

1 Introducing Critical Media Studies

KEY CONCEPTS

CONVERGENCE
CRITICAL CITIZENSHIP
CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES
DECENTRALIZATION
DIGITIZATION
INDIVIDUALIZATION
INTERACTIVITY

INTERPRETIVIST PARADIGM
MASS MEDIA
MEDIUM
MOBILITY
SIMULATION

SKILL
SOCIALIZATION
THEORY

Many years ago, while listening to live music at a country and western bar with a friend, one of the authors of this book tried Rocky Mountain oysters for the first time. He had never heard of them before and knew nothing about them. But when the basket of deep-fried treats arrived at the table, he confidently picked one up, dipped it in barbecue sauce, and popped it in his mouth. It was surprisingly chewy, gamey even, and he did not really care for it, especially after his friend revealed that “Rocky Mountain oysters” is just a clever name for bull testicles.

We begin with this brief anecdote because it illustrates one of the chief ways that we learn things, namely through first-hand experience. We know what some things look, smell, feel, sound, or taste like because we have personally seen, smelled, felt, heard, or tasted them. In short, some of what we know about the world is based on direct sensory experience of our immediate surroundings or environment. You know what “sour” tastes like not because someone explained it to you or because you read about it in a book, but because you tasted something sour. But, as it turns out, direct sensory experience is not the only or even most common way we learn things.

A great deal of what we know we have learned *through* someone or something else such as a parent, friend, teacher, museum, book, film, television show, online video, or website. Thank goodness for Wikipedia! This type of knowing or learning is *mediated*, meaning that it was conveyed via some indirect channel or **medium**. Indeed, the word “medium,” which derives from the Latin word *medius*, means “middle” or that which comes between two things. Readers of

this book who have never tasted Rocky Mountain oysters, for instance, now know that they are chewy, as that information has been mediated by or communicated through the medium of this book.

When we stop to think about all the things we know, we suddenly realize that the vast majority of what we know is mediated. We know things about places we have never visited, historical figures and celebrities we have never met, and practices and behaviors in which we have never personally engaged. Thanks to mediated experiences, we know things about faraway lands, including the deepest depths of the ocean and the furthest reaches of outer space, about Robert Oppenheimer and Taylor Swift, and, thanks to *CSI* and other crime-based TV series, we may even know something about conducting a homicide investigation. In fact, in our ever-connected digital world, when we are faced with something we do not know, we simply look it up. In short, much of what we know we have learned through media.

That having been said, we need to be careful not to assume that the things we learn through media are neutral or unbiased. The media, after all, do more than merely expose us to information, which can itself be accurate or not. They expose us to attitudes, values, and beliefs. In other words, media not only teach us about things but also shape our thoughts and feelings toward those things. As we will see throughout this book, it is impossible for media (any media) to teach us about things in a neutral or unbiased way. That is because media filter the world even when they do not intend to. There is no way for media, as their name suggests, not to “mediate” our experience, and, thus, no way for them not to filter it.

Because much of what we know, as well as much of what we think and feel about what we know, is a product of the media we consume, much of who we are – including our attitudes, values, and beliefs about virtually everything – is a product of the media as well. Before the advent of digital media, we were all largely exposed to similar if not the same media. This created a sort of monoculture that was widely shared. But in a networked digital world, where we are constantly fed targeted information based on computer algorithms that analyze our preferences and behaviors, we no longer share a common mediated experience. This shift carries profound implications for those who interact with media and especially for those who study media. So, we think it is worthwhile to take a moment to explore it in greater detail.

Take politics as an example. All of us have views – even if we are not conscious of them – about the proper role of government in people’s lives. Some people believe that government ought to play a central role in our lives. These people tend to support social programs run by the government, as well as government regulations for things like guns. Other people believe that government should play a very limited role in our lives. These people tend to oppose government-sponsored social programs along with regulations related to gun control. But how do people form these beliefs? Attitudes about government are shaped by, among other things, the media people consume, which is why whether one gets their news from MSNBC or Fox (and which, if either, is recommended by their newsfeed) matters quite a bit.

Nor is what we think and feel about the world limited to things as seemingly removed from daily life as politics. Your attitudes, values, and beliefs about love, romance, sex, marriage, friendship, and family are also shaped and influenced by media. Let us face it, long before you experienced the “feeling” of romantic love for the first time, you already had attitudes about it based on the music you listen to, the films and online videos you watch, and the social influencers you follow. Your whole conception of romantic love is, to some degree, shaped by *your* media environment, and the content of that environment may look very different than the content in someone else’s media environment.

While media increasingly create personalized experiences, they are, nonetheless, a powerful socializing force. **Socialization** is the process by which social institutions like education, religion, family, and media teach us about the social world and our place in it. Given that the average person consumes more than 12 hours of media every day, there is likely no more powerful socializing force in your life today than media. After all, you do not spend 12 hours a day in school, in church, or interacting with your family. And even if you did, those institutions are themselves heavily influenced by the ideas and information circulating widely in our endlessly mediated world.

In the preceding paragraph, we shared what we take to be a relatively uncontroversial claim: that media are the most powerful socializing force in the world today because they – more so than any other social institution – shape what we know, as well as our thoughts and feelings about what we know. But media do something even more fundamental. In addition to influencing *what* we know (our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs) through their content, media also shape *how* we know (the very process of thinking itself) through their form. Media are much more than their *messages*, which carry meanings and values. They are also *technologies*, which condition our habits of mind and modes of consciousness. In other words, media convey both *information* (facts and data) and *ideologies* (attitudes, values, and beliefs) about the world and create *epistemologies* (modes of information processing). A post on X, for instance, both conveys a simple message like “here is what I am having for lunch” and, through habitual use, conditions us to think in simple ways. Table 1.1 summarizes media’s twofold socialization influence.

Once one understands that media teach us not only *what* to think but also *how* to think, then one might conclude that media are not simply the most powerful socializing force in the world today, but that they have likely always been the most powerful socializing force in the world. We recognize this claim may seem counterintuitive and, thus, requires some explanation. After all, are not media a relatively recent invention? The short answer is no. Recall our definition of media as that which “mediates” or filters our experience of the world. This view is consistent with the work of Marshal McLuhan, who famously defined media as, “any extension of ourselves.”¹

From this perspective, media would include everything from telescopes, which extend our sense of sight, to clocks, which manage our sense of time. It would also include cave drawings, which, as pictorial representations, mediate

Table 1.1 The twofold socializing influence of media

<i>What we know</i>	<i>How we know</i>
The content of media messages conveys information and ideology, which shapes our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs	The form of media technologies creates epistemology, which conditions our habits of mind and modes of information processing

the experiences that they depict such as hunting. Not all media are as readily recognizable as telescopes, clocks, and cave drawings, however. One ancient and relatively “invisible” medium is language, and like cave drawings, it also mediates our experience of the world. The words we use for things are not the actual things themselves; they are linguistic representations of those things. The word “hammer” is not an actual hammer (and you cannot pound a nail with the word). As such, absolutely everything that anyone has ever told you is mediated, which is to say filtered, by language.

