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In conversation, the term *the media* generally refers to communication media or mass media, which are available to a plurality of recipients and are conceived collectively, as a single, all-encompassing and pervasive entity. Originally meaning an intermediary or a middle quantity, the word *medium* has been in use since the sixteenth century. By the 1700s, the term was used to refer to currency and a medium of exchange. In the nineteenth century, *medium* tended to indicate a material used in creative expression and a “channel of mass communication.” Since the early twentieth century, *medium* has referred to “any physical material ... used for recording or reproducing data, images, or sound” (Oxford English Dictionary Online). The term *media* carries different meanings in various fields. In the field of natural science, a *medium* is a substrate, whereas in the arts it is a material with distinctive physical properties. In media studies and other social sciences, *media* typically refer to “the means of communication” (print or broadcast media) or “certain technical forms by which these means are actualized” (books, newspapers, television, radio, film, and now the Internet and video games) (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, p. 176).

Each medium—from the newspaper to the telephone to the personal digital assistant—has its own formal properties and preferred content, arises from distinctive political, economic, and cultural matrices, and holds the potential to influence individuals and society in varying ways. There are obvious limitations to regarding media only as technical devices for delivering content to receivers or audiences. The functions and impact of the media can be sufficiently understood only if broader social dimensions of communication are taken into account.

MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Today there is widespread recognition that the media have had significant impacts—both beneficial and deleterious—on individuals and societies through all stages of their development, playing key roles in socialization and education. They have been variously charged with watering down political debate while also opening up new political forums, and with debasing popular discourse while also facilitating more democratic access to educational resources.

Throughout the history of communication, each era’s predominant media have reflected the shape and character of the civilizations that created and made of use them. Harold Innis (1894–1952), a Canadian economic historian, regards media as “staples” allowing for the creation of monopolies of knowledge, and he explores the impact of the media on the spatial and temporal organization of power. Durable, or what he calls “time-biased,” media, like stone and clay tablets, make a society or empire tend toward longevity (e.g., the Egyptian civilization), whereas light, portable, “space-biased” media, like papyrus, allow for territorial expansion, as with the Roman Empire. In the latter part of the fourteenth century, block printing techniques, first developed in East Asia, reached Europe, where, by the 1450s, metal printing was developed by Johannes Gutenberg. Printing technology revolutionized religion and education in Europe by bringing the word, printed in vernacular languages, to the public. Print culture has been essential to the development of such aspects of Western modernity as rational individualism, scientific knowledge, the nation-state, and capitalism. The emergence

of radio broadcasting in the 1920s ushered in a new era in the development of electronic communication media. The ability of radio to reach, simultaneously, unprecedented numbers of people was soon exploited by totalitarian regimes. The rise of film necessitated the creation of a massive industry and new communal exhibition spaces, forged new relationships between media makers and politicians (e.g., the Committee on Public Information), and provided a new form for addressing timely social issues. In the mid-twentieth century, television, through both its form and content, reinforced postwar consumerism and a turn inward, to the private suburban home and the nuclear family.

THEORIES OF MEDIA

Not until recently have the media received sufficient critical attention in academic fields. Classical thinkers such as Karl Marx (1818–1883), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) neglected the role of the media in the development of modern societies. With industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, the growth of the media accelerated, as did scholars' interest in it. Communication studies programs began appearing in Western universities in the early twentieth century. These early programs tended to focus on the use of media in public address—during the war years, for propaganda—and on media's effects on its audiences. A critical analysis of the medium itself—and not on the process of communication or rhetoric—is a relatively new development, one that distinguishes media studies from communication studies. The various approaches to the media can be divided into three general categories, in accordance with their particular focus—though it should be noted that these are not mutually exclusive and are commonly applied in combination.

Media and Political Economics The political economics approach advanced studies of media in the mid-twentieth century. Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) studied the formation of public opinion through propaganda, while Harold Lasswell (1902–1978) conducted empirical analyses of communication, commonly through content analyses of propaganda in the two World Wars. Yet this early work tended to focus on the effects of a medium's message on the audiences and paid little attention to the nature of the medium itself. Through his investigation of the transformation of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) critically examined the political role of the print media—such as the periodical press—during the transition from absolutism to liberal democracy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The conventional Marxist theory of the media is also one of the main schools of the political economic approach. More recent political economic media scholarship, including the work of Noam Chomsky (b. 1928) and Robert McChesney (b. 1952), focuses on ownership of media organization and argues that the consolidation of ownership in the hands of a few large media corporations limits the variety of ideas presented to the public. Theorists of this type also emphasize the institutional nature of media, focusing on the labor of media production (e.g., work in the newsroom or on the film set).

