On Halloween eve in 2010—right before the nation’s midterm elections—Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central’s popular fake-news anchors, held a “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” on the Mall in Washington, D.C. News media estimates of the crowd for this comedic extravaganza ranged from 200,000 to 300,000 (although Colbert said it was closer to “six billion”). The rally both satirized and criticized the loud partisan pundits on the Right and Left who control the nation’s political debates. The rally also took aim at the news media, especially cable news outlets like MSNBC and Fox News, where much of these partisan debates play out by promoting conflict over compromise. On Twitter, a former Newsweek reporter said that “the Rally to Restore Sanity turn[ed] out to be history’s largest act of press criticism.”
It is common to hear complaints about the mean-spirited partisanship that thrives in our politics and news media. A key reason for the recent rise of partisanship in today’s news media is economics. In the nineteenth century and far into the twentieth century, newspapers and then TV news strove for “objectivity” or neutrality, muting their political viewpoints to appeal to the broadest possible audience. However, in today’s fragmented marketplace (where we now have more and more media options), newspapers and TV news have lost a lot of their audiences to smartphones, social networks, and the Internet. This means that the media must target smaller groups with shared interests—such as conservatives, liberals, sports fanatics, history buffs, or shopaholics—to find an audience—and the advertisers and revenue that come with them.

This is the economic incentive behind news outlets encouraging the partisan divide. As Stewart said at his rally, “The press can hold its magnifying glass up to our problems . . . illuminating issues heretofore unseen, or they can use that magnifying glass to light ants on fire and then perhaps host a week of shows on the sudden, unexpected, dangerous flaming ant epidemic.” So if you can keep enough viewers week after week focused on whatever is that next “flaming ant epidemic” (e.g., a congressman’s sexual indiscretions, conspiracy theories about the president’s birth certificate), you can boost audience ratings and sell ads at higher rates.

But as news-media outlets—often subsidiary companies of large entertainment conglomerates—chase ratings and ads, how well are democracy and journalism being served? In their influential book *Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel worry that “the public sphere” has become “an arena solely for polarized debate, not for compromise, consensus, and solution.” At the 2010 rally, Stewart made a related point—that the twenty-four-hour political punditry “did not cause our problems but its existence makes solving them that much harder.” Promoted as “a rally for the militantly moderate,” the event underscored a major point that Stewart has made frequently over the years: Too often the point of these news/argument programs is conflict rather than compromise, hostility rather than civility. As Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, “A debate focused only on the extremes of argument does not serve the public but instead leaves most citizens out.”

In the end, the role the news media play in presenting the world to us is enormously important. But we also have a job that is equally important. Like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, we must point a critical lens back at the media. Our job is to describe, analyze, and interpret the stories that we hear, watch, and read daily to arrive at our own judgments about the media’s performance. This textbook offers a map to help us become more *media literate*, critiquing the media—not as detached cynics or entrenched partisans—but as informed audiences with a stake in the outcome.

“*The media is like our immune system. If it over-reacts to everything, we actually get sicker . . . or eczema.*”

*JON STEWART AT THE RALLY TO RESTORE SANITY AND/OR FEAR, OCTOBER 2010*
So what exactly are the roles and responsibilities of the media in the wake of the historic Obama election, the 2010 midterm elections in which Republicans took back control of the House, the economic and unemployment crises, and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? In such times—with so many problems requiring compromise and solutions—how do we demand the highest standards from our media? In this book, we take up such questions, examine the history and business of mass media, and discuss the media as a central force in shaping culture and our democracy. After all, the media have an impact beyond the reporting of news stories. At their best, in all their various forms, from mainstream newspapers and radio talk shows to blogs, the media try to help us understand the events that affect us.

But, at their worst, the media’s appetite for telling and selling stories leads them not only to document tragedy but also to misrepresent or exploit it. Many viewers and social critics disapprove of how media, particularly TV and cable, seem to hurtle from one event to another, often dwelling on trivial, celebrity-driven content. They also fault media for failing to remain detached from reported events—for example, by uncritically using government-created language such as “shock and awe” (the military’s term for the early bombing strikes on Baghdad in the Iraq war). In addition, the growth of media industries, commercial culture, and new converging technologies—such as broadband networks, iPads, and digital and mobile television—offers new challenges. If we can learn to examine and critique the powerful dynamics of the media, we will be better able to monitor the rapid changes going on around us.

We start our study by examining key concepts and introducing the critical process for investigating media industries and issues. In later chapters, we probe the history and structure of media’s major institutions. In the process, we will develop an informed and critical view of the influence these institutions have had on national and global life. The goal is to become media literate—critical consumers of mass media institutions and engaged participants who accept part of the responsibility for the shape and direction of media culture. In this chapter, we will:

• Address key ideas including communication, culture, mass media, and mass communication
• Investigate important periods in communication history: the oral, written, print, electronic, and digital eras
• Examine the concept of media convergence
• Look at the central role of storytelling in media and culture
• Discuss two models for organizing and categorizing culture: a skyscraper and a map
• Trace important cultural values in both the modern and postmodern societies
• Learn about media literacy and the five stages of the critical process: description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement

As you read through this chapter, think about your early experiences with the media. Identify a favorite media product from your childhood—a song, book, TV show, or movie. Why was it so important to you? How much of an impact did your early taste in media have on your identity? How has your taste shifted over time to today? What does this change indicate about your identity now? For more questions to help you think about the role of media in your life, see “Questioning the Media” in the Chapter Review.
One way to understand the impact of the media on our lives is to explore the cultural context in which the media operate. Often, culture is narrowly associated with art, the unique forms of creative expression that give pleasure and set standards about what is true, good, and beautiful. Culture, however, can be viewed more broadly as the ways in which people live and represent themselves at particular historical times. This idea of culture encompasses fashion, sports, architecture, education, religion, and science, as well as mass media. Although we can study discrete cultural products, such as novels or songs from various historical periods, culture itself is always changing. It includes a society’s art, beliefs, customs, games, technologies, traditions, and institutions. It also encompasses a society’s modes of communication: the creation and use of symbol systems that convey information and meaning (e.g., languages, Morse code, motion pictures, and one-zero binary computer codes).

Culture is made up of both the products that a society fashions and, perhaps more important, the processes that forge those products and reflect a culture’s diverse values. Thus culture may be defined as the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values. According to this definition, when we listen to music, read a book, watch television, or scan the Internet, we usually are not asking “Is this art?” but are instead trying to identify or connect with something or someone. In other words, we are assigning meaning to the song, book, TV program, or Web site. Culture, therefore, is a process that delivers the values of a society through products or other meaning-making forms. The American ideal of “rugged individualism,” for instance, has been depicted for decades through a tradition of westerns and detective stories on television, in movies and books, and even in political ads.

Culture links individuals to their society by providing both shared and contested values, and the mass media help circulate those values. The mass media are the cultural industries—the channels of communication—that produce and distribute songs, novels, TV shows, newspapers, movies, video games, Internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people. The historical development of media and communication can be traced through several overlapping phases or eras in which newer forms of technology disrupted and modified older forms—a process that many academics, critics, and media professionals call convergence.

These eras, which all still operate to some degree, are oral, written, print, electronic, and digital. The first two eras refer to the communication of tribal or feudal communities and agricultural economies. The last three phases feature the development of mass communication: the process of designing cultural messages and stories and delivering them to large and diverse audiences through media channels as old and distinctive as the printed book and as new and converged as the Internet. Hastened by the growth of industry and modern technology, mass communication accompanied the shift of rural populations to urban settings and the rise of a consumer culture.
Oral and Written Eras in Communication

In most early societies, information and knowledge first circulated slowly through oral traditions passed on by poets, teachers, and tribal storytellers. As alphabets and the written word emerged, however, a manuscript, or written, culture began to develop and eventually overshadowed oral communication. Documented and transcribed by philosophers, monks, and stenographers, the manuscript culture served the ruling classes. Working people were generally illiterate, and the economic and educational gap between rulers and the ruled was vast. These eras of oral and written communication developed slowly over many centuries. Although exact time frames are disputed, historians generally consider these eras as part of Western civilization’s premodern period, spanning the epoch from roughly 1000 B.C.E. to the mid-fifteenth century.

Early tensions between oral and written communication played out among ancient Greek philosophers and writers. Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.), for instance, made his arguments through public conversations and debates. Known as the Socratic method, this dialogue style of communication and inquiry is still used in college classrooms and university law schools. Many philosophers who believed in the superiority of the oral tradition feared that the written word would threaten public discussion by offering fewer opportunities for the give-and-take of conversation. In fact, Socrates’ most famous student, Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), sought to banish poets, whom he saw as purveyors of ideas less rigorous than those generated in oral, face-to-face, question-and-answer discussions. These debates foreshadowed similar discussions in our time regarding the dangers of television and the Internet. Do aspects of contemporary culture, such as reality TV shows, Twitter, and social networking sites, cheapen public discussion and discourage face-to-face communication?

The Print Revolution

While paper and block printing developed in China around 100 C.E. and 1045, respectively, what we recognize as modern printing did not emerge until the middle of the fifteenth century. At that time in Germany, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of movable metallic type and the printing press ushered in the modern print era. Printing presses and publications then spread rapidly across Europe in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Early on, many books were large, elaborate, and expensive. It took months to illustrate and publish these volumes, and they were usually purchased by wealthy aristocrats, royal families, church leaders, prominent merchants, and powerful politicians. Gradually, however, printers reduced the size and cost of books, making them available and affordable to more people. Books eventually became the first mass-marketed products in history.

