15 The Media

ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2001, terrorists hijacked three planes and used them to attack sites in Washington and New York. The timing of the attacks was such that when a plane crashed into the second of the Twin Towers in New York, around twenty minutes after the first tower had been struck, it is estimated that a global audience of two billion watched the incident on television in real time. Almost 140 years earlier, in 1865, the actor John Wilkes Booth assassinated US President Abraham Lincoln in a Washington theatre. It took twelve days before the news reached London. The ship carrying the message from the United States was met by a smaller boat off the south coast of Ireland and the news was telegraphed to London from Cork, still beating the ship by three days. (It wasn't until the 1950s that a dedicated trans-oceanic cable existed to carry telegraphs instantly across the Atlantic – although long-wave radio transmission between continents became possible in the early twentieth century.)

In the twenty-first century, communications technology is such that informa-

more by the type of the media than by the content, or the messages, which the media convey. A society in which satellite television plays an important part, for example, is obviously a very different medium from one that relies on the printed word carried aboard an ocean liner. Everyday life is experienced differently in a society in which the television, relaying news instantaneously from one side of the globe to the other, plays an important role to one that relies on horses, ships or the telegraph wire, for example. The electronic media, according to McLuhan, are creating a **global village** – people throughout the world see major events unfold and hence participate in them together. For billions of people around the world the image of Osama Bin Laden, the man blamed for masterminding the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, is more instantly recognizable to them than their next-door neighbour.

We live today in an interconnected world in which people experience the same events from many different places. Thanks to globalization and the power of communications technology, people from Caracas to Cairo are able to receive the same popular music, news, films and television programmes. Twenty-four-hour news channels report on stories as they occur and broadcast coverage of the unfolding events for the rest of the world to see. Films made in Hollywood or Hong Kong reach audiences around the world, while celebrities such as David Beckham and Tiger Woods have become household names on every continent.

For several decades, we have been witnessing a process of convergence in the production, distribution and consumption of information. Whereas at one time

Do you know Osama Bin Laden's face better than that of your next-door neighbour?

tion can be shared instantaneously, and by millions of people simultaneously, almost anywhere around the world. **Communication** – the transfer of information from one individual or group to another, whether in speech or through the mass media of modern times – is crucial to any society. One influential early theorist of communication media was the Canadian author Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, 'the medium is the message'. That is to say, society is influenced much

ways of communicating, such as print, television and film, were relatively self-contained spheres, they have now become intertwined to a remarkable degree. The divisions between forms of communication are no longer as dramatic as they once were: television, radio, newspapers and telephones are undergoing profound transformations as a result of advances in technology and the rapid spread of the Internet. While newspapers remain central to our lives, the ways they are organized and deliver their services are changing. Newspapers can be read online, mobile telephone use is exploding, and digital television and satellite broadcasting services allow an unprecedented diversity of choice for viewing audiences. It is the Internet, however, that is at the heart of this communications revolution. With the expansion of technologies such as voice recognition, broadband transmission, web casting and cable links, the Internet threatens to erase the distinctions between traditional forms of media and to become the conduit for the delivery of information, entertainment, advertising and commerce to media audiences.

In this chapter, we'll study the transformations affecting mass media and communications as part of globalization. The **mass media** include a wide variety of forms, including television, newspapers, films, magazines, radio, advertisements, video games and CDs. These are referred to as 'mass' media because they reach mass audiences – audiences comprised of very large numbers of people.

We begin the study of the mass media by considering some of the forms it can take. We discuss older, more traditional forms of media, such as the press, cinema, radio and television, before looking at the recent development of new forms of media like the Internet. Second, we shall explore some of the key theoretical perspectives on the media. Next, we look at the some of the issues surrounding mass media and society, such as bias, the effects of the media and audiences. Last, we look at the development of the mass media in a global age.

Traditional and new media

An important precursor to the mass media was the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, which made the high-speed reproduction of texts possible for the first time. Yet, although technological advances played a crucial part in the development of the mass media, the influence of social, cultural and economic factors must also be taken into account. The mass media could only develop in societies with a relatively free press and an educated and wealthy enough population to take advantage of it. In the last few years, new technologies, such as the Internet, have revolutionized the mass media and wider society too. In the next section we look at the development of new forms of media; first, we examine the rise of the mass media in the UK, by looking at briefly at the press, film, radio and television.

Traditional media

The press

The development of the press in Britain during the nineteenth century occurred at a time of political and social unrest. The government exerted its control over the emerging newspaper industry through strict laws on libel and sedition, which

prevented political agitation; at the same time, a stamp tax was imposed to ensure that newspapers were only affordable by the well-off. The stamp tax had unintended consequences, as illegal and inexpensive pamphlets emerged, spreading radical views amongst the newly industrial working class. The biggest of these pamphlets, such as William Cobbett's weekly *Political Register*, outsold the official, 'stamped' press many times over (Hall 1982).

