UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

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THIRD EDITION

$SAGE

CHAPTER 1

Understanding the Media

Chapter overview

This chapter will help you appreciate:

- The critical questions which need to be addressed in order to develop more fully your understanding of the media
- How the study of media is eclectic in nature
- The importance of investigating the media in a social context
- The overall approach taken in this book
- The benefits of beginning to examine your own media use, consumption and exposure in a more critical light
- The necessity to focus on the production, content and reception of media texts. This is achieved through the use of case studies on the iPod, U2 and *The Simpsons*.

Key concepts

- Media saturation
- Media
- Mass media
- Social context
- Sociological imagination
- Media globalization
- Media texts
- Production–content–reception model of media analysis
- Audiences as participants and producers/produsers
- Theoretical and methodological tools
- Media use and media exposure
- Political economy

Introduction

It's just after 7 am in Auckland, New Zealand. **Media** and journalism student Emily Johnson wakes and thinks about the busy day ahead in college. Before she even gets out of bed, she reaches for her iPad and goes immediately to her Facebook page. Emily immediately sees that she has a new friend request, nine comments and 12 'likes'. Overnight, her Facebook friends have left replies to Emily's most recent postings about her favourite singer David Bowie. She reviews the news timeline and leaves a comment or two. Facebook reminds her that it is her friend Gavin's birthday and suggests that she post a birthday message to him. A banner advert asks Emily to think about local gym membership. She receives invites to a college party being held after her final exams. She tentatively answers with a 'Maybe'. Emily also replies to the comments left by her two sisters who have moved to London to further their studies. They have uploaded photographs taken at a punk t-shirt stall in Camden Market. By way of return, Emily posts the most recent picture of her cat Snowtoes. She thinks about how Facebook allows them to stay in contact every day so that they can catch up on family news and gossip. In doing so, Emily and her sisters are participating in the largest virtual or online community in human history. As of 2013, there were over 1 billion active users of Facebook which is an example of the unprecedented scale of media saturation that we now encounter.

It is also big business. On the first day of its stock market flotation in 2012 Facebook was valued at US$104.2 billion.

As a media and journalism student Emily thinks about how her use of Facebook stands in stark contrast to her grandparents' experience, and how, when they first migrated to New Zealand, they had to wait several weeks for a letter to arrive via ship from their families in Manchester in the UK.

Like Emily, you are presented every day with a plethora of images and messages about the social world. The vast array of images and messages you encounter – increasingly created and distributed by a handful of multimedia conglomerates – is unprecedented in human history. In addition to this, many audience members have themselves become producers of media content through their use of Facebook and YouTube. The minutiae of the lives of celebrities are dissected and re-circulated on Twitter. Social media allow for the illusion of familiarity between the ordinary and the famous by facilitating the development of para-social relationships. Ordinary people compete for stardom, celebrity and wealth on programmes like *X-Factor* where audience members at home vote to keep the prospective stars on or off the show. They are constantly reminded of the need to consume certain products and look a certain way. Celebrity chefs lecture the poor and unemployed on their eating habits. Print and other forms of media represent being 'fat' or 'overweight' as a disease in the shape of the so-called 'obesity epidemic' (see Saguy and Almeling, 2008). The covers of magazines aimed at a female

readership mix the themes of celebrity gossip and the possibility of weight loss each week ('Lose 3 Stone before Christmas', 'How I Lost 100lbs …', 'The New Me …').

These are just few of the myriad of media contexts in which we all find ourselves. More importantly, there are fundamental questions to be addressed about the democratic nature of the media. The media saturation that shapes all of our lives is increasingly colonized by commercial interests that are driven not by altruism but by profit. The intention of this book is to allow you to unpick the complexities of these relationships by learning to ask critical questions, and to ask questions about the media and power in particular.

This book's starting point is your own vast experience as an audience member. From the outset you are encouraged to think critically and ask awkward questions about your own experience of the media, whether as a consumer or as a producer of media content. The chapter starts by looking at the main issues that you need to address in order to begin to more fully understand the ever-burgeoning media. Although the diverse nature of media analysis is acknowledged, a particular emphasis is placed in your textbook on the need to examine the media in a social context. A sociological approach – with a particular focus on **political economy** – to media analysis continues to offer a set of approaches that are both critical and fruitful. Starting with three detailed examples, the iPod, U2 and *The Simpsons* are used as case studies in order to demonstrate the kinds of critical questions you might raise about the contemporary media.

A CLOSER LOOK 1.1

Media saturation

The Kaiser Foundation has undertaken a number of detailed surveys of media use amongst 8–18-year-olds in the USA. In their study *Generation M2: Media Lives of the 8- to 18-Year-Olds*, Rideout et al. (2010) surveyed 2,002 students and also gathered data from 702 of the students who kept a media diary over seven days. The study found a significant increase in media use amongst students and especially amongst those from ethnic minorities. The study estimates that 8–18-year-olds spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes on entertainment media each day (in excess of 53 hours per week). The authors note that many of their respondents engage in what they term 'media multitasking', that is, using more than one form of media at the same time, resulting in 10 hours and 45 minutes of media content being used in the 7 hours and 38 minutes. In addition to the increasingly high levels of media use we can also think about the rapid expansion in the number of contexts in which audiences are exposed to media content.
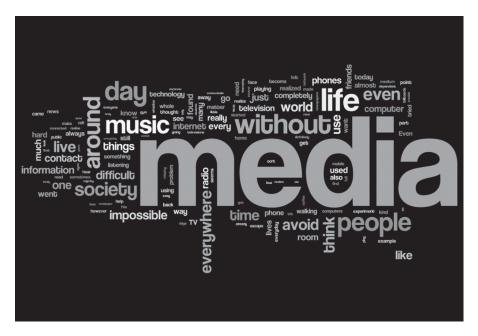
Plate 1.1   **24/7, Always On Media. It is next to impossible to avoid the media in a media saturated world. Image reproduced courtesy of The Kaiser Foundation 2010 ©.**

Defining the media

McQuail (2010), in acknowledging the rapidly changing environment in which the media operate, offers us a useful set of criteria through which we can define the contemporary media. McQuail argues that these features have profound consequences for the cultural life and political and economic organization of contemporary societies. He says:

In respect of *politics*, the **mass media** provide:

An arena of debate and a set of channels for making policies, candidates, relevant facts and ideas more widely known as well as providing politicians, interest groups and agents of government with a means of publicity and influence. (2010: 4)

In the realm of *culture*, the mass media:

Are for most people the main channel of cultural representation and expression, and primary source of images of social reality and materials for forming and maintaining social identity. Everyday social life is strongly

patterned by the routines of media use and infused by its contents through the way leisure time is spent, lifestyles are influenced, conversation is given its topics and models of behavior are offered for all contingencies. (2010: 4)

In addition:

The media have grown in economic value, with even larger and more international media corporations dominating the media market, with influence extending through sport, travel, leisure, food and clothing industries and with interconnections with telecommunications and all information-based economic sectors. (2010: 4–5)

Therefore, as well as allowing the communication of messages or texts between senders and receivers, the mass media need to be seen in terms of their public character and in respect of their political, cultural, social and economic importance. The extracted reading by McChesney (1999) below stresses the important role that the media can (and should) play in ensuring the existence of a democratic society. Media professionals working in the media industries produce media products, which are increasingly seen as commodities to be bought and sold in a globalized marketplace. Many of these products or texts have significance in the day-to-day lives of many audience members in different parts of the globe. The texts may be a primary source of information and knowledge about the social world and most significantly about relationships of power. **Media texts** have a further potency in the way in which cultural and political differences are constructed and defined. The experience of living in modern and postmodern societies is defined primarily by the very existence of the media. Our understanding of the media then has to go further than a narrow technical definition of the media as the medium of communication between senders and receivers.

Figure 1.1 summarizes the key ways in which the media can be conceptualized. Moving from the narrow technical definition of the media as the medium through which messages or texts may be sent between senders and receivers, a much broader understanding of the media suggests that they are understood as industries or organizations, where media texts are commodities as well as cultural products, where and when the media act as powerful agents of social change and transformation, and where audiences have the potential to be producers of media content. In short, this book is concerned with understanding the media in a social context. Such a concern will invariably be taken up with questions of power and unequal power relationships. As the case study of the iPod will shortly demonstrate, students of the media need to move beyond the novelty of the latest technological device or application and confront sometimes difficult questions about the twenty-first century media.

- Media as means of communication between 'senders' and 'receivers'
- Media texts as cultural products with social, cultural and political significance

Media as means of communication between 'senders' and 'receivers'	Media as industries or organizations.	Media texts as commodities produced by the media industries.
Media texts as cultural products with social, cultural and political significance.	Media as agents of social change and **globalization**.	Media as agents of **socialization** and powerful sources of social meaning.
		Media as content produced and disseminated by audiences.

Figure 1.1   Conceptualizing the media.

⚡ Key thinker 1.1   C. Wright Mills (1916–1962)

Although he lived a relatively short life, the American sociologist C. (Charles) Wright Mills contributed significantly to the development of recent sociological thinking. From a young age, Wright Mills perceived himself to be an outsider, a fact which influenced his formation as a radical thinker. A motorcycle enthusiast, Wright Mills's views were also shaped by his extensive travels in Europe. Much of his work as a sociologist was concerned with applying ideas and concepts developed initially by Karl Marx and Max Weber which sought to understand more about power relationships and the growing problem of alienation in the twentieth century. C. Wright Mills is best known for his critically acclaimed book *The Sociological Imagination* (1976). This provocative text poses a challenge to all of us, as students of society, to look at our everyday 'run of the mill' familiar world, as if we were looking at it for the very first time as newcomers or strangers. In doing so, Wright Mills asks us to 'de-familiarize the familiar' and make use of a sociological lens or imagination. The 'sociological imagination' requires of us to think about why and how the social world is organized the way that it is. It asks us to think critically about our immediate personal experiences and situate them in a wider social context. By doing so, we will be able to best ask (and answer) questions about the social world and gain deeper insights into those larger forces that shape our personal experiences. For more go to: http://www.cwrightmills.org/

The media in a social context

Living as we do in a media-saturated society, we can run the very real risk of taking the social significance of the media for granted (see Hanson, 2005). However, the questions posed in this chapter about the role of the media in everyday life will

remind you about the extent to which the media are an intrinsic part of the web of your day-to-day experience. Applying the 'sociological imagination' (see Key thinker 1.1 and Stop and think 1.1) to these commonplace experiences allows you to look on these phenomena as if you were seeing them for the very first time. In 'defamiliarizing the familiar' you will begin to appreciate how the media operate at both macro and micro levels.

Let's briefly consider one example. Imagine if you came from another planet and had never read a newspaper. If you arrived in the last 20 years you might notice that in many newspapers (and other media settings) journalists have increasingly expressed concerns about the reported levels of fatness in the **developed world**. As a stranger to our planet you might be forgiven for thinking that 'fatness' is something that can be transmitted from one person to another (rather like AIDS, HIV or influenza for example). Your mistake might be influenced by the fact that recent media constructions of fatness have seen it consistently framed as an 'obesity epidemic'. The reporting of this 'epidemic' citing evidence of a rise in 'morbid obesity' reproduces moral discourses which blame individuals (women, the poor, members of ethnic minority groups) for their fatness and lack of control with food. As a first-time user of the media you might also be struck by the irony that the media have successfully managed to construct a moral panic about fatness and yet carry considerable amounts of advertising or copy (adverts for McDonald's, restaurant reviews, lifestyle features focused on food or recipes, for example) which encourage more and more consumption (see Boero, 2007, 2012; Saguy and Almeling, 2008). By applying the sociological imagination to the media you can begin to think about the degree to which media representations of the world are socially constructed and about the extent to which media reproduce dominant discourses as if they were social facts.

···**CHAPTER LINK**···

As you will see in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, the media continue to play an important ideological role in contemporary societies in terms of how they contribute to, or challenge unequal power relationships through the dissemination of hegemonic discourses.