The printing press combined three elements necessary for mass-market innovation. First, machine duplication replaced the tedious system in which scribes hand-copied texts. Second, duplication could occur rapidly, so large quantities of the same book could be reproduced easily. Third, the faster production of multiple copies brought down the cost of each unit, which made books more affordable to less affluent people.

Since mass-produced printed materials could spread information and ideas faster and farther than ever before, writers could use print to disseminate views counter to traditional civic doctrine and religious authority—views that paved the way for major social and cultural changes, such as the Protestant Reformation and the rise of modern nationalism. People started to resist traditional clerical authority and also to think of themselves not merely as members of families, isolated communities, or tribes, but as part of a country whose interests were
broader than local or regional concerns. While oral and written societies had favored decentralized local governments, the print era supported the ascent of more centralized nation-states.

Eventually, the machine production of mass quantities that had resulted in a lowered cost per unit for books became an essential factor in the mass production of other goods, which led to the Industrial Revolution, modern capitalism, and the consumer culture in the twentieth century. With the revolution in industry came the rise of the middle class and an elite business class of owners and managers who acquired the kind of influence formerly held only by the nobility or the clergy. Print media became key tools that commercial and political leaders used to distribute information and maintain social order.

As with the Internet today, however, it was difficult for a single business or political leader, certainly in a democratic society, to gain exclusive control over printing technology (although the king or queen did control printing press licenses in England until the early nineteenth century, and even today governments in many countries control presses, access to paper, advertising, and distribution channels). Instead, the mass publication of pamphlets, magazines, and books helped democratize knowledge, and literacy rates rose among the working and middle classes. Industrialization required a more educated workforce, but printed literature and textbooks also encouraged compulsory education, thus promoting literacy and extending learning beyond the world of wealthy upper-class citizens.

Just as the printing press fostered nationalism, it also nourished the ideal of individualism. People came to rely less on their local community and their commercial, religious, and political leaders for guidance. By challenging tribal life, the printing press “fostered the modern idea of individuality,” disrupting “the medieval sense of community and integration.”

In urban and industrial environments, many individuals became cut off from the traditions of rural and small-town life, which had encouraged community cooperation in premodern times. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideal of individualism affirmed the rise of commerce and increased resistance to government interference in the affairs of self-reliant entrepreneurs. The democratic impulse of individualism became a fundamental value in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Electronic and Digital Eras

In Europe and America, the impact of industry’s rise was enormous: Factories replaced farms as the main centers of work and production. During the 1880s, roughly 80 percent of Americans lived on farms and in small towns; by the 1920s and 1930s, most had moved to urban areas, where new industries and economic opportunities beckoned. The city had overtaken the country as the focus of national life.

The Electronic Era

In America, the gradual transformation from an industrial, print-based society to one grounded in the Information Age began with the development of the telegraph in the 1840s. Featuring dot-dash electronic signals, the telegraph made four key contributions to communication. First, it separated communication from transportation, making media messages instantaneous—unencumbered by stagecoaches, ships, or the pony express. Second, the telegraph, in combination with the rise of mass-marketed newspapers, transformed “information into a commodity, a ‘thing’ that could be bought or sold irrespective of its uses or meaning.” By the time of the Civil War, news had become a valuable product. Third, the telegraph made it easier for military, business, and political leaders to coordinate commercial and military operations, especially after the installation of the transatlantic cable in the late 1860s. Fourth, the telegraph led to future technological developments, such as wireless telegraphy (later named “radio”), the fax machine, and the cell phone, which ironically resulted in the telegraph’s demise: In 2006, Western Union telegraph offices sent their final messages.
The rise of film at the turn of the twentieth century and the development of radio in the 1920s were early signals, but the electronic phase of the Information Age really boomed in the 1950s and 1960s with the arrival of television and its dramatic impact on daily life. Then, with the coming of ever more communication gadgetry—personal computers, cable TV, DVDs, DVRs, direct broadcast satellites, cell phones, smartphones, PDAs, and e-mail—the Information Age passed into its digital phase.

The Digital Era

In digital communication, images, texts, and sounds are converted (encoded) into electronic signals (represented as varied combinations of binary numbers—ones and zeros) that are then reassembled (decoded) as a precise reproduction of, say, a TV picture, a magazine article, a song, or a telephone voice. On the Internet, various images, texts, and sounds are all digitally reproduced and transmitted globally.

New technologies, particularly cable television and the Internet, have developed so quickly that traditional leaders in communication have lost some of their control over information. For example, starting with the 1992 presidential campaign, the network news shows (ABC, CBS, and NBC) began to lose their audiences to MTV, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Comedy Central, and radio talk shows. By the 2004 national elections, Internet bloggers—people who post commentary on personal and political-opinion-based Web sites—had become a key element in news.

Moreover, e-mail—a digital reinvention of oral culture—has assumed some of the functions of the postal service and is outpacing attempts to control communications beyond national borders. A professor sitting at her desk in Cedar Falls, Iowa, sends e-mail messages routinely to research scientists in Budapest. Yet as recently as 1990, letters—or “snail mail”—between the United States and former communist states might have been censored or taken months to reach their destinations. Moreover, many repressive and totalitarian regimes have had trouble controlling messages sent out in the borderless Internet.

Further reinventing oral culture has been the emergence of social media, particularly the phenomenon of Facebook—which now has more than 500 million users worldwide. Basically, social media are digital applications that allow people from all over the world to have ongoing online conversations, share stories and interests, and generate their own media content. The Internet and social media are changing the ways we consume and engage with media culture. In pre-Internet days (say, back in the late 1980s), most people would watch popular TV shows like The Cosby Show, A Different World, Cheers, or Roseanne at the time they originally aired. Such scheduling provided common media experiences at specific times within our culture. While we still watch TV shows, we are increasingly likely to do so at our own convenience with Web sites like Hulu or DVR/On-Demand options. We are also increasingly making our media choices on the basis of Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter recommendations from friends. Or we upload our own media—from photos of friends at last night’s party to homemade videos of our lives, pets, and hobbies—to share with friends instead of watching “mainstream” programming. While these options allow us to connect with friends and give us more choices, they also break down shared media experiences in favor of individual interests and pursuits.

Media Convergence in the Digital Era

Developments in the electronic and digital eras fully ushered in the phenomenon of media convergence—a term that media critics and analysts use when describing all the changes currently occurring in media content and within media companies. However, the term actually has two different meanings—one referring to technology and one to business—and has a great impact on how media companies are charting a course for the future.
The Dual Roles of Media Convergence

The first definition of media convergence involves the technological merging of content across different media channels—for example, the magazine articles, radio programs, songs, TV shows, and movies now available on the Internet through laptops, iPads, and smartphones.

Such technical convergence is not entirely new. For example, in the late 1920s, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) purchased the Victor Talking Machine Company and introduced machines that could play both radio and recorded music. In the 1950s, this collaboration helped radio survive the emergence of television. Radio lost much of its content to TV and could not afford to hire live bands, so it became more dependent on deejays to play records produced by the music industry. However, contemporary media convergence is much broader than the simple merging of older and newer forms. In fact, the eras of communication are themselves reinvented in this “age of convergence.” Oral communication, for example, finds itself reconfigured, in part, in e-mail and social media. And print communication is re-formed in the thousands of newspapers now available online. Also, keep in mind the wonderful ironies of media convergence: The first major digital retailer, Amazon.com, made its name by selling the world’s oldest mass medium—the book—on the world’s newest mass medium—the Internet.

A second definition of media convergence—sometimes called cross platform by media marketers—describes a business model that involves consolidating various media holdings, such as cable connections, phone services, television transmissions, and Internet access, under one corporate umbrella. The goal is not necessarily to offer consumers more choice in their media options, but to better manage resources and maximize profits. For example, a company that owns TV stations, radio outlets, and newspapers in multiple markets—as well as in the same cities—can deploy a reporter or producer to create three or four versions of the same story for various media outlets. So rather than having each radio station, TV station, newspaper, and online news site generate diverse and independent stories about an issue, a media corporation employing the convergence model can use fewer employees to generate multiple versions of the same story.

Media Businesses in a Converged World

The ramifications of media convergence are best revealed in the business strategy of Google—the most successful company of the digital era so far. Google is the Internet’s main organizer and aggregator because it finds both “new” and “old” media content—like blogs and newspapers—and delivers that content to vast numbers of online consumers. Google does not produce any of the content, and most consumers who find a news story or magazine article through a Google
search pay nothing to the original media content provider nor to Google. Instead, as the “middle man” or distributor, Google makes most of its money by selling ads that accompany search results. But not all ads are created equal; as writer and journalism critic James Fallows points out, Google does not sell ads on its news site:

*Virtually all of Google’s (enormous) revenue comes from a tiny handful of its activities: mainly the searches people conduct when they’re looking for something to buy. That money subsidizes all the other services the company offers—the classic “let me Google that” informational query (as opposed to the shopping query), Google Earth, driving directions, online storage for Gmail and Google Docs, the still-money-losing YouTube video-hosting service. Structurally this is very much like the old newspaper bargain, in which the ad-crammed classified section, the weekly grocery-store pullout, and other commercial features underwrote state-house coverage and the bureau in Kabul.*

In fact, Fallows writes that Google, which has certainly done its part in contributing to the decline of newspapers, still has a large stake in seeing newspapers succeed online. Over the last few years, Google has undertaken a number of experiments to help older news media make the transition into the converged world. Google executives believe that since they aren’t in the content business, they are dependent on news organizations to produce the quality information and journalism that healthy democracies need—and that Google can deliver.