The stamp tax – condemned by its opponents as a 'tax on knowledge' – was finally repealed in 1855 after a series of reductions, leading many writers to hail a golden era of British journalism marked by a 'transition from official to popular control' (Koss 1973). An alternative view was put forward by James Curran and Jean Seaton challenged this view in their historical account of the British press, *Power Without Responsibility* (2003). They saw the repeal of the stamp tax as an attempt to break the popularity of the radical press and to boost the sales of more 'respectable' newspapers. For Curran and Seaton the repeal of the stamp tax did not introduce a new era of press freedom, but a time of repression and ideological control, this time by market forces rather than government. (The issue of media control is discussed below, pp. 615–20.)

The newspaper was a fundamentally important development in the history of modern media, because it packaged many different types of information in a limited and easily reproducible format. Newspapers contained in a single package information on current affairs, entertainment and consumer goods. The cheap daily press was pioneered in the United States.

The one-cent daily paper was originally established in New York and then copied in other major eastern US cities. By the early 1900s there were city or regional newspapers covering most of the American states; in contrast to the smaller countries of Europe, national newspapers did not develop. The invention of cheap newsprint was the key to the mass diffusion of newspapers from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Curran and Seaton have noted that extra revenue from advertising enabled the cover prices to fall dramatically during this period, making the newspaper affordable for all. They also argue that advertising undermined the radical press as advertisers tended to place announcements in papers to which they were politically sympathetic, and to select papers with a smaller circulation and a wealthy readership, rather than radical papers with a higher circulation which sold to readers who would be unlikely to afford the product advertised (Curran and Seaton 2003).

By the early twentieth century new types of national newspaper had emerged in the UK, such as the *Daily Mail, Daily Express, Mirror* and the *News of the World*, selling a mixture of news, entertainment and patriotism to a largely working-class readership. *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* provided more serious news analysis for wealthier readers. Ownership of much of the news media by this stage was concentrated amongst a handful of rich entrepreneurs. By the 1930s Lords Beaverbrook, Camrose, Kemsley and Rothermere owned 50 per cent of British national and local daily papers and 30 per cent of the Sunday papers. Critics have argued that the 'press barons', as they became known,

used their ownership of national newspapers to promote their own political causes and ambitions (Curran and Seaton 2003). (We discuss the issue of media ownership further below: see pp. 599–601.)

For half a century or more, newspapers were the chief way of conveying information quickly and comprehensively to a mass public. Their influence has waned with the rise of radio, cinema and – much more important – television and, increasingly, the Internet. Figures for newspaper readership suggest that the proportion of people who read a national daily paper in Britain has declined since the early 1980s. Among men, the proportion of daily newspaper readers dropped from 76 per cent in 1981 to 60 per cent in 1998–9; readership levels are somewhat lower among women, but a similar drop – from 68 per cent to 51 per cent – has taken place (HMSO 2000).

Online communication might well bite further into newspaper circulation. News information is now available online almost instantaneously and is constantly updated during the course of the day. Many newspapers can also be accessed and read online free of charge.

Film

The first film to be shown to paying customers was in 1895 in Paris, France, where the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of the Train in La Ciotat Station* caused viewers to flee from their seats as the screen slowly filled with an oncoming steam engine. Whilst the print media in the UK developed slowly over many decades, film and the cinema arrived much faster. The first cinema in the UK opened in 1896 and by 1914 there were more than five hundred in London alone. Cinema tickets could be afforded by all classes and the decline in working hours and rise in unemployment in the late 1920s meant the cinema-goers soon formed a mass audience.

Audience demands were soon leading cinemas to screen two new programmes a week, each consisting of two films, a B-movie and the main feature. The demand for new films led studios to churn out productions to tight schedules. These films tended to be formulaic and created by bureaucratic organizations with a high degree of specialization and division of labour.

> Bureaucracy is further discussed in chapter 16, 'Organizations and Networks', pp. 638–46.)

As the industry became more commercialized a 'star system' emerged, with studios encouraging interest in the personal lives of actors like Mary Pickford and Rudolf Valentino, whose appearance in a film would ensure a box-office hit.

By 1925, 95 per cent of the films shown in the UK were American. Cinemas were increasingly controlled by the American studios which owned the distribution rights to films. The studios could oblige cinemas to bulk-buy future productions, effectively freezing out competitors. As with the print media, ownership had become largely concentrated amongst a few large corporations. The American production of the films raises questions about cultural imperialism and the mass media, which we return to below (see pp. 626–30).

Radio and television

As audiences, we interact differently with the radio and television from how we do with the cinema. Radio and television

bined with other activities in the everyday lives of its audience – most radio is listened to in the morning as part of the ritual of preparation for the day. Television and radio also have an immediacy which film does not: they can report events, as they did the terrorist attacks in the USA in September 2001, from almost anywhere in the world to a mass audience as they happen.

In the UK, radio was quickly taken under the control of a public monopoly, which by 1926 had become known as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Radio provided the organizational model for television broadcasting in the UK, and the BBC remains a public organization to this day, funded by licence fees charged to every household that owns a television set. For some years the BBC was the only organization permitted to broadcast either radio or television programmes in the UK. This policy was relaxed with the introduction of commercial television in the 1950s – dependent on advertising for its revenue, rather than the licence fee – and later a host of commercial radio stations.

