CONVERGING MEDIA

An Introduction to Mass Communication
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The pages of this Sample Chapter may have
slight variations in final published form.

www.time.com

TIME

A SURPRISING POLL:
THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT KIDS
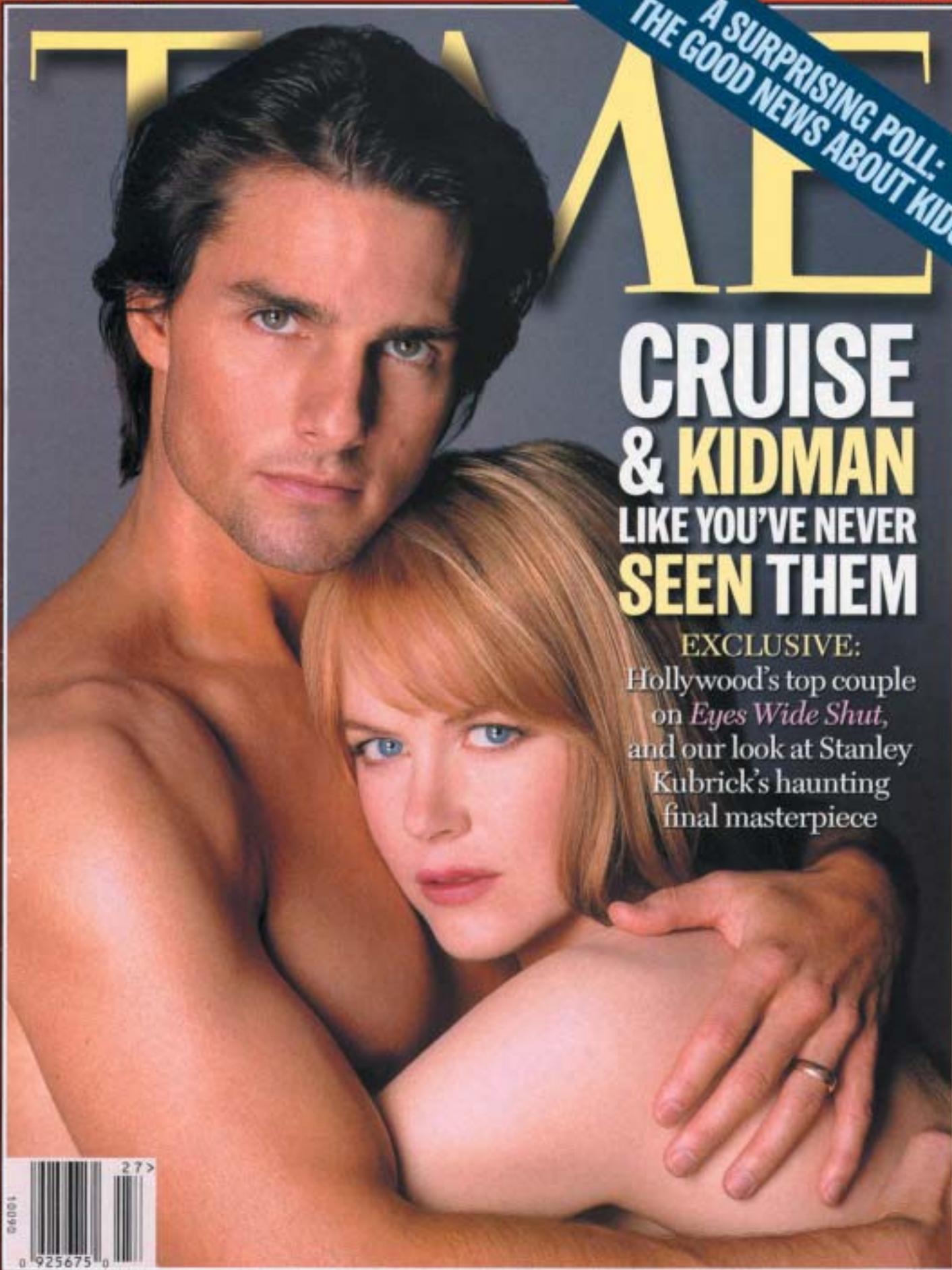
CRUISE & KIDMAN
LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THEM

EXCLUSIVE:
Hollywood's top couple
on *Eyes Wide Shut,*
and our look at Stanley
Kubrick's haunting
final masterpiece

Media Literacy and Ethics

Noted director Stanley Kubrick

had worked in seclusion for a year with stars Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman in making *Eyes Wide Shut.* When Kubrick, director of *Dr. Strangelove, A Clockwork Orange,* and *2001: A Space Odyssey,* died in March 1999 shortly after filming was completed, interest in seeing his last film was heightened.

But was the release of the film news that was important enough to appear on the July 5, 1999, cover of *Time* magazine, two weeks before the movie was going to open in theaters? Other major news outlets during that week did not think so, as they covered news of fighting in Sierra Leone and Kosovo.

Could the fact that the Warner Bros. movie studio made the film, a division of Time Warner (now AOL Time Warner), have had anything to do with the editorial decision to feature *Eyes Wide Shut* so prominently in the magazine, as well as have the film's two sexy stars on the cover? Despite mediocre reviews

from most critics, the film was number one at the box office its first weekend, bringing in $22 million, although it fell rapidly after that as the public apparently agreed with the critics that despite the hype nothing much happens in the movie.
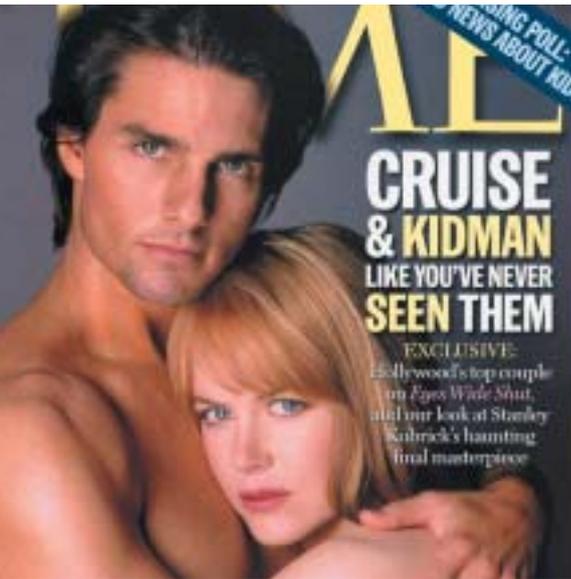
How many people read the glowing preview of the film in *Time,* were enticed by the exclusive interview with Cruise and Kidman or the photos of the stars and the movie, and decided to go see it? We'll never know.

However, this case illustrates how media concentration of ownership can bring pressures on news organizations to use their credibility with the public for purposes other than pure news, even if no orders are explicitly given. It also demonstrates why it is more important than ever for the public to be media literate.

OBJECTIVES

In this chapter we will:

- ■ Define media literacy and provide some basic skills to improve critical thinking ability when consuming mass communication content.
- ■ Explain three elements of media literacy: media grammar, fragmentation of media channels, and the commercial forces that shape media content.
- ■ Provide tips on how to recognize reliable online information and evaluate online sources.
- ■ Define some basic elements in media ethics.
- ■ Describe the consequences and societal repercussions when ethical principles are not followed in media.

Prologue

We live in a media society. Mass communications surround us and influence our world in a variety of ways. They entertain us, they inform us, and they sell us everything from household products to political candidates. In 2001, for example, New York City's mayoral election was won by billionaire media tycoon Michael Bloomberg, who spent roughly $50 million of his own money on his campaign, most of it for television advertising. That's about $70 a vote (he got roughly 50.4 percent of the vote, or 718,488 votes).

With the pervasiveness of media in modern life, it is more important than ever to understand when and how we are being manipulated by media messages. We must look critically at all media we receive and understand something about how media organizations work as businesses and how they fit into other aspects of society.

This chapter explains some basic principles behind media literacy while teaching you to critically analyze the media messages you receive. Finally, it explores some important issues in media ethics, especially in relation to the concentration of media ownership.

What Is Media Literacy?

Being able to read, understanding how to navigate a Web site or send an e-mail attachment, and realizing a scary part of a movie is coming up when the background music changes are all types of literacy that involve media. Some are what we would consider as the traditional meaning of the term *literacy,* and others can be classified as visual literacy or computer literacy. Knowing all the movies a director has ever made, how much he or she made them for, and how much they grossed is also a type of literacy involving media, albeit a limited one. **Media literacy** encompasses all these skills and much more.

Media literacy can be defined as the process of interacting with media content and critically analyzing it by considering its particular presentation, its underlying political or social messages, and ownership and regulation issues that may affect what media is presented in what form. In the age of digital media, additional issues when interacting with media must also be considered, such as erosion of media–consumer privacy and tracking of consumer behavior.

