Chapter 1

Introduction

*Modern Life Is a Media Experience*

Why study the media? The answer is so obvious that many academics and educators overlook its paramount importance. Media are key to everyday life in the twenty-first century. But more than that, media are the lens through which we experience the world and what we take to be the reality of that world.

Any quick observation of today’s children will uncover the central importance of media in constituting, not simply influencing, their lives. Our 15-year-old daughter gets up in the morning and turns on her computer and radio at the same time. While text messaging her friends before school, she downloads new songs to her MP3 player. When she comes home and turns to homework, it is done on the computer while she keeps track of her friends on the social-networking site Facebook.

Our 11-year-old son rises early so that he has a couple of hours to play his computer games before the structure of school keeps him from them for at least a few hours. When we ask him why he loves to play with computers, he says that playing with other kids is more fun, but when they are not around, computers are almost as fun and almost as interactive, especially when he plays games online. They are much more fun, in fact, than the possibilities that old media hold for him. Watching TV or reading books is too passive, in his opinion. It scarcely needs pointing out that both children will often see video or watch TV as part of their daily school routine. And so their day goes.

For both of us, often the first act in the morning is to check e-mail and see what has come in. This act of turning on a computer also lets us check the day’s *New York Times*. In the interim we might turn on the radio and listen to National Public Radio, either the news or the music station. A walk to the front door gets us the print version of *The Washington Post*. Before any of the four of us are fully awake, we are immersed in
media: old and new, print and electronic, audio and video, passive and interactive, and synchronous and asynchronous.

This is only one family’s habits, but habits that are increasingly common in the United States. Internet service providers (ISPs), which used to see traffic increase only with the start of the workday, now find that it takes off “like a rocket ship” at 7 a.m. as adults and children go online as soon as they wake up (Stone 2009). The experience of living life betwixt and between media use is quickly becoming one of the universal conditions of life, certainly in the developed and developing worlds, crossing cultural, social class, and racial lines. It is this ubiquity of the media in the modern world that we seek to show to our readers, as we describe the new academic field of media studies and what it has to offer to all of us as we negotiate modern life. We address both how the ever-presence of the media affects all dimensions of our lives, and how the way media are always present has changed dramatically over the last few decades.

A short comparison helps us to move beyond our particular family and our particular moment in the history of media to emphasize in a very general way how media operate to structure our experience, and how dramatically the role of media has changed over the last century.

A Tale of Two Hurricanes

The hurricane slammed into the United States packing winds of over 145 mph, slightly down from the Category 5 levels it registered over open water. While evacuation warnings had been circulating for days and wealthy neighborhoods emptied, other residents, predominantly poor and black, stayed behind. Hours later, when the storm had passed, it seemed at first that the damage from wind and rain would be serious, but far from catastrophic. Sadly, that was not to be the case. Earthen dikes erected to contain a huge lake gave way. As floodwaters rose, desperate people sought safety in the attics and on the rooftops of their submerged homes. Thousands of people died in one of the worst natural disasters in American history.

Government response was slow and insufficient, as state and local authorities were rapidly overwhelmed and the federal government seemed nowhere to be found. The fact that the dead were disproportionately poor and black raised questions of racism in both evacuation and rescue efforts. While these issues were quickly forgotten by the white community
and the wider society, they remain a source of bitterness in the black community.

This description might be about Hurricane Katrina hitting the Gulf Coast in 2005, with which we are all familiar (because most of us followed it in the media), but it actually describes a hurricane that hit Florida in 1928.2 Sometimes called the “Forgotten Hurricane,” it left 2,500 dead and is the second deadliest hurricane in American history, behind only the 1900 Galveston hurricane, which killed 8,000. By way of contrast, the death toll for Katrina is estimated at around 1,600. Considering the similarities and differences between the hurricanes of 2005 and 1928 helps introduce many of the central points we want to make about media studies in the rest of this book.

First and perhaps most significantly, consider the vast differences in the state of the media in 1928 compared to 2005. Katrina was tracked from satellites and searcher planes in continuous contact with the US Weather Service, which then almost instantaneously transmitted storm information to the public via radio, television, the Internet, and other forms of communication. Updates on the direction and intensity of the storm were continuous and close to real time. Directions on preparing for the storm and, ultimately, evacuation orders could easily be communicated from authorities to the anxious citizens in Katrina’s path.3 Information about the storm and preparations for its landfall were not limited to those living in Katrina’s path, but rather were instantly transmitted to a worldwide audience.

Consider the very different state of telecommunications in 1928. Information about the 1928 storm was sporadic, often inaccurate, and usually hopelessly outdated. Ships at sea transmitted wireless information about the storm when they could (i.e., when not being swamped or sunk). Most data came from telegraph and wireless ground stations based on reports from local weather stations on the Atlantic islands that were devastated by the storm before it hit Florida. At one point, the Weather Service “lost” the storm when communication facilities were destroyed in Puerto Rico. The inability to accurately track the storm greatly increased the number of dead and injured in Florida. When the hurricane did not appear for hours after people expected it (based on outdated and inaccurate warnings), they left their places of shelter so that when the storm did hit, many were in vulnerable positions.