The first Director-General of the BBC, John Reith (later Lord Reith), a strict Presbyterian Christian, imposed his values rigidily on the organization. To Reith the purpose of the BBC was to 'inform, educate and entertain'; it could be added, in that order. As the historian A. J. P. Taylor has written, Reith used 'the brute force of monopoly to stamp Christian morality on the British people' (cited in Curran and Seaton 2003). It was during this period that the distinctive role of the BBC as a public-service broadcaster developed. (The future of public service broadcasting in the UK is discussed further on p. 614.)

The number of television sets in the UK

Paul Julius Reuter initiated a prototype news service in Paris in 1849, using carrier pigeons as well as the electric telegraph in his network. By 1923, the company he founded, Reuters, was transmitting news by radio.

enters the household in a way that the cinema cannot. Neither do these media demand the attention that film does. Listening to the radio, in particular, is com-

and the amount of time that people spend viewing them increased dramatically from the 1950s onwards. Television now dominates the other media. If the current trends in TV watching continue, by the age of eighteen the average child born today will have spent more time watching television than in any other activity except sleep. Virtually every household now possesses a TV set. In the UK, every day around 85 per cent of adults watch television (HMSO 2004), and the average set is switched on for between three and six hours per day. Much the same is true in other West European countries and in the USA. Individuals aged four and over in the UK watch an average of twenty-five hours of television a week. Older people watch twice as much television as children, perhaps because they are not in school and go to bed later in the evening, and people from lower social classes watch more than those from the top three social classes (see figure 15.1).

Television and social life

Several media theorists have been highly sceptical about the effects that a seemingly ever-increasing diet of television has had on the population: two well-known accounts have been provided by Robert Putnam in his recent works on social capital and Neil Postman (1931–2003) in his tellingly titled book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985).
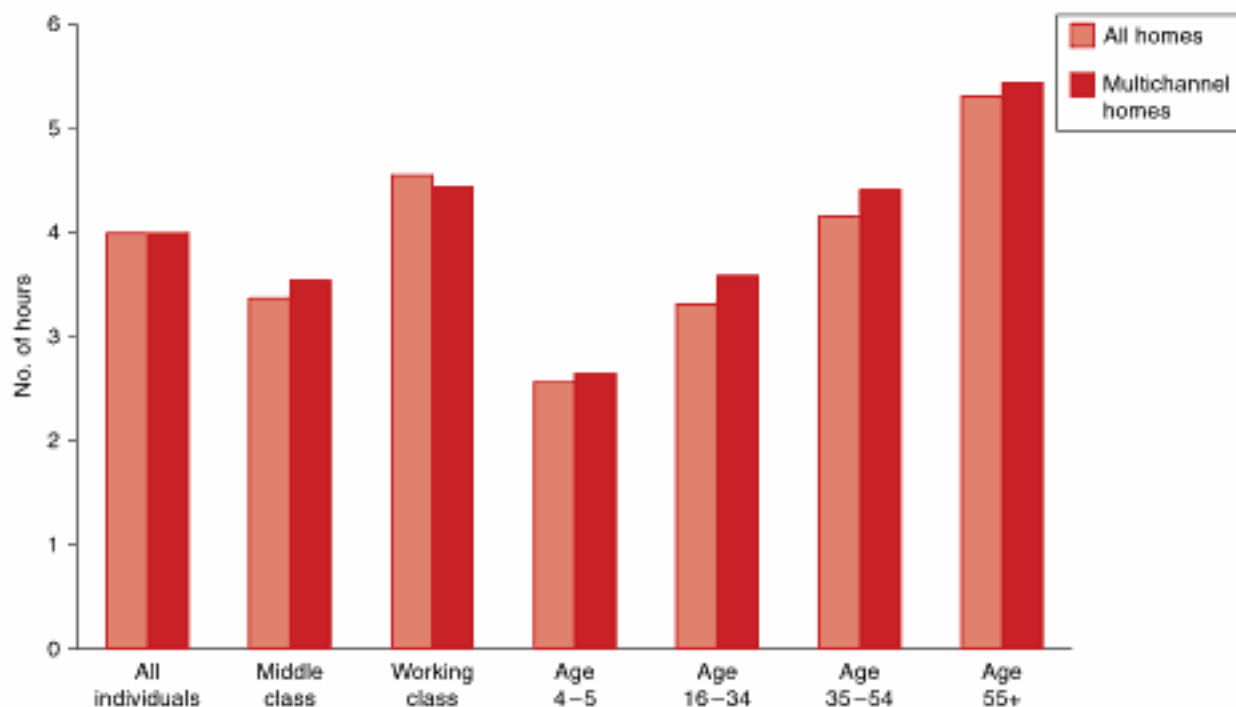

Figure 15.1   Number of hours of television viewed per household per day, by age and social class, January–March 2003

Source: Adapted from Ofcom (2003), p. 32

To Postman, television presents serious issues as entertainment because, in his phrase, 'the form excludes the content'. By this, he means that television as 'the form' is a medium that is incapable of sustaining serious 'content'. For Postman, rational argument is best carried on in the form of the printed word, which is capable of sustaining complex and serious content. He harks back to the nineteenth century as an 'age of reason', when the written word was dominant. Postman's argument contains some similarities with Marshall McLuhan's claim that 'the medium is the message' (see p. 585), although Postman is much more sceptical than McLuhan about the benefits of electronic media. To Postman, the medium of print creates a rational population, whereas the medium of television creates an entertained one. In a society dominated by the television, news, education and politics are all reduced to entertainment, so that we are, as the title of his book indicates, doing nothing more than 'amusing ourselves to death'.