Today’s converged media world has broken down the old definitions of distinct media forms like newspapers and television—both now available online and across multiple platforms. And it favors players like Google whose business model works in a world where customers expect to get their media in multiple places—and often for free. But the next challenge ahead in the new, converged world is to resolve who will pay for quality content and how that system will emerge. In the upcoming industry chapters, we will take a closer look at how media convergence is affecting each industry in terms of both content production and business strategies.

**Mass Media and the Process of Communication**

The mass media constitute a wide variety of industries and merchandise, from moving documentary news programs about famines in Africa to shady infomercials about how to retrieve millions of dollars in unclaimed money online. The word *media* is, after all, a Latin plural form of the singular noun *medium*, meaning an intervening substance through which something is conveyed or transmitted. Television, newspapers, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, radio, broadcast satellites, and the Internet are all part of the media; and they are all quite capable of either producing worthy products or pandering to society’s worst desires, prejudices, and stereotypes. Let’s begin by looking at how mass media develop, and then at how they work and are interpreted in our society.

**The Evolution of a New Mass Medium**

The development of most mass media is initiated not only by the diligence of inventors, such as Thomas Edison (see Chapters 3 and 6), but also by social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances. For instance, both telegraph and radio evolved as newly industrialized nations sought to expand their military and economic control and to transmit information more rapidly.
The phonograph emerged because of the social and economic conditions of a growing middle class with more money and leisure time. Today, the Internet is a contemporary response to new concerns: transporting messages and sharing information more rapidly for an increasingly mobile and interconnected global population.

Media innovations typically go through three stages. First is the novelty, or development, stage, in which inventors and technicians try to solve a particular problem, such as making pictures move, transmitting messages from ship to shore, or sending mail electronically. Second is the entrepreneurial stage, in which inventors and investors determine a practical and marketable use for the new device. For example, early radio relayed messages to and from places where telegraph wires could not go, such as military ships at sea. Part of the Internet also had its roots in the ideas of military leaders, who wanted a communication system that was decentralized and distributed widely enough to survive nuclear war or natural disasters.

The third phase in a medium’s development involves a breakthrough to the mass medium stage. At this point, businesses figure out how to market the new device or medium as a consumer product. Although the government and the U.S. Navy played a central role in radio’s early years, it was commercial entrepreneurs who pioneered radio broadcasting and figured out how to reach millions of people. In the same way, Pentagon and government researchers helped develop early prototypes for the Internet, but commercial interests extended the Internet’s global reach and business potential.

The Linear Model of Mass Communication

Now that we know how the mass media evolve, let’s look at two influential models to see how a mass medium actually communicates messages and meanings. In one of the older and more enduring explanations about how media operate, mass communication is conceptualized as a linear process of producing and delivering messages to large audiences. Senders (authors, producers, and organizations) transmit messages (programs, texts, images, sounds, and ads) through a mass media channel (newspapers, books, magazines, radio, television, or the Internet) to large groups of receivers (readers, viewers, and consumers). In the process, gatekeepers (news editors, executive producers, and other media managers) function as message filters. Media gatekeepers make decisions about what messages actually get produced for particular receivers. The process also allows for feedback, in which citizens and consumers, if they choose, return messages to senders or gatekeepers through letters-to-the-editor, phone calls, e-mail, Web postings, or talk shows.

But the problem with the linear model is that in reality media messages do not usually move smoothly from a sender at point A to a receiver at point Z. Words and images are more likely to spill into one another, crisscrossing in the daily media deluge of ads, TV shows, news reports, social media, smartphone apps, and—of course—everyday conversation. Media messages and stories are encoded and sent in written and visual forms, but senders often have very little control over how their intended messages are decoded or whether the messages are ignored or misread by readers and viewers.

A Cultural Model for Understanding Mass Communication

Another approach for understanding media is the cultural model. This concept recognizes that individuals bring diverse meanings to messages, given factors and differences such as gender, age, educational level, ethnicity, and occupation. In this model of mass communication, audiences actively affirm, interpret, refashion, or reject the messages and stories that flow through various media channels. For example, when controversial singer Lady Gaga released her nine-minute music video for the song “Telephone” in 2010, fans and critics had very different
interpretations of the video. Some saw Lady Gaga as a cutting-edge artist pushing boundaries and celebrating alternative lifestyles—and the rightful heir to Madonna. Others, however, saw the video as tasteless and cruel, making fun of transsexuals and exploiting women—not to mention celebrating the poisoning of an old boyfriend.

While the linear model may demonstrate how a message gets from a sender to a receiver, the cultural model suggests the complexity of this process and the lack of control that “senders” (such as media executives, movie makers, writers, news editors, ad agencies, etc.) often have over how audiences receive messages and the meanings the senders may have intended. Sometimes, producers of media messages seem to be the active creators of communication while audiences are merely passive receptacles. But as the Lady Gaga example illustrates, consumers also shape media messages to fit or support their own values and viewpoints. This phenomenon is known as selective exposure: People typically seek messages and produce meanings that correspond to their own cultural beliefs, values, and interests. For example, studies have shown that people with political leanings toward the left or the right tend to seek out blogs or news outlets that reinforce their preexisting views.

Stories: The Foundation of Media

Despite selective exposure, the stories that circulate in the media can shape a society’s perception of events and attitudes. Throughout the twentieth century and during the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, courageous journalists covered armed conflicts, telling stories that helped the public comprehend the magnitude and tragedy of such events. In the 1950s and 1960s, television news stories on the Civil Rights movement led to crucial legislation that transformed the way many white people viewed the grievances and aspirations of African Americans. In the late 1960s to early 1970s, the persistent media coverage of the Vietnam War ultimately led to a loss of public support for the war. In the late 1990s, stories about the President Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair sparked heated debates over private codes of behavior and public abuses of authority. In 2005, news media stories about the federal government’s inadequate response to the devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina prompted the resignation of the head of FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

More recently, news coverage of the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil rig explosion that killed eleven workers and spewed oil for three months eventually led to the resignation of BP’s CEO for his clumsy handling of the disaster. And, by 2010, news reports about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan sparked debates about terrorism and torture and substantially eroded overall support for the wars. In each of these instances, the stories the mass media told played a key role in changing individual awareness, cultural attitudes, and even public policy.

To use a cultural model for mass communication is to understand that our media institutions are basically in the narrative—or storytelling—business. Media stories put events in context, helping us to better understand both our daily lives and the larger world. As psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, we are storytelling creatures, and as children we acquire language to tell those stories that we have inside us. In his book Making Stories, he says, “Stories, finally, provide models of the world.” The common denominator, in fact, between our entertainment and information cultures is the narrative. It is the media’s main cultural currency—whether it’s Michael Jackson’s Thriller video, a post on a gossip blog, a Fox News “exclusive,” a New York Times article, or a funny TV commercial. The point is that the popular narratives of our culture are complex and varied. Roger Rosenblatt, writing in Time magazine during the polarizing 2000 presidential election, made this observation about the importance of stories: “We are a narrative species. We exist by storytelling—by relating our situations—and the test of our evolution may lie in getting the story right.”

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”
JOAN DIDION, THE WHITE ALBUM

“Stories matter, and matter deeply, because they are the best way to save our lives.”
FRANK MCCONNELL, STORYTELLING AND MYTHMAKING, 1979
The Power of Media in Everyday Life

The earliest debates, at least in Western society, about the impact of cultural narratives on daily life date back to the ancient Greeks. Socrates, himself accused of corrupting young minds, worried that children exposed to popular art forms and stories “without distinction” would “take into their souls teachings that are wholly opposite to those we wish them to be possessed of when they are grown up.” He believed art should uplift us from the ordinary routines of our lives. The playwright Euripides, however, believed that art should imitate life, that characters should be “real,” and that artistic works should reflect the actual world—even when that reality is sordid.

In The Republic, Plato developed the classical view of art: It should aim to instruct and uplift. He worried that some staged performances glorified evil and that common folk watching might not be able to distinguish between art and reality. Aristotle, Plato’s student, occupied a middle ground in these debates, arguing that art and stories should provide insight into the human condition but should entertain as well.

The cultural concerns of classical philosophers are still with us. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, newly arrived immigrants to the United States who spoke little English gravitated toward cultural events (such as boxing, vaudeville, and the emerging medium of silent film) whose enjoyment did not depend solely on understanding English. Consequently, these popular events occasionally became a flash point for some groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, local politicians, religious leaders, and police vice squads, who not only resented the commercial success of immigrant culture but also feared that these “low” cultural forms would undermine what they saw as traditional American values and interests.

VIETNAM WAR PROTESTS
On October 21, 1967, a crowd of 100,000 protesters marched on the Pentagon demanding the end of the Vietnam War. Sadly, violence erupted when some protesters clashed with the U.S. Marshals protecting the Pentagon. However, this iconic image from the same protest appeared in the Washington Post the next day and went on to become a symbol for the peaceful ideals behind the protests. When has an image in the media made an event “real” to you?
In the United States in the 1950s, the emergence of television and rock and roll generated several points of contention. For instance, the phenomenal popularity of Elvis Presley set the stage for many of today’s debates over hip-hop lyrics and television’s influence, especially on young people. In 1956 and 1957, Presley made three appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. The public outcry against Presley’s “lascivious” hip movements was so great that by the third show the camera operators were instructed to shoot the singer only from the waist up. In some communities, objections to Presley were motivated by class bias and racism. Many white adults believed that this “poor white trash” singer from Mississippi was spreading rhythm and blues, a “dangerous” form of black popular culture.

