists, ordinary people from around the world who are directly affected by U.S. foreign policy, grassroots leaders and peace activists, artists, academics and independent analysts” (Democracynow.org 2011).

Some efforts take advantage of the Internet to build international links. For example, the global network Indymedia offers what it bills as “grassroots, non-corporate coverage . . . a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth” (Indymedia.org 2001). Indymedia activists do not aim at being objective; they take sides, presenting a typically left or progressive view on issues of the day.

Conservative activists have also created their own media forms that blend news and opinion. Websites like Townhall—a commercially owned operation—assemble what it describes as “political commentary and analysis from over 100 leading columnists and opinion leaders, research from 100 partner organizations, conservative talk-radio and a community of millions of grassroots conservatives” (Townhall.com 2011). The site links to hundreds of conservative bloggers. Conservative media activist Brent Bozell and his Media Research Center argue for a liberal bias in mainstream media and have created the Cybercast News Service (CNS) (cnsnews.com), which presents a distinctly right-wing spin on the news or, as the site’s slogan puts it, “The Right News. Right Now.”

At their best, efforts that—through well-reasoned, fact-based reporting—broaden the range of perspectives or tackle issues overlooked by mainstream commercial media can make a substantial contribution to keeping people informed and engaged, even when they clearly approach the issues from a particular political viewpoint. But at their worst, some partisan media—whether bitter cable talk shows on mainstream media or newer alternative websites—can also contribute to political polarization and the propagation of falsehoods—as with the widespread myth perpetuated in some circles that Barack Obama is a Muslim who was not born in the United States. If people immerse themselves only in media that confirm their preexisting beliefs and play to their prejudices, it is unlikely that they will understand the arguments of opponents, be able to productively discuss issues with people who hold different opinions, or find the kind of common ground necessary for a healthy functioning democracy. Instead, relying solely on such media may contribute to the entrenched and bitterly divisive politics of recent years.

As we have seen, news media production is the result of a series of conventions and routines that enable professionals collectively to do their jobs and meet the demands of the
organizations for which they work. These conventions incorporate fundamental professional norms (e.g., objectivity) and basic organizational goals (e.g., gathering news). Routine media practices shape, to a great degree, the final media products.

We have also seen that some media reject some of these conventions—most notably the idea of objectivity—to create new forms of reporting and opinion. Another alternative to traditional mainstream commercial news can be seen in the growing number of experiments involving user-generated content, some of which bypass traditional journalists, while others involve collaboration with them.

THE RISE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT

With the exception of alternative journalism, most of our discussion so far has focused on mainstream professional journalism. However, Web 2.0 has enabled the creation of a growing number of news sites that use amateur producers and user-generated content rather than professional journalists. User-generated content is produced by the end user. It has become increasingly popular since 2005, thanks to the availability of broadband Internet access, multifunction smartphones, blogging, and wiki software. (Wiki software allows users to collectively create and edit web pages such as those at Wikipedia.) Do such sites produce their own conventions? Does the idea of objectivity apply to non-professional journalists? Without professional standards, should we trust these news outlets? Answers to these sorts of questions about this fast-changing field are still evolving.

Various forms of user-generated media overlap and often go by different names, but we can loosely group user-generated journalism into four different types, each with a different degree of amateur participation and control over content. First, some traditional news sites invite audiences to submit content in various forms; second, “pro-am” efforts involve the pairing of traditional professional journalists with input from amateurs to create news content; third, some all-amateur sites make use of collaborative wiki platforms; and fourth, some amateur sites involve the submission of “citizen journalism” projects.

Users and Mainstream Media: iReport

The first category of user-generated content piggybacks on existing traditional news websites. For example, in 2006, CNN launched iReport, its platform for user-generated content, with the aim of “paint[ing] a more complete picture of the news” (iReport.cnn.com 2011). Users can “take part in the news” by producing and uploading their own stories, which are published on the website. In doing so, contributors give CNN the right to edit and use their work in any way without payment. A small number of stories that are vetted by the CNN staff are marked with a special badge, and may be used in other CNN platforms. Otherwise, as the CNN site warns, iReport stories are “not edited, fact-checked, or screened.” Similar initiatives include Fox’s UReport and MSNBC’s FirstPerson.

The “comments” section on news websites provide another way for users to contribute by commenting on the facts reported in an article. Unlike a traditional letter to the editor, these comments appear instantaneously, unscreened, sometimes moments after a story
appears. According to Robert Quigley, the social media editor at the *Austin American-Statesman*, comments on stories are a “living, breathing thing with people jumping into a breaking story with live updates and thoughts” (quoted in Lavrusik 2009).

Traditional news outlets often encourage the use of platforms that enable audience feedback, a sign of the convergence of these various media forms (Quandt and Singer 2008). Often anchors on news broadcasts suggest that you also follow their Twitter feed, or they show some of the tweets or e-mails from their viewers about the topics covered during the evening’s broadcast. In such cases, audience perspectives are more visible in the news, but professional journalists still select and approve the contributions.