···

? Stop and think 1.1

Using the sociological imagination

The media diary exercise in the 'Toolkit' in your book's companion website may surprise you as to the degree to which you are exposed

(Continued)

to the media in your everyday life. Because of their ubiquity, it is difficult for us to separate ourselves from our everyday, largely mass-mediated, experiences (see Gitlin, 2002). The challenge for media students is to stand back from this media saturation for a while and ask critical questions of what we otherwise take for granted in our day-to-day lives. In doing so, we have the potential to gain new and hopefully critical insights into an otherwise all too familiar world. By asking questions such as those just outlined you stand to gain much from your study of the media. Applying the concept of 'the sociological imagination', try to imagine how your everyday life would be without the media.

1. What sorts of differences would there be in a medialess society?

2. How would you find out about national and world events?

3. Where would you get your ideas and opinions about those who are 'different' from you?

4. How would you know about the views and opinions of the powerful?

5. Would your conversations with family and friends be any different?

6. In the absence of social media such as Facebook would your friendships and relationships be different?

7. How would you entertain yourself?

8. How would your use of time be different in your daily life?

At the macro level the media are an important agent of transformation and social change, they are inextricably bound up with the capitalist project and they play a centre-stage role in the reproduction and continuation of various kinds of social inequalities at local, national and global levels. The media have played – and continue to play – an important part in the transformation of societies from being traditional to modern and from being modern to postmodern. The experience of living in **modernity** and **postmodernity** is shaped significantly by mass mediation.

For most people the 'texture' of modernity and postmodernity is formed as a result of the very existence of the media in their everyday lives. More importantly, there are fundamental questions to be addressed about the democratic nature of the media. The media saturation that shapes your life is increasingly colonized by commercial interests who are not driven by altruism but by profit. The media play a central role in defining societies as traditional, modern or postmodern. The mainstream media industries – many of which in

their own right are examples par excellence of global capitalist organizations – play a pivotal role in the continued spread of a consumer culture that drives and perpetuates global capitalism. One can find very obvious examples of consumerism within advertising across the media, but at a more general level the media promote certain kinds of lifestyles and taste cultures within a broad range of media genres as being more legitimate and desirable than others. The increasingly complex ownership structure of the media industries and their interconnections with other kinds of capitalist industries have in recent times reinforced these patterns even further.

Modern and postmodern societies continue to be marked by inequalities in terms of class, ethnicity and gender. The media's role in reproducing these inequalities may be seen on two main fronts. We can view the question of the media and inequality in terms of access to the media and we can and should ask questions about the extent to which the media either challenge or reproduce social inequality in their representation of the social world.

The much favoured illusion of the global community or 'global village' used repeatedly by the media industry itself needs to be balanced with a more realistic perspective that recognizes that not all social groups or societies have equal access to media technology or the increasing amount of media content being made available for purchase and consumption.

At a micro level the media act as agents of socialization, constitute a powerful source of social meaning and occupy a significant amount of people's leisure time. Writing about mediated childhoods and leisure in a comparative European context, Livingstone reminds us of the increasingly complex nature of the media environment in which many children now live (see Livingstone, 2002 for an elaboration). She begins with the following example to make the point that we need to recognize the importance of contextualizing the uses of 'new' and 'old' media in everyday life:

> Two eight-year-old boys play their favourite multimedia adventure game on the family PC. When they discover an Internet site where the same game could be played interactively with unknown others, this occasions great excitement in the household. The boys choose their fantasy personae and try diverse strategies to play the game, both co-operative and competitive, simultaneously 'talking' on-line (i.e. writing) to the other participants. But when restricted in their access to the Internet, for reasons of cost, the game spins off into 'real life'. Now the boys, together with their younger sisters, choose a character, don their battledress and play 'the game' all over the house, going downstairs to Hell, The Volcanoes and The Labyrinth, and upstairs to The Town, 'improving' the game in the process. The new game is called, confusingly for adult observers, 'playing the Internet'. (Livingstone, 1998: 436)

Attention also needs to be paid to the **agency** or creativity of both media professionals and media audiences when the media is considered at this micro level.

The media are important agents of socialization in that they reproduce dominant (and other) social norms, beliefs, discourses, ideologies and values.

Although sometimes media content may be constructed with the expressed aim of educating or duping audience members – as evidenced in anti-smoking advertising campaigns or in propaganda films, for example – most of the time the transmission of norms, beliefs, ideologies, discourses and values happens in an unconscious fashion. The mainstream media draw upon a wide range of taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world: assumptions that, more often than not, go unquestioned by media professionals and audiences alike.

One of the key aims of this book is to introduce you to the tools of analysis that you might use to interrogate the otherwise all too familiar media content of your daily life. Consider, for example, the array of messages within media content that you will encounter today about gender roles. Do these messages challenge or perpetuate what are currently viewed as the 'appropriate' gender roles in your specific social setting or cultural context? What do these messages tell you about masculinity and femininity? What sorts of assumptions are inherent in these media messages about being a 'man' or a 'woman' in the early twenty-first century? What aspects of being male or female are downplayed or ignored altogether in these media messages? What sorts of normative assumptions are made about sexuality? Is universal heterosexuality assumed? What sorts of discourses predominate about ideal body shapes and weight? Within the mainstream print and broadcast media how are these messages articulated at a symbolic level? Do you think that they alter in any way the understanding you have about the social world in terms of gender divisions and gender-based inequality? If you were to compare how these messages concerning gender politics vary with those reproduced in the media, say, twenty years ago, how would they differ? Why? Whose interests are served by the predominance of certain kinds of assumptions within media content and why (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013)?

Media content acts as a powerful source of social meaning. The media are centrally involved in the social construction of reality for audience members, giving them an understanding – however limited – of both their immediate and their more distant social contexts. Media audiences are informed and entertained by the media industries. A significant amount of people's leisure time is taken up with media consumption, and media content itself plays an important role in the day-to-day conversations and interactions in which members of society engage. Media content draws upon and contributes to the discourses or forms of knowledge that we have about the wider social world.

? Stop and think 1.2

Ask someone from an older generation in your family (a parent, guardian, grandparent, for example) to describe their media lives from when they were teenagers. What are the main differences between your media experiences and theirs? What shapes or determines these differences? Do these differences matter?