It is easy to forget this fact, of course, because when people hear the word “media,” they almost always think of *mass* media. But mass media are a subset of media, a much broader category that, as we have already discussed, includes any technology that mediates our experience. While our central concern throughout this book is, in fact, with mass media, we think it is important to situate it within the category of “media” more generally for a couple of reasons.

First, it serves as a reminder that different media filter the world in different ways. Every medium, which is to say every technology, activates and appeals to our senses differently. Some media are auditory, some are visual, some are tactile, and others appeal to multiple senses at once. So, while content is one kind of filter for experience, technology is another kind of filter, one that privileges certain types of sensory experience over others. This insight is the basis of the perspective we explore in Chapter 2. Hearing something and seeing something are, in fact, very different experiences, which is why the spoken word and the written word create different sensations even when they employ the same words. Once you understand this fact, you are better able to understand the ways that media shape our modes of consciousness.

Second, since our technologies are constantly changing, so too is our social world and the way we make sense of it. There used to be, for instance, a relatively clear distinction between interpersonal communication, which was private, and mass communication (MC), which was public. But in the digital age, interpersonal communication is often public on social media platforms where it potentially reaches a mass audience. Moreover, digital media decenters who produces media in society, creating the opportunity for virtually anyone with a computer or smartphone to be a mass producer of information. All of this is by way of saying that more and more of our media experiences are mass mediated experiences and more and more people are producing those experiences.

The consequences of these shifts are profound for what counts as mass media, how mass media operate in society, and how best to study them. *Critical Media*

Studies aims to address each of these consequences and to equip you to better understand the role that contemporary media play in shaping both what and how we know. Toward that end, this book surveys a variety of perspectives for evaluating and assessing the role of mass media in our daily lives. Whether listening to Spotify while walking across campus, sharing pictures with friends on Instagram, receiving the latest sports scores via your mobile phone, reposting your favorite TikTok video, or binge-watching popular Netflix series like *Baby Reindeer* or *Dancing for the Devil*, mass media are regular fixtures of everyday life. But before beginning to explore the specific and complex roles that mass media play in our lives, it is worth looking at who they are, when they originated, and how they have developed.

Categorizing Mass Media

As we saw in the previous section, “media” is a very broad term that includes an almost infinite array of technologies such as language, letters, cars, clocks, cameras, clothing, telephones, telescopes, microscopes, mirrors, cave drawings, and smoke signals. But our principal concern in this book is with **mass media**, those technologies that allow for communication with a potentially large audience in distant locations. We say potentially large audience because a medium having the capacity to reach a large audience does not mean that it always will. (Think about all the social media posts that are never seen by anyone.) Nor is mass media solely about audience size. A graduation speaker or musician, for instance, may address thousands of people in a stadium, but this is not considered mass media (unless it is also broadcast or viewed online) because the audience is not remote. So, based on this understanding, what counts as mass media?

For research and tracking purposes, mass media are often divided into two broad categories: traditional and new. Traditional media, which are also referred to as *analog* or legacy media, include print media (books, newspapers, magazines, and catalogs), broadcast radio and television, home video, motion pictures, physical sound recording, direct mail, and roadside billboards. New media, which are commonly referred to as *digital* media, include any online content accessed through mobile devices (smartphones and tablets), PCs (laptops and desktops), gaming consoles, and other connected devices (internet-enabled TVs and over-the-top devices). New or digital media are often further subdivided into two primary types: (a) *commercially generated content* such as film and TV on streaming services like Netflix, Disney+, Paramount+, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, and Hulu, as well as online commercial newspapers, magazines, and podcasts; and (b) *user-generated content* such as the text, links, images, and videos shared on social media sites like TikTok, X, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as individually produced vlogs and podcasts.

The transition from traditional to new media is significant; so it is worth reflecting on what distinguishes these two categories. The most fundamental and important difference stems from the fact that traditional media are analog

and new media are digital. Analog media and messages reflect a continuous, uninterrupted signal; that signal is made up of either matter (in the case of printed material) or energy (in the case of electronic media). Digital media and messages, by contrast, are comprised of discrete “bits,” which are strings of computer code involving 0s and 1s. Because bits have no color, size, or weight, they are easy to copy, manipulate, and change. This fact is the basis of several other key differences. Whereas traditional media are highly standardized, costly to alter and distribute, and passively consumed, digital media are highly targeted or personalized, easy to update and circulate, and more interactive. These differences have also contributed to the decentering of production, which is why user-generated content is so central to digital media.

Given the advantages of new media over traditional media, media use is steadily moving away from traditional media in the direction of new media. As Table 1.2 illustrates, total media use (traditional + new) has hovered around 12 hours per day among adults (18+) in the United States for 10 years. However, during this time, digital media’s share of total media use has grown from 47.3% in 2016 to 64.9% in 2025. All signs indicate that that trend will continue, and, in fact, 2017 was the last time traditional media use exceeded digital media use. It is worth noting that there was a significant spike in time spent with digital media in 2020, which was caused by remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital media use fell sharply immediately following the pandemic but has steadily increased since then, and 2025 was the first year that digital media use exceeded digital media use during the pandemic.

The distinction between traditional or analog media and new or digital media is – like any act of classification – arbitrary. In pointing out that it is arbitrary, we do not intend to suggest that it is not meaningful or motivated. We simply wish to stress that it is always possible to classify things in other ways, which would draw attention to different features. In choosing this classificatory schema, our aim is to highlight the major paradigm shift that is currently underway in our media environment. Today, our whole media environment is increasingly becoming a digital media environment, and that is consequential. But that has not always been the case. In the subsections that follow, we want to look at the historical development of mass media not in terms of a single grand paradigm shift from traditional to new media, but as a series of smaller shifts from mass printing to electronic media to broadcast media to digital media.

Table 1.2 Average time (hours:minutes) spent per day with traditional vs. new media by US adults, 2016–25

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Traditional media	6:22	6:14	6:04	5:33	5:31	5:00	4:53	4:37	4:28	4:18
New media	5:43	5:53	6:24	6:49	7:50	7:01	7:19	7:34	7:46	7:58
Total media use	12:05	12:07	12:28	12:22	13:21	12:01	12:12	12:11	12:14	12:16

Source: Adapted from A. Guttmann, Time spent per day with digital versus traditional media in the United States from 2011 to 2025, *Statista*, May 2, 2025.

