

# LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR STUDYING RACE, GENDER, AND THE MEDIA

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### THE MEDIA MATTER

Ours is a mediated society; much of what we know about, care about, and think is important is based on what we see in the media. The media provide information, entertainment, escape, relaxation, and even help us make small talk. The media can help save lives, and—unfortunately—the media can also encourage people to cause harm to others. For example:

- The AMBER Alert system uses local radio and TV stations in conjunction with electronic highway signs to rapidly disseminate information about child abductions.
- Have you received any emails from Nigeria asking you to help retrieve funds rightfully due to some sympathetic-sounding person or family? It's a scam, but it works far too often.
- Videophones are saving lives of young heart patients who live in communities without pediatric cardiologists. Previously, the information was sent by taxi to the specialist—sometimes several hundred miles away!
- A New York City subway clerk was torched and killed after some teens copied what they'd seen in the film *Money Train*.
- A 7-year-old boy imitated a move he'd seen while watching pro wrestling on TV and accidentally killed his 3-year-old brother.
- Using telecommunication technologies, distance learning opens classroom doors to people all over the world who previously couldn't afford or find the time to attend school and brings educational opportunities to students in remote areas.

If the world is shrinking, it's because the media—especially TV—have brought things ever closer to us. The average American household has the television set on for more than seven hours a day. This means that if you—as a busy college student with homework and perhaps some extracurricular activities, work, and/or family obligations—only have the TV on for about two hours, then some other household has it on for more than 12 hours. Now think about your involvement with other social institutions. How much time have you

spent in the classroom in your life? (You're in college, it's a lot more than most Americans.) How does that compare to your time spent with TV? How will that change as you leave the classroom but continue to watch television? How many hours per day do you spend with your parents (and reflect on others who might not be as lucky), or with religious leaders? How can the media *not* affect us in some way?

A primary assumption underlying media research is that the media do matter—what we see, read, and hear does have some effect on us. Different types of scholars, however, approach the matter of media effects differently. Social scientists model their research on the natural sciences, and strive to maintain objectivity. They often employ experimental or survey methodologies testing for precise and narrowly defined media effects (such as how people's opinions change as a result of media exposure or whether people behave more aggressively after being exposed to violent media content).

Critical/cultural researchers, on the other hand, reject not only the desirability of maintaining an objective, value-neutral position but also the very possibility of accomplishing such a goal. As human beings, they argue, we cannot distance ourselves from our social world. A subjective interpretation is thus not only desired but required to learn how the media affect the world in which we live. These positions reflect fundamentally different assumptions from those held by most social scientists. The types of media effects critical/cultural researchers investigate are different, too. They're much more broadly defined, and often address the cumulative effects of a lifetime of exposure to media content—content that typically represents a limited range of viewpoints, ideas, and images. Ultimately, the media help maintain a status quo in which certain groups in our society routinely have access to power and privilege while others do not. Critical/cultural scholars tend to prefer qualitative methodologies such as rhetorical or textual analysis, interviews, and ethnographic techniques. Additionally, critical/cultural scholars extend their involvement with their research to include the ultimate goal of making the world a better place. If we can identify how our social structures function to oppress certain groups, then we can try to do something to make things better.

This book contains work by both social scientists and critical/cultural scholars, though the latter group dominates. See if you can identify which perspective seems to be guiding each author and how it affects the questions asked and the way the answers are sought.

## RACE AND GENDER MATTER

Like it or not, we do classify people on the basis of race/ethnicity and gender. Our perceptions of our own and others' identities color all our interactions; they affect our expectations of others, our expectations of ourselves, and others' expectations of us.

According to sociologist Joseph Healey (1995), we make snap judgments about people (and things). Because we live in a complex world, we simply don't have time to ruminate about all the fine points of everything and everyone we encounter. We constantly categorize people and groups, often on the basis of nothing more than their most "obvious" characteristics: markers of race and gender.

Why do the markers of race and gender stand out? Why are these the "obvious" characteristics? Healey said this is because "our attention is drawn to the characteristics that have come to identify the dividing lines between groups" (1995, p. 162). We could classify

people according height, or even the size of their feet, but we don't. We rely on what we have been taught: "Our perceptions and impressions in the present are conditioned by the dividing lines that reflect group relations in the past. Our 'knowledge' that skin color can be used to judge others and our sensitivity to this characteristic reflects our socialization into a race-conscious society with a long history of racial stratification" (p. 162). It's the same with gender. We've been socialized into a gender-conscious society that is also stratified (divided in a hierarchical fashion, with some social groups having more of the goods/services valued by society than other groups do) along the lines of gender.