**Amateurs and Professionals Together: Pro-Am Efforts**

A number of mainstream news organizations have launched efforts to enlist the assistance of amateurs in creating news stories while maintaining control and employing professional journalistic standards of fact-checking. These can involve professional journalists soliciting information from readers about a topic they are investigating. For example, the Florida *Fort Myers News-Press* newspaper announced an investigation into the high cost home buyers were being charged for simple water- and sewer-line connections, asking readers to supply stories and information about their experiences. Bids, contracts, blueprints, and other documents were submitted by readers and posted on the paper’s website for examination and discussion. The paper learned of cases where home owners were charged up to $30,000 for a simple hookup and, eventually, exposed illegal price-fixing in some bids. The paper now has a “Team Watchdog” feature, which regularly solicits input from readers and uses volunteers to “serve as consultants, research data, work side by side with the professional reporting staff and interact with readers” (News-press.com/watchdog 2011).

Another pro-am approach is to enlist the help of non-journalists to sort through mountains of information, a process sometimes referred to as “crowd-sourcing.” In the U.K., *The Guardian* newspaper asked readers to help them review over 700,000 expense reports from members of Parliament. Over 20,000 readers took part, tagging reports in a range of categories from “not interesting” (involving routine documents and cover sheets) to “investigate this!” (involving suspicious, high-ticket items). Many other crowd-sourcing experiments, using various formats, have followed (Anderson 2009).

**Collaborative Content Creation: Wikinews**

A third form of user-generated content involves all-amateur collaborative creations. *Wikipedia* is a well-known collaborative online encyclopedia. *Wikinews* is its spin-off project, where stories are written as news articles as opposed to encyclopedia entries. Unlike mainstream news sources and the professional journalists who work for them, anyone with Internet access can write or edit a Wikinews article.

So what have Wikinews users done in a totally new media platform? Ironically, they have largely recreated the conventions of traditional news media. Most notably, in defining “what is news,” *Wikinews*—like *Wikipedia* (Wales 2001)—insists that articles be written from a “neutral point of view.” This foundational operating principle guides much of the
decision making on the site. In addition, like traditional news, Wikinews separates fact from opinion, noting in its guidelines that “news is factual. Opinions should be sourced from qualified sources.” Without using the term, the site even lists criteria for newsworthiness, noting that “news is relevant. . . . Stories should appeal to a large number of people” (Wikinews.org 2011). In fact, Wikinews users have adopted an elaborate set of official policies regarding both content and style that serve as the conventions for one of the latest news platforms—but which echo the conventions of traditional news media.

For example, Wikinews explicitly emulates mainstream media, defining news as “stories like those you read in the newspaper, or see on the television news.” Its policies encourage writers to cite sources, avoid copyright infringement, and follow standard grammatical rules—policies familiar to any professional journalist. Wikinews relies on many volunteer contributors to crowd-source its content—including checking facts and correcting errors—and provides a nonprofit service to Internet users, but it does not employ professional journalists to enforce these rules.

**Citizen Journalists: OhmyNews**

A fourth form of user-generated news content can be broadly labeled “citizen journalism” and includes examples such as OhmyNews and Current TV. OhmyNews is a South Korean online news outlet with the motto “Every Citizen Is a Reporter.” Founded in 2000 (with an English version appearing in 2004), it was the first in the world to publish articles by its readers, which account for about 80% of the total content that goes online. Its declared aim is to “help correct the imbalance in the Korean media environment” (OhmyNews 2010). Unlike CNN’s iReport, stories are fact-checked by the site’s editorial team before publication.

Current TV is a cable television network founded by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Joel Hyatt in 2005 and partially owned by media giant Comcast. It is the first viewer-generated channel in history. It broadcasts three- to-seven-minute programs called “pods,” which are submitted and voted on by its online community of viewers (though the ultimate decision to air the program depends on the network’s editorial staff). During the airing of the 2008 presidential election debates, Current TV partnered with the microblogging site Twitter to allow its viewers to tweet their comments, which were showed on screen.

Some observers worry that some forms of citizen journalism serve as cheap labor for the benefit of profit-making multinationals (Deuze 2008). Demotix (demotix.com), a user-generated content website and 15,000-strong online community, seeks to address this by collecting news content to sell to commercial media. As such, it seeks to bridge the gulf between amateurism and professionalism.

These various user-generated news efforts have produced a variety of models, none of which have yet proven their long-term viability. It seems certain, however, that user-generated news—in one form or another—is here to stay. Taking a broader perspective on media organizations and conventions, we can see that these new efforts are, in some ways, a return to older types of media that were neither centrally owned nor produced by commercial media conglomerates. In fact, to a large extent, citizen journalism has emerged out of dissatisfaction with the existing commercial news media.
As these new forms of media continue to evolve, they will follow in the footsteps of older media in developing conventions and routines that enable people to work together—whether in amateur journalism or in professional-amateur collaborations.

OCCUPATIONAL ROLES AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Journalists are not the only media professionals who follow routine practices. Analyzing work practices and professional norms can help us understand other media as well. Let’s turn to two additional examples—photographers and book editors—and place them in the context of roles.

Roles

The concept of role has a long history in sociological theory and research. It has helped clarify the relationship between society and individuals, and the relationship between the forces of structure and agency. We also use the term in everyday conversation: We know that actors play specific roles, we might refer to a member of a basketball team as a role-player, and on learning of a recent dispute at the local bar, we might ask our friends what role they played in the squabble. Sociologically, roles can be thought of as the bundles of expectations that are associated with different social positions. For example, students know the basic requirements of their role: attend class, complete assignments, show a certain measure of respect for teachers, and so on. We rarely think about the specific content of roles because we have largely internalized them. A person who has learned a role tends to just do it and not think about it as a role. In fact, roles become part of our sense of self. You would say, "I am a student," not "I play the role of a student."