Today, with the reach of print, electronic, and digital communications and the amount of time people spend consuming them (see Figure 1.1), mass media play an even more controversial role in society. Many people are critical of the quality of much contemporary culture and are concerned about the overwhelming amount of information now available. Many see popular media culture as unacceptably commercial and sensationalistic. Too many talk shows exploit personal problems for commercial gain, reality shows often glamorize outlandish behavior and sometimes dangerous stunts, and television research continues to document a connection between aggression in children and violent entertainment programs or video games. Children, who watch nearly forty thousand TV commercials each year, are particularly vulnerable to marketers selling junk food, toys, and “cool” clothing. Even the computer, once heralded as an educational salvation, has created confusion. Today, when kids announce that they are “on the computer,” parents wonder whether they are writing a term paper, playing a video game, chatting with friends on Facebook, or peeking at pornography.

Yet how much the media shape society—and how much they simply respond to existing cultural issues—is still unknown. Although some media depictions may worsen social problems, research has seldom demonstrated that the media directly cause our society’s major afflictions. For instance, when a middle-school student shoots a fellow student over designer clothing, should society blame the ad that glamorized clothes and the network that carried the ad? Or are parents, teachers, and religious leaders failing to instill strong moral values? Or are economic and social issues involving gun legislation, consumerism, and income disparity at work as well? Even if the clothing manufacturer bears responsibility as a corporate citizen, did the ad alone bring about the tragedy, or is the ad symptomatic of a larger problem?

With American mass media industries earning more than $200 billion annually, the economic and societal stakes are high. Large portions of media resources now go toward studying audiences, capturing their attention through stories, and taking their consumer dollars. To increase their revenues, media outlets try to influence everything from how people shop to how they vote. Like the air we breathe, the commercially based culture that mass media help create surrounds us. Its impact, like the air, is often taken for granted. But to monitor that culture’s “air quality”—to become media literate—we must attend more thoughtfully to diverse media stories that are too often taken for granted. (For further discussion, see “Examining Ethics: Covering War” on pages 16–17.)
By 2010, as the Afghanistan and Iraq wars continued into their ninth and seventh years, respectively, journalistic coverage of the wars began to wane. This was partly due to news organizations losing interest in an event when it drags on for a long time and becomes “old news.” The news media are often biased in favor of “current events.” But war reporting also declined because of the financial crisis; more than fifteen thousand reporters lost their jobs or took buyouts in 2009 alone as newspapers cut staff to save money. In fact, many news organizations stopped sending reporters to cover the wars, depending instead on wire service reporters, foreign correspondents from other countries, or major news organizations like the New York Times or CNN for their coverage. Despite the decreasing coverage, the news media confront ethical challenges about the best way to cover the wars, including reporting on the deaths of soldiers, dealing with First Amendment issues, and knowing what is most appropriate for their audiences to view, read, or hear.

When President Obama took office in 2009, he suspended the previous Bush administration ban on media coverage of soldiers’ coffins returning to U.S. soil from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. First Amendment advocates praised Obama’s decision, although after a flurry of news coverage of these arrivals in April 2009, media outlets quickly grew less and less interested as the wars dragged on. Later, though, the Obama administration upset some of the same First Amendment supporters when it decided not to release more prisoner and detainee abuse photos from earlier in the wars, citing concerns for the safety of current U.S. troops and fears of further inflaming anti-American opinion. Both issues—one opening up news access and one closing it down—suggest the difficult and often tense relationship between presidential administrations and the news media.

Back in 2006—with the war in Iraq about to enter its fourth year—then-President George W. Bush criticized the national news media for not showing enough “good news” about U.S. efforts to bring democracy to Iraq. Bush’s remarks raised ethical questions about the complex relationship between the government and the news media during times of war: How much freedom should the news media have to cover a war? What topics should they report on? How much control should the military have over the media’s reports on a war? Are there topics that should not be covered?

These kinds of questions have also created ethical quagmires for local TV stations that cover war and its effects on communities where soldiers have been called to duty and then injured or killed. Some station managers—out of fear of alienating viewers—encourage their news division not to seem too critical of war efforts, wanting the station to appear “patriotic.” In one extreme case, the nation’s largest TV station owner—Sinclair Broadcast Group—would not air the ABC News program Nightline in 2004 because it devoted an episode to reading the names of all U.S. soldiers killed in the Iraq war up to that time. Here is an...
How much freedom should the news media have to cover war?

excerpt from a New York Times account of that event:

Sinclair Broadcast Group, one of the largest owners of local television stations, will preempt tonight’s edition of the ABC News program “Nightline,” saying the program’s plan to have Ted Koppel [who then anchored the program] read aloud the names of every member of the armed forces killed in action in Iraq was motivated by an antiwar agenda and threatened to undermine American efforts there.

The decision means viewers in eight cities, including St. Louis and Columbus, Ohio, will not see “Nightline.” ABC News disputed that the program carried a political message, calling it in a statement “an expression of respect which simply seeks to honor those who have laid down their lives for their country.”

But Mark Hyman, the vice president of corporate relations for Sinclair, who is also a conservative commentator on the company’s newscasts, said tonight’s edition of “Nightline” is biased journalism. “Mr. Koppel’s reading of the fallen will have no proportionality,” he said in a telephone interview, pointing out that the program will ignore other aspects of the war effort.

The company’s reaction to “Nightline” is consistent with criticism from some conservatives, who are charging ABC with trying to influence opinion against the war.

Mr. Koppel and the producers of “Nightline” said earlier this week that they had no political motivation behind the decision to devote an entire show, expanded to 40 minutes, to reading the names and displaying the photos of those killed. They said they only intended to honor the dead and document what Mr. Koppel called “the human cost” of the war.¹

Given such a case, how might a local TV news director today—under pressure from the station’s manager or owner—formulate guidelines to help negotiate such ethical territory? While most TV news divisions have ethical codes to guide journalists’ behavior in certain situations, could ordinary citizens help shape ethical discussions and decisions? Following is a general plan for dealing with an array of ethical dilemmas that media practitioners face and for finding ways in which nonjournalists might participate in this decision-making process.

Arriving at ethical decisions is a particular kind of criticism involving several steps. These include (1) laying out the case; (2) pinpointing the key issues; (3) identifying the parties involved, their intents, and their potentially competing values; (4) studying ethical models and theories; (5) presenting strategies and options; and (6) formulating a decision or policy.²

As a test case, let’s look at how local TV news directors might establish ethical guidelines for war-related events. By following the six steps above, our goal is to make some ethical decisions and to lay the groundwork for policies that address TV images or photographs—for example, those of protesters, supporters, memorials, or funerals—used in war coverage. (See Chapter 13 for details on confronting ethical problems.)

Examining Ethics Activity

As a class or in smaller groups, design policies that address at least one of the issues raised above. Start by researching the topic; find as much information as possible. For example, you can research guidelines that local stations already use by contacting local news directors and TV journalists.

Do they have guidelines? If so, are they adequate? Are there certain types of images they will not show? Do they send reporters or photographers to cover the arrival of the remains of local soldiers killed in the wars? Finally, if time allows, send the policies to various TV news directors and/or station managers; ask for their evaluations and whether they would consider implementing the policies.
Some cultural phenomena gain wide popular appeal, and others do not. Some appeal to certain age groups or social classes. Some, such as rock and roll, jazz, and classical music, are popular worldwide; other cultural forms, such as Tejano, salsa, and Cajun music, are popular primarily in certain regions or communities. Certain aspects of culture are considered elite in one place (e.g., opera in the United States) and popular in another (e.g., opera in Italy). Though categories may change over time and from one society to another, two metaphors offer contrasting views about the way culture operates in our daily lives: culture as a hierarchy, represented by a skyscraper model, and culture as a process, represented by a map model.

Culture as a Skyscraper

Throughout twentieth-century America, critics and audiences perceived culture as a hierarchy with supposedly superior products at the top and inferior ones at the bottom. This can be imagined, in some respects, as a modern skyscraper. In this model, the top floors of the building house high culture, such as ballet, the symphony, art museums, and classic literature. The bottom floors—and even the basement—house popular or low culture, including such icons as soap operas, rock music, radio shock jocks, and video games (see Figure 1.2). High culture, identified with “good taste,” higher education, and support by wealthy patrons and corporate donors, is associated with “fine art,” which is available primarily in libraries, theaters, and museums. In contrast, low or popular culture is aligned with the “questionable” tastes of the masses, who enjoy the commercial “junk” circulated by the mass media, such as reality TV, celebrity gossip Web sites, and violent action films. Whether or not we agree with this cultural skyscraper model, the high-low hierarchy often determines or limits the ways in which we view and discuss culture today.

An Inability to Appreciate Fine Art

Some critics claim that popular culture, in the form of contemporary movies, television, and music, distracts students from serious literature and philosophy, thus stunting their imagination and undermining their ability to recognize great art. This critical view pits popular culture against high art, discounting a person’s ability to value Bach and the Beatles or Shakespeare and The Simpsons concurrently. The assumption is that because popular forms of culture are made for profit, they cannot be experienced as valuable artistic experiences in the same way as more elite art forms such as classical ballet, Italian opera, modern sculpture, or Renaissance painting—even though many of what we regard as elite art forms today were once supported and even commissioned by wealthy patrons.