When our generalizations become overly simplistic, when we ignore evidence that they are incorrect, or when they become exaggerated, become *stereotypes*. Stereotypes reflect our (erroneous) beliefs that the few traits we stress are the most important, and that they apply to all members of the group. They deny the presence and the importance of individual characteristics. Stereotypes are an important component of *prejudice*, which Healey (1995, p. 27) defined as "the tendency of an individual to think about other groups in negative ways and to attach negative emotions to those groups." Prejudice has both a cognitive (thought processes) and an emotional element. Stereotypes are at the heart of the cognitive aspect of prejudice. Prejudice can lead to *discrimination*, although it doesn't need to, because even a very prejudiced person can choose not to act on her or his negative cognitive or emotional response to certain social groups. Discrimination occurs when people are treated unequally just because they belong to a certain group. People can be treated differently for many different reasons, but any time unequal treatment is based on group membership (even the perception of group membership) the behavior is discriminatory.

A final word about race and ethnicity: They're not the same thing. Although both are socially constructed, race is primarily defined in terms of physical characteristics, while ethnicity is primarily defined in terms of cultural characteristics. Markers of race include skin color and hair (delineating individuals as being of African, Chinese, Japanese, European descent); markers of ethnicities include religious practices, language use, mode of dress, dietary habits or cuisine (delineating individuals as being Catholic, Hindu, Irish Americans). Race and ethnicity can overlap; for example some ethnic groups are thought to have defining physical characteristics (such as the stereotypical Irish red hair), and some racial groups are thought to have defining cultural traits (such as religious values).

### AUDIENCE, CONTENT, PRODUCTION: THREE FOCAL POINTS

Our media system is complex and incorporates a variety of interrelated components. Three major elements of the system are the producers, the audience, and the actual media content.<sup>1</sup> The chapters of this book are organized around those three elements.<sup>2</sup> *Production* involves anything having to do with the creation and distribution of mediated messages: how the messages are assembled, by whom, in what circumstances, under what constraints. *Content* emphasizes the mediated messages themselves: what they present, and how; what is included, and by implication, what is excluded. *Audience* addresses the people who engage, consume, or interact with mediated messages: how they use the media, what sense they make of media content, and how they are affected by the media.

The Production-Content-Audience distinction is consistent with models of communication focusing on the Source (or Sender), Message, Channel, and Receiver. Scholars

have presented these models in a variety of ways, but at their core they focus on who creates or originates the message (Sender/Source), how the Source has presented the ideas she or he wishes to communicate (Message), how the actual message is conveyed (Channel), and to whom the message is sent (Receiver).<sup>3</sup> SMCR-type models fit well with the social scientific approach and all have their roots in the 1940s in the work of Harold Lasswell (1948) and Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949). The Shannon and Weaver mathematical model of communication has been most influential in the field.

The Production-Content-Audience distinction is also consistent with how media studies can be approached within the critical/cultural studies perspective. These three realms are usually referred to as Production, Text, and Reception by critical/cultural scholars, and are considered *Points of Intervention*. Don't let the overt political stance implied by that term escape you—remember the goal of critical/cultural scholars: to understand how social structures serve to oppress and repress certain social groups and to end that oppression.

### KEY CONCEPTS AND RECURRING THEMES

As you read this book, you'll begin to notice a pattern of recurring themes that often inform the readings even if they're not explicitly mentioned. Thinking about them right up front will help frame the readings in a way that should prove beneficial. And speaking of framing . . .

Erving Goffman argued in his classic 1974 book that the framing of an event or activity establishes its meaning. *Framing* is the process by which we make sense of the events around us. Frames are like story lines that allow us to interpret new information in the context of something we already understand. We use frames all the time, without even knowing it. For example, we might say to our friends that a singer is "the new Mariah Carey." People "pitching" ideas for films or television shows often frame their ideas in concepts the networks already know and understand: "It's a western set in outer space."

Journalists use frames as they prepare news stories, too, whether they know it or not. Despite journalists' quest for the objective presentation of "the facts," Gamson claimed that "facts have no intrinsic meaning. They take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others." Because news stories always emphasize some facts over others, we should "think of news as telling stories about the world rather than as presenting 'information,' even though the stories, of course, include factual elements" (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). A story might frame something as an economic or a moral issue, a local issue or one with far-reaching consequences. A story might emphasize the "horse race" aspects of a political campaign or the important issues and stands held by the candidates. Framing is important, because research has shown that the frames can affect our attitudes and judgments about the issues and people involved in the story—especially, as Gitlin (1980) argued, when people don't have firsthand knowledge of and experience with the issue at hand.