In other words, media consumers should question what they see, hear, or otherwise experience when receiving or interacting with mediated communication. Is a news story biased? Why might it be biased? Why is it even news? Does a popular television show or video game have too much violence, or does it encourage gender or racial stereotypes? What is an advertiser really trying to sell and to whom? Does the placement of articles and photos on a newspaper fairly represent the relative importance of those items as news? These are just a sample of the kinds of questions critical media consumers should ask.

Developing media literacy is an ongoing process, not a goal. There is no qualification test in media literacy to differentiate the media literate from the media illiterate. You will never receive a certificate in "media literacy." If you do,

media literacy—the process of interacting with media content and critically analyzing it by considering its particular presentation, its underlying political or social messages, and ownership and regulation issues that may affect what media is presented in what form.

MEDIA **Quiz** **How Media Literate Are You?**

Because of widespread media exposure, most young people have a relatively high level of media literacy in some areas. Although you may have seen every movie your favorite actor has ever been in and can swap MP3 music files with friends over the Internet, you don't necessarily have an adequate level of media literacy in today's world.

Get a general idea of how media literate you are by taking the following quiz. Answers are at the end of the chapter. Be sure to try this quiz again at the end of the semester to see if your media literacy has improved.

1. Can you name the number-one song in the pop chart right now by title and artist?
2. Name other hit songs the group or artist may have had.
3. Name the recording company this artist or group is signed to.
4. Name the titles of at least three books by best-selling author Stephen King.
5. Name at least three movies made from Stephen King's books.
6. Describe the last time you saw product placement in a movie.
7. Have you ever downloaded a song via the Internet via a file-swapping service such as Morpheus or KaZaA?

8. Have you ever "burned" a CD?
9. Have you ever created a Web site?
10. Is your local newspaper independently owned or owned by a national newspaper chain? If the former, who is the owner and what other businesses in town, if any, does he or she own? If the latter, which chain?
11. Match the following corporations with this partial list of what they own.

    Corporations:
    Disney,
    AOL Time Warner,
    Viacom,
    News Corp.,
    Bertelsmann,
    Sony

    Media entity:
    People, Sports Illustrated, Fortune, CNN, HBO, Random House, RCA, Arista Records, ESPN, Miramax Films, ABC, NFL.com, Fox TV, *New York Post, The Times* (UK), L.A. Dodgers, Columbia Tri-Star, Epic Records, E! Latin America, UPN, MTV, Paramount Pictures, CBS, Simon & Schuster Books.

12. True or false: Personal information about yourself from registering on a Web site can be sold to another company without your knowledge.

you should apply your newfound media literacy skills and ask whether it is worth the paper it is printed on.

If it is impossible to establish perfect media literacy, then why even bother trying to reach the unattainable? The answer is because it is always possible to improve your level of media literacy and thus be a wiser media consumer. The importance of media in contemporary society makes it imperative that audience members exercise critical thinking in their consumption of media content so they can better control their actions and not be controlled by media messages.

Media literacy scholar W. James Potter talks about building "knowledge structures" to improve one's level of media literacy.[1] A knowledge structure is simply a way to visualize building one's level of knowledge on a given topic or topics. For example, if you have a basic understanding of the history of television and someone tells you he or she remembers watching *I Love Lucy* in the 1920s, you can be confident that that person is incorrect because television as a mass medium did not yet exist in the 1920s.

It might seem like an impossible task to learn about all the issues surrounding media, especially in the rapidly changing world of digital media that relies so heavily on complex technology. However, three basic categories represent the foundation for critical media consumption. These are:

1. media grammar;
2. fragmentation of media channels; and
3. commercial forces that shape media content.

Media Grammar

Being a critical consumer of media messages begins with understanding the grammar of the media, or how that media presents itself and is used and understood by the audience. Each medium of mass communication presents its messages uniquely. With media that we are familiar with through widespread use or exposure, we often do not think about the role media grammar plays in what we see, how we see it, and what our perceptions are. In many ways, it becomes "background," but it nevertheless can have profound implications for our understanding of media. We become more aware of media grammar when we encounter a new media type that we do not know the "rules" for yet, such as online media.

Subtext Messages

Common to the grammar of all media, however, is **subtext.** Subtext is the message beneath the message—the underlying, or implicit, message that is being conveyed by media content. A situation comedy such as Warner Brothers' popular television show *Friends* (aired on NBC) may be explicitly about the humorous lives of a group of friends living in Manhattan, but the subtext may be that friends should be of the same race. In *Friends,* all six friends are white. Viewers, especially children and adolescents, may watch the show to be amused, but they may be subtly learning that they, too, should choose best friends of the same race.

subtext—the message beneath the message; the underlying, or implicit, message that is being conveyed by media content.

Being aware of subtext messages does not mean becoming a conspiracy theorist and assuming all television producers or book authors have a hidden agenda that they are trying to spread to the public. The creators of content may not be aware that they are propagating subtext messages; they feel they are simply telling an interesting or amusing story or writing about what they are familiar with. But that doesn't mean that the audience should not be on guard of possible implicit messages in media that reinforce stereotypes or influence one's opinions in the real world.

Print Media

The print media, partly due to their long history compared to other types of mass communication, have developed a very sophisticated media grammar. Everything, including the physical dimensions of a book, whether it contains pictures or not, the size and style of the type, whether it is hardcover or paperback, and the artwork on the book jacket, conveys important messages to the potential book buyer beyond the actual content of the book. Within a book itself, there are several aspects of media grammar that have evolved over the years. Spacing between words to help aid reading comprehension is an early example, as are page numbering, tables of contents, an index, and chapter headings as we know them today. We take many of these elements for granted, but some took years to develop.

Newspapers have their own types of media grammar that have also evolved over time and that continue to change. An obvious example is the amount of color photos and graphics used in newspapers today compared to 30 or 40 years ago. Since space is limited in a newspaper in terms of page size and number of pages, more graphics means there is less room for text. Although many media critics and journalists have complained that this "packaging" of news into relatively short, easy-to-read units accompanied by splashy pictures or graphics does readers a disservice by not providing them with the depth of information they need in today's world, U.S. newspapers have continued to add color and graphics to their pages to make them more visually appealing. Proponents of the trend say that newspapers must compete with television and other visual media for audience attention and so must present news in a way that suits peoples' busy lifestyles.

Most newspapers are organized into sections such as sports, business, and local news. These not only act to help organize information so readers can quickly find stories that interest them, but they create subconscious parameters for readers on what types of stories to expect in those sections. The editorial page and op-ed pages are where newspaper readers expect to hear opinions on events, either from the newspaper staff or publisher itself (editorials) or from guest columnists in the op-ed page.

In terms of size, newspapers conform largely to the rules of either tabloid (typically more sensational in tone) or broadsheet (more serious). They use headlines to capture attention and "teasers" on the front page or front section pages to entice readers to see articles inside the paper. They use a variety of graphic techniques to attract and guide the reader's eye. More important stories usually appear "above the fold," or on the upper half of the broadsheet paper, so when the papers are stacked in a newsstand, those stories and graphics are what people first see.

From *Gilligan's Island* to *Survivor*: A Three-Decade Cruise in Media Literacy

Gilligan's Island, a 1960s sitcom about seven shipwrecked characters on a deserted Pacific island, is still often seen in reruns. After the first few episodes aired in 1964, Sherwood Schwartz, the show's producer, said in a 1984 interview that he had been contacted by the Coast Guard, who told him they had received several dozen serious complaints from people saying that the military should send a ship to find and rescue the people. Schwartz asked, "Who did these viewers think was filming the castaways on that island? There was even a laugh track on the show. Who was laughing at the survivors of the wreck of the *S.S. Minnow?* It boggled the mind."[2]