However, sometimes the socially constructed nature of roles becomes apparent, for example, when role expectations are obviously breached. Take the classroom as an example. If a student were to fall into a deep sleep in class, begin snoring loudly, and perhaps even slide onto the carpeted floor to get a bit more comfortable, others in the class would feel a bit uneasy. They would be uncomfortable, in large part, because the snoring student had rather blatantly violated a key component of the student role. Students are expected not only to attend class but to show some interest—even if feigned—in what goes on there. The level of interest expected to be shown may be quite modest, but curling up for a good nap clearly violates even the minimal role expectation. These kinds of situations clarify role norms; seeing what we shouldn’t be doing reaffirms what we should be doing.

Another time when we become aware of roles is when we have to learn a new one. Think about starting a new job that involves a kind of work you have never done. During the first few days, the bundle of expectations associated with this new role—whether it be waitress, teacher, or stockbroker—is likely to be a bit unclear, even confusing. Eventually, though, you must learn the ropes to be successful in your new job. You do this by following instructions, watching others do the work, and getting feedback on your own efforts.

The process by which we learn the basic ground rules of a role is called socialization. Every media occupation that we will encounter in this book—journalist, photographer, writer, filmmaker, musician, and so on—requires a kind of socialization into that role. We tend to think of this kind of work as creative, done by people who have a special talent.
However, we need to keep in mind that even these creative media jobs are performed by people who must fulfill the expectations of their role and must fit into the expectations of the organizations with which they work.

On one hand, the concept of role highlights the significance of external social controls. Specific roles, we might say, serve as a social control mechanism by clarifying what is expected of us. Because other members of a social group also know the norms of the role, the expectations are enforced by our interaction with others. We generally do not consider role expectations oppressive because the social control is not simply imposed on us. We internalize, to varying degrees, the components of the role, often so thoroughly that we hardly acknowledge any social control. The role concept, then, explains how individual behavior is both patterned by and influenced by broader social forces.

This is, however, only half of the story. Roles are not rigid; they do not dictate specific behaviors. On the contrary, individuals often have a good deal of room for negotiation within the framework of the roles they occupy. Parents, for example, can relate to their children in a variety of ways—as friend, strict disciplinarian, or hands-off monitor—without violating the norms of the parent role. However, there are limits. Certain actions will be widely perceived as violating basic norms, and some actions may even lead to the removal of children from the home, an effective termination of the parent role.

Roles also are not static. The parent example illustrates the dynamic nature of roles. What is expected of parents today is different from what was expected 50 years ago. Nor are roles permanent. Changing social conditions both create and eliminate the need for particular roles. In the following sections, we explore how roles and socialization apply to media professionals.

**Photography**

We see photographs everywhere, and to most people they are not much of a mystery. Digital cameras are our companions at outings with friends, family gatherings, or on vacations. Many cell phones can take pictures, too, bringing photography into routine everyday life. Our cameras are usually quite simple, requiring few choices, and largely automated, reducing the chance of serious errors. And software such as Photoshop or Picassa, enable us to crop, clean up, and otherwise manipulate our digital images. Amateur photographers use these pictures to tell stories, remember distant friends or places, or display their artistic talent. So what separates those of us who take photos from someone who is a professional photographer?

The easiest answer is to note that photographers get paid for their pictures, but many of us know people whose amateur photographs rival anything that is published, making this distinction a mere technicality. Another answer to this question is talent. Professional photographers have a vision for their pictures that the rest of us typically lack. There is undoubtedly something to this distinction, but we would be hard-pressed to put it to practical use. Who should define this talent or vision? How do we decide who is worthy of the status of photographer, and who is just a weekend picture taker?

Instead, it is more useful to think about photographers as people who take on the role of photographer and behave according to the norms of that role. Indeed, Battani (1999) demonstrates how a specific occupational role of the photographer emerged in the mid-19th century, as early photographers sought to institutionalize their emerging field as a legitimate profession. To enhance their reputations, attract wealthy customers for portraits, and build favorable
relationships with the suppliers of photographic materials, the early photographers worked to promote “an image of their studios and practices as places of refined culture” (p. 622).

Of course, there are different types of photography and, therefore, different versions of this role. For example, the photojournalist and the advertising photographer may use similar basic equipment, but each has a different role—with different sets of tasks, expectations, and norms. Rosenblum’s (1978) classic study Photographers at Work shows that role expectations and organizational demands are central to explaining the different styles of photography in newspapers and advertising as well as the different conceptions of creativity held by photographers in the two settings. Rosenblum suggests that it is not enough to note the existence of conventions. We also need “to discover the underlying general social processes that create the conventions which shape and condition human behavior” (p. 4).

News photos and advertising photos draw on distinct stylistic conventions that make the images quite different from each other in ways that are readily apparent even to the untrained eye. (See Exhibit 4.2.) We have all seen so many news and ad photos that, even if we cannot remember specifics, we have a sense of the look or style of the two different types of photos. Photo images selling jeans or perfume in Vanity Fair, for example, are usually easily distinguishable from a front-page photo illustrating the lead story in the New York Times. (However, as savvy PR specialists have developed increasingly effective strategies for managing the news, many news photos are the result of staged photo opportunities that adopt conventions from advertising. Meanwhile, some edgy advertising campaigns try to adopt a rough look of spontaneity that contrasts starkly with traditional advertising techniques.) If the photo styles and their associated conventions are different, the sources of these differences can be found in the socialization of photographers, their work roles, and the organizational goals the pictures need to meet.