In the case of this book, the information provided in this chapter should frame the readings in such a manner that you're on the lookout for certain concepts, and that your understanding of the readings is bolstered by your knowledge of these concepts.

*Symbolic Annihilation* is a concept often associated with sociologist Gaye Tuchman (whose 1978 work is widely cited, with good reason), but which was presented by George Gerbner in 1972 and George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1976. It is rooted in two assumptions: that media content is a symbolic rather than literal representation of society and that to be represented in the media is in itself a form of power—social groups that are powerless can be relatively easily ignored, allowing the media to focus on the social groups that really matter. It's almost like implying that certain groups don't really exist. Even though we can't go out and actually annihilate everyone who isn't a straight, White, middle- to upper-class male, we can at least make sure we don't have to encounter them in our mediated versions of reality. Tuchman (1978) focused on the symbolic annihilation of women, but the concept is applicable to any socially constructed group, whether based on gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, appearance, social class, and so on.

Tuchman argued that through absence, condemnation, and trivialization, the media reflect a social world in which women are consistently devalued. When the media consistently fail to represent a particular social group, it becomes easy for us to assume the group either doesn't exist or doesn't really matter. So, if the media consistently present an image of a social world that is (in terms of numbers) dominated by men, Tuchman argued, the media have symbolically annihilated women. Women have conveniently been removed (at least when they're not wanted). But women are not completely absent from media content. Symbolic annihilation also looks at condemnation or trivialization. Perhaps women are reduced to incompetent childlike beings needing protection from men. Perhaps they're only valuable when they're attractive, young, thin; sexual rather than smart. Perhaps they only function well in the home, getting into all sorts of trouble—some comic, some tragic—when they dare leave the confines of the traditionally acceptable roles: (wife, mother). Even when enacting "appropriate" roles, however, women's contributions may be less valuable than those made by the men of the house. As you're reading the following essays about a variety of social groups falling outside of the straight White middle- to upper-class male norm—whether it's women, homosexuals, African Americans, Muslims, Sikhs, Latin Americans, Native Americans, or even "White trash," consider the extent to which, and how, the group might be experiencing a form of symbolic annihilation.

*Intersectionality.* The variety of social groups noted above raises an important issue: Each of us is a product of a combination of experiences and identities, rooted in a variety of socially constructed classifications. The social reality experienced by gay White males, for example, differs from that experienced by White lesbians, or by straight White males. Intersectionality helps us understand the futility of trying to know what it means, for example, to be "Native American." None of us can ever be *only* Native American, *only* female, *only* bisexual, *only* deaf or blind. We all experience multiple identities that combine, or intersect, to help us understand who we are, and who others are, and to help others understand who we are. Our unique combination of identities affects all of our interactions with others. As you read this book, you'll see this is a dominant theme. Notice how some readings overtly address intersectionality whereas others are informed by intersectionality even though it may not be a key focal point.

*Cultural/Social Identity* is another concept you'll come across repeatedly. We all have the sense that we belong to a particular cultural group (or several), even if we haven't consciously thought about it. The more we've thought about it, and the more significance

we attach to our membership in these groups, the more important this cultural identity is to us. Sometimes a cultural or social identity is so pivotal to us that we never approach any social situation without being aware of ourselves as (for example) a gay man. At other times, an aspect of our identity might hardly be considered.

The way issues of identity are handled can reveal social tensions rooted in issues of difference. Think about the character "Pat" originated by Julia Sweeney on *Saturday Night Live*. If gender identity didn't matter, Pat wouldn't be funny. Have you ever heard a comment about "when Michael Jackson was Black," or heard people debating whether he actually has vitiligo, a condition resulting in the loss of skin pigment? If racial identity didn't matter, we wouldn't care about Michael Jackson's evolving appearance, so we'd never bother making fun of it, and we wouldn't care whether the lightening of his skin was due to vitiligo or personal preference.<sup>4</sup> We wouldn't have people arguing about who is and is not Black, or who has the "right" to employ traditionally Black modes of dress and speech. Members of one social group (in particular the dominant White group) might go so far as to remove someone else's cultural or social identity. We see this every time someone (usually White) refers to a well-accepted Black person in a color-blind manner: "I don't see Bill Cosby as a Black comedian, he's just a comedian" In this book, note how frequently issues of identity are considered, even if the authors don't explicitly use that term.