In June 2000 CBS aired the first of a series of "reality-based TV" shows called *Survivor,* in which 16 people were sent to a remote island and largely left to fend for themselves and undergo a series of trials and contests even as they voted a member off the island each week. The sole "survivor" would win $1 million. The show became a huge hit. It is estimated that 52 million people watched the finale of the first season. The show was copied from a popular 1997 Swedish show called *Expedition Robinson.* As of this writing, there were no reports that the Coast Guard received any complaints that the people should be rescued, although in February 2001 one of the former contestants, a 27-year-old San Francisco attorney named Stacey Stillman, sued the show claiming that producers had rigged the selection process to bolster the show's demographic appeal.[3]
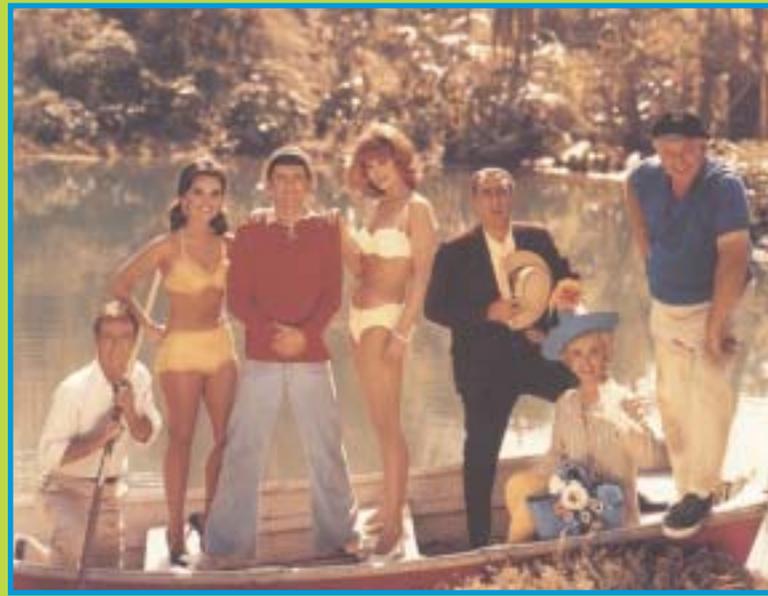
Newspapers present hard news using an inverted pyramid organization (most important items first) in the body of the text report. Sources, or people interviewed, are quoted to establish the credibility of what is being reported, enliven the report, and to show that it's not just the reporter offering his or her views. Photos and illustrations are accompanied by a brief tag line that explains what the artwork is about. Features, such as human-interest stories or profiles, are written in a different style, sometimes starting with a vignette that helps humanize the story and hook the reader.

Even if you can't read the language, you can probably make an educated guess as to what type of news these Mideast newspapers cover. Why? Because their formats are similar to newspapers you are already familiar with.

Magazines similarly use sophisticated graphic and design techniques and feature more long-form writing, often with just one or two articles per page and multipage articles. Advertising in magazines often takes up a full page, and in some magazines it is hard to immediately tell if something is an ad or graphics for the beginning of a feature. In some ways magazines combine elements of books and newspapers in their media grammar. Because of their length, they usually have a table of contents (many also have an advertiser index), which helps readers find specific articles quickly. Like newspapers, they are often divided into subject-related sections within their topic area, which usually contain short, newsy items on the subject.

Radio and Recorded Music

Radio and recorded music similarly have their own grammar, that of sound. Radio uses a combination of audio techniques to achieve different ends. Among these techniques are volume changes, multiple audio tracks, **actualities** (i.e., edited audio clips from people interviewed), sound effects, and **voice-overs,** all of which can be used to convey information, capture attention or achieve some other purpose.

Recorded music typically conforms to particular stylistic conventions, especially with regards to length (less than five minutes a song) and music format. Popular music genres, such as hip hop, rock, country, or swing, have certain rhythms, lyrical styles, and sounds that make them clearly distinguishable. This underlying media grammar facilitates easier marketing and promotion.

Even a format as apparently chaotic as talk radio has a well-defined media grammar. Many talk radio shows include call-ins from comic imitators of famous people and a "sidekick" in the studio who supports or provides counterpoints to the main host.

actualities—used in radio and television to denote edited audio or video clips of people interviewed.

voice-over—an unseen announcer or narrator talking while other activity takes place either on radio or while a scene is being shown on television.

Film and Television

Although film and television have much shorter histories as mass media than does print, they have already developed a sophisticated media grammar that is based on editing, camera angles, lighting, movement, and sound.

In a scene from the movie *Natural Born Killers*, filmmaker Oliver Stone addressed serious societal issues by turning the media grammar of the sitcom on its head. He used garish colors; strong, abusive language that referred to wife battering and incest; and a laugh track at intentionally inappropriate times.

For example, in the early history of film, most movies were only a few minutes long and either simply recorded daily activities or were essentially uncut filmed short stage plays. Although the short length of movies was more a function of the limited technology at the time, audiences soon tired of the novelty of watching silent filmed plays and wanted something more interesting.

Filmmakers started producing more sophisticated storylines for their short films and introduced a technique that was unique to film at the time—crosscut scenes. By crosscutting different scenes to simulate simultaneous events happening in two different locations, filmmakers were able to tell much more complex and dramatic stories. Further, by increasing the speed between crosscut scenes, it helped increase dramatic tension in the audience.

Today's filmmakers have many more such tools at their disposal and are able to give audiences a lot of information, all with visual or audio techniques. Think of the combination of low music and strong shadows in many horror movies, or how we understand an on-screen dream sequence or flashback, or how we differentiate "good" from "bad" characters even before they have spoken or revealed their characters through the narrative plot.

The media grammar of television fiction uses many of the same techniques seen in movies, although of course television production budgets are much smaller than movie budgets. Think of the media grammar of your average sitcom—it is usually shot on a set, with perhaps less than half a dozen "locations" generally used, and the actors come and go as if on a stage. The camera is usually stationary, although multiple camera angles are used, and a **laugh track** is used with the various punch lines, which in some sitcoms can almost be timed with clockwork precision (even if the line isn't particularly funny).

laugh track—a device used in television sitcoms that generates prerecorded laughter, timed to coincide with punch lines of jokes.

Media Inventors and Innovators

Bringing History to Life Online

An intriguing example of what's possible in the new media environment comes in the form of a Web site called "Race and Place: African American Community Histories." The site focuses on the history of Charlottesville, Virginia, and presents its story through a rich blend of digital media, interactivity, and diversity. The site was developed by students as part of a course introducing them to archival research at the University of Virginia, a university known for its innovative use of educational technology. The site is a component in a larger online archive called "Race and Place: African American Community Histories."

The site features more than 9500 pictures of African Americans from the late 1800s, taken by Rufus W. Holsinger, a commercial photographer who operated a studio in Charlottesville. More than 500 of the photos are of people who lived in the Charlottesville area. Holsinger provided scant information about his subjects, so the students faced the challenge of placing names to faces.

The students' persistence paid off. Having no more than a few scraps of information to accompany a set of photographs of African Americans at the turn of the century, students at the university set up a table at a local festival in search of anyone who could put names to the faces. At the festival, one woman alone recognized 15 of her family members and acquaintances.

The students built an online data base incorporating records from the 1910 census and the Charlottesville business and city directories from the period. Now, visitors to the site can quickly identify local enterprises, places of worship, social clubs and organizations, or schools by sorting or searching the database, as well as identifying people. If they do, they can provide information about anyone they might recognize.

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Weblink
Race and Place: African American Community Histories
http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/afam/home.html

Other types of television shows have their own types of media grammar, such as game shows, soap operas, talk shows, and news. Although we tend to think of the news as objective—or at least the media grammar used in news shows tries to encourage that kind of thinking by the audience—it is important to understand how camera angles, lighting, distance from the subject and interviewer, sound, and intercut scenes all affect our perceptions of the news.

The "objective point of view" used in television news reporting interviews treats the viewer as an observer. Typically, the camera is kept still, with shots over the shoulder of the journalist interviewing a subject. Prior to the interview, the subject is instructed by the journalist never to look directly into the camera. Rather, only the news anchor or field reporter in his or her stand-up, often used as a means to summarize or conclude the report, is allowed to look directly into the camera and thereby establish eye contact with the audience. This grammar establishes the authoritativeness and objectivity of the journalist and helps the viewer recognize the difference between the subject and the reporter.

It has been interesting to see how television news especially has borrowed some elements from the online world in its media grammar—which originally had borrowed heavily from television when graphical user interfaces such as windows and digital video started appearing online. Multiple windows on the television screen showing different kinds of information, scrolling news across the bottom of the screen giving news updates, and icons such as blinking cursors

are just some examples of how television news is borrowing from the online world and thus adding new types of media grammar.

Online Media

Online media are still so new that their grammar is still developing. Imagine a media world in which not all the audience members know how to turn pages in a book; where they try to use a remote control on a magazine; where they are afraid to use their remote control lest they break the television, or where they see a different kind of image on the TV than their neighbors because their television was made by a different company or their television is last year's model. That is roughly the state of online media in the early twenty-first century, and it is unlikely to change anytime in the near future.

However, some media grammar elements are starting to form. **Hypertext,** for example, is generally either underlined or otherwise set apart typographically or graphically from nonlinked text. An unwritten rule to have a Web site logo in the upper left corner of the screen linked to return to the Web site's homepage is being followed by more and more Web developers. The increased use of icons to create a visual, interactive "language" that transverses Web sites allows computer users to quickly learn how to use new types of programs or utilize interactivity on a Web site. Examples include more or less standardized icons for functions such as printing, opening a document, sending a file, e-mailing a document, on-screen drawing, painting, or image editing tools, and icons to allow for image manipulation such as zooming in or out, where applicable.