Although Postman's book is fiercely argued, it has been criticized as being based on impression rather than empirical research. This criticism cannot be levelled at the work of the American political theorist Robert Putman.

By **social capital**, as we have seen, Putnam is referring to useful social networks, a sense of mutual obligation and trustworthiness, an understanding of the norms that govern effective behaviour and, in general, other social resources that enable people to act effectively. Putnam's account, put forward in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000) and elsewhere, is based on research in the United States, where he finds significant decline in social capital over the last few decades. Putnam (1996) suggests a culprit for that decline: television.

Putnam points out that in 1950, around the time measures of social capital peaked, barely 10 per cent of Americans had a television set in their homes; by 1959, this figure had risen to 90 per cent. Studies estimate that the average American now watches roughly four hours of TV every day (not including periods when television is merely playing in the background). A conservative estimate of television viewing in the USA means that this one activity now absorbs around 40 per cent of the average American's free time. Putnam notes that this massive change in the way Americans spend their lives coincided precisely with the years of declining social capital.

Putnam argues that the link between mass television watching and the erosion of social capital is not merely circumstantial. Taking other facts into consideration, such as education, age and gender, TV viewing is strongly and negatively related to social trust and group membership. Using the same criteria, the correlation of newspaper reading to social trust and group membership is positive.

One reason Putnam suggests for why TV viewing erodes social capital is the effect of programme content on viewers. For example, studies suggest that heavy watchers of TV are unusually sceptical about the benevolence of other people – by overestimating crime rates for example. Putnam concludes: 'Just as the erosion of the ozone layer was detected only many

years after the proliferation of the chlorofluorocarbons that caused it, so too the erosion of America's social capital became visible only several decades after the underlying process had begun.' Although Putnam warns against nostalgia for the 1950s, he argues that it is time for critical reflection on the effects of technologies on our lives (Putnam 1995).

New media

In his book *Being Digital* (1995), the founder of the media laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nicholas Negroponte, analyses the profound importance of digital data in current communications technologies. Any piece of information, including pictures, moving images and sounds, can be translated through a binary system into 'bits'. A bit is either 1 or 0. For instance, the digital representation of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, is 1, 10, 11, 100, 101, etc. Digitization – and speed – is at the origin of the development of multimedia: what used to be different media needing different technologies (such as visuals and sound) can now be combined on a single medium (DVD and PCs, etc.). In recent years the processing power of computers has doubled every eighteen months. This means, for example, that it is now possible to watch films and listen to music via the Internet. Digitization also permits the development of interactive media, allowing individuals actively to participate in, or structure, what they see or hear. In this section we examine the profound impact that digitization has had on the media.

Digital television

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, television broadcasting technol-ogy has been undergoing a revolution, with the transfer of programme transmission from analogue to digital. Analogue TV is the 'old' system of broadcasting that has been used to transmit signals to television sets around the country since the 1940s. It converts sound and pictures into waves, which are transmitted through the air and picked up by the aerial on the roof of the house or on top of the television.

Digital TV works by transforming pictures and sound into information that is understood by a computer. Digital transmissions are received in three ways: through the TV aerial and a decoder (often a set-top box), via a satellite dish or via cable. The television acts like a computer and converts this information back into pictures and sound. Broadcasters and service providers argue that digital television not only means more channels, but also a better quality of sound and pictures and additional services. Digital TV offers the possibility of, for instance, interactive television, the Internet, home shopping and home banking. The arrival of digital TV has also created the possibility of single units that merge the personal computer with the television, although these are not yet widely in use.

In the UK, the government hopes that all viewers will have transferred from analogue to digital television by 2012, when the transmission of television on analogue frequencies is expected to stop. All transmissions from then on will be digital. By 2004, one-third of UK households had already switched to digital television.

The number of television channels available to British audiences has been increasing as a result of advances in satellite, cable and digital technology. In 2003, one service provider, Sky, offered a

Digital and satellite television gives viewers a seemingly endless choice of viewing.

monthly subscription package that gave the viewer a choice of 187 channels. The introduction of digital television on to the UK commercial market in 1998 greatly increased the proportion of viewers subscribing to pay television. In 2003, 26 per cent of British households subscribed to satellite television, while 9 per cent subscribed to cable television (Ofcom 2003)

The Internet

Although we have concentrated so far on newspapers, film and television, the media cannot be thought of only in those terms. One of the most fundamental aspects of the media concerns the very infrastructure through which information is communicated and exchanged. Some important technological advances during the second half of the twentieth century have completely transformed the face of **telecommunications** – the communication of information, sounds or images at a distance through a technological medium.