> **!** **'Do it!' 1.1   Media and the construction of social reality**
>
> Go to the Toolkit section in the book's companion website and complete the short exercise on the Media Construction of Social Reality. Having done so, think about the role played by journalists and others in shaping our perception of social issues – particularly issues that prove to be contentious in society, for example immigration, class inequalities and poverty. In your opinion are powerful people (those with more economic or political power or a higher class status) treated differently than ordinary people in the media? Why do you think that this is?

Finally, it is important to remember that the media industries and media audiences are comprised of living, breathing people who shape and are shaped by media content as well as a wide range of other social forces. Given the centrality of the media in people's everyday lives, it is important to stress the capacity that audience members have to actively engage with media content. As you will see later on, an appreciation of the specific social contexts in which media consumption takes place is a crucial starting point in attempting to understand the power of the media over their audience and the circumstances in which audience members can exercise agency in their interactions with media texts. Similarly, it is this tension between structure and agency that frames our concerns in beginning to understand the world of the media professional.

> **?** **Stop and think 1.3**
>
> **It's a man's world**
>
> It is common practice for women to be portrayed in a narrow and sexist fashion in tabloid newspapers. They are, to use Tuchman's (1978) important phrase, 'symbolically annihilated'. Routinely, women are written about in terms of their beauty, their physical attributes or celebrity status. It is, of course, important to note that the tabloid press ignore significant numbers of women who owing to their age, class background, disability, ethnicity or physical shape or size, for example, do not fit in with received notions of glamour or attractiveness. Try to imagine a situation in which these roles
>
> *(Continued)*

would be reversed. What do you think might happen if tabloid journalists wrote about men in the same way as they regularly do about women? How might male and female readers react? Would it be perceived as amusing or threatening? Why?

Case study 1.1   Asking questions: the iPod

The 'i' world and the digital divide

On 21 September 2012, queues formed overnight at Apple Stores throughout the world in order for Apple devotees to acquire the iPhone 5. Its launch attracted fever-pitch interest, bearing a strong resemblance to movie premieres or record releases in the recent past. It is hardly surprising as Apple products such as the iPod, iPhone and iPad have attained iconic status and have come to symbolize media **convergence** in an age of media globalization. They have radically altered the relationship between audiences and content in terms of the consumption and production of media content. Perceived by many as having a counter-cultural or an alternative image, the advertising strategies used to sell the aforementioned media products to the 'net generation' celebrate the values of individuality and networked individualism. However, behind the glitz and appeal of these clever technological devices lie some more problematic questions about their production and manufacture. Setting aside the ingenuity of the devices and their many applications, the hegemonic position achieved by Apple in a very competitive marketplace has arisen in no small measure from the company's dependency on cheap labour in Asia. Mulrennan (2010) demonstrates how Apple (and other global firms like Dell, Sony and Hewlett Packard) is directly implicated in the more exploitative aspects of digital capitalism.

The iPod, for example, sold 225 million units in 2009 and accounted for 78% of all digital media players (Mulrennan, 2010: 92). From its initial launch in 2001, the iPod saw Apple's shares rise from $9.43 to $203.00 in 2009. Mulrennan (2010) reminds us that we have to take the (usually invisible) exploitative dimensions of the manufacture of the iPod into account in order to fully understand Apple's dominant position in the global marketplace. While the iPod is manufactured in China, the components are sourced in the US or from **transnational** US companies who are present in countries like Japan and Taiwan. According to Linden et al. (2007) the cheapest aspect of the making of the 5th generation iPod is their assembly and testing in China. Estimated to be just $4, it accounts for 1.3% of overall costs. The bulk of profits revert to the US or to transnational US companies. In 2012, Apple paid just US$713 million in tax on its overseas profits of $36.8 billion – less than 2% (*The Irish Times*, 4 November 2012).

The iPod is assembled by a Taiwanese Company – Foxconn – based in China. Investigative journalists and others have repeatedly criticized the working and living conditions of the (mainly rural) workers who assemble and test the iPod. Mulrennan (2010) notes that the

Foxconn factory in Guandong province employs '... 200,000 people, most of whom live, 100 to a room, in dormitories that are free to employees ... a stipulation exists that should an employee live within the compound, they are forbidden visitors. Employees were found to work up to 15 hours per day for a wage of £27.00 per month' (Mulrennan, 2010: 97). The walled campus which has its own fire brigade and television service – Foxconn TV – is known locally as 'iPod City'. Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of serious problems in the workplace where the iPod is assembled is the presence of suicide prevention netting at the first floor level of the gigantic factory building. Despite Apple's subsequent claims that they are 'dedicated to ensuring that working conditions are safe and employees are treated with respect and dignity wherever Apple products are made' (Mulrennan, 2010: 98), criticisms of the working conditions at Foxconn have persisted. As further evidence of this, Apple asked the Fair Labour Association in 2012 to investigate further claims of mistreatment and exploitation of employees at the Foxconn factory.

Apple is not alone in the exploitative relationship that exists between the Western capitalist world and less developed emerging economies. However, the continued use of cheap labour is an essential part of the story of their success and their now dominant global position. Digital capitalism, like Apple, has to be understood not only at a surface level – that is, what the latest gadget can do – but in terms of *all* aspects of production, consumption and use, and especially so if the production involves exploitation.

? Stop and think 1.4

1. If you own an iPod, iPad or iPhone take a close look at it. Does it tell you where it is manufactured and by which company?

2. Apple's iTunes dominates the way in which we now download music. Do you think that is a good or a bad thing?

! Do it! 1.2   An apple a day ...

Listen to Leslie T. Chang's TED Talk on the experiences and perspectives of female Chinese workers who manufacture Apple and other products: http://www.ted.com/talks/leslie_t_chang_the_voices_of_china_s_workers.html

Read the online article on iPhones in China by Shi (2011) on your companion website.