Print media

The first truly mass medium involved movable-type mechanical printing. Bi Sheng invented ceramic movable type in China around 1040, during the Song Dynasty, though the oldest extant book printed using metal movable type, the *Jikji*, would not appear until 1377 in Korea. Movable type printing continued to be refined and developed by others, including the German goldsmith Johannes Gutenberg, who, around 1450, implemented a series of innovations that resulted in movable-type mechanical printing. Gutenberg's printing press sparked a revolution in how humans preserve, disseminate, and ultimately relate to knowledge.

Before the advent of the printing press, hand-printed or woodblock-printed materials were costly, laborious, and rare. The development of movable-type mechanical printing allowed for the comparatively cheap production of a diverse array of documents, pamphlets, and books. The spread of printed materials touched almost every aspect of human life. Suddenly, knowledge could be recorded and preserved for future generations. More importantly, the press allowed for the unprecedented circulation of knowledge to cities across Europe and beyond. Though still limited by class distinctions, access to information from outside of one's immediate context was a real possibility.

Not long after the settlement of Jamestown in 1607, the new colonies' first printing press was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While much of the early printing in the colonies was religion-oriented, such as the *Bay Psalm Book*,² English novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Tom Jones* (1749) were also popular. Religious tracts and novels were eventually followed by almanacs, newspapers, and magazines. The most well-known early almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which included information on the weather along with some political opinions, was printed by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia from 1733 to 1757.

Though various cities had short-lived or local non-daily newspapers in the 1700s, the New York *Sun*, which is considered the first successful mass-circulation newspaper, did not begin operations until 1833.³ The failure of earlier newspapers is often attributed to the fact that they were small operations run by local printers. It was not until newspapers began using editors and receiving substantial financial backing – first from political parties and later from wealthy elites like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst – that the newspaper industry mushroomed.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the newspaper industry experienced rapid growth. This trend continued until 1973, at which point there were 1,774 daily newspapers in the United States with a combined circulation of 63.1 million. This meant that about 92% of US households subscribed to a daily newspaper. Since then, newspaper circulation has seen a steady decline. As of 2018, only 1,279 daily newspapers remained in the United States. By 2020, the estimated circulation of daily newspapers in the United States was 24.2 million, down from 55.8 million 10 years earlier.⁴ In that same time, newspaper revenue declined by more than half. Despite declining circulation among print

Table 1.3 Number of print magazines in the United States from 2002 to 2020 (in two-year intervals)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Number of magazines	5,340	7,188	6,734	7,383	7,163	7,390	7,289	7,216	7,218	7,416

Source: Adapted from A. Watson, U.S. Magazine Industry, *Statista*, May 16, 2024.

newspapers, however, Americans are still consuming the news. They are simply turning to digital media to do so. As of 2020, 86% of Americans said they were getting their news online; this is more than twice as many as were getting their news online in 2016, just four years earlier.⁵

The history of the print magazine industry in the United States is not quite as grim as that of the newspaper industry, having proved a bit more resilient. The first US magazine, *American Magazine*, was launched in 1741, though the industry did not really take off until the 20th century when it experienced a period of rapid growth. Since 2004, the total number of print magazines circulating in the United States has remained relatively stable, reaching its zenith in 2020 when 7,416 consumer magazines circulated in the United States. This edged out the previous highwater mark, which was established back in 2012. Table 1.3 shows the number of magazine titles in the United States from 2002 to 2020 in two-year intervals.

Like the magazine industry, the book publishing industry has not experienced the deep losses that the newspaper industry has over the past two decades. Part of that has to do with the sheer number of books published each year. Annually, between 700,000 and 1 million new titles are printed, though about half of these are self-published, which sell only about five copies on average. While initially book sales rose following the pandemic, print book sales declined 2.7% in the United States in 2023. Similarly, the global book market was valued at \$132.4 billion in 2023, which was down from \$138.35 billion in 2021. That having been said, the value of the global book market is projected to reach \$163.89 billion by 2030 due in large measure to an uptick in eBook and audiobook sales, which have increased by more than 30% since 2020.⁶

Electronic media

For several hundred years, printing was our sole MC technology. But that would all change as our understanding and mastery of electricity developed. While some regard electricity itself as an MC technology – allowing it to send a message (namely, light) to a large audience in distant places – it is more common to think about it in terms of the communication technologies it facilitated, beginning with the telegraph and later sound recording and motion pictures.

From this perspective, the electrical telegraph is often regarded as the second mass medium. Telegraphy refers to long-distance communication using symbolic codes and includes various systems such as flag semaphore or the use of

visual signs to convey information at a distance. But electrical telegraphy, which was patented by Sir William Fothergill Cooke and Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1837, encouraged something that simpler forms of telegraphy had not: the commodification of information. According to Neil Postman, “The telegraph made information into a commodity, a ‘thing’ that could be bought and sold irrespective of its uses or meaning.”⁷ As the electrical telegraph spread, thanks in no small part to the efforts of Samuel Findley Breese Morse, the information grid he helped to develop created the possibility of up-to-the-minute “news” that was free from local context. Now, for instance, inclement weather in one area could be reported in another.

In addition to altering our understanding of news by displacing information from its immediate context, the electrical telegraph demonstrated the unique capacity of electronic communication technologies to make a distant place feel immediate or present. The development of sound recording and motion pictures – whose historical development is deeply intertwined, thanks in large part to Thomas Edison – further enhanced that capability. The capacity to record sounds and images, which could then be shared with a remote audience and at a later time, introduced people in a sensorially compelling way to experiences they may otherwise have never known.

In the span of 15 years, Edison and his assistant, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, created what would later develop into the first two new mass media since the telegraph. Edison’s first invention, the phonograph, in 1877, was a device that played recorded sound, and his second, the kinetoscope, in 1892, was an early motion picture device that showed short, silent films in peepshow fashion to individual viewers. Edison’s goal was to synchronize audio and visual images into a film projector that would allow for more than one viewer at a time. Though sound film did not become possible until the early 1920s, improvements in film projection – namely, the development of the vitascope – gave rise to the silent film era in the meantime. The eventual synchronization of sound and film launched talking pictures or “talkies.” The first commercially successful, feature-length talkie was a musical film, *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927. Hollywood was about to enter its Golden Age of the 1930s and 1940s, in which “the studios were geared to produce a singular commodity, the feature film.”⁸

With the motion picture industry firmly established, sound recording began to receive independent attention and the record industry came to dominate the music industry, which had previously been involved primarily in the production of sheet music. By the start of the 20th century, profits from the sale of sound recordings quickly eclipsed those from the sale of sheet music. This shift was fueled in large part by the continuous development of cheap and easily reproducible formats such as magnetic tape in 1926, long-playing (LP) records in 1948, compact or audio cassettes in 1963, optical or compact discs (CDs) in 1982, and lossy bitcompression technologies such as MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (MP3s) in 1995.