Mass communication in an online digital environment increasingly exploits a full range of storytelling and communication tools, including text, audio, video, graphics, and animation. This broadened set of tools enables the journalist or other communication professional to tell each story in a way uniquely suited to that story. Because of the lack of experience of many users of online media and the ever-changing state of technological improvements, it still can be a challenge to guide users in accessing that information easily as an online media grammar develops.

The value of enriched storytelling capabilities has been demonstrated in a variety of publishing enterprises. One early example is Voyager, a company founded by Bob Stein, whose electronic publishing produced a series of highly acclaimed digital products, such as "Poetry in Motion," featuring a rich multimedia presentation of poet Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), "Starry Night," which explores Van Gogh's remarkable painting, and "First Person: Mumia Abu-Jamal," the black journalist convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison in a sensational case involving racial and political crosscurrents in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Weblink
Voyager
[voyager.learntech.com/cdrom/]

How to Recognize Reliable Information and Evaluate Resources

With the increased availability of media channels, especially online, it has become increasingly difficult for audiences to recognize which channels offer reliable information and how to evaluate the information they encounter.

hypertext—text online that is linked to another Web page, Web site, or different part of the same Web page by HTML coding.

There are at least three principal ways to evaluate media in the digital age. First is brand name. Some brands are well-established and have proven their reliability over time. Among these are leading news publishers, such as The New York Times Company, which publishes news and information in print, online, and also on television. News consumers who see this brand, regardless of medium, can probably count on it to be a good source of information.

The second way is to examine the new or unfamiliar source's own internal standards, practices, organization, and personnel. Most Web sites include a section called "about us," and it usually provides useful information about who operates the site, how it is run, and what procedures it follows in creating content. This information should lay out a compelling case as to why readers should trust the site. More and more Web sites offering news are also posting their mission statements online in order to help establish their credibility.

Or, it might be worth looking at a Web site called "Who Is?" Who Is? provides a comprehensive and up-to-date database on all Web sites. They provide a wealth of useful information, including who owns each site's domain name, to whom it is registered, and their contact information. Such information can be useful in establishing the legitimacy of a Web site. Web sites that do not have accurate or complete contact information should not be as trusted as those that do.

The third way to evaluate media is to compare the new or unfamiliar source of information with other trusted or independent sources. For example, if one encounters a new Web site on financial information and is unsure of its veracity, it may be useful to compare its reports with an established or trusted brand, such as *The Wall Street Journal,* which has spent more than a century establishing its reliability. Another option when looking at online news sources is to look at the original source material as well to see if the article accurately portrayed what was important.

*Do*s and *Don't*s when Evaluating Online Information

The Internet is full of hoaxes, cranks, scams, and cons. The up-to-the-minute, 24/7 nature of news on the Web and low-cost distribution make it an ideal place for misinformation to be spread, because facts cannot always be quickly verified. How do you know when you are being fed a line when online?

- Do check the "About Us" section of a Web site to find out background information on who runs it. Do they clearly state their mission, what they stand for, and who any sponsors are, or do they seem evasive and unclear? If they fall in the latter category, that could be a warning sign that they are not being on the level as to their real purpose.
- Do check what other sites they link to in a "Useful Links" page and scan what those sites stand for. Most Web sites link to others who share their views or at least will have more similar-minded links than links to opposing Web sites.
- Do compare the information in the Web site with similar stories in other Web sites, both from branded news names and from smaller sites. If you receive information that a well-known or respected group has made an important announcement, check the organization's Web site, as they should have that information posted as well.

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- Don't trust the name of the organization who owns the Web site. Lobbying groups and other organizations that are trying to push a specific agenda will often adopt names that mask their true goals or at least put them in a euphemistic light.
- Don't trust information that has no date somewhere on the page. Information that may have been accurate when it was first posted may well be out of date when you come to the site.
- Don't trust information you read from discussion groups, online chat rooms, or Usenet, even if the person posting claims to be an expert or authority on the subject. As the old newsroom saying goes: If your mother says she loves you, check it out.

The Fragmentation of Media Channels

Today's media system is increasingly fragmented. The number of media channels has exploded since the mid-1970s, when most people in the United States had access to four national television networks (three commercial, one public), one or two national news magazines, a local daily newspaper, and a handful of local radio stations. Today, the typical media consumer has hundreds of national channels of television and radio content to choose from, as well as dozens of international channels. Online, media consumers have thousands of media Web sites from around the United States and the world to explore.

The Multichannel Universe

The explosion in the number of channels has enormous implications for media literacy. In the past, one needed only to turn the television dial a few times to see the entire spectrum of television programming. Today, it can take half an hour to navigate through the **electronic program guide** listings of just the current program offerings. Making sense of all the media available on the Internet is even more daunting.

The consequences of fragmentation are potentially significant in terms of the impact of media on society. Rarely do national audiences come together for common, simultaneous media experiences. The effects of this fragmentation have been hard to document, but many people have asserted that fragmentation leads to less social cohesion. This fragmentation can be amplified by many of the personalization features on the Web. Internet users can choose what kinds of news and entertainment content they see when they get online and thus filter out views and news that they would otherwise be exposed to in traditional media. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a concern is that people will become so focused on some narrow aspect of a particular topic or subject with other like-minded individuals that they will ignore larger societal issues that do not directly affect or interest them.

Before television, national magazines were said to help the young American nation define itself and give people a common platform to look at and discuss issues. A sometimes-heard lament is that when the three networks dominated

electronic program guide (EPG)—guide available on television that provides program listings and some simple interactivity, such as ordering pay-per-view programs through the television or buying CDs or DVDs of music or shows that are listed.

American television viewing, television played a vital role in establishing or reinforcing a common culture or a common agenda for the nation. Television, for example, provided live coverage of our first step on the moon, and this helped foster great national pride.

One also needs to consider other programming commonly seen during the era when three commercial networks dominated. Although there were some great programs to be sure, such as Edward Murrow's *See It Now* or *Playhouse 90,* among the most widely seen programs were situation comedies such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Gilligan's Island.* Entertaining though these programs may have been, it is hard to argue they provided the glue that held our nation together. Even more, it was during the 1960s when the networks were at their peak in terms of viewing dominance that the nation was embroiled in its greatest social upheaval since the Civil War, a century before.

A Diversity of Voices

The flip side of fragmentation is increased diversity of voices in programming. When the three long-standing commercial networks dominated, their programming was almost devoid of cultural diversity. It was an almost entirely white world, frequently suburban in nature. Despite an occasional program featuring black, Latino, or other minority group lead characters, it was not until the development of Fox, WB, and UPN that commercial network television began to show significantly more inclusive programming during prime time—although it is still highly skewed in terms of the portrayal of many social, cultural, and ethnic groups. Moreover, the growth of cable and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) has ushered in even more cultural diversity and diversity of voices on television. Although it may be hard to get the nation gathered around the television set watching a single program anymore, it is also true that television of the early twenty-first century provides a window of greater cultural diversity of the nation and the world. Of course, it is still far from a perfect social or cultural mirror.

The proliferation of online media has also led to a huge growth in the diversity or plurality of media voices available to consumers. Although many media consumers may still be most comfortable with a relatively small number of

The creation of TV networks Fox, UPN, and WB has helped increase the diversity of characters seen on broadcast television with shows like *The Hughleys*.

media channels, they now at least have access to a diverse set of voices and perspectives online. Research from the Pew Center indicates that frequent users of the Internet appreciate and value this variety of media voices.

Mass Audiences

Despite media fragmentation, certain programs still draw record audiences. An excellent example was CBS's coverage of the 1994 Winter Olympics. The coverage set a ratings record, making it the most-watched event in TV history, with 204 million U.S. viewers, or 83 percent of the country, seeing at least a portion of CBS's coverage. International viewership was even higher, with estimates of more than 1 billion viewers worldwide.

More recently, when the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center occurred on September 11, 2001, almost all media turned their attention to the attack and its aftermath. For days, weeks, and even months following the attack, it was hard to find any media channel—print, broadcast, cable, or online—that didn't focus in large part on terrorism and the U.S. response to it. In this case, fragmentation of channels probably helped in the depth of coverage, as more media outlets covered various angles of the tragedy and thus gave the public more information than they would have had if the media outlets were confined to only a few.

Commercial Forces That Shape Media Content

Even in an open and democratic society with a free press such as in the United States, economic factors and corporate decisions often influence what is and is not covered in the news and what kind of entertainment is created and shown to the general public. Rarely does the average media consumer think of how commercial forces are shaping the content we see everyday, but these forces affect everything from what types of shows are produced to whether a news report critical of an important advertiser is downplayed or even pulled by the media corporation.