*Social Construction of Reality.* The previous discussion of social identity at least implicitly highlights the fact that identities are negotiated within a social context<sup>5</sup>. Sometimes identities are forced upon people (as in the "one-drop rule," which claimed that any individual with at least one drop of African blood was Black). Sometimes they are rejected (as when people of one social group attempt to "pass" for another, or when acquaintances of people who have undergone gender reassignment refuse to refer to the person as "he" rather than "she"). But most often we understand and accept what it means in our culture to be male or female, Black, White, Native American, Latino/a, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and so on. How do we do this? Through our interactions with others. By consistently being treated in a certain way, we begin to expect to be treated in that way. This is exemplified in the process of engenderment, by which a biological female becomes a socially constructed feminine being and a biological male becomes a socially constructed masculine being. We learn what boys and girls (and later, men and women) act like, do for fun, think is important, are good at, and so forth. A similar process is also at work in constructing our ideas about people of various racial and ethnic groups.

The importance of race and gender in our society has nothing to do with physical attributes of race and gender, and everything to do with society's interpretation of what it means to be a member of a particular gender or racial/ethnic group. What it *really* means to be a Black man, or a Latina, or a Muslim in our society is entirely dependent upon what we *think* it means to be a Black man, or a Latina, or a Muslim. As you read this book, think about what the media are telling us about what it means to be a member of a given social group, and how that reflects to us what that group is, does, and values.

*Discourse* is a concept frequently employed by scholars. It may be used/defined differently by different people, but it essentially refers to ways of conceptualizing, discussing, or writing about various social phenomena (such as racism or sexism). Discourses can be seen as interpretive frameworks with a powerful role in defining the phenomenon of interest, in determining exactly what it is and how it can or should be dealt with, or even whether it should be addressed at all. In a way, discourse is related to framing. It's probably safe to

say that discourse is a more “rich” concept that tends to be favored by critical/cultural scholars, while framing is more narrow and tends to be favored by social scientists.

*Ideology* is of fundamental importance to critical/cultural studies, with roots in Marxism. As with discourse, definitions of ideology abound. Ideology is best understood as a set of deeply held ideas about the nature of the world and the way the world ought to be. Some are more repressive or more egalitarian than others. In any given society, multiple ideologies can be found, but one ideology is usually accepted by most of the society’s members. We call this the *dominant ideology*.

Discovering and articulating a culture’s dominant ideology and how it’s perpetuated is important to critical/cultural scholars, because if it serves to oppress and repress certain cultural groups, these scholars would like to see it changed. Media perform a pivotal role in perpetuating the dominant ideology, because media texts so often reproduce that ideology. If we (as members of a society) don’t see much that represents an alternative way of approaching or understanding our world, it’s unlikely we’ll embrace an alternative ideology. Because of this, it’s vital to examine the way the media represent members of a culture’s social groups. In our culture, we should look at media depictions not only of the dominant social group (straight, White, middle- to upper-class male), but also of the subordinated groups (homosexuals, women, people of color, people of lower economic classes, and the like).

We should also look at how the media represent groups that explicitly challenge the status quo. The media can ignore such challenges only up to a point. Sometimes the groups become so large and well organized that they must be acknowledged. But if they’re challenging the dominant ideology, how can the mainstream media (which subscribe to that ideology) portray them? Often, groups challenging the dominant ideology are represented as deviant, as fringe elements, as disorganized. They are rarely shown as offering a viable and beneficial alternative to the way things are. In labor disputes, maybe union negotiators are shown as demanding and unreasonable while management is only doing what is logical during the current economic climate. In the early days of the environmental movement, its members were seen as hippies and called “tree-huggers.” Members of the women’s movement were called “bra-burners.” These portrayals show us what it means to belong to these groups, and in doing so, represent the dominant ideology in action. Why should we take these weirdos and their crazy ideas seriously?

## CRITICAL THINKING AND MEDIA LITERACY

One of this book’s goals is to encourage you to think critically about the media. *Critical thinking* has been defined in a variety of ways, but at the very least, it involves “the ability to examine issues rationally, logically and coherently” (Stark & Lowther, 1988, p. 23). However, a fuller definition helps delineate the processes involved more clearly. A group of experts gathered by the American Philosophical Association defined critical thinking as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based” (Facione, 1990, p. 2). Essentially, for the type of course using this book, critical thinking boils down to asking and trying to answer the following types of questions (which will take a variety of forms, in part due to whether they’re directed at media content, media production, or media audiences):

What do I see? What do I think it means? How did it get that way? To what extent is that appropriate, a good thing, or handled effectively? What does this tell me about some aspect of our media system, or our society? And finally, Why do I say that?