**Socialization of Photographers**

Socialization refers to the process by which people learn the expectations of a particular role. It is likely that young news and ad photographers begin with similar sets of skills. Each knows the basic technical requirements of taking pictures. Socialization allows the beginner to move beyond the technical aspects of the work and learn how to conceptually see images in ways that are distinct to the professional photojournalist or the ad photographer. This distinct vision must be learned in order for each photographer to produce suitable pictures. One underlying assumption here is that ways of seeing images are socially constructed. Photojournalists and ad photographers must learn to see images in ways that are in line with their professional and organizational roles.

Entry-level photographers have to learn and internalize the basic norms of the organizations they work for and, at the same time, learn the culture of their profession. A beginning photojournalist learns the kind of news that the paper and its website features and, more important, becomes acquainted with the picture selection process at that news organization. If you have ever seen photojournalists on assignment, you have probably noticed that they are likely to take a large number of pictures of various aspects of the scene. When you pick up the paper in the morning, however, only one of these shots will have made it into print, and even the paper’s website is likely to feature only a few of the many pictures taken. The photo editor is responsible for selecting which pictures to use. Part of the process of socialization, then, is learning the norms of the selection process to be able to produce the kind of pictures that the photo editor will select. After all, one of the principal goals of photojournalists is getting their pictures published.
Exhibit 4.2  Photographic Conventions

Both of these photos show people eating. Which is from the news and which is the sort used in an advertisement? The obvious differences illustrate the different level of control that the news and ad photographers have over their picture.

This top picture is a news photo that documents an independently existing event—Thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter; it is not staged for the photojournalist. What are the telltale signs that this photo captures a “real” moment?

This bottom photo is the sort used in an advertisement for a laptop. Although the subject matter is similar to that in the top photograph, the ad photographer here has shaped every element, leaving nothing to chance. In its original color version, the photographer created a pleasing color palette: the glass holds orange juice, the bowl lush red strawberries, the shirts are white, and the foliage behind the couple is bright green. In addition, the couple’s loving pose, the woman’s pajama bottoms, and the remnants of breakfast all combine to create an relaxed, pleasant mood—perhaps a lazy Sunday morning.

Sources: Photo #1—U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Steve Johnson; Photo #2—©iStockphoto.com/vm.

It is one thing to know what your editors expect; it is another to be able to produce it. The beginner must learn the role of the press photographer. To produce suitable news photos, press photographers usually believe that they should not behave in such a way that
their presence changes the unfolding of events. This is one of the fundamental professional norms of photojournalism: Pictures should document happenings, not transform them. While pictures inevitably provide selective snapshots of complex phenomena, the commitment to unobtrusiveness is central to the ideology of photojournalism. News photographers, then, have to learn techniques to stay out of the way yet still get good pictures.

Taking pictures that are suitable for publication while remaining unobtrusive is no easy task. Because the events that photographers cover are almost all either prescheduled (e.g., press conferences, parades, sporting events) or fit into standard story formats (e.g., fires, accidents, crimes), photographers learn that they will be successful if they can anticipate what they will see to plan the kinds of shots they will take. This anticipation allows photographers to locate themselves in strategic spots, use the appropriate lenses, focus on the setting or people that are central to the event, and produce the kinds of pictures that will be acceptable to their editors. Thus, the socialization of the photojournalist involves learning how to anticipate action and plan shots in advance.

Advertising photographers must learn a set of organizational and professional norms that are different from those of photojournalism. One difference is that advertising photographers learn to leave nothing to chance; every aspect of each photo is the responsibility of the photographer. We are exposed to so many ad images each day that we can easily forget that everything about an ad photo has been staged. This staging is most obvious in respect to lighting and setting, but it extends to every last detail: the hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry of the models; items that sit in the background of the picture; and the specific nature of any key props for the shot. Should the woman in the lingerie ad wear a wedding ring? If so, how will she hold her hand to both look natural and display the ring? The ad photographer must learn how to exert precise control and develop the technical skills required to accomplish it.

Advertising photographers learn that ad photography is a collective process; managing relationships with art directors and representatives of the advertiser is a key part of the job. The ad photographer learns that success requires not only vision or skill in creating compelling images but also the ability to negotiate with—even please—those who have creative control over the advertisements. In practice, this means that photographers learn that there is little room for individualists who perceive themselves as pure artists. The profession requires that ad photographers see their role as just one part of a collective process driven by the logic of commerce.

Photographers’ Work Roles and Organizational Goals

The division of labor within newsrooms shapes the kinds of pictures that photojournalists take. Newspaper photography involves various people in coordinated activities: the person who decides on the assignment, the photographer, the photo editor who selects the pictures, the printer, the editor who decides which stories to run, and the web master who manages the paper’s site. News organizations are highly developed bureaucracies that rely on clearly defined rules and classification systems. This kind of organization leads photographers to take standard pictures, the kinds of photos that we would be likely to recognize as news photos. The key is the system of classification, in which events are grouped into types: the disaster, the war, the political campaign, the court case. In producing news coverage, news organizations impose a standard script—including images—on these basic types of stories. Photographers are expected to produce images that fit the standard scripts. When images that do not fit the script are routinely weeded out by the photo editors, photographers soon learn not to take these kinds of pictures in the first place.
Role expectations also provide the framework for definitions of creativity. Editors expect photographers to have good news judgment, to be willing to use initiative to get good pictures, and to produce pictures that can tell various aspects of the story. Moreover, photographers are expected to regularly provide the kind of standard pictures that can accompany standardized stories, which both editors and readers come to expect. This expectation does not leave much room for the independent creativity of the photojournalist. The subject matter is assigned, and the organizational norms suggest the kinds of pictures that are appropriate. As a result, photojournalists generally see themselves not as creative artists but as reporters who take pictures.