Case study 1.2   I know it's only rock and roll
Asking questions about U2

In a remote South African village a group of teenage boys listen to the U2 song 'One' on a shared wind-up radio. Afterwards they talk about U2 and the fact that they find them appealing because of their meaningful lyrics. They usually listen to U2 on the radio or on cheap pirated cassette copies of the band's recordings. At the same time in Tokyo a female fan participates in an internet chat room discussion about the band's film *Rattle and Hum*. Using a pseudonym, she converses with other U2 fans in America, Australia, Germany and Sweden. A heated debate ensues about the overall quality of the film. The participants debate whether the film represents a high or low point in the band's journey through the roots of American rock-and-roll culture. Some of the fans argue that U2's reinvention of themselves as being postmodern and ironic in their 1990s recordings *Achtung Baby* and *Zooropa* was in fact the zenith of their creativity. Meanwhile in London a young man listens to the band's music on his recently purchased limited edition U2 branded iPod as he travels to work on the Tube. His passage to work is itself a media-rich environment. There are hundreds of adverts in the various underground stations in addition to the posters within his individual carriage. His fellow travellers read newspapers, books, magazines. Where possible, some work on their iPads. Like him, many of them are listening to music

Plate 1.2   'U2 image reproduced by kind permission of Principle Management © Deirdre O'Callaghan 2011.

on their phones. The young man is thinking about the fact that later that evening he will watch U2's '360 Degrees' tour in a 'pay per view' concert, live from Bucharest, via his recently purchased digital satellite television system. The latest technology will allow him to choose from a range of camera angles while watching the concert in his sitting room. The irony that one of the main themes of U2's 1992 'Zoo TV' tour was the subversive power of the audience is not lost on him. He watches the concert wearing a U2 t-shirt that he has bought from the official U2 website. As the concert is televised he posts tweets to his Twitter account on each song and on Bono's performance in particular. He also adds comments about U2 to his Facebook page. Afterwards he converses online in a forum with other U2 fans about the concert.

These fans all share a common interest in the globalized popular culture and multimedia phenomenon that is U2. However, they interact with and about U2 using different media and in clearly different social contexts. In spite of their shared interest in U2 they do not have equal access to the range of media settings in which U2 may now be found. The fans differ in terms of which of them can afford to pay for legitimate recordings, official band merchandise or live concert broadcasts by the band. Although U2 has an importance for all these fans we cannot presume anything about the meanings that these fans take from either U2's lyrics or the images contained within their promotional videos or films.

CHAPTER LINK

Fandom is discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

Asking questions about U2

What sorts of questions might you usefully ask about this specific example of media use? Depending on your chosen theoretical perspective or methodological approach you might have concerns, for example, about U2 being representative of a globalized (or Americanized) form of popular culture that now predominates over all other popular cultures. If you follow a **feminist** line of argument you might be interested in whom – in gender terms – U2 appeal to. Is their audience what is presumed to be a traditional male-dominated rock-and-roll audience or have they also significance for female fans? What differences, if any, emerge between male and female U2 fans? What other kinds of demographic factors such as age, class or ethnicity shape their fan base? Do U2 fans constitute a specific sub-culture as would many of the fans of Marilyn Manson, Morrissey or Nirvana? How do they differ from younger fans of 'manufactured' stars like Justin Bieber or Britney Spears?

CHAPTER LINK

Audience reception and rock music fandom are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

A student taking a postmodern position might be interested in exploring to what extent U2's media products contribute towards creating what Baudrillard termed a '**hyperreality**' for their fans. She might ask to what extent their promotional videos, DVDs or films make use of **intertextuality**. To what extent do U2's audiences appropriate or localize the main themes of their songs in terms of either their own personal experience or their own cultural context?

Alternatively, you might focus on the band's use of new media technology and examine how it shapes the media texts that they produce for their fans.

You could decide to focus on the selling of music (and its related products) as a phenomenon in itself. You could also usefully ask questions about the ownership and control of the production and distribution of media products such as U2's recordings and associated merchandise. In U2's case they are signed to Interscope Records, which is owned and controlled by the multinational global corporation Vivendi-Universal – a global conglomerate with diverse interests ranging from music, games, pay TV, digital television and telephony.

You could possibly do an analysis of their records and videos to examine their content in terms of dominant themes and representations. U2 have already been a focus of attention for some musicologists and sociologists. The songs 'Sunday, Bloody Sunday' and 'Zoo Station' have, for instance, been examined as examples of discourses (Fast, 2000). On the other hand, you might also want to ask some questions about the meaning that U2 have for their audiences in the totality of markets in which their products are bought, sold and exchanged. In doing so you would need to acknowledge the fact that their audiences vary in terms of age, class, gender and ethnicity and location, for example. The contexts in which these fans are exposed to the variety of media products associated with the band – whether they are alone or in a group, for example – might also be of possible significance in your deliberations.

? Stop and think 1.5

Apply the questions posed above about U2 to your favourite recording artiste. What sorts of differences emerge and why?

Asking questions? Which questions?

The case studies of the iPod and U2 offer you some clues as to how you should approach understanding the media more generally. These examples suggest that

in undertaking media analysis you need to ask fundamental questions about the media. These questions might be about the ownership, control and distribution of media products; they might be about the dynamics involved in the creation of media products, or equally they might be concerned with audience response(s) or activities. In approaching the media in this way we have the potential to gain deeper insights into what are increasingly multifaceted phenomena. This more broadly defined approach to understanding the media means that we must learn to choose between a wide range of theoretical and methodological models of media analysis.

The importance of theory and method

We use a variety of theories and methods in an attempt to add to our overall understanding or knowledge base. Our choice of theory and method not only provides the means of identifying 'truths' but also provides the context within which those 'truths' are reliable and valid. Theories allow us to move from the specific to the general. They permit us to think about 'facts' at a higher level. They help us to make connections between sometimes otherwise seemingly unrelated phenomena. One useful way to think about the use of theory in this context is to imagine that your overall subject area, discipline or approach is a camera. As a student of the media you have a range of lenses that you may place on the camera. These will allow you look at something in a variety of ways and perhaps result in you coming to a multiplicity of conclusions, depending upon your chosen lens or lenses. Theories work like a camera lens in this regard. They will help illuminate different aspects of the same phenomena. To extend the camera metaphor for a moment, **research methods** may be likened to the other techniques involved in camera work in that they allow you to zoom in or out of specific phenomena. Your choice of method will determine whether you go for the very detailed or the very general aspect of your **research question**. Research methods allow us to undertake research that is credible. Research should be carried out in a transparent and reputable way. A research design may be replicated in other contexts (in other cultures, societies or communities, for example) and this allows researchers to compare their findings and to test the theoretical implications of their results. Whether you are a student who prefers a qualitative to a quantitative approach, or you prefer to combine research approaches depending upon your particular research question, the overall aim is to engage in work that is trustworthy and rigorous. Your choice of theoretical perspective(s) and methodological approach(es) will have an important bearing on how you arrive at a position of understanding and knowledge.