These activities happen at the local level and national or international level. At the local level, a cutback in the number of reporters to help save money can result in a noticeable drop of local coverage, such as coverage of area schools. The newspaper company may save money, but the public is poorer for the lessened coverage of local issues that they should be informed about. A company that advertises heavily in a local newspaper may have undue influence on decisions whether articles critical of it are published or not by threatening to withdraw its advertising.

But this kind of manipulation of media content is not confined to small-town media outlets. In 1998, Chris Patten, former British governor of Hong Kong, had his book contract cancelled by HarperCollins, which is a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Patten's book, *East and West,* was reportedly going to be highly critical of China's policies, and Murdoch at the time was trying to get China to accept Murdoch's Star TV satellite and cable programs.
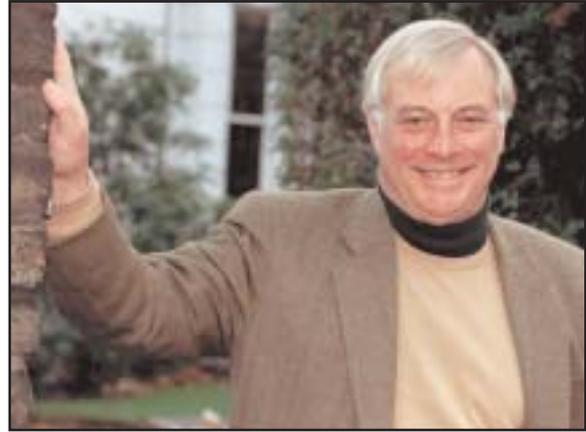
Chris Patten, former British governor of Hong Kong.

Similarly, a few years prior to that he removed the BBC from Star TV when Chinese leaders expressed displeasure at the BBC's reports on the killings in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

These incidents are not meant to show that Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation are particularly greedy or selfish; similar stories of corporate decisions influencing what we see or do not see can be told about all of the major media corporations and will be covered in more detail later in this chapter when discussing media ethics.

Profit and Nonprofit Media

Basic to all media is the underlying commercial nature of mass communication. As such, there are two main systems for funding media in the United States. One system relies on the commercial marketplace where print and electronic media are run to make money. The other system is not for profit and relies on a combination of public funding, or support from government or other public institutions, corporate gifts and sponsorships, and audience contributions. This system is used especially for electronic media. There are a variety of other funding models used around the world for nonprofit media, including systems where the public pays a tax on television or radio receivers, which then is used to fund media programming.

In the for-profit model, ownership plays a key role in determining the nature of the media enterprise. For-profit media companies are either publicly held companies or privately held, often family-owned, operations. For publicly held media companies, shares are bought and sold on the stock market, just like any other company. The people who run these companies are responsible to their shareholders, who, by and large, expect their investments to return a profit.

In recent history, media businesses have been among the most profitable of any industry, with profit margins typically in double digits, or 10 percent or higher, on an annual basis. Sometimes, profit pressures lead media companies, especially publicly traded companies, to focus on the short term—cutting costs, laying off staff, or making decisions that can increase near-term profits—but that negatively influence the quality of a product, such as a news enterprise. The result can be an immediate increase in profitability, but that profitability is not sustainable.

Conversely, making money can also be an incentive for media companies to produce a better-quality product. The Disney Company, for example, is among

the most profitable of major publicly owned media companies in the United States, and it is recognized for its quality products, including award-winning motion pictures, recorded music, and television (it owns the ABC television network, one of the most highly regarded and watched).

The influence of this commercial foundation is especially evident in entertainment media, such as in much television programming and many motion pictures. Most of the television schedule is organized with commercial breaks on the hour and throughout each program so advertisers can insert their commercial messages. Broadcast television, although thought of as "free" television, is still essentially paid for by the consumer in the form of higher prices for products as companies have to recoup their expenses for advertising and marketing budgets. But in addition to commercials, advertisers can influence the content of shows and motion pictures directly.

Product Placement and Corporate Sponsorship

Influencing the content of shows and motion pictures can happen in at least two ways. The first is product placement, where advertisers pay to have their product displayed in a movie or show with the brand name highly visible to the audience. Second, advertisers or marketers sometimes work directly with media organizations to sponsor specific programs on television or special sections in newspapers. A brand of beer or soft drink sponsoring a concert tour that is televised on MTV is an example of this.

Even entire channels of content are based on corporate sponsorship. An example is the Hallmark Channel. Launched in August 2001 by Hallmark Cards and Crown Media Holdings, the Hallmark Channel features dozens of series, specials, movies, and miniseries, ranging from *Gulliver's Travels* to *Animal Farm*. The Hallmark Channel is widely distributed through 1700 cable systems, DirecTV and EchoStar direct-to-home satellite services, and C-Band dish owners across the United States and worldwide to 100 international markets; the channel is seen by more than 80 million subscribers globally.[4] It's worth noting that simply because a program or channel is advertiser-sponsored, it isn't necessarily flawed. In fact, advertising sponsorship has produced some of the best programming on television, including the Hallmark Channel, which features a library of 4500 hours of programming that has won nearly 200 Emmy Awards.

Shaping Public Service Media

Although the U.S. media system includes public service broadcasting, even that is increasingly influenced or shaped by commercial forces. In the United States, a large portion of the funding for public service broadcasting comes from corporate sponsors, and those sponsors tend to be most interested in programming that is consistent with the image they want to cultivate among public broadcasting's generally upscale audiences. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which produces and distributes public programming, received 17 percent of its funding from businesses in 2000, the second highest source of funding for public television. The largest portion, 26 percent, comes from member donations. Less than a third of PBS's funding comes from government sources.[5]

As a result of the relatively large portion of corporate sponsorship and the relaxing of rules that do not allow corporations to advertise on public television, even public service broadcasters sometimes shape their programming in accordance with commercial forces. PBS has also faced especially tough competition with some of the specialized cable channels, which produce targeted or niche educational programming on sciences, nature, or history much like that shown by PBS.

Concentration of Media Ownership

Regardless of ownership, there are incentives for media companies to seek economies of scale. Strictly speaking, economies of scale refer to the decrease in unit manufacturing cost that results from mass production. In the context of media, it means essentially that media enterprises can reduce costs and increase profit by getting larger and reaching a larger market with their content. Of course, just getting bigger doesn't necessarily translate into greater economies of scale, but it is the basic reason behind a fundamental trend in media over the past half century. Successful media enterprises have acquired other media enterprises, either through purchase or merger, and thereby become larger in size and scope. Newspaper companies have bought other newspaper companies; radio station groups have bought other radio station groups. Cross-media enterprises have acquired other media enterprises, sometimes extending internationally as well. The result is a media system that is increasingly large, multifaceted, and international in ownership. These companies compete with other large media enterprises and across international borders.

Some critics have argued that despite the possible economies of scale, there is a significant downside to media conglomerates or media monopolies (i.e., when in a community there is just one media organization serving the public). Greater concentration of ownership, or fewer owners owning more media, results in less diversity of media voices, and the public is thus poorly served. Minority voices and nonmainstream views are silenced.

One of the most vocal critics of concentrated media ownership is Ben H. Bagdikian. In his book *Media Monopoly,* Bagdikian presents evidence that during the 1990s a small number of the country's largest corporations purchased more public communications power than ever before. In 1983, the biggest media merger in history was a $340 million deal involving the Gannett Company, a newspaper chain, which bought Combined Communications Corporation, whose assets included billboards, newspapers, and broadcast stations. In 1996, Disney's acquisition of ABC/Capital Cities was a $19 billion deal—56 times larger. In 2001, AOL's acquisition of Time Warner dwarfed even this deal at $160 billion, or nearly ten times the price of the 1996 Disney deal.

These companies, Bagdikian contends, have built a communications cartel within the United States. A cartel is a group of independent businesses that collaborate to regulate production, pricing, and marketing of goods by the members of the group. In this case, the group is controlling not just industrial products such as gasoline, refrigerators, or clothing. At stake are the words and images that define and shape the culture and political agenda of the country. "Aided by the digital revolution and the acquisition of subsidiaries that operate at every step in the mass communications process, from the creation of content to its delivery into the home, the communications cartel has exercised stunning influ-

ence over national legislation and government agencies, an influence whose scope and power would have been considered scandalous or illegal twenty years ago," writes Bagdikian.

Bagdikian further notes that 99 percent of the 1500 daily newspapers in the country are the only daily in their cities. All but a few of the nation's 11,800 cable systems are monopolies in their cities. Most of the country's 11,000 commercial radio stations are part of national ownership groups and just a half dozen formats (e.g., all-talk, all-news, rock, rap, adult contemporary) dominate programming in every city. The major commercial television networks and their local affiliates carry programs of essentially the same type all across the country. This system is a **media oligopoly.** The term *media oligopoly* refers to a marketplace in which media ownership and diversity are severely limited and the actions of any single media group substantially affect its competitors, including the content and price of media products for both consumers and advertisers.