Ad photographers, in contrast, take on the role of merchants as they must sell their services to an ad agency and an advertiser, follow the lead of the art director, and produce pictures that are generally prescribed. Thus, much ad photography is reduced to technical work. The photographer must have the knowledge and skills to effectively carry out the wishes of those making the creative decisions. Much of the day-to-day work of the ad photographer involves creating scripted images and adding small variations—in angle or lighting, for example—so that art directors have several different versions of the picture from which to choose.

For the vast majority of ad photographers, creativity is not in the conception of the images but in the ability to capture the desired image. They often achieve this by devising solutions to technical problems in the photographic process. Creativity in ad photography, then, is being innovative enough to figure out how to get the image the art director wants when standard techniques do not work. The creativity of ad photography is not in the vision but in a kind of technical mastery (Rosenblum 1978).

Photographers, then, are not all the same. They work in different kinds of organizations that place different demands on them. They are socialized into different professional roles and take different kinds of pictures. Organizational and professional norms provide the context for understanding the pictures photographers take, the daily routines in the workplace, and the ways photographers evaluate their own work. One of the central lessons to be learned from our focus on photographers is that authority relations within the workplace can tell us a good deal about the kind of work that media professionals do. Photographers, in both news and advertising, have specific superiors whom they must satisfy by producing appropriate pictures. Most of the time, they carry out the creative wishes of others rather than conceptualizing on their own. What about media professionals who are higher in the organizational hierarchy? What norms or social forces affect how they organize their work? A look at the work of book editors will help us answer these questions.

**Editorial Decision Making**

Book publishing is a dynamic, multifaceted industry. Books are published on a wide range of subjects, packaged in various formats, sold in many different settings, and bought by many types of readers. In addition, there are several different kinds of publishing companies, from large commercial houses that sign prominent authors to seven-figure, advance-payment contracts to small presses that publish scholarly monographs.

In all publishing firms, the key decision is which manuscripts to publish. Regardless of whether the house is aiming for the best-seller list, with sales in the millions, or for adoption by college professors as a classroom text, where success might mean only a few thousand copies sold, all publishers have to sift through many submissions and proposals and select the few that will become books. These selection processes take place in other media industries as
well. Record labels sign a small number of musicians, Hollywood studios produce a limited number of films, and the television networks add only a handful of new programs to their prime-time schedules each year. In each of these industries, decision makers need to make a large number of choices for projects about which they have only partial knowledge. These decisions, of course, have substantial consequences—they dictate the books, music, films, and television programs that will be available.

Different industries and the various sectors within each industry have different rules that govern the decision-making process. The search for steady profits by commercial media companies makes evaluations of the potential for economic success a central feature of the decision-making process. Those in decision-making roles need to develop strategies for evaluating the potential profitability of a particular movie or book.

### The Work of the Book Editor

In most publishing houses, the people who solicit, evaluate, and sign manuscripts are called acquisitions editors. It is their job to get high-quality books for the press, to weed out titles that do not fit, and to work with authors to produce books that will meet organizational goals. Acquisitions editors have varying degrees of autonomy and different editorial mandates at different presses, but they are ordinarily the principal filter through which the decision to publish is made.

One study of publishing (Coser, Kadushin, and Powell 1982) found that a key factor in whether a manuscript is published is the channel that brings a potential author to a publisher's attention. Abstract measures of the quality or significance of a book manuscript are far less important—at least in determining whether a book is published—than the way the manuscript comes in the door. There are different “lines” of authors (perhaps a better image is piles of manuscripts) awaiting the eyes of editors. These different piles are organized according to how they were received. The longest, and by far most unsuccessful, line is made up of authors who send their unsolicited manuscript to a publishing house, hoping that it will be impressive enough to be accepted for publication. Unfortunately for aspiring authors, there is very little likelihood that this route will pay off. One large publisher estimated that only 1 out of 15,000 unsolicited manuscripts are published each year (Anand, Barnett, and Carpenter 2004).

Other avenues are more likely to lead to publication. Unsolicited manuscripts that are addressed to the appropriate editor by name are more likely to be considered seriously than those not directed at an individual. More important, personal contacts are what really facilitate the publication of a book. Manuscripts that come through informal networks—other authors, friends, or professional meetings—go into a much smaller pile that is taken more seriously. And authors who have agents are placed in yet another pile.