With the exception of magnetic tape for sound recording, which was invented by German engineer Fritz Pfleumer, and Columbia Records’ LP, Sony and Philips were responsible for all of the previously mentioned recording formats,

as well as the Betamax (1975), LaserDisc (1978), Video2000 (1980), Betacam (1982), Video8 (1985), Digital Audio Tape (1987), Hi8 (1989), CD-i (1991), MiniDisc (1992), Digital Compact Disc (1992), Universal Media Disc (2005), Blu-ray Disc (2006), and DVD (as part of the 1995 DVD Consortium) formats. Several of these more recent formats have had implications for the motion picture industry, as they allow for the playback and recording of movies on DVD players and computers at home. All these formats are, of course, steadily being replaced by the digital streaming of music and film.

Broadcast media

In taking advantage of electricity's unique properties, the telegraph did something even more fundamental than fostering context-free information – it annihilated space and time. The telegraph was the first communication technology to separate messages from the mode of transportation. In a print-based world, information could travel no faster than foot, horse, buggy, boat, or locomotive depending on the time period. This significantly slowed its dissemination and limited its reach. But by the late 1880s, telegraphy was evolving from a wired to a wireless technology, and in 1888, the German physicist Heinrich Rudolf Hertz demonstrated the capability of transmitting a signal through the air using electromagnetic waves (radio waves).

That capability was the beginning of the broadcast revolution, which would transform our media landscape once again. Broadcast radio came on the scene first, experimenting with transmissions throughout the 1890s. By 1895, the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi had developed a wireless telegraphy system using Hertzian waves, and in 1901, he successfully transmitted a signal across the Atlantic Ocean. Radio was born, though initially radiotelegraphy lacked the continuous electromagnetic wave needed for audio modulation. The development of continuous radio wave transmitters solved this problem, and Westinghouse Electric began transmitting the first commercial radio broadcast under the call sign KDKA in Pittsburgh on 2 November 1920. According to the Federal Communications Commission, “Within just four years of the initial KDKA broadcast, 600 stations existed in the U.S. and radio’s rapid popularity contributed to our shared national identity by providing syndicated news, sports, and music.”⁹

Inventors quickly realized that the principles governing the transmission of audio over airwaves could be used to transmit images, and work on television – which means “far-vision” – began shortly thereafter. The history of TV is an interesting one that found the radio industry racing against a farm boy from Idaho, Philo T. Farnsworth, to develop it. Farnsworth ultimately finished first, securing the patent for television in 1927, although its commercialization would take some time. CBS launched the first television schedule in 1941. Not only do radio and television share an overlapping technological history, but they also share an overlapping professional history, as many of television’s early stars came from radio. Further, they shared a number of technical challenges early on, not the least of which was broadcast interference. However, after the Federal

Table 1.4 Number of commercial broadcast stations in the United States from 1950 to 2020

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
AM radio stations	2,118	3,539	4,323	4,589	4,987	4,685	4,782	4,580
FM radio stations	493	815	2,196	3,282	4,392	5,892	6,526	6,726
Television stations	47	515	677	734	1,092	1,288	1,390	1,372

Source: Compiled from Broadcast Station Totals, The Federal Communications Commission, October 16, 2023.

Communications Commission (FCC) sorted out broadcast frequencies for radio in 1945 and for television in 1952, commercial broadcast stations spread rapidly (see Table 1.4).

The number of commercial radio and television stations began to level off in the early 2000s before beginning a slow decline in the past decade. The shift away from broadcast radio and television is also evident in ownership and usage patterns. As of 2008, 96% of US households had at least one radio receiver (and the average household had three), but that number had fallen to 68% by 2020.¹⁰ While fewer people own home receivers today, radio continues to be a popular form of entertainment in automobiles and offices. The way people listen to the radio has also changed. Satellite radio, which provides a direct-to-consumer subscription service, was launched in 1997, though it did not become profitable until 2008 when Sirius and XM combined to form the sole satellite radio provider in the United States, Sirius XM Radio. As of 31 December 2023, Sirius XM had nearly 34 million subscribers and reported \$8.953 billion in revenue.¹¹

Like radio, the television landscape has changed dramatically in the past few decades. Whereas television was once dominated by over-the-air broadcast programming, fewer than 20% of US households owned a TV set capable of receiving free, broadcast programming in 2023.¹² Meanwhile, the number of US households who received content via cable or satellite television increased exponentially from 1970 to 2011, growing from 7% to over 85%.¹³ Since 2014, cable and satellite TV subscriptions have decreased in favor of connected TV (CTV), which relies on a wired or wireless internet connection. Nor are changes in the television landscape limited to how content is received; they have also altered how television is consumed. In the broadcast era, television – even cable and satellite television – was mostly *linear*, meaning programming was scheduled for set days and times. Today, except for live sporting events, television is primarily consumed through *over-the-top* (OTT) technologies that support digital streaming services, meaning you watch what you want to watch when you want to watch it.

New media

The most recent and perhaps most dramatic revolution in our media environment is the transition from traditional or analog media to new or digital media. According to Lev Manovich:

The new revolution is arguable more profound than previous ones[.] ... Indeed, the introduction of the printing press affected only one stage of cultural communication – the distribution of media. ... In contrast, the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution; it also affects all types of media – texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions.¹⁴

In this section, we explore the development of new media.

New media is an expansive category that, as we saw earlier, includes everything from digital TV and video to podcasts, eBooks, video games, and social media. What unites this diverse array of cultural objects is the use of digital computing technology for creation, distribution, and circulation.¹⁵ As such, it is helpful to begin a history of new media with a brief overview of the development of the digital computer. The first digital computer was created by American physicist John V. Atanasoff and his graduate assistant, Clifford E. Berry, at Iowa State College in 1942. While Charles Babbage had invented a mechanical computer much earlier, the Atanasoff–Berry computer (ABC) was the first computer to use binary code (0s and 1s) to represent all data, which allowed for its calculations to be performed using electronics.¹⁶

While digital computing is responsible for the explosion of digital content, the internet is largely responsible for access to all that content. The internet began its life as a project initiated by the US Department of Defense in 1969 known as the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). The project's aim was to create a decentered communication network premised on the idea of *packet switching* that could continue to operate in the event of nuclear war. But as the number of nodes proliferated, it quickly grew into a global digital network that was under no single authority. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that only 10% of US adults were using the internet in 1995. By August 2011, that number had grown to 78% of adults and 95% of teenagers.¹⁷ Today, millions of people use the internet for everything from online banking and bill paying to job searching and social networking.