Imagine that you were asked to undertake a short piece of observation-based research on the followers of punk music. If your interest is in the sociology of subcultures or countercultures you might concentrate on how punks invert the meanings of symbols that already have currency in

wider society such as safety pins, the swastika or bin bags, for example. Alternatively, you might be interested in how individual punks conform to the norms and values of the subculture or counterculture to which they belong. If your interest is in gender politics your focus might be on whether punk culture replicates or challenges patriarchal relationships of power. The choices that you make about theory and method therefore have important implications for furthering your knowledge and understanding.

CHAPTER LINK

An extended discussion on research methods and media analysis is to found in Chapter 10, 'The How and Why of Media Analysis'.

Key thinker 1.2   Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)

The late, brilliant (and contentious) French thinker Jean Baudrillard looms large over recent thinking about the role of the media in everyday life. Influenced initially by Marxism and **semiotics** – and by Roland Barthes and Marshall McLuhan in particular – Baudrillard's writings have come to serve as *the* manifesto for adherents of postmodern theory. According to Baudrillard, the postmodern experience is defined by and through the 'ecstasy of communication'. In living media-saturated lives, the media texts which surround us simulate a 'hyper-reality' for audiences in which 'media reality' is more 'real' than 'reality' itself. Baudrillard's most controversial book is, arguably, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995). Here, he examines the extent to which the (first) Gulf War took place in a virtual space, that is, on our television screens. This war was different from previous wars in that it was represented within some media coverage as a virtual reality game. The symbols and language used (e.g. a target-rich environment) were unprecedented in terms of war coverage. It is not surprising that Baudrillard's ideas have caused considerable controversy. He has been criticized for over-generalizing, for being politically disengaged and for not testing his ideas against any empirical research findings on how audience members actually experience media saturation and whether or not they engage critically with media content.

Read on! 1.1　A sociological approach to media analysis

Keith Tester (1994) *Media, Culture and Morality*. London: Routledge, pp. 4–5.

... There is much more to be said about the media than cultural studies can allow. Most of these additional things can be said if a sociological light is brought to bear on the media. This is because sociology holds out the possibility of a lively study of culture which is informed by a seriousness of moral and cultural purpose of a kind that is inconceivable from the point of view of cultural studies.

... Sociology might do this because, unlike cultural studies, if it is worth doing, sociology is not happy just to describe and explore what exists. Sociology ought to be driven by a sense of moral commitment and by a moral outrage at what presently passes for a good life; an outrage that cultural studies, with its increasing emphasis on things like clothes and shopping, can say absolutely nothing about.

Sociology ought to seek to know why things happen. In so doing it offers the chance that it will be possible to develop an argument for why things ought to have happened differently in the past or could be made to happen differently in the future. Consequently, a sociological approach can mean that we will refuse to take anything at all for granted. Certainly, we will be unable to take it for granted that something is 'good' or 'boring' simply because it is. Sociology can in principle rescue the media – and therefore the cultural and moral values – from the trivialization to which they are otherwise all too susceptible.

... If a sociological imagination is brought to bear on the question of the media and their impact on cultural and moral values, then it is potentially possible to encourage people to think about the media for themselves. People in principle will be able to develop their own attitudes towards the media rather than simply accept what they are told.

? Stop and think 1.6

1. How does Tester characterize a sociological approach to media analysis? How does it differ from a cultural studies approach?

2. Tester stresses the need to use the 'sociological imagination' – a term first coined by the sociologist C. Wright Mills and discussed in here in the introduction and this chapter – in our approach to the media. What sorts of benefits does its use bring?

Read on! 1.2   Asking the right questions

James Halloran (1998) 'Mass communication research: asking the right questions' in Anders Hansen, Simon Cottle, Ralph Negrine and Chris Newbold (eds) *Mass Communication Research Methods*. London: Macmillan, p. 19.

… Over the years there has been a growing appreciation that the whole communication process needs to be studied, and that includes those who provide (including their institutions) as well as the nature of what is provided, and those who receive what is provided. For example, the production of programmes in broadcasting fulfils functions for the institution, the broadcaster, the audience and society at large. This needs to be recognized and dealt with in research. Intentions, aims, purposes, policies, organizational frameworks, modes of operation, professional values, funding, general circumscriptions, external pressures and ideological considerations all need to be taken into account.

Ideally, the media should not be seen in isolation, but as one set of social institutions, interacting with other institutions within the wider social system. The failure to recognize the relevance of context and interaction between institutions has resulted in a neglect of the part played in the communication process by non-media institutions, and an underestimation of the importance of mediation, support factors, follow-up activities and the like. The other side of this coin is the problem of media-centredness. The media do not work in isolation, but in and through a nexus of mediating factors. What any medium can do on its own is probably quite limited.

Let it be repeated that, simply stated, this means that we should not be asking what the media do to people, or what they could do to people, but what will people, variously located in society, with different experiences, opportunities, skills, competencies and needs make of what the media and other sources provide, and which are available to them? This is really at the heart of the problem, and if we fail to get this question right, our research will be worthless.

? Stop and think 1.7

1. Do you understand what Halloran means by the term 'media-centredness'? What are the problems with taking a media-centred approach in media analysis?

2. Think of an example of how you would apply Halloran's model in attempting to understand more about the communications process. In doing so outline the various stages involved in undertaking such a piece of research.

Case study 1.3   Asking questions about *The Simpsons*

Let's consider one further example of how you might approach and critically understand the media. The cartoon series *The Simpsons* is a classic example of the globalization of popular culture. Phrases such as 'Doh' and 'Don't have a cow, man!' have entered everyday speech across the globe. Its importance, however, extends beyond its obvious popularity with younger and older audience members in different societies and cultures. *The Simpsons* also makes an interesting case study in the increasingly transnational nature of cultural production, given that the main animation of the series is undertaken in South Korea, while its distribution is owned and controlled by Twentieth Television (formerly known as Twentieth Century Fox) in North America (see Elber, 2001). Produced by Gracie Films for Twentieth Television – a media giant that is in turn owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – the programme is a valuable commodity for its owners and creators.