These piles are not likely to exist in any concrete form (although the volume of unsolicited manuscripts is so high that it is hard to believe they sit anywhere except in piles on an editorial assistant's desk); the pile metaphor suggests that publishing houses organize work, even if unconsciously, along these lines. Organizationally, this system operates like a kind of obstacle course with different entry points. Depending on where each manuscript starts the course, it will face different hurdles, opportunities, time frames, and perhaps even personnel until it completes the course or is rejected. The specific nature of the obstacle course depends on the particularities of the organization of the publishing house.
While the basic factors influencing acquisition editors discussed by Coser and colleagues. (1982) still hold true, more recent studies have found additional dynamics at play in today’s publishing industry. For example, acquisition editors today often feel increasing pressure to only sign books with blockbuster potential. Likewise, they struggle with reading submissions as more of their time is dedicated to the marketing and publicity of books, and specialized marketing and publicity staff have an increasing say in which books are published (Greco, Rodriguez, and Wharton 2007). Publishing houses often resort to working with authors who have their own ability to get their names out and cross-promote their books—through popular blogs they write, shows they host or appear on, or through newspapers and magazines to which they regularly contribute.

With over 275,000 titles published by U.S. houses in 2008, editors and publicity staff feel great strain in competing for the public’s attention—and new competition has appeared. In 2008, over 285,000 new titles were self-published and published using on-demand technology. While these self-published books almost never rival the sales figures of books distributed by major publishers, the leading publishing houses have reason for concern about the new ways authors can bypass the traditional players in the book business.

As you can see, there are far too many books published each year for any one bookstore to place on their shelves. So just as publishers follow a set of conventions as they determine which books to publish, brick-and-mortar bookstores adopt their own conventions to help them decide which books to sell. Advance reviews and publishers’ catalog descriptions help booksellers make selection decisions, and like the front pages of newspapers, publishers put their most promising books toward the front of the catalog and dedicate more space to their displays. In addition to these catalogs, according to Miller (2006), the buyers for booksellers (those who decide which books a bookstore will carry) consider past sales of the author’s previous work, the current popularity of the book’s genre, the publisher’s promotional budget and plans, whether the author will be touring or making any media appearances, the sales rep’s or editor’s enthusiasm and recommendations, the ease of ordering and receiving from the book’s supplier, the terms at which the book is being made available (discount, shipping costs, payment, and return policies), the book’s list price, production quality and cover design, the book’s topicality, the buyer’s understanding of local tastes and habits, and the buyer’s personal tastes.

Of course, because different bookstores try to craft distinct identities and target specific types of customers, each bookstore develops its own set of norms for making sense of the various relevant facts. For instance, some bookstores will pay attention to (and perhaps develop a reputation for) local authors. Other bookstores may hesitate to stock books that do not have promotional budgets or avoid books that they think will offend loyal customers. At the large chain bookstores, Barnes & Noble and Borders, much of the work of deciding which titles to carry is centralized, as books are selected for the entire national chain and then distributed to stores based on the chain’s profile of the local market. Miller (1998) argues that selection procedure is one of the key differences between independent bookstores and the national chains. Both the independents and the chains employ routine conventions to sift through the vast array of potential books, but the independents give much more weight to local interest in their decisions.

Online sellers like Amazon don’t have to worry as much about which books to stock, as their store exists only in virtual space, with physical books stocked in relatively inexpensive unadorned warehouses. While this gives them an advantage over bookstores who have to pay high prices for rent in foot-trafficked areas and who have to contend with not having an in-store copy of a
book that a reader may want, online sellers face additional difficulties in allowing users to browse their selections. In response to this problem, online sellers use pictures of book covers on their websites, show similar and recommended books on the page for a book that a user has searched for, and provide options like the “Look Inside!” feature on Amazon to try to give buyers the experience of browsing in a physical bookstore (Weedon 2007). The quickly growing popularity of e-books gives online retailers the additional competitive advantage of being able to provide books instantly—without the cost of storing and shipping a physical product.

**Scholarly Publishing**

Walter Powell (1985) studied the operating procedures that govern the process of manuscript selection in two scholarly publishing houses. Scholarly publishing is a particularly useful example because it is a segment of the book industry that is not so clearly oriented to profitability. As a general rule, books need to be able to sell enough copies to pay for the costs of production and meet the house’s criteria for scholarly quality. However, editors do not have to focus their attention on signing best sellers. As a result, acquisitions editors at scholarly publishing houses have a more ambiguous goal than their counterparts at the large commercial houses, where sales potential is the dominant goal.

Editors follow a set of routines, governed by standard operating assumptions, that help them make decisions about what to publish. The volume of manuscripts is so high that it is impossible to attend to each project. As a consequence, routines allow editors to make decisions and still manage their schedules.

Potential manuscripts are not organized, evaluated, or responded to on a first-come, first-served basis. Manuscripts from unknown authors who have never had contact with the publishing house do not receive much editorial attention and are, therefore, unlikely to be published. Manuscripts from an author with previous connections to the house or those solicited by an editor receive much more thorough and quicker attention. In addition, editors make use of prominent academics who serve as series editors to help attract new authors or evaluate manuscripts. In this way, editors can farm out evaluations to a stable, trusted group of scholars who may be more expert in the particular field. Most scholarly houses also use outside reviewers—people the editor selects to anonymously assess the quality of the manuscript. Editors use all these practices to manage their workload in ways that are consistent with their editorial goals and their obligations to their authors, colleagues, and friends. All of this suggests a good deal of autonomy for editors; they can draw upon series editors when they choose to, send manuscripts to an outside reviewer who is likely to be supportive (or not), and give closer attention to projects that involve scholars they already know.