New communications technologies stand, for example, behind profound changes in the world's money systems and stock markets. Money is no longer gold, or the cash in your pocket. More and more, money has become electronic, stored in computers in the world's banks. The value of whatever cash you do happen to have in your pocket is determined by the activities of traders on electronically linked money

markets. Such markets have been created only over the last few decades: they are the product of a marriage between computers and satellite communication technology. 'Technology', it has been said, 'is rapidly turning the stock exchange into a seamless global market, open 24 hours a day' (Gibbons 1990).

Four technological trends have contributed to these developments: first, the constant improvement in the capabilities of computers, together with declining costs; second, digitization of data (discussed in relation to television on pp. 494–5), making possible the integration of computer and telecommunications technologies; third, satellite communications development; and fourth, fibre optics, which allow many different messages to travel down a single small cable. The dramatic communications explosion of recent years shows no signs of slowing down.

The origins of the Internet

By the early 1990s, it was becoming clear that the future lay not with the individual personal computer (PC) but with a global system of interconnected computers – the **Internet**. Although many computer users may not have realized it at the time, the PC was quickly to become little more than a point of access to events happening elsewhere – events happening on a network stretching across the planet, a network that is not owned by any individual or company.

> The potential of the Internet for the growth of international activism is explored in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Terrorism', pp. 870–1.

The Internet originated during the Cold War period that preceded 1989. The 'Net' developed out of a system used in the Pen-

tagon, the headquarters of the American military, from 1969. This system was first of all named the ARPA net, after the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency. The aim was limited. The ARPA sought to allow scientists working on military contracts in different parts of America to pool their resources and to share the expensive equipment they were using. Almost as an afterthought, its originators thought up a way of sending messages too – thus electronic mail, 'email', was born.

The Pentagon Internet consisted of five hundred computers until the early 1980s, all located in military laboratories and university computer science departments. Other people in universities then started catching on, and began using the system for their own purposes. By 1987 the Internet had expanded to include 28,000 host computers, at many different universities and research labs.

The spread of commercial Internet service providers (ISPs) that offer dial-up, and later broadband, access through modems has fuelled the growing proportion of households with online capabilities. Online services, electronic bulletin boards, chat-rooms and software libraries were put onto the net by a bewildering variety of people, initially mainly situated in the United States, but now all over the world. Corporations also got in on the act. In 1994 companies overtook universities as the dominant users of the network.

The best-known use of the Internet is the World Wide Web (www). Indeed, like a cuckoo in a nest, it threatens to take over its host. The web is in effect a global multimedia library. It was invented by a software engineer at a Swiss physics lab in 1990; the software that popularized it across the world was written by an under-
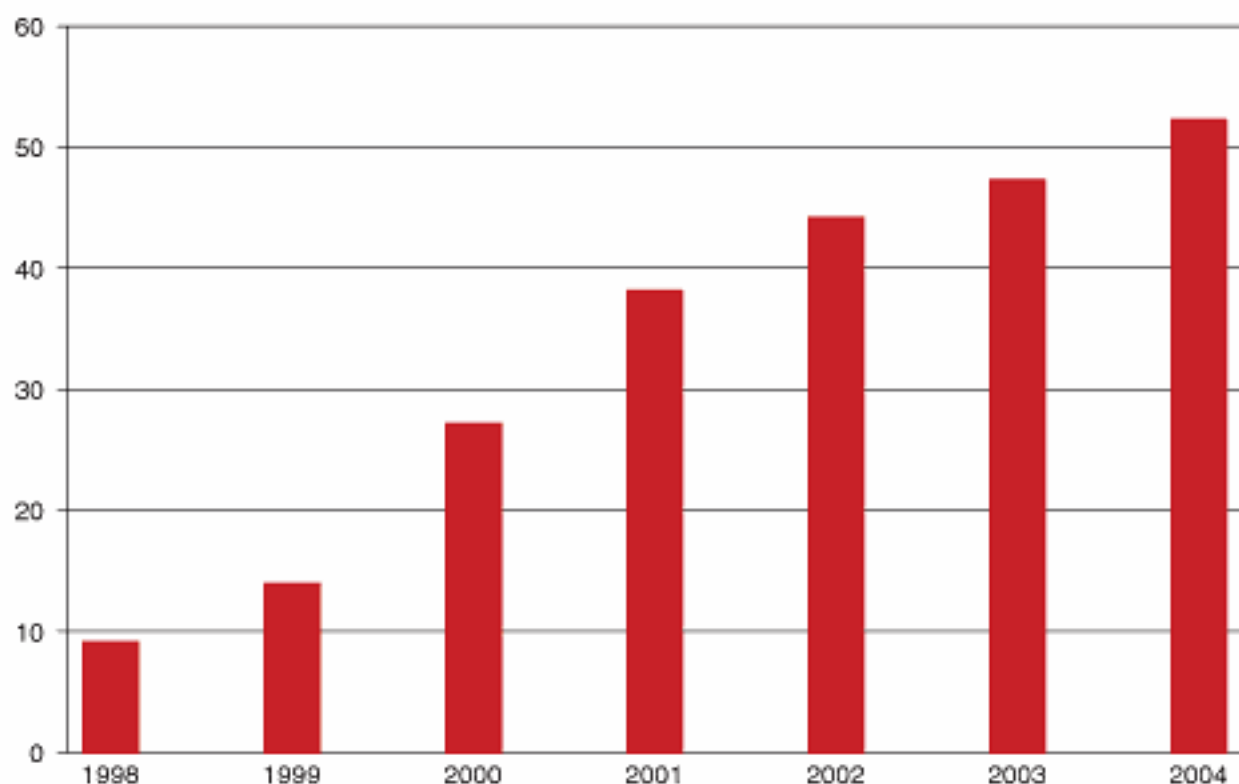
Figure 15.2   Households in the UK with home Internet access, 1998–2004 (%)