Social networking plays a particularly prominent role in our digital world. Among US adults, the five most popular social media sites in 2023 were YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok (in that order).¹⁸ Among children, YouTube is the most recognized brand in the United States (ahead of even Disney), with 96% of children aged 6–12 reporting they are aware of YouTube, and 80% of those children using it on a daily basis.¹⁹ Moreover, user-generated video content on YouTube gets 10x more views than brand-generated content.²⁰ Globally, Facebook is the most popular social media site with 2.9 billion users; YouTube is the second most popular with 2.5 billion users.²¹ There were 302 million social media users in the United States in 2023, which is a penetration rate of over 91%.²² On average, those users have 7.1 social media accounts where they spend 2 hours and 7 minutes a day; this is slightly lower than the global average where users have 8.4 accounts and spend 2 hours and 25 minutes a day.²³ Users consume a wide variety of content on social media,

Table 1.5 Daily time spent (hours:minutes) on digital “media activity” via mobile devices, and PCs, laptops, and tablets, based on geographic region in 2023

	Asia-Pacific	Southeast Asia	Western Europe	Central and Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East and Africa	North America
Mobile	3:35	4:29	2:44	3:52	5:00	4:34	3:33
PC/laptop/tablet	2:22	2:55	2:56	3:44	3:52	3:37	3:35
Total time spent	5:57	7:24	5:40	7:36	8:52	8:11	7:08

Source: The Global Media Intelligence Report 2023, eMarketer, August 2023, p. 4.

though short-form videos of less than one minute are among the most popular, capturing the attention of 66% of users.²⁴

When social media use is combined with other forms of digital media use, we spend more than eight hours a day consuming digital media alone. Time spent with traditional media brings the total daily average of media use to over 12 hours. Thus, it is worth considering in greater detail how that time is spent. Digital media use is tracked and measured in a variety of different ways and contexts, so it is important to be precise when reviewing data. Table 1.5 charts self-reported time spent engaging in “media activity” on mobile devices and PCs, laptops, and tablets. It excludes time spent on digital media using other connected devices such as smart TVs and gaming consoles. Based on this data, the global average for daily time spent on media activity was 6 hours and 40 minutes (3:48 on mobile devices and 2:52 on PCs, laptops, and tablets). Time spent on digital media was greatest in Latin America and least in Asia-Pacific, but these data tell us little about what is actually being consumed. Table 1.6 breaks down digital media use in the United States by both device and content type from 2019 to 2023.

Table 1.6 Daily time spent (hours:minutes) with digital media in the United States by device and type from 2019 to 2023

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Mobile (nonvoice)	3:45	4:16	4:23	4:29	4:35
• Audio	1:07	1:10	1:16	1:19	1:22
• Video	0:42	0:49	0:51	0:53	0:55
• Social networks	0:52	1:03	1:03	1:03	1:04
• Other	1:05	1:15	1:13	1:14	1:14
Desktop/laptop	1:54	2:03	1:59	1:56	1:56
• Audio	0:16	0:20	0:20	0:20	0:20
• Video	0:23	0:26	0:26	0:25	0:25
• Social networks	0:07	0:07	0:07	0:06	0:06
• Other	1:08	1:09	1:06	1:04	1:04
Other connected devices	1:10	1:30	1:38	1:44	1:49
Total time spent with digital media	6:49	7:50	7:59	8:09	8:20

Source: Average Time Spent with Media in US, by Media, 2019–2023, eMarketer, April 2021.

Key Trends in Digital Media

As digital media increasingly supplant traditional media, it is important to consider the ways that they are transforming our media landscape and social world. In this section, we highlight six trends related to the development and spread of digital media: convergence, decentralization, individualization, interactivity, mobility, and simulation. While the linear bias of print media forces us to take these trends up sequentially, we wish to stress that these trends are mutually influential and are probably better thought of as a constellation of related forces than as distinct and independent trends.

Convergence

The first and most obvious trend related to digital media is **convergence**, the tendency of formerly diverse mediums to share a common, integrated platform. In the very material world of traditional media, a VHS tape and a record required separate technologies (a VCR and record player) to play back their respective content. But with digital media, there is no distinction among various types of content. Today one can view an image, listen to a song, or watch a film or video on a tablet or smartphone with no need for separate devices. That is because digital information – whether audio, video, image, or anything else – is all composed of the same stuff: bits. A *bit* is the smallest unit of digital information; it exists as a single digit, either a 0 or a 1.

The process of transforming information, which may previously have existed as matter or waves, into bits is known as **digitization**. Digitization allows the content of analog media (printed text, photographic prints, physically recorded sound, celluloid film, and broadcast radio and television) to be converted into digital media. Since the bits that compose a digital book, image, and audio or video file are all the same, they are highly interchangeable and, thus, easy to integrate into a common platform. In short, as Nicholas Negroponte explains, “bits commingle effortlessly.”²⁵

The development of bits solved one of the key challenges related to convergence: noise. Analog signals such as those used in radio and television broadcasting generate noise, or message distortion and decay over long distances. Digitization reduces distortion by relying on bits rather than a continuous signal. A second technical hurdle of convergence was bandwidth. It is challenging to transmit large data packets, such as those involving images and video, quickly and easily over a communication channel. However, improved data-compression techniques and bandwidth expansions have made possible the real-time transmission of large data packets over both wired and wireless networks. As these technical hurdles have been overcome, convergence has accelerated.

Some scholars regard convergence as a cultural change as well as a technological one. According to Henry Jenkins, convergence is much more than “a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices. ... convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are

encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among disperse media content.”²⁶ While we agree with Jenkins that convergence is usefully understood as a cultural phenomenon that “occurs within the brains of individual consumers,” we would note that convergence as a habit of mind emerges in relation to convergence as a structural trait of digital media.

Decentralization

The second key trend related to digital media is **decentralization**, a decentering of the modes of production. In a traditional media environment, the modes of production are highly centralized. Books are produced by book publishers, films are made by major production studios, music is produced by record labels, and radio and television are created by broadcast networks. In an analog world, if one did not own a book publishing house, a record label, a film studio, or a radio or television network, as well as an integrated distribution system, one was not likely to produce media – or, at least, not *mass* media.

Digital media changed all that for a couple of reasons. First, since bits are nothing more than strings of binary code, they are relatively easy to create, change, copy, and circulate. Think about how much easier it is to correct an error on a webpage (digital media) as opposed to in a printed book (analog media), or how much easier it is to make a copy of a digital file than of a hard-copy file. Second, bits not only make media production and distribution easier, but they also make it more cost-effective. Today, virtually everyone who owns a PC or mobile device has access to digital editing software, which allows them to modify images and video.

The fundamental differences between traditional and digital media have transformed virtually everyone into content creators. Now, anyone with a connected digital device can create and share content like selfies with the entire world. By one estimate, the average person takes 450 selfies a year, and collectively we share 93 million selfies every day.²⁷ Basically, digital media has made us all mass producers of information – and are we ever! According to one source, every minute of every day in 2024, users posted 510,000 comments on Facebook, sent 350,000 posts on X (and that is a significant decrease from when it was Twitter), and shared nearly 66,000 photos and videos on Instagram.²⁸ And that is just three platforms; think about the countless hours of user-generated content shared on TikTok, YouTube, and Twitch. In short, more people are producing more mass media than at any time in history.