The Globalization of Media

Dominating the media worldwide are diversified global media giants (see Table 2-1). These corporations are international conglomerates, many of whom are either financially dominated themselves by nonmedia business interests or at least contain in their financial portfolio significant nonmedia commercial properties and investments. They include a wide range of media or channels of distribution, especially video.

AOL Time Warner

As shown in Table 2-1, the largest media company in the world is AOL Time Warner. Notably, this company has existed only since 2001. The parent companies, America Online and Time Warner, had existed for many years, but in January 2000 they announced their plans to merge and create the new, largest media enterprise in the world. In January 2001, the merger (technically, AOL acquired Time Warner) became official as federal regulators gave their approval. By the time the merger was complete, however, the bottom had fallen out of the dot-com financial sector, the economy had weakened in general, AOL Time Warner's stock had dropped substantially in 2001 and 2002, and there were several executive shake-ups during 2002.

AOL Time Warner has more than 200 subsidiaries, including Time Inc. (the largest magazine publisher in the United States); Warner Bros. (producer and distributor of movies, TV programs, and videos); Warner Music Group; Home Box Office (the largest pay TV service in the United States); Cinemax (another pay TV service); Time Warner Cable (the largest cable system in the United States); Warner Books (a major book publisher); cable TV networks, including CNN, TBS, TNT, and Comedy Central (50 percent owned with Viacom); the WB television network; and various other properties ranging from *Mad* magazine to the Atlanta Braves baseball team and a number of other professional sports teams. It employs more than 90,000 people and has its headquarters in New York City's Rockefeller Center, although a new headquarters is being built for $1.7 billion near Columbus Circle, on the southwest corner of Central Park. Its chairman is Stephen M. Case, the founder of AOL and now sole representative from the

media oligopoly—a marketplace in which media ownership and diversity are severely limited and the actions of any single media group substantially affect its competitors, including the content and price of media products for both consumers and advertisers.

Table 2-1 Global Media Corporations, Ranked by 2000 Revenues in Billions of Dollars

Company	Revenues in billions of dollars	Head-quarters	News-papers/ Magazines	TV, Movies	Radio	Cable	Book	Music	Internet
1. AOL Time Warner*	$36.4	United States	*Time,* many other magazines	Warner Communi-cations, HBO, WB	None	TWC	Warner Books	Warner Music	AOL, many online publi-cations, Road Runner cable modem
2. Disney	$25.4	United States	None	ABC, Buena Vista, Miramax	ABC	ESPN	Hyperion	Walt Disney Records	ESPN.com, Infoseek
3. Viacom CBS	$20	United States	None	Paramount, UPN, CBS	Infinity	MTV, Showtime, Nickel-odeon	Simon & Schuster	Famous Music Pub.	MTV.com, CBS MarketWatch. com, Sports-line
4. Sony	$16 (only media portion, not including consumer elec-tronics; total revenues are $58)	Japan	None	Columbia Pictures, Sony	None	Game Show Network	None	Columbia, Epic, Nashville	Limited, but big in elec-tronics, games, and devices, which are increasingly online
5. Bertels-mann	$15.8	Germany	Gruner+ Jahr	CLT-UFA	CLT-UFA	None	Random House	Bertels-mann Music Group	Bn.com

(continued)

AOL side of the business among upper-level executives, and CEO is Richard D. Parsons, a long-time executive at Time Warner.

The Walt Disney Company

Second in size to AOL Time Warner is the Walt Disney Company. The legendary Walt Disney founded the company, which still maintains its unique flavor of family-oriented media entertainment. Its properties include ABC Television Network; Buena Vista Motion Pictures Group; Miramax Films; various theme parks, such as the Animal Kingdom, Disneyland, Disneyland Paris, Tokyo Disneyland, Disney-MGM Studios, Epcot Center, and the Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida (the most-visited theme park in North America); a cruise line; Internet companies; and the professional NHL hockey team the Anaheim Mighty Ducks. The ABC TV network includes a dozen owned and operated TV stations

Table 2-1 Global Media Corporations, Ranked by 2000 Revenues in Billions of Dollars (continued)

Company	Revenues in billions of dollars	Head-quarters	News-papers/ Magazines	TV, Movies	Radio	Cable	Book	Music	Internet
6. Vivendi Universal	$14.6 (only media portion, not including water-services; total revenues are $40)	France	Many magazines	42% of USA Networks, Universal Studios, CANAL+ (French pay-TV service)	None	None	Houghton Mifflin	Universal Music Group	Cegetel
7. News Corp	$13.8	Australia	*New York Post, Times* (London)	20th Century Fox, Fox net-work, Star TV	None	Fox News, Sports, Family Channel	Harper Collins	Mush-room Records	Fox.com
8. AT&T Broad-band & Internet Services	$8.2	United States	None	Liberty Media	None	Former TCI and MediaOne	None	None	Digital cable
9. Comcast	$8.2	United States	None	QVC, and E! Entertainment TV	None	Comcast	None	None	High-speed cable. digital cable
10. Cox Media	$7.8	United States	Cox NPs	Cox TV stations	Cox radio stations	Cox Cable	None	None	With 28 city-specific Internet sites, cable modem

Sources: Hoovers.com, Fortune.com, company reports.

*Note: AOL announced its acquisition of Time Warner in January 2000, but the official merger of the two companies was not completed until January 2001.

as well as shares in nine cable channels, including premier sportscaster ESPN. Disney employs 117,000 people worldwide. The company is headquartered in Burbank, California. Chairman and CEO is Michael D. Eisner, and the vice chairman is Roy E. Disney.

Viacom CBS

Third on the list of media giants is Viacom CBS. Viacom was founded as a cable channel spin-off from CBS in 1971, following an FCC order forcing the net-works to divest their programming syndication and cable TV businesses, and it is ironic that 29 years later the spin-off had grown to such proportions that it was large enough to buy its parent.

Cable pioneer Ralph Baruch headed Viacom during many of its early years after the CBS spin-off and helped the company grow through a series of smart business

Media Inventors and Innovators

Pamela Thomas-Graham

On Sept. 1, 1999, NBC Chairman and CEO Robert Wright named Pamela Thomas-Graham the president and CEO of CNBC.com and executive vice president, NBC. Thomas-Graham, a graduate of the Harvard Law School and the Harvard Business School, was the first black woman partner at McKinsey & Company, the world's largest management consulting firm, where she specialized in new media. In her NBC posts, she is among the most influential executives in television, online, and overall media businesses. In 2001, *Black Enterprise* magazine named Thomas-Graham the African American executive of the year.

Pamela Thomas-Graham.

moves, tempered by a strong commitment to public service. During the Baruch years, Viacom was pronounced reflecting its Latin roots, as "Vee-ah," but with Sumner Redstone's acquisition in 1987 and a shift of corporate culture, the pronunciation was changed to a more Anglo flavor, with a long "i" sound (as in "high").

The reunited behemoth has wide-ranging interests, including Blockbuster, the number-one video chain with 4200 stores that represent 25 percent of videotape rentals (Viacom CBS owns 80 percent of the chain); MTV Networks (MTV, VH-1, Nickelodeon); Showtime Networks; the United Paramount Network (UPN, 50 percent); the CBS Television Network; the Nashville Network; Country Music Television; and 82 percent of Infinity Broadcasting, which owns 160 radio stations in 34 U.S. markets. Also in its empire are book publisher Simon & Schuster, Paramount Pictures, 34 TV stations, and more than 100 theaters in Canada. The merged operation also has a strong online presence in CBS MarketWatch.com (37 percent ownership) and SportsLine USA (a 21 percent stake). With its MTV Internet division, MTVi, including both MTV and VH-1, as well as SonicNet (a premiere provider of online music), Viacom CBS is positioned well to provide not only online music but also online music video. Its Nickelodeon channel, already one of the most popular children's destinations on the Web with 2.4 million registered users, also is well positioned to bring more online video.

Sumner Redstone, CEO of Viacom CBS, controls 67 percent of Viacom voting stock. The company is headquartered in New York.

Of the remaining seven largest media companies worldwide, four are based outside the United States, although each has various U.S. media business interests. These four international media companies are Japan's Sony Corporation, Germany's Bertelsmann AG, France's Vivendi Universal, and Australia's News Corporation.

Yahoo!