Even the notion of “warning” must be examined in light of the vast differences in media between 1928 and today. We take it for granted that
once vital information is known to authorities, it will be rapidly disseminated via widely available media channels. In 1928, such channels either did not exist (e.g., television, mobile phones, and the Internet) or were available to only a very few (e.g., telephone and radio). Hurricane warnings were sent through newspapers (as a result, they came hours or even days too late), telephone (in one Florida town, there was only one phone, whose owner had to go from house to house trying to warn his 400 neighbors), radio (again, only available to a small proportion of Floridians), or flags flown from the tops of public buildings. Most Floridians, especially those who were poor and lived in rural communities, were outside the reach of any channels of mass communication and had to rely on word of mouth spread from family to family.

Organizing prompt relief to a stricken area is a life-and-death issue: the more rapid the response, the more lives can be saved. In 1928 local governments ceased to operate due to the storm, and no information about its impact was available to the Florida state government for over a day. The federal government was in the dark for longer than that.4

Information about the storm was slow to reach any kind of wider audience. The first article about the storm did not appear in the New York Times until September 18, two days after it hit Florida. Even then, the initial facts reported were highly inaccurate (it was first estimated that 24 had drowned around Lake Okeechobee). In subsequent days, the estimated death toll continued to rise (it reached 800 in a front-page Times story on September 21). Somewhat ironically, by the time accurate information about the magnitude of the catastrophe became available, the story had ceased to be front-page news. A Times story reporting that an estimated 2,500 might have died (close to what we now believe was the storm’s toll) appeared on September 22, but was printed on page 10 of the newspaper. By September 28, a story about the storm’s aftermath was on page 38.

In general, newspaper coverage of this enormous catastrophe was sporadic outside of the stricken area. This could not contrast more with the extended focus on Hurricane Katrina in all the forms of media we take for granted today – television, radio, the Internet, and print. While in 1928 someone who lived outside the stricken area might pay virtually no attention to the event, this was not so for the media event that took place in 2005. By a “media event,” we mean an occurrence that commands the attention of all of the media – print and electronic, including the Internet. Such an event calls a virtual “time-out” from ordinary life,
more or less requiring that we pay attention. September 11, the death of Princess Diana, and the invasion of Iraq were all media events. The concept of a media event is essential to understanding the role of media in modern life and is a key concept in the media studies literature. Although comparing the 1928 and 2005 hurricanes highlights dramatic improvements in the way information is produced and disseminated, this does not mean that changes in telecommunications led to improvements in other areas of American society. When, for example, it came to issues of race and class, many aspects of the two hurricanes were remarkably similar and illustrate important continuities in American society between 1928 and the present. These continuities, despite dramatic changes in specific features of telecommunications technology, illustrate how media both influence and are influenced by the structures that shape society.

Like the rest of US society, the American media have, at best, a checkered record when it comes to dealing with issues of racial and economic inequality. Yet, one of the most striking aspects of media coverage of Katrina was that with cameras and journalists reporting live from the scene, powerful images and stories of the degree to which most victims were poor and black were unavoidable. As CNN commentator Jack Cafferty said, race has become “the big elephant in the room” (Daily Kos 2005).

These sorts of comments and the emotional stories coming out of New Orleans highlighting the plight of the black and poor residents left behind in the city’s evacuation prompted a national dialogue (if only a brief one) about the plight of the black underclass in many American inner cities. It raised questions about how even evacuation plans, by relying primarily on residents owning their own automobile, inevitably left many poor city residents behind. Likewise, those forced to rely on the increasingly overwhelmed and horrific public facilities, like the New Orleans Superdome, were almost entirely poor and black. No such national conversation was sparked by media coverage of the 1928 storm.

Although this blatant disparity in the treatment of the rich and poor seemed shocking to journalists and many viewers in 2005, had the hurricane of 1928 not been forgotten, it would have been much clearer that such inequality in the face of natural disaster has a long history. In the 1928 storm, race and class were important determinants of who survived and who perished. Of the 2,500 fatalities, an estimated three quarters were black (mostly farmers and migrant farm workers who worked and
lived north and south of the dike that gave way). In contrast, the overwhelmingly rich and white community of Palm Beach suffered few fatalities due to, among other things, better access to what information was available (not a digital divide, but a communications–information divide).

In both cases, rescue and recovery efforts similarly raised questions about race and class. In the Katrina case, many accused the federal government of responding slowly due to the poverty and race of the victims. In 1928, coffins were reserved for white victims, while most black victims were buried in unmarked mass graves. Similarly, many black survivors were forced at gunpoint to work at recovery efforts. Given the magnitude of the storm and the horrors of its aftermath, Eliot Kleinberg (2003), author of a definitive book about the 1928 hurricane, asks whether this catastrophe would have faded so completely from public memory had the victims been overwhelmingly white.