A Tendency to Exploit High Culture

Another concern is that popular culture exploits classic works of literature and art. A good example may be Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s dark Gothic novel Frankenstein, written in 1818 and ultimately transformed into multiple popular forms. Today, the tale is best remembered by virtue of two movies: a 1931 film version starring Boris Karloff as the towering and tragic monster, and the 1974 Mel Brooks comedy Young Frankenstein. In addition to the movies,
Figure 1.2
CultUre as a skyscraper

Culture is diverse and difficult to categorize. Yet throughout the twentieth century, we tended to think of culture not as a social process but as a set of products sorted into high, low, or middle positions on a cultural skyscraper. Look at this highly arbitrary arrangement and see if you agree or disagree. Write in some of your own examples.

Why do we categorize or classify culture in this way? Who controls this process? Is control of making cultural categories important—why or why not?
television turned the tale into *The Munsters*, a mid-1960s situation comedy. The monster was even resurrected as sugar-coated Frankenberry cereal. In the recycled forms of the original story, Shelley’s powerful themes about abusing science and judging people on the basis of appearances are often lost or trivialized in favor of a simplistic horror story, a comedy spoof, or a form of junk food.

**A Throw-Away Ethic**

Unlike an Italian opera or a Shakespearean tragedy, many elements of popular culture have a short life span. The average newspaper circulates for about twelve hours, then lands in a recycle bin or lines a litter box; the average magazine circulates for five to seven days; a new Top 40 song on the radio lasts about one month; a typical new TV series survives for less than ten weeks; and most new Web sites or blogs are rarely visited and doomed to oblivion.

Although endurance does not necessarily denote quality, many critics think that so-called better or “higher” forms of culture have more staying power. In this argument, lower or popular forms of culture are unstable and fleeting; they follow rather than lead public taste. In the TV industry in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, network executives employed the “least objectionable programming” (or LOP) strategy that critics said pandered to mediocrity with bland, disposable programs that a “normal” viewer would not find objectionable, challenging, or disturbing.

**A Diminished Audience for High Culture**

Some observers also warn that popular culture has inundated the cultural environment, driving out higher forms of culture and cheapening public life. This concern is supported by data showing that TV sets are in use in the average American home for more than eight hours a day, exposing adults and children each year to thousands of hours of trivial TV commercials, violent crime dramas, and superficial “reality” programs. According to one story critics tell, the prevalence of so many popular media products prevents the public from experiencing genuine art. Forty or more radio stations are available in large cities; cable and/or satellite systems with hundreds of channels are in place in 70 percent of all U.S. households; and Internet services and DVD players are in more than 90 percent of U.S. homes. In this scenario, the chances of audiences finding more refined forms of culture supposedly become very small, although critics fail to note the choices that are also available on such a variety of radio stations, cable channels, and Internet sites. (For an alternate view, see “Case Study: The Sleeper Curve” on pages 24-25.)
Dulling Our Cultural Taste Buds

Another cautionary story, frequently recounted by academics, politicians, and TV pundits, tells how popular culture, especially its more visual forms (such as TV advertising and YouTube videos), undermines democratic ideals and reasoned argument. According to this view, popular media may inhibit not only rational thought but also social progress by transforming audiences into cultural dupes lured by the promise of products. A few multinational conglomerates that make large profits from media products may be distracting citizens from examining economic disparity and implementing change. Seductive advertising images showcasing the buffed and airbrushed bodies of professional models, for example, frequently contradict the actual lives of people who cannot hope to achieve a particular “look” or may not have the money to obtain the high-end cosmetic or clothing products offered. In this environment, art and commerce have become blurred, restricting the audience’s ability to make cultural and economic distinctions. Sometimes called the “Big Mac” theory, this view suggests that people are so addicted to mass-produced media menus that they lose their discriminating taste for finer fare and, much worse, their ability to see and challenge social inequities.

Culture as a Map

The second way to view culture is as a map. Here, culture is an ongoing and complicated process—rather than a high/low vertical hierarchy—that allows us to better account for our diverse and individual tastes. In the map model, we judge forms of culture as good or bad based on a combination of personal taste and the aesthetic judgments a society makes at particular historical times. Because such tastes and evaluations are “all over the map”—a cultural map suggests that we can pursue many connections from one cultural place to another and can appreciate a range of cultural experiences without simply ranking them from high to low.

Our attraction to and choice of cultural phenomena—such as the stories we read in books or watch at the movies—represent how we make our lives meaningful. Culture offers plenty of places to go that are conventional, familiar, and comforting. Yet at the same time, our culture’s narrative storehouse contains other stories that tend toward the innovative, unfamiliar, and challenging. Most forms of culture, however, demonstrate multiple tendencies. We may use online social networks because they are comforting (an easy way to keep up with friends) and innovative (new tools or apps that engage us). We watch televised sporting events for their familiarity, conventional organization, and because the unknown outcome can be challenging. The map offered here (see Figure 1.3 on page 22) is based on a familiar subway grid. Each station represents tendencies or elements related to why a person may be attracted to different cultural products. Also, more popular culture forms congregate in more congested areas of the map while less popular cultural forms are outliers. Such a large, multidirectional map may be a more flexible, multidimensional, and inclusive way of imagining how culture works.

The Comfort of Familiar Stories

The appeal of culture is often its familiar stories, pulling audiences toward the security of repetition and common landmarks on the cultural map. Consider, for instance, early television’s Lassie series, about the adventures of a collie named Lassie and her owner, young Timmy. Of the more than five hundred episodes, many have a familiar and repetitive plot line: Timmy, who arguably possessed the poorest sense of direction and suffered more concussions than any TV character in history, gets lost or knocked unconscious. After finding Timmy and licking his face, Lassie goes for help and saves the day. Adult critics might mock this melodramatic formula, but many children find comfort in the predictability of the story. This quality is also evident when night after night children ask their parents to read the same book, such as Margaret Wise Brown’s Good Night, Moon or Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, or watch the same DVD, such as Snow White or The Princess Bride.
Innovation and the Attraction of “What’s New”

Like children, adults also seek comfort, often returning to an old Beatles or Guns N’ Roses song, a William Butler Yeats or Emily Dickinson poem, or a TV rerun of *Seinfeld* or *Andy Griffith*. But we also like cultural adventure. We may turn from a familiar film on cable’s American Movie Classics to discover a new movie from Iran or India on the Independent Film Channel. We seek new stories and new places to go—those aspects of culture that demonstrate originality and complexity. For instance, James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939) created language anew and challenged readers, as the novel’s poetic first sentence illustrates: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” A revolutionary work, crammed with historical names and topical references to events, myths, songs, jokes, and daily conversation, Joyce’s novel remains a challenge to understand and decode. His work demonstrated that part of what culture provides is the impulse to explore new places, to strike out in new directions, searching for something different that may contribute to growth and change.

A Wide Range of Messages

We know that people have complex cultural tastes, needs, and interests based on different backgrounds and dispositions. It is not surprising, then, that our cultural treasures—from blues music and opera to comic books and classical literature—contain a variety of messages. Just as Shakespeare’s plays—popular entertainments in his day—were packed with both obscure and popular references, TV episodes of *The Simpsons* have included allusions to the Beatles, Kafka, *Teletubbies*, Tennessee Williams, talk shows, Aerosmith, *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, Freud, *Psycho*, and *Citizen Kane*. In other words, as part of an ongoing process, cultural products and their meanings are “all over the map,” spreading out in diverse directions.

Challenging the Nostalgia for a Better Past

Some critics of popular culture assert—often without presenting supportive evidence—that society was better off before the latest developments in mass media. These critics resist
the idea of re-imagining an established cultural hierarchy as a multidirectional map. The nostalgia for some imagined “better past” has often operated as a device for condemning new cultural phenomena. In the nineteenth century, in fact, a number of intellectuals and politicians worried that rising literacy rates among the working class might create havoc: How would the aristocracy and intellectuals maintain their authority and status if everyone could read?

Throughout history, a call to return to familiar terrain, to “the good old days,” has been a frequent response to new, “threatening” forms of popular culture. Yet over the years many of these forms—including the waltz, silent movies, ragtime, and jazz—have themselves become cultural “classics.” How can we tell now what the future has in store for such cultural expressions as comic books, graphic novels, rock and roll, soap operas, fashion photography, dance music, hip-hop, tabloid newspapers, “reality” television programs, and social media?

Cultural Values of the Modern Period

To understand how the mass media have come to occupy their current cultural position, we need to trace significant changes in cultural values from the modern period until today. In general, historians and literary scholars think of the modern period in the United States as having its roots in the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century and extending until about the mid-twentieth century. Although there are many ways to conceptualize what it means to be “modern,” we will focus on four major features or values that resonate best with changes across media and culture: efficiency, individualism, rationalism, and progress.

Working Efficiently

In the business world, modernization involved captains of industry using new technology to create efficient manufacturing centers, produce inexpensive products to make everyday life better, and make commerce more profitable. Printing presses and assembly lines made major contributions in this transformation, and then modern advertising spread the word about new gadgets to American consumers. In terms of culture, the modern mantra has been “form follows function.” For example, the growing populations of big cities placed a premium on space, creating a new form of building that fulfilled that functional demand by building upwards. Modern skyscrapers made of glass, steel, and concrete replaced the supposedly wasteful decorative and ornate styles of premodern Gothic cathedrals. This new value was replicated or echoed in journalism, where a front-page style rejected decorative and ornate adjectives and adverbs for “just the facts,” requiring reporters to ask and answer the questions who, what, when, where, and why. To be lean and efficient, modern news de-emphasized complex analysis and historical context.