Worthy of special note in the age of digital media is Santa Clara, California–based Yahoo! Although it's not entirely clear how to categorize Yahoo!, there is no question that it is digital and it is big. Ranked number 293 by the *Financial Times* in 1998, it moved up to number 40 in 2000, with a market capitalization (i.e., value of stock) of US $116 billion. Yahoo! had 2000 revenues of $1.1 billion. Yahoo.com draws more than 57 million visitors each month and is the most heavily trafficked of all Internet portals, or sites that draw visitors for a number of services, including e-mail, search, and content. Founders and "chief Yahoo!s" are David Filo and Jerry Yang, who own about 9 percent and 8 percent of the company respectively.

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Weblink
Yahoo!
[www.yahoo.com]

Media Executive Diversity

One noteworthy aspect of these ten media giants is that in every case but two, the chief executive (either the chairman or the CEO) is a white male of western European descent. The exceptions are Richard Parsons, CEO of AOL Time Warner, who is African American, and the Japanese chairman of Sony. Not until one travels far down the media hierarchy does one find significant diversity in media ownership at firms such as $577 million Spanish-language television network Univision, Yahoo!, or the $1.5 billion Black Entertainment Television, whose founder Robert Johnson in 2000 launched a major black-oriented Web presence.

One notable attempt at greater diversity or inclusivity at the top of the networks failed with a resounding thud in 1999 when Jamie Tarses resigned from her position as head of ABC Entertainment. In 1996, at age 32, Tarses became not only the youngest but the first woman to head a network entertainment division. She had achieved considerable success in programming at NBC, where she helped create prime-time hits such as *Friends*. At ABC she introduced a series of sophisticated urban comedies such as *Dharma and Greg*. In response to a restructuring at the network, Tarses resigned her post as the president of ABC Entertainment. In leaving she said, "I definitely never want to be an executive again."[6]

Media Ethics

It is important to understand the difference between ethics and laws. Although many of our most basic laws are based on ethical precepts, many unethical actions are not illegal. Ethics are moral codes that we live by, and philosophers have struggled with understanding principles of ethics for thousands of years. As societal and cultural mores change over time, ideas of what constitutes ethical practices also shift. Ethics can also differ between cultures. For example, lying to someone to save them or someone else from embarrassment may be perfectly acceptable, even expected, in some cultures, whereas people in other cultures would believe lying under any circumstances is unethical.

There is no single, underlying unified ethical principle that all people can follow for complete justice and peace. A useful approach to applying ethical principles in life and in the practice of mass communication is outlined by three prominent ethics scholars in their book *Media Ethics*. Clifford G. Christians, Kim B. Rotzoll, and Mark Fackler outline five theoretical approaches to ethics that can be used as philosophical principles from which to frame ethical issues that arise:

1. *The Golden Rule.* A basic ethical principle in Judeo-Christian belief, which dominates most Western societies, the Golden Rule is often cited as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Another way to phrase the same belief is "Love thy neighbor as thyself." In other words, we should help other people not simply when we perceive some future benefit for us in helping them, but simply because it is the right thing to do.

   This principle could be applied by a journalist who is interviewing the grieving relative of an accident or crime victim, for example. By treating the person with respect and dignity and asking him- or herself if he or she would want to be treated in the same way if in the subject's situation, the journalist can perhaps avoid some of the charges of invasion of privacy or tastelessness in coverage that the media are often accused of. Some journalists who have been on the receiving end of news stories have often mentioned their shock when they realize how insensitive and intrusive the news media can be.

2. *The Golden Mean.* One of the oldest ethical principles, the Golden Mean was espoused in different forms by Aristotle and Confucius, each of whom said that finding a balance between two extremes is the most ethical way. This "middle way" may well shift as the extremes shift, of course, and even this principle has to be taken in moderation. It would not be ethical to steal only half the money from a cash register rather than all of it, for example, because stealing is wrong in the first place.

   Applying the Golden Mean to news stories would involve trying to find balance and fairness among all sides of an issue. It does not mean automatically giving each side the same amount of coverage or space in the newspaper, however, as the relative importance of the groups must be judged.

3. *The Categorical Imperative.* Immanuel Kant was an influential German philosopher in the eighteenth century who stated that actions should be decided on moral laws that would apply to everyone. In other words, if someone was going to be punished for lying, then every person who lied should be punished, even if the lie was told to save a life or protect someone else.

   For media organizations, examples of applying Kant's categorical imperative would be in their decisions to publish names of crime victims or to cover all crimes of a certain seriousness, for example. In this case, if a newspaper published all names of drivers arrested for drunk driving, then even the mayor (or newspaper publisher) would have his or her name published if arrested.

4. *The Principle of Utility.* This theoretical approach states that what is most ethical is what does the most good for the greatest number of people, a concept called utilitarianism. This means that even if a decision or act severely hurts someone or a small group, if it helps a much greater number of people, then it is right. Scientific research on animals and humans operates under a utilitarian principle, although there are many safeguards to minimize potential suffering and harm of test subjects.

Utilitarianism can often be used to justify media coverage of sensitive or painful events for a small number of people, because the coverage can help many others. Examples include investigative reports of government wrongdoing in which a few individuals may go to jail or lose their jobs while society as a whole is better for exposing the wrongdoers.

5. *Veil of Ignorance.* Twentieth-century philosopher John Rawls argued in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* that fairness is the fundamental idea in the concept of justice. However, in complex modern society it is often difficult to establish what is fair because some groups have greater wealth, power, and advantages than others. In order to better understand fairness, Rawls advocates the parties step behind a "veil of ignorance" in which they are no longer the owner or the employee. They must stake out a basic position on the issue not knowing what role they would have after it is decided. From this framework Rawls says the parties would be able to better establish fair practices.

Immanuel Kant.

Using the technique of applying a veil of ignorance to an issue helps those involved see the issue from a different perspective. The journalist may realize that if he were the politician, then he could do his job better or communicate more effectively if a journalist was not always so cynical and abrasive in dealing with him. This may lead to a change in that journalist's behavior.

It should be obvious that one theoretical approach will not work for all situations, and that conflicts between ethical precepts are at the crux of ethical dilemmas in life and in media. The Golden Rule may often conflict with the categorical imperative, as an editor may well imagine she wouldn't want her own name to appear in an embarrassing front-page story although the newspaper's policy is to always print crime victims' names. Media organizations often do not show the same vigor in reporting about their own business practices and mistakes—even giving "no comment" responses to questions—as they do about other businesses—a clear violation of the categorical imperative. The principle of utilitarianism can be used to run roughshod over people's rights of privacy, as editors justify heavy coverage of tragic stories involving famous people as "the public's right to know." But what good does such intrusive coverage actually serve? On the other hand, should a story that could close a polluting factory that employs many people in the town not be published because it would break the principle of utilitarianism?

Media professionals must deal with a number of ethical problems throughout the course of their daily work, some of which are discussed briefly later in this book in the chapters dealing with each of those professions. Because of the nature of the work in mass communication, ethical lapses can have repercussions far beyond the unethical media professional, potentially ruining others' careers, affecting the public's perception and trust of media in general, and even in some cases ending lives.

However, sometimes corporate decisions made in executive boardrooms far above the journalist's level can also have ethical repercussions. Sometimes journalists or media professionals may be willing pawns in unethical practices and at other times they simply try to do their jobs as best they can within the larger organizational environment.

We will concentrate here on media ethics issues that arise from commercial forces shaping media content and the concentration and globalization of media

ownership. Two examples of ethical issues raised have already been mentioned in this chapter: the case of *Time Magazine's* cover and extensive coverage of the film *Eyes Wide Shut* and Chris Patten's cancelled HarperCollins book contract as parent company owner Rupert Murdoch tried to get his Star TV cable and satellite service into the Chinese market. Would either of these instances have happened if the movie studio and the book publisher were not owned by larger media companies with substantial business interests in other areas?

Public Interests vs. Business Interests

Businesses in a capitalistic society are expected to make money for their owners, whether the companies are privately held or traded publicly on the stock market. Members of the public invest in companies that are or are expected to be successful, which means making profits. Media companies are no different than other types of corporations in that regard.

However, media organizations are in a uniquely powerful position to influence the public compared to other types of companies because of the "product"—media content—they create. In fact, a shoe manufacturer or cereal maker who wants to influence public opinion has to go through the media to do so. Because of the power of media to shape and influence the public, some aspects of the media industry such as journalism are given special protection under the Constitution. Partly as a result of these protections and partly through historical traditions, media—and journalists in particular—have had a strong public service mission. Many questions arise on how seriously the public service mission of news is kept in mind when news organizations become divisions of larger entertainment media companies or corporations that do not have any background in media at all.

At the heart of many media ethics dilemmas are the conflicting goals of serving the public with information and maximizing profit for the business. These issues can arise in a number of ways.