One reason for the degree to which the 1928 hurricane was “forgotten” has to do with the ways in which the media system has been and continues to be dominated by issues of concern to middle-class white Americans. This is true for the news as well as the myriad forms of popular entertainment that help shape the consciousness and attention of most Americans. Given the ways in which issues of race and class are addressed—or, more accurately, ignored—it is not surprising that the conditions of poor black Americans could be ignored as easily in 2005 as they had been in 1928.

At the same time, popular culture in some of its forms can serve as a repository for the memories and concerns lost to the mainstream media (Lipsitz 2001). While much media attempt to construct a picture of white, middle-class life as the norm for America, some forms of popular culture can also reflect and appeal to smaller ethnic, racial, gendered, or classed audiences. For instance, memories of the forgotten hurricane remain for readers of the celebrated 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston, an acclaimed black writer who was born in Florida. And, as mentioned above, although the memory of the 1928 storm has faded for the general public, bitterness about the differential treatment of blacks lingers in the black families who still live in the devastated towns. Evidence of the longevity of this bitterness is evidenced by protests that led mass gravesites to be marked with memorials in 2002. (See Figure 1.1.)

In short, the story of these two hurricanes highlights several of the points we shall emphasize throughout this book. First, and most
significantly, the media matter. The contours of the media environment in which we live determine what we know about the world; indeed, in large part they determine our understanding of reality. In the extreme, access to media can be a matter of life or death. It is clear that access to telephones and radio in 1928 determined who would live and who would die. The vast differences between the plights of poor blacks and wealthy whites in 1928 were at least partially because the latter had access to the newest communication technologies. This is no less true today. As we increasingly organize modern life on the assumption that everyone will have access to the newest forms of media, lack of access can have dire consequences.

Second, the new media environment within which we live has fragmented audiences in ways that were unimaginable even 25 years ago – the mass audience of the heyday of television is a thing of the past. New forms of communications technology mean that we increasingly consume a media diet unique to each of us – what we watch, listen to, and think about (and when) differs widely across different segments of the public (Turow 1997, 2006; Sunstein 2001). While there may be groups of people who were concerned with the plight of inner-city blacks, or the impact of climate change on hurricanes, these folks could attend to media

Figure 1.1. Two different ways the “Forgotten Hurricane” is remembered. On the left, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and on the right, the plaque erected in 2002 to honor the African-American flood victims buried in mass graves.
meeting their interest without ever encountering the much broader public, who knew little and (perhaps) cared less about these issues. Consequently, when media events occur that focus all the myriad forms of media on the same subject – whether Hurricane Katrina, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or a presidential campaign – they become rare moments of public dialogue about vital questions usually ignored by the vast majority of media outlets and the audiences who use them.

Finally, although media matter, it is important to see that they are not all that matters. By focusing on issues of racial, class, and gender inequality, we are reminded that some social problems and issues endure, despite the dramatic changes in media with which we all live. Before moving on to a closer examination of today’s media and the ways in which they differ from the media of the recent and distant past, we first highlight several of the key concepts we will be using throughout the book.

**What Is a Media Environment?**

In media studies, we define the “media environment” as both the specific communications technology in use (e.g., personal computers, newspapers, and television) and the social, political, and economic structure within which these technologies are used (e.g., how media outlets are owned, how individuals actually use them for a wide range of purposes, and the government regulations that affect them). This is vital, since to understand media, we need to know much more than the characteristics of the specific technologies available and in use. As we saw from the example of the 1928 hurricane, knowing that both radio and telephone were available tells us little about the ways they were used in a crisis, since they were differentially available to segments of the population depending on economic and racial inequalities.

So media studies scholars draw from other fields in both the social sciences and humanities. Sociology, political science, and economics help us discuss the different types of contexts within which media operate. For example, sociologists help us to define the social context of the media by giving us a theoretical and empirical understanding of institutions like the family, schools, the government, and the church; media operate within and on all of these social structures. In addition, these institutions are the source of values and attitudes that affect the way we think about and use media in our everyday lives. Issues like what television shows are
considered appropriate for children, whether the Internet is safe or dangerous, and who should buy Internet access at home – all of these issues are affected by social attitudes and values, which sociologists study.

Political science focuses on the institutions of government and the play of power, examining how political decisions are made and the forces that affect the political system, like voting, political activism, campaigning, political parties, and so on. The political process affects the working of media institutions in that it determines regulations and laws within which they operate. At the same time, media also play a leading role in bringing information to the public about the political process itself, in enabling participation and organization, and in other ways as well. When it comes to elections, for example, Americans receive virtually all of their information about the long campaign – from information during the primary season to each party’s convention to the actual campaign itself to the outcome of voting on Election Night – through media of one sort or another, from older forms like television, radio, and newspapers to newer forms like the Internet and cell phones.

At the same time, policy decisions made by the political system shape the nature of those various media channels and the types of information that flow through them. So, for example, since policy makers in the 1930s created a privately owned and advertiser-driven media system, in contrast to the public broadcasting models of many western democracies, candidates are forced to raise large amounts of money to pay for campaign ads, with obvious consequences for the role of money in politics (McChesney 1993; Hallin and Mancini 2004).