Source: National Statistics Online (2004)

graduate at the University of Illinois. Users generally navigate the web with the help of an Internet 'browser' – a software program that allows individuals to search for information, locate particular sites or web pages, and mark those pages for future reference. Through the web, it is possible to download a wide variety of documents and programs, from government policy papers to anti-virus software to computer games. As websites have grown in sophistication, they have become a feast for the senses. Many are adorned with intricate graphics and photographs, or contain video and audio files. The web also serves as the main interface for 'e-commerce' – business transactions conducted online.

With the spread of home-based personal computers access to the Internet in the UK has grown considerably in recent years. By the second quarter of 2004, 52 per cent of households in the UK (12.8 million) could access the Internet from home, compared with just 9 per cent (2.2 million) in the same quarter of 1998 – see figure 15.2.

According to a survey by the National Office of Statistics, the most common use of the Internet among UK adults who had used it during the previous three months was email (85 per cent) and finding information about goods or services (82 per cent). The most frequent place of access was the person's own home (82 per cent), followed by their workplace (42 per cent).

Table 15.1   Internet users around the world: per 1,000 people (2002)

All developing countries	40.9
Least developed countries	2.8
Arab States	28.0
East Asia and the Pacific	60.9
Latin America and the Caribbean	81.2
South Asia	14.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	9.6
Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS	71.8
OECD	383.1
High-income OECD	450.5
High human development	382.6
Medium human development	37.3
Low human development	5.9
High income	445.8
Middle income	59.5
Low income	13.0
World	99.4

Source: UNDP (2004)

In July 2004, 37 per cent of adults had never used the Internet (HMSO 2004).

How many people are actually connected to the Internet globally is unknown, but the United Nations estimates that by 2000 around 10 per cent of the world's population were Internet users – and that number is rising fast. However, this access to the Internet is highly uneven (see table 15.1). In 2002, although 45 per cent of people in high-income countries, such as those in Western Europe or North America, were classed as Internet users, only around 1.3 per cent of people in low-income countries, which includes much of Africa, were classified as such.

The impact of the Internet

In a world of quite stunning technological change, no one can be sure what the future holds. Many see the Internet as exemplifying the new global order emerging at the close of the twentieth century. Exchanges on the Internet take place in cyberspace. **Cyberspace** means the space of interaction formed by the global network of computers that compose the Internet. In cyberspace, we are no longer 'people', but messages on one another's screens. The Internet provides no certainty about other people's identity, whether they are male or female, or where they are. There is a famous cartoon about the Internet, which has a dog sitting in front of a computer. The caption reads: 'The great thing about the Internet is that no one knows you are a dog.'

The spread of the Internet across the globe has raised important questions for sociologists. The Internet is transforming

the contours of daily life – blurring the boundaries between the global and local, presenting new channels for communication and interaction, and allowing more and more everyday tasks to be carried out online. Yet at the same time as it provides exciting new opportunities to explore the social world, the Internet also threatens to undermine human relationships and communities. Although the 'information age' is still in its early stages, many sociologists are already debating the complex implications of the Internet for late modern societies.

Opinions on the effects of the Internet on social interaction fall into two broad categories. On the one hand are those observers who see the online world as fostering new forms of electronic relationship that either enhance or supplement existing face-to-face interactions. While travelling or working abroad, individuals can use the Internet to communicate regularly with friends and relatives at home. Distance and separation become more tolerable. The Internet also allows the formation of new types of relationship: 'anonymous' online users can meet in 'chat-rooms' and discuss topics of mutual interest. These cyber contacts sometimes evolve into fully fledged electronic friendships or even result in face-to-face meetings. Many Internet users become part of lively online communities that are qualitatively different from those they inhabit in the physical world. Scholars who see the Internet as a positive addition to human interaction argue that it expands and enriches people's social networks.