Being critical participants in our media system means constantly asking questions, and doing our best to answer them in a logical and defensible fashion. We should engage in a systematic but not necessarily linear process of thinking through these issues, defining terms and concepts, looking at and evaluating evidence, considering the pros and cons of various positions, acknowledging underlying assumptions, and justifying our position.

As elements of critical thinking are tailored to the media context, we begin to develop the idea of *media literacy*. Although the United States falls far behind much of the rest of the developed world in the development and integration of media literacy into the educational system, we are beginning to understand its importance. Wulff (1997) argued that media literacy is a key component in people's ability to participate actively in a democratic society, as well as within a global context.

But what exactly is media literacy? It extends the concept of "literacy" (the ability to read and write) to the realm of mediated communication. Media literacy "helps people understand, produce and negotiate meanings in a culture made up of powerful images, words and sounds" (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1). According to the Aspen Institute, "A media literate person: Can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy in relationship to all media" (Aufderheide, p. 1).

According to the Center for Media Literacy's web site, "A media literate person doesn't know all the answers, but knows how to ask the right questions: Who created this message? Why? How and why did they choose what to include and what to leave out of this message? How is it intended to influence me? And more."

The National Communication Association (1998, pp. 19–23) developed five "standards" of media literacy, each of which can be reflected in specific "competencies" or abilities and as a result are particularly valuable for educational purposes. Here are the standards, with some of their associated competencies:

- *Media literate communicators demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the ways people use media in their personal and public lives.* (Specifically, they "recognize the roles of cultural and language in media practices," "identify personal and public media content, forms, and products," and "analyze the historical and current ways in which media affect people's personal and public lives," among other competencies.)
- *Media literate communicators demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the complex relationships among audiences and media content.* (Specifically, they "identify media forms, content, and products," "recognize that media are open to multiple interpretations," and "evaluate ideas and images in media with possible individual, social and cultural consequences," among other competencies.)
- *Media literate communicators demonstrate knowledge and understanding that media content is produced within social and cultural contexts.* (Specifically, they "identify the production contexts of media content and products," "identify the social and cultural constraints on the production of media," and "evaluate the ideas and aesthetics in media content and products, among other competencies.")

- *Media literate communicators demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the commercial nature of media.* (Specifically, they “explain how media organizations operate” and “compare media organizations to other social and cultural organizations,” among other competencies.)
- *Media literate communicators demonstrate ability to use media to communicate to specific audiences.* (Specifically, they “identify suitable media to communicate for specific purposes and outcomes,” “analyze their media work for technical and aesthetic strengths and weaknesses,” and “recognize that their media work has individual, social, and ethical consequences,” among other competencies.)

As you read this book, consider these media literacy standards and competencies. Notice how the authors reflect these competencies in their writing. Think about how your responses to the items presented in the “It’s Your Turn” section of each reading reflect these competencies. Try to exhibit these competencies as you read/see/hear media content, and as you create media content for class or other purposes. You’ll probably find that the more you do it, the easier it is to respond in a media literate fashion to the “It’s Your Turn” items as well as to the media content you encounter in your day-to-day life. Perhaps it will even become second nature, which would be good, because a more media-literate media user is a more empowered and less vulnerable media user.

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## NOTES

1. There are other elements affecting media, such as the legal/regulatory system, but even though regulators could be considered a specialized segment of the audience, this book won’t address that part of the process.

2. Classification systems such as the one used here are useful devices to help us organize and make sense of ideas and processes, but they’re not perfect—some readings don’t fit neatly into a single category. As you read this book, think about the questions posed in item 3 in “It’s Your Turn,” at the end of the chapter.

3. Even though this book doesn’t have a special section devoted to the channel of communication, some readings do focus on how the channel of communication might change the relationship of the participants within

the communication process and perhaps even the communication process itself. Note also that one of the alternate tables of contents organizes the readings by medium.

4. Consider the difference between Michael Jackson lightening his skin and the voluntary skin darkening undertaken by Whites everywhere at the beach, in tanning salons, and the like. Why do we not tease Whites for becoming darker, and what does this reveal about the power hierarchy in our society?

5. The social construction of reality concept was first presented by sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). Although it’s a little book, it has had a large impact on many disciplines.

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## IT’S YOUR TURN: WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

1. At this point, does the social scientific or the critical/cultural studies approach seem to make more sense to you? Why? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?
2. Consider the term “Points of Intervention” used within the critical/cultural studies tradition. Why do you think they use that term? Would social scientists ever employ such a term? Why or why not?