Economics gives us the tools to analyze the financial structure of media organizations, and a critical perspective on the way the government chooses to allow them to make profits (e.g., through advertising or subscription), how much concentration of ownership will be allowed, and so on. The comparative economic perspective that media studies offers is particularly useful in making sense of the constraints and possibilities characterizing different approaches to ownership and control of media in different nations.

Media studies scholars also draw on disciplines like English, film studies, and anthropology to understand the meaning that might be attached – by authors, critics, and viewers/readers – to any particular media text. They do this to grasp the complexity of analyzing and understanding these issues. Especially influential have been those scholars working in the interdisciplinary tradition defined as “cultural studies.” Most generally, we
learn from this body of literature that culture is best understood as the ways in which individuals, groups, and societies struggle to “make meaning.” Media are central to the making of culture.

Although we draw on other disciplines, we still argue that media studies constitutes a unique and vital discipline in its own right. All disciplines borrow from each other – imagine trying to study sociology without drawing on the insights of psychology or trying to understand politics without also understanding history. Media studies is a distinct discipline to the extent that it places the media environment at the center of its focus. It insists that media are a primary feature of modern society and central to any sophisticated analysis of life in the twenty-first century.

The Importance of Changing Media Environments

The significance of the media environment (or more generally, the dominant form of communication that characterizes a society) is best illustrated at times when the media environment is changing. As Marshall McLuhan argued, “[C]hanges in broader communication cultures alter the very structure of human consciousness” (1964).

What does it mean to say that changes in the media environment alter the very structure of human consciousness? It is hard to see these changes when we are living in the media environment we are trying to analyze – something like a fish trying to describe water. So, before considering more recent and familiar changes, especially the transition from print to electronic culture, an example from a much earlier change is especially useful to illustrate the profound transformations McLuhan describes.

Eric Havelock (1903–88), an influential classicist, was the first to argue that the transition from oral to written cultures between the sixth and fourth centuries BC fundamentally altered human thought and, in the case of the Greeks, the course of Western civilization. His ideas were a strong influence on media scholars, including McLuhan. In *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Western Mind*, Illich and Sanders (1988) illustrate how the transition between oral and written culture altered the ways people understood reality, how they understood themselves, and how they organized their societies. For example, while we are used to thinking of memory as a library (where our brain stores discrete pieces of information that we retrieve, much as we take books off library shelves and open them to the specific sections) or a computer (where our brain processes
information and stores it for retrieval later, much as a computer stores and retrieves information saved on its hard drive), such an understanding could not, of course, precede the invention of libraries or computers.

Like words and text, memory is a child of the alphabet. Only after it had become possible to fix the flow of speech in phonetic transcription did the idea emerge that knowledge – information – could be held in the mind as a store. Today, we take this idea so completely for granted that it is hard for us to reconstruct an age when recollection was not conceived as a trip into the cellar to pick up stores, or a look into a ledger to verify an entry. Since the fourth century B.C., memory has been conceived as such a deposit that can be opened searched and used. [Yet,] it is now clear that a purely oral tradition knows no division between recollecting and doing. (Illich and Sanders 1988, 54)

It is worth remembering that, just as many intellectuals today believe that a decline in reading and an increase in reliance on television and computers are “dumbing down” today’s young people, so too did teachers once believe that moving from oral to print cultures was having a negative impact on their students’ abilities. Plato, “the first uneasy man of letters,” was anguish by the effect that the alphabet was having on his pupils. “Their reliance on silent, passive texts could not but narrow the stream of their remembrance, making it shallow and dull” (Illich and Sanders 1988).

How are you reading this book? Likely you are sitting somewhere by yourself and silently concentrating on the text. It is very unlikely that you are reading aloud. Yet, when writing and print were only beginning to emerge as the dominant form of communication, silent reading was not yet possible. Because in an oral tradition there is no separation between recollecting and doing or performing, reading could only be done out loud. Indeed, libraries did not become places of silence until around the thirteenth century.

In his history of reading, Alberto Manguel tells the story of St. Augustine’s bewilderment in 383 AD at finding that Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, was reading in silence.

“When [Ambrose] read,” said Augustine, “his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading
like this in silence, for he never read aloud.” Eyes scanning the page, tongue held still: that is exactly how I would describe a reader today, sitting with a book in a café.

To Augustine, however, such reading manners seemed sufficiently strange for him to note them in his Confessions. The implication is that this method of reading, this silent perusing of the page, was in his time something out of the ordinary, and that normal reading was performed out loud. Even though instances of silent reading can be traced to earlier dates, not until the tenth century does this manner of reading become usual in the West. (1997, 51)

In fundamental ways, the dominant form of communication carries with it many assumptions about the world around us – indeed, communication constructs reality itself. Reality and the mode of communication through which we perceive reality are not two distinct entities, but rather the former constructs the latter. So, the development and spread of print culture precipitated fundamental changes in how societies could be organized, how the state would be organized, and how individuals would define themselves and their relationship to others. For example, the basic principle on which the United States was founded – that government powers are limited by a contract – is, obviously, dependent on a written Constitution.