Media and Technology The technological approach focuses attention on the material substance of the media. This approach tends to examine the technological attributes, the form, of the medium, and the impact that those material qualities have on individual and social development. The famous dictum of Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980), “The Medium is the Message,” illustrates the importance of the technical form of media irrespective of their content. Understanding media as extensions of the human body, McLuhan argued that media technologies encourage distinctive modes of thought and perception, which has profound social consequences. Print, for instance, encourages rational, linear thinking, and portable books, which can be read in private, tend to promote atomization. He also devised the concepts of “hot” and “cool” media to describe how particular media forms encourage more or less participation in the communication process.

Media and Culture The cultural approach to media tends to examine the interplay between cultural production, identity politics, media representation, and reception, often in quotidian settings and situation. The theorists of the Frankfurt school made significant contributions to the early development of cultural analysis of the media in the 1930s and 1940s. Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) critically investigated the ideological function of communication media as a tool of social domination. According to them, the culture industry, a central characteristic of a new configuration of capitalist modernity, ultimately induced compliance with dominant social relations by utilizing mass communication. Compared to their overly negative view of mass media, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) put more emphasis on the positive role of the media. Benjamin argued that while communication technologies such as photography and cinema have tended to destroy the authentic and unique character of artwork, they have also created new forms of media culture that provide the modern masses with the opportunity for aesthetic experience and thereby stimulate their critical political consciousness. More recently, scholars like Raymond Williams (1921–1988), James Carey (1934–2006), and those of the Birmingham school have conceived of communication as *culture*, and have endeavored to combine media studies with cultural studies. They examine how dominant ideologies are embedded in, and produce meaning in, popular culture by virtue of mass media. Rejecting elitist perspectives that regard audiences as inert masses engaging in passive reception, these scholars emphasize that media consumers actively produce meaning by accepting, negotiating, or rejecting a medium's dominant meaning.

NEW MEDIA AND POSTMODERNISM

Electronic and digital media have indeed made their mark on contemporary societies around the globe, introducing new challenges and opportunities. Yet long-lived concerns, including the independence of media from government and corporate control, are extant not only in the postindustrial world, but particularly in developing nations. The role of the media, from the local to the international level, in contemporary political conflicts, from terrorism to political coups, has garnered much attention inside and outside the academy. Meanwhile, video games, often charged with promoting violence and encouraging sedentary lifestyles, are championed by some designers and educators as a revolutionary new tool for hands-on learning. Video cameras, when used as surveillance media, and Internet spyware have also raised political and ethical questions about the uses to which technologies are put: to protect children from potential sexual predators in online chat rooms, to monitor employees' business-related correspondence, or to track people traffic in urban public places. Personal media technologies such as cellular phones, digital cameras, and MP3 players—many of which come equipped with global positioning technology—shape users' conceptions of time and space, changing the way people schedule their daily activities, interact with friends and family, and navigate through space. These new media are influencing the way people learn, create personal identities and social networks, and engage in politics, and the way governments and economies evolve in response to global flows of capital and culture. Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), a French philosopher, sees Page 61 the emergence of cyberspace and new media technologies as creating what he calls *simulation* and *hyperreality*. In the age of postmodern society, he argues, the new media-saturated culture becomes predominant over the “real” world, replacing conventional social relations grounded in political economics.

Media—regarded either as a collective, encompassing, mass entity or as individual technologies with distinctive forms and unique political, economic, and cultural characteristics—interact with individuals and societies in ways that have attracted attention both within popular culture and across academic disciplines. And in what is regarded as an increasingly mediated world, their influence will undoubtedly continue to be subjected to scholarly examination and critique.

SEE ALSO Chomsky, Noam ; Communication ; Cultural Studies ; Cyberspace ; Frankfurt School ; Habermas, Jürgen ; Hall, Stuart ; Information, Economics of ; Internet ; Journalism ; Lasswell, Harold ; Marxism ; Medium Is the Message ; Postmodernism ; Public Sphere ; Repressive Tolerance ; Television

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