Powell’s (1985) research uncovered some of the informal controls, or organizational premises, that shape editorial work. He is particularly candid about the development of his own understanding of publishing. At first, he accepted editors’ explanations that they had wide discretion in acquiring books. However, Powell later noticed several things that made him skeptical: Editors had a clear sense of which authors deserved priority service and which could be put off for long periods; editors never proposed atypical books, demonstrating their sense of boundaries; and there was a high turnover rate among editors yet stability in the kinds of decisions that were made. In addition, Powell found that his observation at the houses had made him an expert in predicting which manuscripts would be signed and which would be rejected. In essence, he had learned the informal rules so well that the decision-making process was no longer a mystery.
Our description of scholarly publishing is similar to our earlier discussion of photography. Through a process of socialization, acquisitions editors learn the values and preferences of their publishing houses. This socialization process is one of the mechanisms by which organizations assert a kind of unobtrusive control. The key to the socialization of editors is learning about the types of books the press publishes. As part of their socialization, editors learn about the history and traditions of the house; they may already be familiar with the prominent books and authors that the house has published. In short, successful editors must understand the house’s “list”—its currently available books, including new releases and the backlist of older titles. New books must fit with the list; that is, they must complement other titles. Editors understand this constraint and adopt it as a norm in their own editorial decisions. In this way, choices about new books are shaped in important ways by the types of books that a house has previously published. In addition, most outside reviewers are authors who have published with the house, thus reinforcing a similar set of norms for each new year’s crop of books. Finally, the process of signing a book—the paperwork and formal evaluations leading to approval of a contract—follows a standard operating procedure each time, adding another step at which editors must pay attention to organizational goals. Most editors anticipate this procedure and do their homework in advance to ensure that their projects meet organizational requirements.

Powell (1985) attributes his finding that editors rarely had their selections rejected by their superiors to their internalization of the basic norms of the publishing house. Editors do not have their projects rejected because they have already weeded out those that did not fit. The manuscripts that they send on for approval by superiors fit with the house list. This is what makes them good editors. They enjoy a good deal of autonomy in their work because they do not think too independently while doing it. In a similar vein, Radway (1997) found a remarkable degree of consensus among Book-of-the-Month Club editors about whether a potential selection was appropriate for the club. She suggests that the weekly editorial meetings at which such decisions were made were a kind of ritual in which the editors collectively articulated, and reminded themselves of, what the Book-of-the-Month Club was all about and why it was different from their book club competitors.

A focus on the practices that editors use to organize their work and on the organizational premises that guide these decisions shows the dynamic relationship between human agency and structural constraint in media production. While organizational premises—structure—may make change more difficult, small changes in routine practices may help alter these premises, leading to the publication of new types of books. The backlist is the concrete embodiment of the relationship between agency and structure. It represents the accumulation of decisions made by prior editors, a tradition that shapes current decisions. But those current decisions will alter the backlist and, in turn, affect the framework for future decisions. In this example, we see both the stability and the potential dynamism of the socialization process.

NORMS ON THE INTERNET, NEW MEDIA, AND NEW ORGANIZATIONS

The three occupations we have explored—journalism, photography, and editorial work—are well-established professions with lengthy traditions. But what about new forms of media and online interaction? How are they different from—and in what ways do they resemble—the occupations and organizations found in traditional media?
The highly decentralized nature of the Internet makes it tempting for us to think that social activity in cyberspace is totally autonomous, free from the kinds of conventions that guide the production of traditional media forms. But while cyberspace permits new forms of interaction and challenges our assumptions about the nature of mass-mediated communication, anyone who has spent time surfing the Internet is likely to have a sense of a clear set of norms that govern behavior in cyberspace, as well as a set of potential consequences for violators. These newly emerging norms and conventions are generated by both the creators of websites and the users who contribute to them.

The creators of many Internet websites are part of larger media organizations and are governed by the occupational norms and standards that predominate in their fields. For example, professional web developer associations promote norms and conventions regarding user-friendly web design, universal access standards, and other issues. These groups operate much like other traditional media professionals. Those who have constructed and are expanding the platforms and networks that connect us to one another—through discussion groups, instant messaging, microblogging, social networking sites, e-mail, and websites—are technological innovators who both draw on and create conventions that help structure our interaction within these networks.

For example, a search engine such as Google operates within a set of conventions that were created—and sometimes change—based on its design. The rankings of search results are produced by Google’s calculation of the number and importance of pages that link to each site, thereby steering users toward the sites with more links to them. Placing the word “define:” before a word in a Google search produces definitions of that word. “Time” plus a name of a city produces the local time there. These and many other features of a site are the structural conventions produced by its creators. Every form of media has similar conventions, such as Twitter’s 140-character limit or Facebook’s use of “friend.”

However, as noted earlier, one of the defining characteristics of the Internet as a medium—and particularly Web 2.0—is that users are often the source of content. These users are not professionals, nor is content creation their occupation. As a result, different and more informal mechanisms have developed to teach the conventions of the medium and guide appropriate behavior.

For example, over time, we have developed language that helps users understand the technology. This language also imposes a kind of logic onto cyberspace by formalizing conventional ways of perceiving, even behaving on, the Internet. Terms used to describe behaviors in cyberspace—such as *trolling, spamming, morphing,* and *lurking*—characterize some of the ways our virtual behavior is both predictable and patterned. Some cyberspace terms, such as *newbie/hoob* and *moderator,* even explicitly describe particular cyber-roles with accompanying expectations.