Cultural responses to and critiques of modern efficiency often manifested themselves in the mass media. For example, Aldous Huxley, in Brave New World (1932), created a fictional world in which he cautioned readers that the efficiencies of modern science and technology posed a threat to individual dignity. Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times (1936), set in a futuristic manufacturing plant, also told the story of the dehumanizing impact of modernization and machinery. Writers and artists, in their criticisms of the modern world, have often pointed to technology’s ability to alienate people from one another, capitalism’s tendency to foster greed, and government’s inclination to create bureaucracies whose inefficiency oppresses rather than helps people.
In the 1973 science fiction comedy movie *Sleeper*, the film’s director, Woody Allen, plays a character who reawakens two hundred years after being cryogenically frozen (after a routine ulcer operation had gone bad). The scientists who “unfreeze” Allen discuss how back in the 1970s people actually believed that “deep fat fried foods,” “steaks,” “cream pies,” and “hot fudge” were unhealthy. But apparently in 2173 those food items will be good for us.

In his 2005 book, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson makes a controversial argument about TV and culture based on the movie. He calls his idea the “Sleeper Curve” and claims that “today’s popular culture is actually making us smarter.”

Johnson’s ideas run counter to those of many critics who worry about popular culture and its potentially disastrous effects, particularly on young people. An influential argument in this strain of thinking appeared more than twenty-five years ago in Neil Postman’s 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman argued that we were moving from the “Age of Typology” to the “Age of Television,” from the “Age of Exposition” to the “Age of Show Business.” Postman worried that an image-centered culture had overtaken words and a print-oriented culture, resulting in “all public discourse increasingly tak[ing] the form of entertainment.” He pointed to the impact of advertising and how “American businessmen discovered, long before the rest of us, that the quality and usefulness of their goods are subordinate to the artifice of their display.”

Postman argued that the TV ad has become central to choosing our government leaders, including the way politicians are branded and packaged as commodity goods in political ads. Postman argued that the short simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems.

Across the converged cultural landscape, we are somewhere between the Age of Television and the Age of the Internet. So Johnson’s argument offers an opportunity to assess where our visual culture has taken us. According to Johnson, “For decades, we’ve worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a path declining steadily toward lowest-common-denominator standards, presumably because the ‘masses’ want dumb, simple pleasures and big media companies try to give the masses what they want. But, the exact opposite is happening: the culture is getting more cognitively demanding, not less.” While Johnson shares many of Postman’s 1985 concerns, he disagrees with the point from *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that image-saturated media is only about “simple” messages and “trivial” culture. Instead, Johnson discusses the complexity of video and computer games and many of TV’s dramatic prime-time series, especially when compared with less demanding TV programming from the 1970s and early 1980s.

As evidence, Johnson compares the plot complications of Fox’s CIA/secret agent thriller *24* with *Dallas*, the prime-time soap opera that was America’s most popular TV show in the early 1980s. “To make sense of an episode of *24*,” Johnson maintains, “you have to integrate far more information than you would have a few decades ago watching a comparable show. Beneath the violence and the ethnic stereotypes, another trend appears: to keep up with entertainment like *24*, you have to pay attention, make inferences, track shifting social relationships.” Johnson argues that today’s audience would be “bored” watching a show like *Dallas*, in part “because the show contains far
less information in each scene, despite the fact that its soap-opera structure made it one of the most complicated narratives on television in its prime. With *Dallas*, the modern viewer doesn’t have to think to make sense of what’s going on, and not having to think is boring.”

In addition to *24*, a number of contemporary programs offer complex narratives, including *House*, *Mad Men*, *Rubicon*, *The Closer*, *Leverage*, *True Blood*, *Dexter*, *Lost*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Johnson says that in contrast to older popular programs like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, contemporary TV storytelling layers “each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you’re exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information, that connect multiple narrative threads.”

Johnson argues that younger audiences today—brought up in the Age of the Internet and in an era of complicated interactive visual games—bring high expectations to other kinds of popular culture as well, including television. “The mind,” Johnson writes, “likes to be challenged; there’s real pleasure to be found in solving puzzles, detecting patterns or unpacking a complex narrative system.”

In countering the cultural fears expressed by critics like Postman and by many parents trying to make sense of the intricate media world that their children encounter each day, Johnson sees a hopeful sign: “I believe that the Sleeper Curve is the single most important new force altering the mental development of young people today, and I believe it is largely a force for good: enhancing our cognitive faculties, not dumbing them down. And yet you almost never hear this story in popular accounts of today’s media.”

Steven Johnson’s theory is one of many about media impact on the way we live and learn. Do you accept Johnson’s Sleeper Curve argument that certain TV programs—along with challenging interactive video and computer games—are intellectually demanding and are actually making us smarter? Why or why not? Are you more persuaded by Postman’s 1985 account—that the word has been displaced by an image-centered culture and, consequently, that popular culture has been dumbed down by its oversimplified and visual triviality? As you consider Postman, think about the Internet: Is it word based or image based? What kinds of opportunities for learning does it offer?

In thinking about both the 1985 and 2005 arguments by Postman and Johnson, consider as well generational differences. Do you enjoy TV shows and video games that your parents or grandparents don’t understand? What types of stories and games do they enjoy? What did earlier generations value in storytelling, and what is similar and dissimilar about storytelling today?

Interview someone who is close to you—but from an earlier generation—about media and story preferences. Then discuss or write about both the common ground and the cultural differences that you discovered. 

“The Web has created a forum for annotation and commentary that allows more complicated shows to prosper, thanks to the fan sites where each episode of shows like *Lost* or *Alias* is dissected with an intensity usually reserved for Talmud scholars.”

- Steven Johnson, 2005
Celebrating the Individual

The values of the *premodern period* (before the Industrial Revolution) were guided by a strong belief in a natural or divine order, placing God or Nature at the center of the universe. But becoming modern meant elevating individual self-expression to a more central position. Scientific discoveries of the period allowed modern print media to offer a place for ordinary readers to engage with new ideas beyond what their religious leaders and local politicians communicated to them. Along with democratic breakthroughs, however, modern individualism and the Industrial Revolution triggered new forms of hierarchy in which certain individuals and groups achieved higher standing in the social order. For example, those who managed commercial enterprises gained more control over the economic ladder, while an intellectual class of modern experts—masters of specialized realms of knowledge on everything from commerce to psychology to literature—gained increasing power over the nation’s economic, political, and cultural agendas.

Believing in a Rational Order

To be modern also meant to value the capacity of logical, scientific minds to solve problems by working in organized groups, both in business and in academic disciplines. Progressive thinkers maintained that the printing press, the telegraph, and the railroad, in combination with a scientific attitude, would foster a new type of informed society. At the core of this society, the printed mass media—particularly newspapers—would educate the citizenry, helping to build and maintain an organized social framework.14

A leading champion for an informed rational society was Walter Lippmann, who wrote the influential book *Public Opinion* in 1922. Later a major newspaper columnist, Lippmann believed that the world was “altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.” He distrusted both the media and the public’s ability to navigate such a world and to reach the rational decisions needed in a democracy. Instead, he called for “an independent, expert organization” for making experience “intelligible to those who have to make decisions.” Driven by a strong belief in science and rationality, Lippmann advocated a “machinery of knowledge” that might be established through “intelligence bureaus” staffed by experts. While such a concept might look like the modern “think tank,” Lippmann saw these as independent of politics, unlike think tanks today, such as the Brookings Institution or Heritage Foundation, which have strong partisan ties.15

Rejecting Tradition/Embracing Progress

Although the independent bureaus never materialized, Walter Lippmann’s ideas were influential throughout the twentieth century and were a product of the *Progressive Era*—a period of political and social reform that lasted roughly from the 1890s to the 1920s. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were prominent national figures associated with this era. On both local and national levels, Progressive Era reformers championed social movements that led to constitutional amendments for both women’s suffrage and Prohibition, political reforms that led to the secret ballot during elections, and economic reforms that ushered in the federal income tax to try to foster a more equitable society. In journalism, the muckraking period (see Chapter 8) represented media’s significant contribution to this era. Working mostly for reform-oriented magazines, muckrakers were journalists who exposed corruption, waste, and scandal in business and politics. Like other Progressives, muckraking journalists shared a belief in the transforming power of science and technology. And they (along with Lippmann) sought out experts to identify problems and develop solutions.

Influenced by the Progressive movement, the notion of being modern in the twentieth century meant throwing off the chains of the past, breaking with tradition, and embracing progress. Many Progressives were skeptical of religious dogma and sought answers in science. For example, in architecture the differences between a premodern Gothic cathedral and a modern...
skyscraper are startling, not only because of their different “looks” but also because of the cultural values these building types represent: the former symbolizing the past and tradition, the latter standing for efficiency and progress. Similarly, twentieth-century journalists, in their quest for modern efficiency, focused on “the now” and the reporting of timely events. Newly standardized forms of front-page journalism that championed “just the facts” and events that “just happened yesterday” did help reporters efficiently meet tight deadlines. But realizing one of Walter Lippmann’s fears, modern newspapers often failed to take a historical perspective or to analyze sufficiently the ideas and interests underlying these events.