On the other hand, not everyone takes such an enthusiastic outlook. As people spend more and more time communicating online and handling their daily tasks in cyberspace, it may be that they spend less time interacting with one another in the physical world. Some sociologists fear that the spread of Internet technology will lead to increased social isolation and atomization. They argue that one effect of increasing Internet access in households is that people are spending less 'quality time' with their families and friends. The Internet is encroaching on domestic life as the lines between work and home are blurred: many employees continue to work at home after hours – checking email or finishing tasks that they were unable to complete during the day. Human contact is reduced, personal relationships suffer, traditional forms of entertainment such as the theatre and books fall by the wayside, and the fabric of social life is weakened.

> The Internet also raises challenging questions about personal identity, creates new forms of community and new possibilities for democratic participation. These issues are discussed in chapter 5, 'Social Interaction and Everyday Life', pp. 154–7.

How are we to evaluate these contrasting positions? Most certainly, there are elements of truth on both sides of the debate. The Internet is undoubtedly broadening our horizons and presents unprecedented opportunities for making contact with others. Yet the frenzied pace at which it is expanding also presents challenges and threats to traditional forms of human interaction. Will the Internet radically transform society into a fragmented, impersonal realm where humans rarely venture out of their

homes and lose their ability to communicate? It seems unlikely. About fifty years ago, very similar fears were expressed as television burst onto the media scene. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1961), an influential sociological analysis of American society in the 1950s, David Riesman and his colleagues expressed concern about the effects of TV on family and community life. While some of their fears were well placed, television and the mass media have also enriched the social world in many ways.

Just as with television before it, the Internet has aroused both hopes and the fears. Will we lose our identities in cyberspace? Will computerized technology dominate us, rather than the reverse? Will human beings retreat into an anti-social online world? The answer to each of these questions, fortunately, is almost certainly 'no'. As we saw earlier in the discussion on the 'compulsion of proximity' in chapter 5 (pp. 157–8), people don't use video conferencing if they can get together with others in an ordinary way. Business executives have far more forms of electronic communication available to them than ever before. At the same time, the number of face-to-face business conferences has shot up.

The sociologist Manuel Castells argues that the Internet will continue to grow because it allows networks to flourish. For Castells, networks are the defining organizational structure of our age.

> Castells' work is discussed in more detail in chapter 16, 'Organizations and Networks', pp. 671–3.

The inherent flexibility and adaptability of networks give them enormous advantages over older types of rational, hierarchical organizations. Castells argues that the Internet gives businesses the capability for global coordination of decentralized and highly complex activities. For individuals, the Internet will enable new combinations of work and self-employment, individual expression, collaboration and sociability, and for political activists it will make it possible for networks of individuals to combine and co-operate and spread their message around the world. Playing on McLuhan's idea that 'the medium is the message', Castells argues that now, 'the network is the message' (2001).

Theoretical perspectives on the media

In this section we examine two of the most influential theoretical approaches to the study of the mass media – functionalism and conflict theory – and introduce some of the important recent contributions to the debate.

Functionalism

In the mid-twentieth century, functionalist theorists such as Charles Wright and Harold Laswell focused on the ways in which the media function in integrating society (Wright 1960; Laswell 1960).

> Functionalist thought was introduced in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', pp. 20–2.

Following the media theorist Denis McQuail (2000), several of the most important social functions of the media are reviewed below:

1 *Information*   The media provides us with a continuous flow of information about the world, from webcams and radio reports that alert us to traffic jams, to rolling weather reports, the stock market and news stories about issues that affect us personally.

2 *Correlation*   The media explains, and helps us to understand the meaning of the information it gives us. It provides support for established social norms and has an important role in the socialization of children. (Socialization is discussed further in chapter 6.)

3 *Continuity*   The media has a function in expressing the dominant culture, recognizing new social developments and forging common values.

4 *Entertainment*   The media provides amusement, diversion and reduces social tension.

5 *Mobilization*   To encourage economic development, work, religion or support in times of war, the media can campaign to mobilize society to meet these objectives.

In recent decades functionalist theories of the media have fallen into decline. In particular, they were criticized for viewing the audience as passive recipients rather than active interpreters of a media message. (More recent and sophisticated accounts of audience response are discussed below, pp. 608–10.) Furthermore, functionalism has been dismissed for doing nothing more than describing the media, rather than explaining it. As functionalist theories of the media declined in popularity, other forms of analysis came to the fore, in particular conflict approaches influenced by Marxism.

Conflict theories

In Europe, conflict approaches to the mass media have been popular. Below, we look at two of the most important theories of the media from a broadly Marxist standpoint: the political economy approach and the cultural industry approach. Other approaches that have been influential within this framework include the work of the Glasgow Media Group (which we examine on pp. 606–8).

Political economy approaches

Political economy approaches view the media as an industry, and examine the way in which the major means of communication have come to be owned by private interests. The ownership of the media has often been concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy media magnates – the dominance of the press barons in the pre-war British press (discussed on pp. 587–8) provides one example. In the global age, the ownership of the media crosses national borders. Below, we profile the Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch, the owner of Sky and other media institutions (pp. 627–8).