Another example of a common set of conventions involves the use of “emoticons” (a composite of the words emotion and icon). Created in the 1980s, emoticons—such as the smiley face :o) or wink ;o)—have become the most common way of supplementing e-mail or text messages with facial cues that simulate the inflection of face-to-face talk. We use emoticons to express emotion, to strengthen a message, and to express humor, usually in informal communication and in a positive context rather than in a negative one (Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow 2008). Another linguistic convention of cyberspace is the use of
acronyms in chat conversations. Examples include LOL (Laughing Out Loud), ROFL (Rolling on the Floor Laughing), BTW (By the Way), AFK (Away From Keyboard), BAK (Back at Keyboard), and WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). Such terms can seem perplexing at first until a user is socialized into learning their meaning.

As we saw in our earlier discussion of user-generated news content, often the norms that develop on new media platforms closely emulate the conventions that already exist in traditional media. But new media forms also require new conventions. In one early study of conventions on the Internet, McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith (1995) explored the “standards of conduct” in online discussion groups, or newsgroups. In effect, they examined the expectations associated with the role of the online newsgroup participant. In particular, they argue that there are specific types of “reproachable” network behavior, that is, actions that violate the basic norms of the Internet, commonly referred to as “netiquette.”

What are the behaviors that elicit reproaches from other network users? One involves the incorrect use of the technological apparatus and is generally associated with novices who have not mastered the format. An example is a user who accidentally posts a message to an entire newsgroup that was intended only for a single recipient. A second norm is not to write messages in capital letters (which is equivalent to SHOUTING). A third is the violation of a basic network convention, such as failing to include your electronic signature with your message or neglecting to include a previous message about which you are commenting (“quoting”). Users who behave in these reproachable ways are likely to be admonished online by fellow users who are committed to the orderly functioning of the group. Such admonishment may be, at least initially, gentle and intended to be educational in nature. But admonishment can become rather venomous, referred to as “flaming.” Many violators likely will learn from their mistakes, seek out help with the technology, and learn the conventions. Those who persist in their reproachable behavior may be threatened with loss of access to the group, and repeat offenders will ultimately be expelled from the newsgroup.

Online norms are powerful shapers of virtual behavior. Perhaps that is why the vast majority of newsgroup subscribers are perpetual lurkers, reading messages but not posting their own. One widely held newsgroup norm, in fact, is to follow a group for some time before posting a message. This allows newcomers to become socialized into the ways of the group, to learn about the group’s history and traditions, and to see the kinds of issues that are generally on the group’s agenda. Additional practices help socialize new members of newsgroups. Upon subscribing, members receive an electronic how-to manual for participation in the group, which includes both technical advice on the workings of the system and instructions on appropriate conduct. Archives of previous group discussions are often available, and new group members are encouraged to read through them. In addition, a file of frequently asked questions (FAQs) is sent to new members so that they do not clutter up the network with the same questions.

Why do such standards of conduct develop in the first place? One answer is that they provide a foundation for the maintenance of the identity of the newsgroup. This identity is passed along to new members through socialization into the norms of the electronic community and is enforced when new members are admonished for not adhering to the ground rules. Where do these standards come from? Many are practical responses to the needs of the medium. For example, regular users are aware that certain conventions, such as using an
appropriate subject line on a posting, enable users to follow threads over time or search and find them later on. Those who use subject lines inappropriately or leave the line blank make participation in the virtual community both more confusing and more time-consuming.

Technological conventions may seem trivial, and notes of reproach for violations may seem nasty, but the requirement of maintaining some kind of order in cyberspace is their driving force. Perhaps most important, McLaughlin and her colleagues (1995) argue that there are underlying social roots to cyber-conventions. These conventions reinforce and protect the collective identities of the electronic communities and can be used to ward off newcomers who pose a threat to these identities or to the stability of the group. Like other producers of media, users of the Internet are part of a social world in which tradition, organizational history, group identity, and the routinization of daily activities help shape the norms and practices that pattern even our virtual behavior.

The lessons from these early Internet newsgroups apply to more recent media platforms. Large media sites—such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—each have their own official policies on acceptable behavior: Facebook’s Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, YouTube’s Community Guidelines, and the Twitter Rules. These policies define appropriate (and inappropriate) uses of these social media services, specifying rules on, for example, privacy, copyright, spam, pornography, and hate speech. These policies establish a framework for conduct on social networking sites, and provide guidelines for how to respond to those who violate established policies. However, such official policies are only a starting point. Regular users of social media are socialized into the conventions of these online spaces and are familiar with a wide range of norms that go beyond corporate policies, including the dos and don’ts of posting on friends’ Facebook walls or how to respond (or not) to Facebook friend requests.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has rounded out our discussion of media production by showing how professional norms, institutional premises, and organizational structures shape the day-to-day work of media producers—whether professionals or amateurs. We have seen that human agents—reporters, photographers, book editors, and Internet users—are active participants in the construction and reconstruction of production routines. These routines serve as conventions that help organize the collective work of media production.

Routines and conventions are shaped by economic, political, and organizational forces, as well as technological constraints, in each sector of the media industry. Conventions can change, although this change is likely to be slow. Ultimately, conventions become a form of structural constraint, producing guidelines for action and decision making by future media professionals.

A production perspective helps us understand the media messages that are part of our lives. In Part Three, we turn to the content of mass media, focusing on questions of inequality and ideology.