Individualization

With more content creators in the world, the range of available content is also more diverse. But just because content is more diverse does not mean our individual experience is more diversified. On the contrary, digital media favors **individualization**, which describes a series of interrelated forces involving the

specialization of content, the narrow *targeting* of individuals through computer algorithms, and strategic efforts to generate *maximum engagement* with this content.

In the era of traditional media, the media industry created content designed to appeal across demographic differences. The aim was to create media that would attract the largest audience possible, which in turn fostered a monoculture. The central aim of digital media is different. Rather than attempting to appeal to a broad audience, it seeks to appeal narrowly to specific interests. The proliferation of content creators, comparative cost-effectiveness of creating and circulating digital content, and development and implementation of digital tracking technologies allow it to do that. So even though there is a greater range of media content today, each of us is exposed to a much narrower segment of it. Digital devices use powerful algorithms to push content based on our preferences and interests. Netflix, for instance, makes recommendations based on previous viewing habits and voluntary ratings, but so, too, do TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

The advantage of targeted content should be obvious. In creating a highly individualized media experience for each of us, digital media heightens engagement, making it more addictive and increasing the time we spend with it.²⁹ But the fact that digital content is targeted is not the only thing that holds our interest. Trust is also an important factor, and user-generated content is seen as especially trustworthy. According to the Nielsen Consumer Trust Index, 92% of consumers trust organic, user-generated content more than they trust traditional advertising.³⁰

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not reflect on another prominent strategy that digital media generally (and social media in particular) use to garner and hold our attention: emotion. In addition to delivering a highly individualized experience, digital media deliver an intensely emotional experience, one that, again, has been targeted to us based on our beliefs and values. Research indicates that social media platforms like Facebook largely traffic in moral outrage; they target us with content they know will elicit strong emotions because it increases the likelihood that we will respond to (engage with) and share (circulate) it.³¹ When people in our personally curated social network see us interacting with content, they, too, are more likely to attend to and interact with it.

Interactivity

In the previous section, we saw that one of the central ways digital media create an individualized experience is by fostering engagement. In this section, we explore the nature of engagement more closely by focusing on the structural trait of **interactivity**, which we define as the capability of a media technology to stimulate user interaction that alters the content, circulation, or context (conditions of reception) of a message. In the era of traditional media, that capability was relatively weak and consumption of mass media was mostly passive. Aside

from the personal interpretive effort involved, audiences did very little to alter the content, circulation, or context of media.

Digital media, by contrast, actively enlist the participation of audiences. Indeed, this is a defining feature of computers, which rely on input devices such as a mouse or keyboard to function. One of the earliest and simplest forms of interactive media was the remote control device, which allowed the user to start, stop, pause, rewind, or fast-forward content. Indeed, Robert Bellamy and James Walker have suggested that the remote control device transformed television viewers from “passive recipients” of media messages into cocreators able to “construct an individualized media mix” through the activity of grazing or channel surfing.³²

A bit more sophisticated form of interactivity occurs with video games, in which the player – through an interface such as a controller or motion sensor – contributes to the gameplay. The player continuously makes a series of choices that influence what is seen and/or heard; and while these choices are not unlimited, they are sufficiently numerous to create a unique individual or, in the case of massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, group experience. The point is not simply that the player must make choices and engage in actions through a controller, but that the media or game in this case is responsive to user input.

MMOs are actually a pretty good example of the interactive character of social media. When someone likes, comments on, or shares something they have seen online, they are altering the way others experience that same content. This is a very different way of experiencing media than watching a film in a theater, where the whole point is to be quiet and not disturb other audience members. On social media, content rarely comes to us having not already been modified by other users on the platform. Even if the only way you interact with some media online is to share it, the act of sharing it alters the way others in your social network encounter it.

Mobility

One of the main reasons we spend more than eight hours a day interacting with digital media is because it is always with us. The fifth key trend driving digital media is **mobility**, the ease with which something can be moved from one place to another. As with the previous trends, this reflects a fundamental shift from the era of traditional media. Historically, mass media have not been very portable. If you wanted to see a film, you had to go to the theater. If you wanted to watch your favorite television show, you had to be at home. Even print media such as books, magazines, and newspapers were limited in their mobility, as their size and weight significantly restricted the amount of printed material one was likely to carry around.

But the development of portable computing, inexpensive storage, wireless technology, and, most importantly, smartphones changed our physical relationship to media. Today, instead of us needing to go *somewhere* to interact with

media, media can go virtually *anywhere* with us. That essentially means we are connected all the time. In the early years of the internet, mobile telephony, and social media, being connected seemed like a good thing. But we mistook connection for community, and as it turns out they are not the same thing. So, while we are more connected than at any time in history, we are also more anxious, alone, and depressed.³³ Before probing these consequences further, let us briefly consider how we got here.

Since young people are among the most heavily influenced by this trend, we will start there. In 2011, only 23% of teens had a smartphone; but by 2016, just 5 years later, the number of teens with a smartphone had grown to 79%.³⁴ In fact, 28% of children aged 8–12 had a smartphone by 2016. The rapid adoption of smartphones was consequential. According to a Pew Research Center study, by 2015, 25% of teens reported that – thanks to “the widespread availability of smartphones” – they were “almost constantly” online.³⁵ By 2022, the number of teens who self-identified as being chronically online had risen to 46%.³⁶ While teens use their phones for a variety of activities such as playing games, social media – which, of course, is engineered to maximize engagement – ranks first.

That brings us back to the psychological harms of always being connected. The problem is not that smartphones *allow* us to go online anywhere at any time, it is that they constantly *draw* us online by pinging us every time someone in our social network posts something or responds to a post of ours. When smartphones draw us into a digital environment, they rip us out of social space. And social space is central to community, to a sense of belonging, and ultimately to our mental health. In short, the highly mobile character of digital media is both undermining community and creating a mental health crisis.

Simulation

The final key trend related to digital media is **simulation**, which borrowing from the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, can be defined as, “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”³⁷ To appreciate what Baudrillard means both by simulation and hyperreality, we need to back up for a moment. The transition from mass printing to electronic media was significant not just because it freed communication from transportation, but also because it decentered the word. Before electronic media, communication was dominated by the word, whether spoken, written, or printed. The development of photography in the 19th century and the subsequent invention of motion pictures and television in the 20th century saw the rise of the image and corresponding decline of the word.³⁸

But what all these images – be they still or moving, celluloid or broadcast – shared in common was they were analog. By capturing patterns of light and dark, the technologies of photography, film, and television mechanically reproduced what was seen.³⁹ In other words, images had an *analog* – a corresponding referent – in the material world. The analog image was, writes Byung-Chul Han, “*in love with reality*.”⁴⁰ This was, in fact, their power; an image was

“worth a thousand words” in no small measure because “seeing was believing.” Images bore a direct relationship to an external reality, which they captured and reproduced. Sure, the meaning of images could be manipulated by their perspective, editing, and other means, but they nonetheless testified to an external reality. Digital images, by contrast, undo this relationship.