Our point here is not to provide a thorough analysis of the changes that followed on the rise of print culture. Rather, we use this example to emphasize how communication structures virtually everything around us, even our most basic notions of what constitutes reality. In order to understand the implications of a new media environment, we need to analyze the ways it structures our own reality. The tools of media studies are, we believe, the best way to make these structuring principles visible and to examine their significance.

The electronic media

Just as the emergence of writing and printing altered the oral cultures of the world, so too did the emergence, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, of electronic communication and new forms of visual media that transformed the existing print culture. The emergence of the telegraph, for example, changed forever the way people thought about time and space. With the telegraph, for the first time ever, information traveled more rapidly than the speed of the fastest physical transportation
(a train, for example), thus breaking the connection between communication and transportation (Carey 1988).

As an example of how strange, even miraculous, this seemed at the time, consider that the telegraph set off a craze for consulting psychics who claimed to talk to the dead. It seemed no less remarkable that we could communicate with the dead than it did that messages could be transmitted without material form, instantaneously across vast differences (Peters 2001).

We now turn to the changes wrought by the transition from print to electronic cultures by exploring television, a centrally important medium from the middle of the twentieth century onward. A wonderful place to begin is with Neil Postman’s influential book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, first published in 1985. Focusing on the transition from print to electronic media, the book highlights the unique characteristics of a culture dominated by television and other visual, electronic media. This book allows us to see what was important about such a media environment, and so prepares us for exploring the media environment in which we live today. The key issue is how any particular media environment, with its own peculiar mix of telecommunications technologies, operating within and on economic, political, and social institutions, structures our vision of the world, affects the operation of democracy, and sets the boundaries for what we see as “natural” and inevitable.

Signaling the significance of media to our most basic understanding of the world, Postman (1985) argues that to talk seriously of television (or any other dominant form of communication) is to talk of epistemology (“the theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge”): “Television has been, in the second half of the twentieth century, our society’s principle way of knowing about itself.” What does he mean by this? Simply that our knowledge about the world, our basic notion of truth, depends on the particular medium that dominates our culture.

Television is a visual medium and, at a most basic level, reinforces the idea that seeing is believing. It is also a mass medium, based on communications from the few (those who control what goes over the air waves) to the many (the mass audience sitting at home watching). “The Age of Television,” as we shall see, was a media environment characterized by a limited number of authoritative sources of information about the world – three broadcast networks and a single newspaper in most towns and cities. This environment contrasts with early typographic America (the late eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries), where there were many more outlets,
including direct experience, for information that was more focused on the local environment and hence about fewer things in a smaller number of places.

Some of the implications of television’s influence seem obvious to us. When it comes to politics, for example, because they must communicate with the public in a visual medium, politicians must be attractive. This effect of television was demonstrated in the very first televised presidential debates in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Kennedy, young, handsome, and with a nice tan from campaigning in California, stood in stark visual contrast to Nixon, who was looking haggard as a result of recovering from a knee injury and refusing makeup. Citizens who listened to the debate on radio tended to see Nixon as the winner, while those who watched the exact same debate on television tended to see Kennedy as the winner (Museum of Broadcast Communications n.d.).

Similarly, the commercial style becomes the style we expect all issues to be dealt with, be they health, politics, or personal. This style involves messages delivered in seconds-long bits, rapid cutting, and the avoidance of detailed or sophisticated argumentation. As political debate has adopted rapid cutting and arresting images to compete for the fickle attentions of the audience, it is reduced to brief sound bites by opposing talking heads, rather than the extended oratory Postman (1985) describes as typifying nineteenth-century political debate. For example, between 1968 and 2004, the length of sound bites allotted to presidential candidates on the network news broadcasts shrank from 48 to 8 seconds (Hallin 1998). Postman argues that in the Age of Typography (i.e., the stretch from the widespread adoption of the printing press to the rise of electronic media in the early twentieth century), discourse in America was generally “serious, coherent, and rational,” while in the Age of Television it became “shriveled, absurd … and dangerous.”

On television, pictures are an integral, necessary part of the process of storytelling, and this is what gives television its particular power. “Seeing is believing” for the public: this has been a theme in the history of media coverage of current events. In the case of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, we are continually learning the power of this aphorism, as we struggled to understand the connection between the reality of the war and the story told in televised images. Of course, television is not the only communications technology responsible for the increasing significance of the image. The rise of photographic representation in the mid-nineteenth century, first in the medium of photography and then with the
development of movies at the very end of the nineteenth century, predated television. Both photography and movies introduced a higher level of truth, or so it was initially thought, to media representations.\footnote{Postman 1985: 28}

The rise of a new dominant form of communication does not, of course, eliminate older forms – people did not stop speaking when they started reading and writing. However, while these older forms remain, they too are changed. In the Age of Television, the logic of a visual medium like television intrudes into all areas of the media environment, including the printed word.