The Simpsons

The Simpsons began life as a short insert on the *Tracey Ullman Show* in 1989 and in 2011 it aired its 23rd season. The show's central protagonist was initially Bart but this soon gave way to a greater focus on Homer, who represents a latterday bungling but immensely popular 'Everyman'. In 1998 *The Simpsons* generated syndication sales of US$3 million per episode (Schlosser, 1998). In 2003 it was estimated that sales from Simpsons t-shirts in the US alone were worth $20 million with global syndication revenues estimated to be $1 billion (Bonné, 2003). The series has helped maximize audiences, advertising and sponsorship for a variety of television networks and it has generated additional profits for its owners and creators through the merchandising of toys, t-shirts, pyjamas, chocolate, breakfast cereals and PlayStation games, for example. In a range of territories such as Australia and Western Europe, *The Simpsons* series has played a pivotal role in the ratings war between publicly and privately owned television channels.

   The Simpsons is not just a television phenomenon, however. It has crossed over into other media settings such as film, video, DVD and the internet. There are many websites where dedicated fans dissect individual episodes of the series and discuss the meaning of specific storylines. As a complex media text about the lives and experiences

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of America's most famous dysfunctional **blue-collar** family, the television programme attempts to engage with its audience on a wide variety of issues. Individual episodes of the programme are replete with intertextual references and parodies. The cartoon within the cartoon – *The Itchy and Scratchy Show* – is a clear send-up of the effects debate within media and communications studies about children and television violence. The decoding of *The Simpsons* requires of its readers a vast array of reference points from Western popular culture. The history of the Beatles, for example, was used as the basis of the storyline of Homer's barbershop quartet group 'The B-Sharps'. The storyline included a reference to barfly Barney Gumble's decision to marry a Japanese performance artist, based presumably on the John Lennon and Yoko Ono story. The Beatle's pilgrimage to India in search of knowledge and wisdom was parodied in an episode which saw Homer and Apu travel to India in order to speak to the founder of Kwik-E-Mart.

There is also – to a certain extent – evidence of reflexivity in that *The Simpsons* manages to critique many of the dominant ideologies at play in North America about class, ethnicity, gender and religiosity. Bad capitalism is personified in the programme through the character of Mr Burns – owner of, among other things, the local nuclear power plant. The hypocrisy of the media dropping in on the homeless on Thanksgiving while rendering them invisible for the rest of the year was satirized in an episode entitled 'Bart versus Thanksgiving'. Issues concerning ethnic differences and gender inequality in the United States are recurring themes.

There is also a sense in watching *The Simpsons* that it is consciously written as a multilayered text. One of the best examples of this might be the ongoing reference to the ambiguous nature of Mr Smithers's sexuality. Within a single episode the text can reproduce some of the slapstick humour traditionally associated with cartoons in combination with a discourse about being a closeted gay man. Many of the episodes contain a consciously 'camp' discourse (see Henry, 2004). Thus the programme manages to mix the usual ingredients of the cartoon genre – that presumably appeal to its younger fans – with other narratives that have more of an adult interest (see Mullen, 2004). *The Simpsons* has (rightly) been celebrated by many commentators for the way in which it has challenged racism and ethnic stereotypes – the one exception being its repeated representation of the Irish as being simian or ape-like and being particularly prone to being violent and/or drunk.

There is more to the series than its clever scripts, however. In a rare moment in one episode of *The Simpsons* viewers saw its news anchorman Kent Brockman reporting on location from a South Korean animation house where the animators were drawing and colouring at bayonet point (episode 9503: 1992). Although the programme has in the past parodied media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his dominance of the world's media, the 'moment' of Brockman's report was a defining one. While it did not contain any direct reference to its own production context, the parody struck an important chord. While some might see this as being just one more example of postmodern irony, it is also a very telling comment on the American animation industry that increasingly

makes use of what it euphemistically refers to as 'overseas animation'. In an important essay, Cherniavsky gives us an account of how and where *The Simpsons* is produced:

> Film Roman subcontracts the labor-intensive aspects of production of the series, including the drawing and coloring of cells, to one of six 'animation houses' in South Korea. According to studio owner Phil Roman, underpriced Asian labor has become indispensable to the animation industry in the United States: 'If we had to do animation here,' Roman notes, 'it would cost a million dollars instead of $100,000 to $150,000 to produce a half-hour, and nobody could afford to do it except for Disney.' (1999: 141)

She argues that *The Simpsons*, in spite of its occasional reflexivity about capitalism, is:

> profoundly implicated in a system of global capital that requires and perpetuates the existence of a casual and chronically impoverished labor force – for example, at Akom, the largest of the South Korean animation houses, where *The Simpsons* is produced, 1,100 of the 1,200 employees are temporary workers, paid around $1.50 per cell for the tedious job of inking and painting – *The Simpsons* cannot reflect on its own transpacific origins. (1999: 153–4)

The Simpsons animation is sub-contracted to five animation houses in South Korea. Where Akom is concerned, for example, the current production arrangements for *The Simpsons* involve upwards of 120 animators working for Akom in Seoul, South Korea. Here, animators are paid less than one-third of what their North American counterparts would be paid for the same work. They work according to instructions sent from the US on the desired camera and colouring requirements. The wider political context of the relationship between the US and the South Korea should also be noted. In addition to availing itself of cheap labour, the US seems intent on bolstering the economic development of South Korea whilst it is in ideological conflict with communist North Korea.

By looking at *The Simpsons* in this way we have highlighted a number of important issues. *The Simpsons* can be seen as a well-constructed media text containing a range of meanings for its global audience which is in itself segmented into various groups depending on age, social status, geographical location, gender and ethnicity, for example. *The Simpsons* can also be viewed as a valuable commodity produced by one of the key players in the global media industry. Like many other commodities its overall production takes place in more than one country. The programme is a source of profit for its owners and creators as well as the television networks that buy the right

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to broadcast the series. Animated television and film are more amenable to translation and therefore travel well in the globalized media marketplace. While at this juncture we can only speculate on the intentions of the programme's writers and producers, there is nonetheless some evidence to suggest that, as a text, *The Simpsons* reproduces an ideological viewpoint that may be considered to be liberal rather than critical in orientation.