For Baudrillard, digital media are simulations and simulations are an implosion of the image (i.e. referent) and the real. This argument is premised on, in Baudrillard’s words, the historical *precession* of simulacra, which suggests that the image has evolved from being a good representation of an external reality to a distorted representation of an external reality, to a mask that conceals the absence of a basic reality, and finally to bearing no relation to any reality at all.⁴¹ The matter of simulation is an important one, as digital media are the key technologies fueling this social phenomenon. The images of digital media do not reproduce and, often, do not even refer to an external reality. Rather, they exist only as images of images for which there is no original referent. They can be invented and created by artificial intelligence and easily manipulated by humans. Digital images no longer represent our world; they construct a realer-than-real environment – a hyperreality – that *is* our social world.

Critical Media Studies

Given the ubiquity of media and their powerful socializing influence, we obviously need to study them. But as with most things, there are multiple ways to accomplish that goal. In this book, our approach will involve what is known as **Critical Media Studies (CMS)**. CMS is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that aims to equip citizens with the theoretical tools and interpretive skills to assess technological environments, analyze institutional power structures, demythologize culturally based representations, and make informed choices regarding media use, thereby fostering a more humane and democratic world. Since this is a rather involved definition, it is helpful to unpack its various pieces.

The first part of our definition suggests that “CMS is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry” and, as we will see, it draws on the disciplines of communication, cultural studies, linguistics, literary studies, sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, and political science, among others. Basically, CMS draws upon any theory, concept, or idea that can help us better understand the role media play in shaping our sense of ourselves and our world. That leads us to the second part of our definition, which is that CMS specifically aims to equip citizens with “theoretical tools and interpretive skills.” But what do we mean by tools and skills?

A **theory** is specifically a descriptive, explanatory, and predictive tool; it helps us to both make sense of (describe and explain) phenomena and anticipate (or predict) the likely consequences or outcomes of those phenomena. But theories, like all tools, are biased, meaning that they are good at doing (describing, explaining, and predicting) some things and poor at doing

(describing, explaining, and predicting) other things. You cannot wash a window with a screwdriver. Indeed, the term “theory” derives from the Greek word *theoria*, which refers to vision, optics, or a way of seeing. Since, as Kenneth Burke notes in *Permanence and Change*, “every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing,”⁴² every theory has biases, blind spots, and, thus, limitations. As such, no theory should ever be treated as the final word on any subject. That is precisely why our book offers an array of different theories. The more tools (theories) in your toolbox, the better equipped you will be to describe, explain, and predict how a particular media technology, industry, message, or audience practice functions.

Possessing multiple theoretical tools does not guarantee critical success, however. The effectiveness of any tool depends greatly upon the **skill** of the user. By skill, we mean the ability to use a tool appropriately and effectively in practice. A scalpel is a tool for conducting surgery, a paddle is a tool for playing pickleball, and a hammer is a tool for pounding nails. But not everyone is equally skilled at using them. Just as a pickleball player or construction worker is unlikely to successfully conduct surgery with a scalpel, effectiveness as a media critic requires considerable *interpretive* skill, which comes only through dedicated practice. In ancient Greek texts, the word *theoria* often appears alongside the word *praxis* (practice) because a tool you do not know how to use is of little value. As such, our book exposes students not only to a wide array of theoretical tools but also to a diverse array of critical examples. In repeatedly demonstrating how to use the theoretical tools introduced in this book, we hope to promote practical skill development with those tools.

The specific “theoretical tools and interpretive skills” we are seeking to equip students with throughout this book can broadly be divided into four categories: technologies, industries, messages, and audiences. These four categories provide the organizational structure of the book, which is as follows:

Media Technologies: Ecological

Part I of *Critical Media Studies* approaches media from an Ecological perspective, which seeks to understand the historical development and environmental impact of each new communication technology. This approach begins with the assumption that media – rather than being one element among many within our social environment – constitute the very environment we inhabit. So, for instance, before the invention of writing and printing, human communication was mostly oral, which made our social environment one of orality. Following the invention of writing and printing, the world of primary orality was transformed into a literate environment. The literate world was subsequently followed by an electronic environment, which, as we have already seen, includes analog and digital media. Chapter 2 unpacks the implications of media as environments.

Media Industries: Marxist, Organizational, and Pragmatic

Part II of the book investigates media industries, paying particular attention to the economic, organizational, and governmental structures and strategies that enable and constrain how mass media operate. Chapter 3 examines the media from a Marxist perspective by exploring the ways economic systems shape ownership patterns and influence production practices. Chapter 4 approaches the media from an Organizational perspective by focusing on the work routines and professional conventions within media workplaces. Chapter 5, the final chapter in Part II, investigates media industries from a Pragmatic perspective, evaluating how government rules and regulations impact the way that media operate in society.

Media Messages: Rhetorical, Cultural, Psychoanalytic, Feminist, and Queer

Part III centers on media messages and concerns how the mass media convey information, ideas, and ideologies. Chapter 6 utilizes a Rhetorical perspective to illuminate how the various structures within media texts work to influence and move audiences. Chapter 7 reflects a Cultural perspective and investigates how the media convey ideologies about matters such as class and race that, in turn, shape cultural attitudes toward various social groups. Chapter 8 adopts a Psychoanalytic perspective, considering parallels between media messages and the unconscious structures of the human psyche. Chapter 9 approaches media from a Feminist perspective, highlighting the complex ways that media influence our cultural performances of gender, whereas Chapter 10 adopts a Queer perspective to illustrate how media contribute to our attitudes about sexuality.

Media Audiences: Reception, Sociological, and Erotic

In Part IV, *Critical Media Studies* turns to media audiences, attending to the diverse ways that audiences interpret, negotiate, and use media to create meanings, pleasures, and identities. Employing a Reception approach, Chapter 11 explores the various meaning-making practices in which audiences engage. Chapter 12 adopts a Sociological approach to media, exploring how audiences use media to negotiate the symbolic and material demands of their everyday lives. Chapter 13 employs an Erotic perspective to understand the transgressive pleasures that audiences experience as they increasingly become active producers as well as consumers of media.

Having laid out the basic organization of the book, we would like to close by reflecting on two additional issues, the central approach or method and the

chief aim or purpose of CMS. In both instances, we argue, CMS is uniquely suited to helping us understand our digital world and to negotiating it more humanely.