[T]here are still readers and there are many books published, but the uses of print and reading are not the same as they once were; not even in schools, the last institutions where print was thought to be invincible. They delude themselves who believe that television and print can coexist, for coexistence implied parity. There is no parity here. Print is now merely a residual epistemology, and it will remain so, aided to some extent by the computer, and newspapers and magazines that are made to look like television screens. \(\text{(Postman 1985: 28)}\)

Even oral communication is altered by television. Consider the university lecture. It is an ancient way for teachers to convey information to students, but while it still survives today, it has been transformed by the rise of television. When one of us first started teaching, we were advised by an older colleague that our students were used to the rhythms of television. Therefore, to be successful, our lectures had to imitate that rhythm – 10 minutes and a commercial, 10 minutes and a commercial. That is, we were to provide a small bit of information (the 10 minutes) and then break the lecture up with a joke, an anecdote, or a brief bit of interaction with students (the commercial). Today, we have gone much further, routinely using PowerPoint slides, video clips, and so on. We now mimic the rhythms of the music video.

By this logic, the media environment of the last half of the twentieth century was an all-encompassing system, influencing virtually everything in the societies in which it was deployed. As Postman argues,

\begin{quote}
There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest – politics, news, education, religion, science, sports – that does not find its way to television. Which means that
\end{quote}
all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television. (1985: 78)

While Postman sees the rise of television as a kind of fall from the grace of print culture, we need not reach the same judgment to see that it did constitute a profound change in the media environment and so the rest of society. For example, Postman celebrates the Lincoln–Douglas debates as an exemplar of nineteenth-century political debate. Yet, Gary Wills (2006) notes that Lincoln himself was impressed by the impact of the telegraph and absorbed its impact on the way we communicate. It is no accident that it is the Gettysburg Address, only 237 words long and influenced by the demands for brevity of the telegraph, which became the greatest and most influential speech in American history. Wills notes that other nineteenth-century figures saw the advantages of brevity and directness introduced by the telegraph. As Mark Twain noted, “Few souls are saved after the first 20 minutes of a sermon.”

Do we still live in the Age of Television? Is the development of the Internet, satellite communication, and so on just an extension of television – “television on steroids,” as Postman wrote? We would like to argue that, writing before the full influence of the Internet was clear, Postman was wrong. A change is now occurring that is every bit as profound as the change from typography to television. It is this enormous, ongoing change that we discuss in the next section. Given the ways in which changes in media both over the long run, as in the case of the shift from oral to written and then to electronic media environments, or in the shorter run, as in the case of the two hurricanes, alter much of what we take for granted in our society, the changes we chronicle in the next section can be expected to exert significant and profound effects.

**Media in the Twenty-First Century:**
**What Has Changed?**

To simply list the developments in communications that have occurred over the last 25 years is to be reminded of how radically different the media environment of the early twenty-first century is from what preceded it. Here we focus on the specific technological changes which have taken place, but it is important to remember that these changes occurred in the context of broader social, political, and economic changes. These include
Introduction: Modern Life Is a Media Experience

17

the end of the Cold War, the accelerated emergence of a global economy, and the changing status and voice of formerly marginalized groups—people of color, women, and gays (we return to this topic in the next chapter).

Alterations in the media environment are influenced by and, in turn, influence these broader social, economic, and political dynamics. We saw this in the example of the two hurricanes when the media environment interacted with the structures of racial inequality in the United States to influence who survived and who did not. While racial inequality remains a significant issue, the media environment of the twenty-first century, unlike the one of 1928, made visible these racial disparities to the wider nation and so prompted a national conversation about the plight of the poor, primarily African-American residents of New Orleans.

Some figures indicate the dramatic changes in the media environment over the last two and a half decades. In 1982, the first year for which we could find figures, fewer than 2 million personal computers were sold in the United States. By 2004 annual sales had grown to 178 million, with three quarters of US households having at least one personal computer by 2008 (“Examine the Home Computers” 2008). In 1982 the average home received approximately 10 television channels, only 21 percent of American homes had a VCR, and the Internet and mobile phones were for all intents and purposes nonexistent. By 2006 the average number of channels received had increased to over 100, approximately 90 percent of homes had VCRs or DVD players, and approximately three in four US households had an Internet connection (50 percent of which were high-speed connections); and by 2008, over three quarters of adult Americans had a cell phone or portable digital assistant (PDA). The result of these developments has been unprecedented access to mediated information and the speed at which it is acquired, as well as greater variation than at any point in history in the form, content, and sources of this information.

Television, of course, remains an important medium, but it has been changed in fundamental ways over the last 25 years. During the era when the number of television stations was limited, content was quite similar across channels. Each network broadcast similar programming designed to attract the largest audience possible. During prime time the usual fare was dramas and comedies, with the preceding hour almost universally devoted to local and national news.