Shifting Values in Postmodern Culture

For many people, the changes occurring in contemporary times, or the postmodern period—from roughly the mid-twentieth century to today—are identified by a confusing array of examples: music videos, remote controls, Nike ads, shopping malls, fax machines, e-mail, video games, blogs, USA Today, YouTube, iPads, hip-hop, and reality TV. Some critics argue that postmodern culture represents a way of seeing—a new condition, or even a malady, of the human spirit. Chiefly a response to the modern world, controversial postmodern values are playing increasingly pivotal roles in our daily lives. Although there are many ways to define the postmodern, this textbook focuses on four major features or values that resonate best with changes across media and culture: populism, diversity, nostalgia, and paradox (see Table 1.1).

Celebrating Populism

In virtually every presidential race, some Democratic and Republican candidates as well as political pundits attempt to identify certain campaigns with populism. As a political idea, populism tries to appeal to ordinary people by highlighting or even creating a conflict between “the people” and “the elite.” For example, populist politicians often tell stories and run ads that criticize big corporations and political favoritism. Meant to resonate with working- and middle-class values and regional ties, such narratives generally pit southern or midwestern small-town “family values” against the supposedly coarser, even corrupt, urban lifestyles associated with big cities and the privilege of East or West Coast “high society.”

In postmodern culture, populism manifests itself in many ways. For example, artists and performers, like Chuck Berry in “Roll Over Beethoven” (1956) or Queen in “Bohemian Rhapsody”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trend</th>
<th>Premodern (pre-1800s)</th>
<th>Modern Industrial Revolution (1800s–1950s)</th>
<th>Postmodern (1950s–present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work hierarchies</td>
<td>peasants/merchants/rulers</td>
<td>factory workers/managers/national CEOs</td>
<td>temp workers/global CEOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major work sites</td>
<td>field/farm</td>
<td>factory/office</td>
<td>office/home/“virtual” or mobile office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication reach</td>
<td>local</td>
<td>national</td>
<td>global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>oral/manuscript</td>
<td>print/electronic</td>
<td>electronic/digital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>storytellers/elders/town criers</td>
<td>books/newspapers/radio</td>
<td>television/cable/Internet/multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication at home</td>
<td>quill pen</td>
<td>typewriter/office computer</td>
<td>personal computer/laptop/cell phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key social values</td>
<td>belief in natural or divine order</td>
<td>individualism/rationalism efficiency/anti-tradition</td>
<td>anti-hierarchy/skepticism/about science, business, government, etc./diversity/multiculturalism/irony &amp; paradox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>oral &amp; print-based/partisan/decorative/controlled by political parties</td>
<td>print-based/“objective”/efficient/timely/controlled by publishing families</td>
<td>TV &amp; Internet-based/opinionated/conversational/controlled by global entertainment conglomerates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(1975) blur the border between high and low culture. In the visual arts, following Andy Warhol’s 1960s pop art style, advertisers borrow from both fine art and street art, while artists borrow from commerce and popular art. In magazines, arresting clothing or cigarette ads combine stark social commentary with low-key sales pitches. At the movies, films like *Fargo* (1996), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and *Juno* (2008) fuse the comic and the serious, the ordinary and the odd. Film stars, like Angelina Jolie and Ben Affleck, often champion oppressed groups while appearing in movies that make the actors wealthy global icons of consumer culture.

Other forms of postmodern style blur modern distinctions not only between art and commerce but also between fact and fiction. For example, television vocabulary now includes infotainment (*Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood*) and infomercials (such as fading celebrities selling anti-wrinkle cream). On cable, MTV’s reality programs—such as *Real World* and *Jersey Shore*—blur boundaries between the staged and the real, mixing serious themes with comedic interludes and romantic spats; Comedy Central’s fake news programs, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, combine real, insightful news stories with biting satire of traditional broadcast and cable news programs.

### Emphasizing Diversity and Recycling Culture

Closely associated with populism, another value (or vice) of the postmodern period emphasizes diversity and fragmentation, including the wild juxtaposition of old and new cultural styles. In a suburban shopping mall, for instance, Waldenbooks and Gap stores border a food court with Vietnamese, Italian, and Mexican options, while techno-digitized instrumental versions of 1960s protest music play in the background to accompany shoppers.

Part of this stylistic diversity involves borrowing and transforming earlier ideas from the modern period. In music, hip-hop deejays and performers sample old R&B, soul, and rock classics, both reinventing old songs and creating something new. Borrowing in hip-hop is often so pronounced that the original artists and record companies have frequently filed for copyright infringement.

Critics of postmodern style contend that such borrowing devalues originality, emphasizing surface over depth and recycled ideas over new ones. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, films were adapted from books and short stories. Now, films often derive from popular TV series: *Mission Impossible, Charlie’s Angels,* and *The A-Team,* to name just a few. In 2007, *The Simpsons Movie* premiered—“18 years in the making,” its promotional ads read, a reference to the long-running TV series on Fox.

### Questioning Science and Revering Nostalgia

Another tendency of postmodern culture is to raise doubts about scientific reasoning. Rather than seeing science purely as enlightened thinking, some postmodern artists and analysts criticize it for laying the groundwork for bureaucratic problems. They reject rational thought as “the answer” to every social problem, revealing instead a nostalgia for the premodern values of small communities, traditional religion, and mystical experience. For example, since the late 1980s a whole host of popular TV programs—such as *Twin Peaks, The X-Files, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charmed, Angel, Lost, True Blood, Fringe*—has emerged to offer the mystical and supernatural as responses to the “evils” of our daily world and the limits of the purely rational.

In other areas of contemporary culture, Internet users reclaim lost conversational skills and letter-writing habits in e-mail and “tweeting.” Even the current popularity of radio and TV talk shows, according to a postmodern perspective, partly represents an attempt to recover lost aspects of oral traditions. Given the feelings of powerlessness and alienation that mark the contemporary age, one attraction of the talk-show format—with its populist themes—has been the way it encourages ordinary people to participate in discussions with celebrities, experts, and one another.
Acknowledging Paradox

A key aspect of our postmodern time is the willingness to accept paradox. While modern culture emphasized breaking with the past in the name of progress, postmodern culture stresses integrating retro styles with current beliefs: At the same time that we seem nostalgic for the past, we embrace new technologies with a vengeance. Although some forms of contemporary culture raise questions about science, still other aspects of postmodern culture warmly accept technology. Blockbuster films such as Avatar, the Harry Potter series, and the Transformer films do both, presenting stories that critique modern science but that depend on technology for their execution.

During the modern period, artists and writers criticized the dangers of machines, pointing out that new technologies frequently eliminate jobs and physically isolate us from one another. While postmodern style often embraces new technology, there is a fundamental paradox in this alliance. Although technology can isolate people, as modernists warned, new technologies can also draw people together to discuss politics on radio talk shows, on Facebook, or on smartphones. For example, Twitter made the world aware of the protests over the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election when the government there tried to suppress media access. Our lives today are full of such incongruities.

Critiquing Media and Culture

In contemporary life, cultural boundaries are being tested; the arbitrary lines between information and entertainment have become blurred. Consumers now read newspapers on their computers. Media corporations do business across vast geographic boundaries. We are witnessing media convergence, in which televisions, computers, and smartphones easily access new and old forms of mass communication. For a fee, everything from magazines to movies is channeled into homes through the Internet and cable or satellite TV.

Considering the diversity of mass media, to paint them all with the same broad brush would be inaccurate and unfair. Yet that is often what we seem to do, which may in fact reflect the distrust many of us have of prominent social institutions, from local governments to daily

“A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.”

H. L. Mencken, American writer and journalist
MASS MEDIA AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

newspapers. Of course, when one recent president lies about an extramarital affair with a young White House intern and another leads us into a long war based on faulty intelligence that mainstream news failed to uncover, our distrust of both government and media may be understandable. It’s ultimately more useful, however, to replace a cynical perception of the media with an attitude of genuine criticism. To deal with these shifts in our experience of our culture and the impact that mass media have on our lives, we need to develop a profound understanding of the media—what they produce and what they ignore.

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

Developing media literacy—that is, attaining knowledge and understanding of mass media—requires following a critical process that takes us through the steps of description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation, and engagement (see “Media Literacy and the Critical Process” above).
Developing a media-literate critical perspective involves mastering five overlapping stages that build on one another:

- **Description:** paying close attention, taking notes, and researching the subject under study
- **Analysis:** discovering and focusing on significant patterns that emerge from the description stage
- **Interpretation:** asking and answering the “What does that mean?” and “So what?” questions about one’s findings
- **Evaluation:** arriving at a judgment about whether something is good, bad, or mediocre, which involves subordinating one’s personal taste to the critical assessment resulting from the first three stages
- **Engagement:** taking some action that connects our critical perspective with our role as citizens to question our media institutions, adding our own voice to the process of shaping the cultural environment

Let’s look at each of these stages in greater detail.

We will be aided in our critical process by keeping an open mind, trying to understand the specific cultural forms we are critiquing, and acknowledging the complexity of contemporary culture.

Just as communication cannot always be reduced to the linear sender-message-receiver model, many forms of media and culture are not easily represented by the high-low model. We should, perhaps, strip culture of such adjectives as high, low, popular, and mass. These modifiers may artificially force media forms and products into predetermined categories. Rather than focusing on these worn-out labels, we might instead look at a wide range of issues generated by culture, from the role of storytelling in the mass media to the global influences of media industries on the consumer marketplace. We should also be moving toward a critical perspective that takes into account the intricacies of the cultural landscape.