Commercial interests can take precedence over what is covered when powerful advertisers cancel or threaten to cancel their advertising in a media outlet. A blatant example may be when an unflattering story on a large local advertiser is going to run in a local newspaper and is either altered or pulled when the advertiser complains. A far more common case involves advertisers pulling their ads when there is coverage of unpopular issues or unpopular editorial stands taken by a media organization. Examples of this include Southern newspapers that supported the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, losing local advertisers. Although news coverage was not about the advertisers directly, the newspaper became associated with an opinion that the advertisers either did not agree with or thought might hurt their businesses if they were seen as advocating that position by advertising in the newspapers.

Another way that commercial interests may interfere with the public interest is when media outlets do not adequately cover certain groups or portions of the population because of a lack of audience and advertiser interest. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* had expanded its coverage and spent tens of millions of dollars on creating zoned editions that covered the growing, largely middle-class and affluent surrounding areas even as it largely ignored coverage of the urban, largely poor, central city. A special section of the paper concentrating on complex urban issues of the south central area was created in 1992, with the *Times* emphasizing

Southern papers that supported the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s often lost local advertisers, an example of the types of commercial influences that can affect news coverage.

its public service mission, but it was closed three years later despite greater than expected advertising because of costs associated with the special section.[7]

Related to the case cited above are the costs associated with running a modern newsroom. Cutting staff is one of the surest ways to drastically reduce operating costs, but at what expense in terms of news coverage? Fewer staff means less coverage of certain subject areas and neighborhoods, which can end up giving the public an incomplete picture of what is happening in their town or region. Similarly, investigative reports are often time consuming and expensive and are less likely to be conducted in a media organization intensely aware of maximizing profits.

Professional training and development are other areas that often suffer. Many journalists interested in learning how to use computer-assisted reporting tools or digital media in order to help make them better reporters must pay their own way to conferences or workshops and use their personal vacation time in order to attend.

Media Types Influencing Content

Just as the type of media used to present content influences how that content is created and how it is received and perceived by the public, various business pressures arise with the various media types. The expense of producing feature-length films, for example, is an important factor for large media companies that want to maximize their profits. A film could have a greater likelihood of getting produced if the media company already owns the rights to the character to be used in the film, for example, and if there is good potential for other media content from within the company, such as music and television shows, to be tied in with the movie to help in marketing it.

The individual divisions of a large media company must deal with the demands of the corporate parent to maximize profits, which can affect decisions within a particular branch such as a book publisher to emphasize publishing books from established authors in a popular genre in order to generate sales at the expense of new authors or types of books that don't fall within established categories.

The need for exciting visual elements has even affected news coverage. *Dateline NBC*'s 15-minute segment "Waiting to Explode," which ran on November 17, 1992, was meant to demonstrate the danger of the gas tanks exploding on certain models of General Motors' pickups. The only trouble was that the trucks shown exploding on the segment had been rigged by the production team to ensure a fiery explosion and that several elements of the information they presented were misleading or inaccurate. It wasn't until later independent

investigations and information given by sources who were at the initial filming that the truth behind the segment came out, forcing NBC to make a public apology and settle the lawsuit that GM had brought against NBC.[8] In this case, the need to have an exciting visual element helped make the ethical breaches that took place in this television news segment more likely.
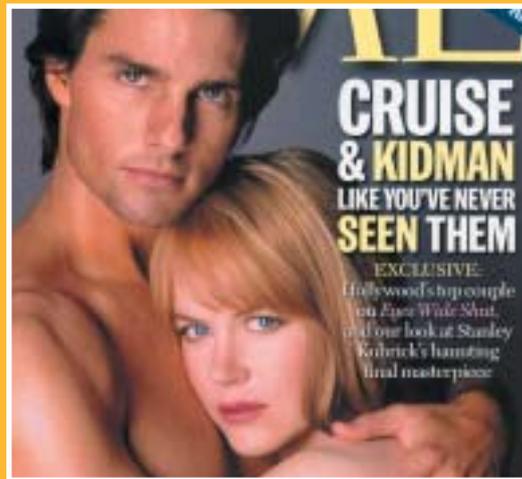
Not every dramatic photograph on the front page of a newspaper is an example of a breach in media ethics, but it is important to have a critical eye and good media literacy when looking at visual media to ask how much of the decision to put that element in the news segment or on the page was driven by the need to capture the public's attention rather than its news value.

S U M M A R Y

Media literacy is not a goal to reach, but an ongoing process in which one can always improve in order to become a better mass media consumer. Media literacy involves critically thinking of the media and understanding the subtext of messages that mass media may be sending. By developing a better understanding in four key areas—media grammar, commercial forces that shape media content, fragmentation of media audiences, and changes in media use because of digital technology—today's audience member can be aware of when mass media are trying to manipulate them and can act accordingly.

Each type of media has its own unique grammar that has developed over time and that helps set the stage for how we perceive certain types of content. Online media, because they are so new, are still developing their media grammar and will continue to do so for several years.

Commercial forces shape the kinds of media content we see because the vast majority of media companies are for-profit and thus must make money to stay in business. Concentration of media ownership has affected how media companies are run, as more and more media outlets become concentrated in fewer and fewer companies.

Because of advances in broadcasting and digital technologies, including the Internet, there is an increasing fragmentation in media audiences. Although this gives a wider diversity of voices, it also threatens to weaken a common sense of community and society as individuals focus on narrow and specific interests.

Media ethics has many facets, ranging from decisions journalists and other media professionals must make every day to ethical repercussions in news coverage and entertainment content that originate at the corporate level and are largely motivated by business interests. Especially for news organizations, the historic mission of serving the public interest can be threatened by corporate parent interests in maximizing profits. This becomes of special concern when companies with media entertainment backgrounds or nonmedia backgrounds take over news organizations.

If you are like most people, you probably answered questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 correct or mostly correct. Question 3, however, might have been more difficult, even if you were familiar with the artist or group. Depending on how much of these questions you got correct, you have showed a normal to above-average media literacy in terms of "fan knowledge."

If you knew the answers to questions 3, 10, and 11, then you demonstrated a fairly high level of media literacy in terms of media ownership. If you knew what product placement is in question 6 and could quickly think of when you last saw it, then you show an above-average knowledge of how advertising can creep into media content where we wouldn't normally be looking for it.

If you answered yes to two out of the three questions of 7 to 9, then you have a pretty good media literacy in terms of producing media and digital technology.

If you knew the answers to questions 12 to 14, then you show a fairly advanced media literacy in terms of some of the important business, legal, and privacy issues facing media consumers of digital media.

Question 4. Some titles by Stephen King include *Carrie, The Shining, Cujo, It, The Tommyknockers,* and *Pet Sematary.*

Question 5. Movies based on King titles include *Carrie, The Shining,* and *Pet Sematary,* among others.

Question 11. AOL Time Warner: *People, Sports Illustrated, Fortune,* CNN, HBO; Bertelsmann: Random House, RCA, Arista Records; Disney: ESPN, Miramax Films, ABC, NFL.com; News Corp.: Fox TV, *New York Post, The Times* (UK), L.A. Dodgers; Sony: Columbia Tri-Star, Epic Records, E! Latin America; Viacom: UPN, MTV, Paramount Pictures, CBS, Simon & Schuster Publishing.

Question 12. True. Web sites sometimes change their privacy policies without informing users, and when Web sites go bankrupt and are sold, the companies buying them out often purchase their registered user lists so they can use them for their own marketing.

Discussion Questions

1. Go to the library and look at a newspaper from 30 years ago (probably available only on microfilm now) and compare the front page with the same paper today. What differences do you notice? What is your first impression of each one? Which one informed you better about matters you need to know?

2. Think about your favorite television program and create a list of at least three subtext messages the show may be sending. Explain what effect you think these messages may have on viewers.

3. Over 30 years ago, at least some television viewers could not distinguish that a sitcom like *Gilligan's Island* was pure fantasy. Now we have "reality TV," which has as its main selling point that the situations and environments are "real," even though a camera crew is also taping. What do you think this change says about U.S. society and media literacy? Is it a change for the better or for the worse?

4. Discuss four ways in which online media could develop or standardize a grammar that would either help people use the Web or help people understand what kind of Web site they are looking at.

5. Would you be willing to pay a mandatory annual television licensing fee if television networks and cable companies promised to show fewer commercials in their shows? If so, how much would you be willing to pay? What advantages or disadvantages could there be to a stronger public-supported media presence in the United States?

6. Discuss the moral and ethical implications of using someone else's artistic creation as the basis of a new creation. What steps can be taken to ensure that artists continue to have incentive to create original works even though they can easily be copied, altered, and distributed on the Web?

7. What social or human barriers are there to the public fully utilizing all the capabilities of broadband cable if it was widely accessible? How could these barriers be overcome or minimized?