Today, the dramatic increase in the number of available media channels has shattered this arrangement. As recently as 1980 the average number
of stations viewed per week was under six, with over eight hours a week devoted to each. By 2003, however, the average viewer watched 15 channels a week, devoting only 3.4 hours to each. Thus, while Americans are watching more television than ever before, the range of what they are watching is greater, and the audience for any particular program smaller. The impact of this increased competition is illustrated by a single example:

When *Seinfeld* was the number one program in America in 1995, it had a big share of audience. But that share of audience 20 years earlier, in 1975, would not have placed it in the top 20 shows on TV. It would have been the 21st most popular show in the United States in 1975. (Pruitt 2000: 15)

Fragmentation of television audiences can also be seen in television news. Although the news was once dominated by the three networks, in 2003 there were more “regular viewers” of cable national news (68 percent) than of the nightly national news on ABC, CBS, and NBC (49 percent combined). At a time when television programmers frantically compete for the attention of the young, the median age for network news is over 60, and their share of the most prized segment of the audience (18-to-49 year olds) has declined in the last 10 years from 46 to 29 percent (Kurtz 2002). The audience for cable news is also aging: the average age of viewers of Headline News is 54, and CNN’s average is 64 (Rutenberg 2001).

Media scholars such as Joseph Turow (1997, 2006) and James Webster and Patricia Phalen (1997) note that shifts in communication technology alter several fundamental expectations about media audiences and media content. The notion of a mass audience, at least as defined in the latter half of the twentieth century, is quickly being abandoned as networks and their competitors vie for audience share by marketing to different segments of the population. As a result, networks such as WB, Fox, ABC, MSNBC, and Lifetime (and their advertisers) seek to maximize differences in an effort to develop unique identities and “brand” loyalty. Developing within the greater consciousness of differing cultural identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual preference, religious beliefs, and ideology, the result of this change in communication technology and the media’s response to it has been a more fragmented audience and greater diversity in genres and content.

Further complicating this picture is the growing ability of viewers to control much of the mediated information they receive, though even here
the line between true control and manipulation is a fine one. Television now serves as a portal to other forms of media through increasingly common technology such as DVD players, digital video recorders, and video game players. While significant in and of themselves, even these figures underestimate the full amount of audience fragmentation. For example, in 1980 fewer than half of all households had multiple televisions, while this figure had increased to 74 percent by 1996. These and related technological developments are changing the way in which television is watched, altering the relationship between content producers and consumers.

Consider the growth of a seemingly mundane technological device – the remote control. This simple innovation made it possible to shift easily between channels, between real-time programming and pre-recorded programming on a DVD player, or even between television and the Internet, all without ever getting up from the couch: the remote control made the “couch potato” possible. As recently as 1985, only 29 percent of all households had a remote control, while by 1996 they were almost universal (94 percent). Far more revolutionary are new technologies such as digital video recording (DVR) systems like TiVo, which in July 2008 were in over 20 million homes. These systems allow viewers to automatically record and play back television shows based on personal preferences and schedules.

The age of the Internet

As dramatic as changes in television have been over the past two decades, they pale in comparison to the impact of the Internet. As noted above, fully three quarters of US households had Internet access by 2006, and half had high-speed connections in their homes. On any given day in 2007, nearly three quarters of adult Americans with an Internet connection went online. By 2007 nearly three in four Americans over the age of 18 used the Internet, and (in 2008) 85 percent of those between the ages of 12 and 17 at least “occasionally” used the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Report 2008).

The diverse, extensive, and fluid nature of Internet use is matched by the content and form of the information created and provided. For example, consider the home page of Yahoo, the most popular Internet portal (Yahoo’s audience is 500 million hits a month). One of every two Internet users visits a Yahoo-branded site at least once a month, and
Yahoo boasts 3.8 billion page views a day (Boulton 2006). The page contains a bewildering combination of information: there are links to “news,” business, sports, and celebrity and popular culture stories. There are also recipes, weather, e-mail links, advertisements, and so forth. Unlike technology in earlier eras, however, the Yahoo home page and other portals (such as Google) serve as gateways for millions of people around the world, and to any one of a billion Web pages of varying topics, sources, genres, and points of view. Hyperlinks on this, and other, Web pages further fragment the audience as viewers follow the links that most interest them: even when two people hit the same page, they are unlikely to actually view the same content.

Numerous other examples highlight the ways in which the Internet challenges the assumptions of the Age of Television described by Postman. The growing phenomenon of Web logs (blogs) is eroding the distinction between producers and consumers of media and even between elites and the broader society. For celebrities like Britney Spears, Tiger Woods, and Lindsey Lohan, the ability of anyone with a cell phone camera or Internet connection to circulate embarrassing images and controversial claims of scandalous behavior have dramatically reduced the ability to maintain a carefully crafted public persona distinct from private behavior. In chapter 3 we discuss the ways in which bloggers have become key players in the political process, challenging the dominance of professional journalists and political elites.

Other aspects of the Internet further complicate the information environment and the struggle for control of it. Chat groups and online discussions provide new venues for fans to discuss television shows, music, and movies; for patients to discuss their illness and the medical profession; for citizens to directly discuss public issues; and so on. Nonmainstream and/or international websites serve as alternative sources of information and opinion on social, political, and economic issues, challenging the gatekeeping functions of the older media producers. Networks of political and social activists use the Web to mount virtual and real-world opposition to traditional political elites or create alternative spaces for discussing issues ignored by mainstream media and elites.