A fair critique of any cultural form, regardless of its social or artistic reputation, requires a working knowledge of the particular book, program, or music under scrutiny. For example, to understand W. E. B. Du Bois’s essays, critics immerse themselves in his work and in the historical context.
Upon receiving the Philadelphia Liberty Medal in 1994, President Václav Havel of the Czech Republic described postmodernism as the fundamental condition of global culture, “when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born.” He described this “new world order” as a “multicultural era” or state in which consistent value systems break into mixed and blended cultures:

For me, a symbol of that state is a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel’s back. . . . New meaning is gradually born from the . . . intersection of many different elements.¹

Many critics, including Havel, think that there is a crucial tie between global politics and postmodern culture. They contend that the people who overthrew governments in the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were the same people who valued American popular culture—especially movies, rock music, and television—for its free expression and democratic possibilities.

Back in the 1990s, as modern communist states were undermined by the growth and influence of transnational corporations, citizens in these nations capitalized on the developing global market, using portable video, digital cameras and phones, and audio technology to smuggle out recordings of repression perpetrated by totalitarian regimes. Thus it was difficult for political leaders to hide repressive acts from the rest of the world. In Newsweek, former CBS news anchor Dan Rather wrote about the role of television in the 1989 student uprising in China:

Television brought Beijing’s battle for democracy to Main Street. It made students who live on the other side of the planet just as human, just as vulnerable as the boy on the next block. The miracle of television is that the triumph and tragedy of Tiananmen Square would not have been any more vivid had it been Times Square.²

Today, these trends continue as citizens in less democratic nations—from Iran to North Korea—send out images and texts on smartphones and laptops.

At the same time, we need to examine the impact on other nations of the influx of U.S. popular culture (movies, TV shows, music, etc.)—our second biggest export (after military and airplane equipment). Has access to an American consumer lifestyle fundamentally altered Havel’s Bedouin on the camel? What happens when CNN or MTV is transported to remote African villages that share a single community TV set? What happens when Westernized popular culture encroaches on the mores of Islamic countries, where the spread of American music, movies, and television is viewed as a danger to tradition? These questions still need answers. A global village, which through technology shares culture and communication, can also alter traditional customs forever.

To try to grasp this phenomenon, we might imagine how we would feel if the culture from a country far away gradually eroded our own established habits. This, in fact, is happening all over the world as U.S. culture has become the world’s global currency. Although newer forms of communication such as Twittering and cell phone texting have in some ways increased citizen participation in global life, in what ways have they threatened the values of older cultures?

Our current postmodern period is double-coded: It is an agent both for the renewed possibilities of democracy and, even in tough economic times, for the worldwide spread of consumerism and American popular culture.
context in which he wrote. Similarly, if we want to develop a meaningful critique of TV’s *Dexter* (where the protagonist is a serial killer) or Rush Limbaugh’s radio program or gossip magazines’ obsession with Justin Bieber, it is essential to understand the contemporary context in which these cultural phenomena are produced.

To begin this process of critical assessment, we must imagine culture as more complicated and richer than the high-low model allows. We must also assume a critical stance that enables us to get outside our own preferences. We may like or dislike hip-hop, R&B, pop, or country, but if we want to criticize these musical genres intelligently, we should understand what the various types of music have to say and why their messages appeal to particular audiences. The same approach applies to other cultural forms. If we critique a newspaper article, we must account for the language that is chosen and what it means; if we analyze a film or TV program, we need to slow down the images in order to understand how they make sense.

**Benefits of a Critical Perspective**

Developing an informed critical perspective and becoming media literate allow us to participate in a debate about media culture as a force for both democracy and consumerism. On the one hand, the media can be a catalyst for democracy and social progress. Consider the role of television in spotlighting racism and injustice in the 1960s; the use of video technology to reveal oppressive conditions in China and Eastern Europe or to document crimes by urban police departments; how the TV coverage of both business and government’s slow response to the Gulf oil spill in 2010 impacted people’s understanding of the event; and how blogs and Twitter can serve to debunk bogus claims or protest fraudulent elections. The media have also helped to renew interest in diverse cultures around the world and other emerging democracies (see “Global Village: Bedouins, Camels, Transistors, and Coke” on page 32).

On the other hand, competing against these democratic tendencies is a powerful commercial culture that reinforces a world economic order controlled by relatively few multinational corporations. For instance, when Poland threw off the shackles of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, one of the first things its new leadership did was buy and dub the American soap operas *Santa Barbara* and *Dynasty*. For some, these shows were a relief from sober Soviet political propaganda, but others worried that Poles might inherit another kind of indoctrination—one starring American consumer culture and dominated by large international media companies.

This example illustrates that contemporary culture cannot easily be characterized as one thing or another. Binary terms such as *liberal* and *conservative* or *high* and *low* have less meaning in an environment where so many boundaries have been blurred, so many media forms have converged, and so many diverse cultures coexist. Modern distinctions between print and electronic culture have begun to break down largely because of the increasing number of individuals who have come of age in what is *both* a print and an electronic culture. Either/or models of culture, such as the high/low approach, are giving way to more inclusive ideas, like the map model for culture discussed earlier.

What are the social implications of the new, blended, and merging cultural phenomena? How do we deal with the fact that public debate and news about everyday life now seem as likely to come from *The View*, Jon Stewart, Conan O’Brien, or bloggers as from the *New York Times*, *NBC Nightly News*, or *Time*? Clearly, such changes challenge us to reassess and rebuild the standards by which we judge our culture. The search for answers lies in recognizing the links between cultural expression and daily life. The search also involves monitoring how well the mass media serve democracy, not just by providing us with consumer culture but by encouraging us to help political, social, and economic practices work better. A healthy democracy requires the active involvement of everyone. Part of this involvement means watching over the role and impact of the mass media, a job that belongs to every one of us—not just the paid media critics and watchdog organizations.
COMMON THREADS

In telling the story of mass media, several plotlines and major themes recur and help provide the “big picture”—the larger context for understanding the links between forms of mass media and popular culture. Under each thread that follows, we pose a set of questions that we will investigate together to help you explore media and culture:

- **Developmental stages of mass media.** How did the media evolve, from their origins in ancient oral traditions to their incarnation on the Internet today? What discoveries, inventions, and social circumstances drove the development of different media? What roles do new technologies play in changing contemporary media and culture?

- **The role that media play in a democracy.** How do policy decisions and government actions affect by the news media and other mass media? How do individuals find room in the media terrain to express alternative (nonmainstream) points of view? How do grassroots movements create media to influence and express political ideas?

- **Mass media, cultural expression, and storytelling.** How is our culture shaped by the mass media? What are the advantages and pitfalls of the media’s appetite for telling and selling stories? As we reach the point where almost all media exist on the Internet in some form, how has our culture been affected?

- **Critical analysis of the mass media.** How can we use the critical process to understand, critique, and influence the media? How important is it to be media literate in today’s world?

- **The converged nature of media.** How has convergence changed the experience of media from the print to the digital era? What are the significant differences between reading a printed newspaper and reading the news online? What changes have to be made in the media business to help older forms of media, like newspapers, in the transition to an online world?

At the end of each chapter, we will examine the historical contexts and current processes that shape media products. By becoming more critical consumers and engaged citizens, we will be in a better position to influence the relationships among mass media, democratic participation, and the complex cultural landscape that we all inhabit.

KEY TERMS

The definitions for the terms listed below can be found in the glossary at the end of the book. The page numbers listed with the terms indicate where the term is highlighted in the chapter.

- communication, 6
- culture, 6
- mass media, 6
- mass communication, 6
- digital communication, 9
- bloggers, 9
- social media, 9
- media convergence, 9
- cross platform, 10
- senders, 12
- messages, 12
- mass media channel, 12
- receivers, 12
- gatekeepers, 12
- feedback, 12
- selective exposure, 13
- narrative, 13
- high culture, 18
- low culture, 18
- modern period, 23
- Progressive Era, 26
- postmodern period, 27
- populism, 27
- media literacy, 30
- critical process, 30
- description, 30
- analysis, 30
- interpretation, 30
- evaluation, 31
- engagement, 31
For review quizzes, chapter summaries, links to media-related Web sites, and more, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mediaculture.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Culture and the Evolution of Mass Communication
1. Define culture, mass communication, and mass media, and explain their interrelationships.
2. What are the key technological breakthroughs that accompanied the transition to the print and electronic eras? Why were these changes significant?
3. Explain the key features of the digital era and the concept of media convergence.

Mass Media and the Process of Communication
4. Explain the linear model of mass communication and its limitations.
5. In looking at the history of popular culture, explain why newer and emerging forms of media seem to threaten status quo values.

QUESTIONING THE MEDIA
1. From your own experience, cite examples in which the media have been accused of unfairness. Draw on comments from parents, teachers, religious leaders, friends, news media, and so on. Discuss whether these criticisms have been justified.
2. Pick an example of a popular media product that you think is harmful to children. How would you make your concerns known? Should the product be removed from circulation? Why or why not? If you think the product should be banned, how would you do it?

Surveying the Cultural Landscape
6. Describe the skyscraper model of culture. What are its strengths and limitations?
7. Describe the map model of culture. What are its strengths and limitations?
8. What are the chief differences between modern and postmodern values?

Critiquing Media and Culture
9. What are the five steps in the critical process? Which of these is the most difficult and why?
10. What is the difference between cynicism and criticism?
11. Why is the critical process important?

3. Make a critical case either defending or condemning Comedy Central’s South Park, a TV or radio talk show, a hip-hop group, a soap opera, or TV news coverage of the war in Afghanistan. Use the five-step critical process to develop your position.
4. Although in some ways postmodern forms of communication, such as e-mail, MTV, smartphones, and Twitter, have helped citizens participate in global life, in what ways might these forms harm more traditional or native cultures?