Read on! 1.3   Playing the piano wearing mittens

Robert W. McChesney (2000) 'The political economy of communication and the future of the field', *Media, Culture & Society*, 22(1): 109–16, p. 115.

Communication scholars must play a central role in analyzing, debating and popularizing issues concerning the relationship of media and democracy. This is an area that conventional politicians and the corporate media have shown little inclination to pursue. Only communication scholars have the resources and institutional basis to move forward with honest independent scholarship and instruction, with a commitment first and foremost to democratic values. The field of communication needs to apply the full weight of its intellectual traditions and methodologies to the daunting questions before us. They desperately require scholarly attention ... if the field of communication does not do it, nobody else will.

... Political economy and communication have a special relationship. Each of them is located uneasily but necessarily between capitalism and democracy; each deals with commercial and material issues and each is ultimately concerned with issues of social justice and political self-government. While one can be a political economist and have only a passing interest in communication issues, the need to at least have a passing interest has grown considerably in this, the so-called Information Age. And if one is a scholar of communication, it strikes me as highly questionable not to have a working knowledge of political economy, in order to understand how

capitalism works. To approach communication without political economy is similar to playing the piano wearing mittens. If scholars are to move beyond description to explanation, political economy must be at the center of the enterprise. It is not only the necessary aspect of the field of communication, but it is one of the cornerstones.

? Stop and think 1.8

1. What is the nature of the relationship between the media and democracy?

2. Why do students and scholars of the media have a special role to play in the analysis of the contemporary media?

? Stop and think 1.9

Asking critical questions

You will gain most as a media student by asking critical questions. Critical thinking requires in all of us a healthy scepticism about what is presented as *fact*. In engaging with media content (a newspaper article, a website or TV news report, for example) or academic writing (a journal article, report or textbook, for example), a sharpening of the senses allows you to be critical of the information you are being presented with. What evidence does an author use? How convincing is it? Are there contrary arguments? Have any aspects been ignored in the **narrative**? Whose interests are served by the way in which the argument is presented? (See Browne and Keeley, 2011; Cottrell, 2008.)

Conclusion

The twenty-first-century media present the media student with an increasingly complex set of questions. Globalization, technological change and the restructuring of media ownership underscore many of the questions that have been asked about the media as well as raising new kinds of issues for all of us in

our roles as students and citizens. There are clear tensions in the field of media analysis as to how we should approach a critical understanding of the media. While a sociological approach to media analysis would recognize the so-called 'pleasure(s) of the text' experienced by audience members, there is more to media analysis than a sole focus on the 'ecstasy of communication' which many postmodernists would hold as sacrosanct. A sociology of media informed by political economy stresses the need to examine these new media realities by reference to the increasingly concentrated nature of media ownership. It asks us to consider whose interests exactly are served by media conglomeration. In this chapter it has been suggested that we need to undertake media analysis in a critical and systematic way. By using a framework that gives equal recognition to the production, content and reception of media texts we can begin to make sense of the increasingly complex media environment in which we live our lives. It is within these parameters that we can now proceed to consider questions – both old and new – about the twenty-first-century media.

Chapter summary

In this chapter we stressed:

1. The importance of critically examining the media in a social context.
2. The variety of ways in which the media can be conceptualized.
3. The differences between a cultural studies and sociological approach to media analysis.
4. That while our experience of media saturation is historically specific, we need to ask critical questions about the media, especially in terms of its role in the reproduction and perpetuation of unequal power relationships.
5. The importance of giving equal recognition to the production, content and reception aspects of media texts.
6. That using tried and tested methodological approaches as well as theoretical perspectives helps you to deepen your understanding of the media.
7. The value of the political economy approach in engaging in a critical media studies, as highlighted in the case studies on Apple, U2 and *The Simpsons*. As students of the media we need to get behind the glitz of media texts and technologies and ask the hard questions about their production, content and reception.

Further reading

Branston, G. and R. Stafford (2006) *The Media Student's Handbook*, 4th edn. London: Routledge.

Croteau, D., W. Hoynes and S. Milan (2012) *Media Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*, 4th edn. London: Sage. This is a very thorough and student-friendly introduction to media analysis from a sociological perspective.

Deacon, D., M. Pickering, P. Golding and G. Murdock (1999) *Researching Communications*. London: Arnold. A very useful introduction to the key research methods needed for mass media analysis.

Ferguson, R. (2004) *The Media in Question*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. An important defence of media studies in the twenty-first century.

Long, P. and T. Wall (2012) *Media Studies: Texts, Production and Context*, 2nd edn. Harlow: Pearson Education.

MacNamara, J.R. (2010), *The 21st Century Media (R)evolution: Emergent Communication Practices*. New York: Peter Lang. MacNamara provides his readers, students and academics alike, with a thorough and thought-provoking text which is far-reaching in scope. An experienced practitioner in the media industry, MacNamara's book is written in an informative and entertaining style which will be of immense benefit to both postgraduate and undergraduate students as well as to their teachers. A particular strength of this book is the breadth of illustrative materials used.

Shi, Y. (2011) 'iPhones in China: the contradictory stories of media-ICT globalization in the era of media convergence and corporate synergy', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 35(2): 134–56. This article examines the official and unofficial reception of the iPhone in mainland China.

Tremayne, M. (2007) (ed.) *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*. London: Routledge. A collection of very interesting

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essays on blogging and its implications for politics, citizenship and democracy, see in particular the chapters by Papacharissi on audiences as media producers and Bentley et al. on citizen journalism.

Online reading

Go to your book's companion website and read the following:

- Couldry, N. (2009) 'My media studies: thoughts from Nick Couldry', *Television and New Media*, 10(1).
- Morimoto, S.A. and L.A. Friedland (2011) 'The lifeworld of youth in the information society', *Youth & Society*, 43(2).