Approach: interpretivist

Research can reflect various paradigms. In the field of communication, research typically operates within one of the two major paradigms: positivist and interpretivist. Since CMS falls squarely in the interpretivist paradigm, it is worth exploring how that paradigm differs from positivism. A positivist paradigm, which is grounded in empiricism, assumes there is an objective reality that can be known and accurately described. Positivists employ a variety of quantitative methods or techniques, which range from experiments and surveys, to test hypotheses. This type of research is typical of the natural sciences and social sciences.

The **interpretivist paradigm**, by contrast, views reality as subjective, as something that emerges from individual experience, perspective, and interpretation. This paradigm has two dominant strands. The first is grounded in the philosophies of constructivism and phenomenology; it utilizes qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and autoethnography to understand the subjective experiences of people. The second strand is rooted in humanism and hermeneutics; it adopts critical perspectives involving historical, rhetorical, and critical-cultural analysis to reveal implicit cultural patterns or structures. Since CMS operates within an interpretivist paradigm, it employs a combination of qualitative and critical methods and is typical of research in the humanities, as well as some social sciences. Table 1.7 summarizes a few of the key distinctions between the positivist and interpretivist research paradigms.

In communication, the study of media can be either interpretivist or positivist. As a way of further clarifying CMS, it is useful to contrast it with the media effects (ME) tradition. The ME tradition reflects the positivist paradigm; it focuses on observable and measurable effects of media on individuals and society. The ME tradition can be traced to: (1) the Payne Fund Studies in the 1920s, which examined the effects of motion pictures on children; (2) the Limited Effects Theory or two-step flow model developed by Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1940s and elaborated on by Elihu Katz in the 1950s; and (3) George Gerbner's work on how television affects viewers' perceptions of society in the 1960s. In each case, the ME tradition seeks to explain and predict the effects of media on audiences.

Alternatively, the CMS tradition focuses on the implicit structures of power, social inequalities, and ideological biases embedded in media institutions, products (or "texts"), and the lived experiences of users. Its historical roots can be traced to: (1) the Frankfurt School, a group of Marxist scholars from Germany, including Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who advanced the notion of the culture industries in the 1930s and 1940s; (2) the British Cultural

Table 1.7 Research paradigms in communication and media

Positivist			Interpretivist
	Quantitative	Qualitative	Critical
Defined	The investigation of communication phenomena in a systematic manner using statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques	The investigation of communication phenomena in an engaged manner that attempts to understand the totality of a situation	The interpretation of communication phenomena in social, historical, and cultural contexts
Philosophical underpinnings	Empiricism	Constructivism, phenomenology	Humanism, hermeneutics
Purpose	To explain and predict	To understand and interpret (through direct human engagement)	To assess and evaluate (by revealing implicit patterns and structures)
Assumptions	Research is objective, impersonal, distanced, absolute, and value-free	Research is subjective, transactional, involved, relative, and value-laden	Research is skeptical, interpretive, and evaluative
Investigator bias	Aims to limit or eradicate it	Aims to recognize and reflect on it	Aims to mobilize it for social and political change
Approaches, techniques, or “methods” of gathering data	• Experiments • Quasi experiments • Direct measurement • Survey research • Questionnaires • Public polling • Structured content analysis	• Grounded theory • Content analysis • Archival research • Oral histories • Focus groups • Case studies • Interviews • Observation • Field notes • Ethnography • Autoethnography	• Historical • Media ecology • Rhetorical/semiotic ◦ Form ◦ Genre ◦ Narrative • Critical-cultural ◦ Marxist ◦ Ideological ◦ Psychoanalytic ◦ Feminist ◦ Cultural theory ◦ Queer theory

Studies tradition led by Stuart Hall in the 1960s and 1970s; (3) structuralist and semiotic approaches to media reflected in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes in the 1970s; and (4) active audience scholarship in the 1980s, including Janice Radway's work on female romance readers and Henry Jenkins's work on fandom and participatory culture.

While both the ME and CMS traditions have utility and value, we think that the CMS tradition is uniquely well suited to our digital moment. Given the six key trends animating digital media (convergence, decentralization, individualization, interactivity, mobility, and simulation), it is especially challenging to draw broad, generalizable, and objective conclusions about the social effects of media today. In contrast to the ME tradition, CMS seeks to analyze, interpret, and assess media practices, products, and uses in situated contexts, not for the purpose of making generalizable claims about effects but for providing digital citizens with the symbolic equipment to live healthier and more humane existences. So, it is to this aim we now turn.

Aim: critical citizenship

When we first began researching and teaching about media more than 20 years ago, the students in our classes largely shared the same media environment. Sure, our students had different tastes in film and music even then, but they possessed a common awareness of the films and musical artists that were popular. We could, for instance, talk about popular television series like *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, and our students were generally familiar with them even if they had never personally watched them.

That is no longer the case. The transition from traditional or analog media to new or digital media means that media users no longer have a common media environment or unified cultural experience. Today, when we are discussing a media theory or concept in class, our students will chime in with examples, but others in the room are often unfamiliar with those examples, as are we.

This shift does not mean that media theory is less valuable today, though it does invite a rethinking of what purpose it serves. The changing nature of our media environment strongly suggests the need to rethink the goals and aims of media research. In the previous section, we suggested that it is no longer desirable or perhaps even possible to make broad, generalizable claims about the media's influence on our cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs, which is not to deny their profound influence on those things. It is simply a recognition that our attitudes, values, and beliefs are, in fact, our own, and they may look very different from those around us who live in a different media bubble.

So, what, then, is the central aim of CMS? We would like to suggest that the purpose of CMS ought to be to foster and promote **critical citizenship**. For us, critical citizenship describes several interrelated elements. First, it entails a heightened sensitivity to and reflexivity about our place in the world. That necessarily involves understanding the role of media in our personal lives. Second, it involves leveraging self-awareness about media's influence to create a happier,

healthier, and more humane existence. Third, it is outward-oriented as well as inward-looking. It recognizes that the structural biases of digital media are not only dehumanizing (by ripping us out of a shared social space) but potentially antidemocratic (by subverting freedom of choice in favor of invisible algorithms). We should actively resist a world where computers make choices for us.

The need for a more mindful existence has, in our judgment, never been greater. The rapid development and spread of artificial intelligence is likely to only deepen and extend the dehumanizing and antidemocratic biases of digital media. So, it is incumbent upon us to honor the humanistic basis of CMS. Adopting a humanistic approach to the social world and our place in it, CMS emphasizes critical citizenship and its commitment to self-reflection, humane existence, and democratic principles.⁴³ This is an approach that entails “thinking about freedom and responsibility and the contribution that intellectual pursuit can make to the welfare of society.”⁴⁴ Because of the subjective element of humanistic criticism, the knowledge it creates is never complete, fixed, or finished.⁴⁵

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