Overall, this new media environment challenges elites – political, social, and economic – by providing communication channels for ordinary citizens to directly produce and access information about political, social, and economic life, bypassing both traditional and new media gatekeepers entirely. For example, the ubiquity of cell phones and other small
Introduction: Modern Life Is a Media Experience

handheld video devices, coupled with the ease of uploading information, has led to numerous websites devoted to allowing almost anyone to post their own media messages. The most popular of these sites, YouTube, provides a forum for all categories of information, from popular music to political rants to clever and not-so-clever spoofs. In some cases, this capability has reinforced the ability of citizens to challenge the authority of even the most authoritarian regimes. In 2009, for instance, cell phones captured images of a young Iranian woman bleeding to death after being shot by pro-government militias. The video circulated rapidly throughout the world and helped gain international support for protesters challenging the fairness of the Iranian elections.

Of course traditional political, economic, cultural, and media elites are also using – and in many ways still dominating – the Internet. Iran and China, for example, maintain extensive facilities for censoring and monitoring the Internet activities of their citizens. But in doing so, they are changing the way they interact with the public, further eroding the tenets of the Age of Television. In addition, new elites – from upstart independent filmmakers, musicians, and journalists to representatives of nonmainstream ideological perspectives, to new media players such as Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft – are vying for control of the media environment. In short, while the Internet has changed, and will continue to change, the way in which information is disseminated and used, the ultimate shape of the “Age of the Internet” is unclear.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have begun to explain how media studies can help us make sense of the mediated world within which we all live. We have shown how changes in the media environment, both over a relatively brief period of time (e.g., 1928–2005) and over much longer time periods (e.g., the transition from oral to print and then from print to electronic media cultures), influence virtually everything about the world within which we live, from the structure of our consciousness to who will live and who will die in the face of natural disasters. These examples demonstrate that media matter and that changes in media must be at the center of our understanding of changes in the world around us. Consequently, it seems clear that the changes of the last two and a half decades will have similarly profound effects on our world in the twenty-first century. The rest of the book
explores how media studies can help us understand and critically analyze those changes.

Notes

1. It is, of course, important to remember that much of the world, and indeed many in the United States, do not share this life experience. Yet, even then, the lack of access to the full panoply of media is understood as an impediment to full participation in society, whether local, national, or global.


3. The wisdom and fairness of these evacuation plans comprise, of course, a very different issue. As we note below, they failed to take into account the very different access to transportation of the average middle-class car owner and poorer inner-city residents without private means of transport.

4. Even then, the differences between 2005 and 1928 are stark. President Calvin Coolidge’s response, in the absence of federal agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), was to call for citizens to make contributions to the Red Cross and other voluntary organizations.

5. We provide an extended discussion of media events in chapter 3.

6. This echoes the argument of the great sociologist Max Weber, who observed that modern society – what he called “rational-legal society” – transforms wants into needs. That is, as the mass production of a wide variety of goods and services addresses the wants of mass markets, society itself becomes organized on the assumption that everyone will have these goods and services. To that extent, they are no longer wants, but needs.

7. It is important to note that much else was changing besides forms of communication during this period. For example, as historians and social scientists have long noted, in the United States, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, the development of industrial capitalism, modern transportation systems, immigration, and the like transformed a predominantly rural society into a predominantly urban one. However, in a brief book like this, we are more interested in highlighting the dramatic role that changes in the dominant forms of media had in this transformation.

8. As we shall see, there is much debate over whether and in what sense, as media scholar Elihu Katz put it, “Television is over,” and has been superseded by a fundamentally different “Age of the Internet.”

9. A sound bite is defined as the length of uninterrupted speech allowed to a person.
10. Matthew Brady’s famous Civil War photographs, first publicized in 1862, ushered in new expectations that this new medium could provide us direct and, paradoxically, unmediated access to reality. Yet, it turns out that many of the shots of the dead on the battlefield were actually carefully posed by the photographers. So, while it was assumed that pictures couldn’t lie, these pictures did – a paradox that remains with us to this day as we attempt to unpack what is real and what is not in the representations we daily confront on television, in newspapers, and elsewhere.

11. For a more detailed treatment of the relationship between these broader shifts and changing communication technologies, see Williams and Delli Carpini (forthcoming, chap. 3), on which the rest of this chapter is largely based.


13. Percentages total more than 100 percent because survey respondents could be regular viewers of more than one news source.

14. One need only consider the advertisements that aired during the first commercial break of the CBS Evening News on June 14, 2001, to conclude that news is a genre that increasingly appeals only to older Americans: Zantac 75 heartburn relief medication, air freshener, Viagra, Caltrate (a calcium supplement that “helps reduce colon polyps and osteoporosis”), Centrum vitamin supplement for heart disease, and an ad for the Mitsubishi Gallant that had as its theme a song with the lyrics, “I wish I knew what I know now when I was young.”

15. All audience figures are from Nielsen Media Research (n.d.).


17. These networks span the political spectrum from Moveon.com on the left to the conservative FreeRepublic.com on the right.

18. Consider, for instance, that Google bought YouTube for $1.65 billion. The deep pockets of Google have meant a crackdown on the posting of copyrighted and/or libelous videos.

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Introduction: Modern Life Is a Media Experience

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