Advocates of a political economy view argue that economic interests work to exclude those voices that lack economic power. Moreover, the voices that do survive are those that are least likely to criticize the prevailing distribution of wealth (Golding and Murdock 1997). This view was famously advanced by the American radical Noam Chomsky, in *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievement of Propaganda* (1991). Chomsky is highly critical of the dominance of large corporations over the American and global media. For Chomsky, their dominance

Rupert Murdoch's company, News Corporation, operates on six continents. Its holdings include the *News of the World*, the *Sun*, part of Twentieth Century Fox, HarperCollins and Sky – amongst many other major media.

results in the tight control of information given to the public. During the Cold War, these corporations controlled information to create a climate of fear of the Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Chomsky argues that the corporately owned media have created new fears, such as global terrorism, and that these fears have prevented real issues, such as the unaccountability of corporations or the lack of democracy in the USA, from being discussed.

The cultural industry

Members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodore Adorno (1903–69), were highly critical of the effect of mass media on the mass population. The Frankfurt School (established in the 1920s) consisted of a loose group of theorists inspired by Marx who nevertheless argued that Marx's views needed radical revision. Among other things, they held that Marx had not given enough attention to the influence of culture in modern capitalist society.

Members of the Frankfurt School argued that leisure time had been industrialized. They made an extensive study of what they called the 'culture industry', meaning the entertainment industries of film, TV, popular music, radio, newspapers and magazines (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). They argued that the pro-

duction of culture had become just as standardized and dominated by the desire for profit as other industries. In a mass society, the leisure industry was used to induce appropriate values amongst the public: leisure was no longer a break form work, but a preparation for it.

Members of the Frankfurt School argued that the spread of the culture industry, with its undemanding and standardized products, undermined the capacity of individuals for critical and independent thought. Art disappears, swamped by commercialization – 'Mozart's Greatest Hits' – and culture is replaced by entertainment. As Lazarsfeld and Merton commented on the USA in the 1950s: 'Economic power seems to have reduced direct exploitation and to have turned to a subtler type of psychological exploitation' (cited in Curran and Seaton 2003).

Recent theories

Jürgen Habermas: the public sphere

The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas is linked to the Frankfurt School of social thought. Habermas took up some of these themes initiated by the Frankfurt School, but developed them in a different way. He has analysed the evolution of the media from the early eighteenth century up to the present day, tracing the emergence – and subsequent decay – of the 'public sphere' (1989). The **public sphere** is an arena of public debate in which issues of general concern can be discussed and opinions formed.

According to Habermas, the public sphere developed first in the salons and coffee houses of London, Paris and other European cities (one of these salons is depicted in chapter 1 on p. 6). People used to meet to discuss issues of the moment. Political debate became a matter of particular importance. Although only small numbers of the population were involved, Habermas argues that the salons were vital to the early development of democracy, for they introduced the idea of resolving political problems through public discussion. The public sphere – at least in principle – involves individuals coming together as equals in a forum for public debate.

However, the promise offered by the early development of the public sphere, Habermas concluded, has not been fully realized. Democratic debate in modern societies is stifled by the development of the culture industry. The spread of mass media and mass entertainment causes the public sphere to become largely a sham. Politics is stage-managed in Parliament and the media, while commercial interests triumph over those of the public. 'Public opinion' is not formed through open, rational discussion, but through manipulation and control – as, for example, in advertising.

> Habermas's writing is discussed in more detail in chapter 4, 'Theoretical Thinking in Sociology', pp. 118–19.

Jean Baudrillard: the world of hyperreality

One of the most influential current theorists of the media is the postmodernist French author Jean Baudrillard, whose work has been strongly influenced by the ideas of McLuhan, who was discussed earlier this chapter (p. 585). Baudrillard regards the impact of modern mass media as being quite different from, and very much more profound than, that of any

technology. The coming of the mass media, particularly electronic media such as television, has transformed the very nature of our lives. TV does not just 'represent' the world to us; it increasingly defines what the world in which we live actually *is*.

Consider as an example the trial of O. J. Simpson, a celebrated court case that unfolded in Los Angeles in 1994–5. Simpson originally became famous as an American football star, but later became known around the world as a result of appearing in several popular films, including the *Naked Gun* series. He was accused of the murder of his wife Nicole, and after a very long trial was acquitted.

The case became compulsive TV viewing for 95 million Americans, who watched Simpson evade arrest as his car sped along a California highway for sixty miles. Not only was his arrest televised, his trial was also broadcast live on US television, and watched around the globe, including in Britain. In America, six television channels showed continuous coverage of the trial. More than 90 per cent of the US television audience claimed to have watched the trial, and 142 million people heard the 'not guilty' verdict delivered on 3 October 1995. More than 2,000 reporters covered the trial, and more than 80 books have been written about it.

In media terms, it was the trial of the century. The trial was not confined to the courtroom; it was also a televisual event linking millions of viewers and commentators in the media. It is an illustration of what Baudrillard calls '**hyperreality**'. There is no longer a 'reality' (the events in the courtroom) which television allows us to see; the 'reality' is actually the string of images on the TV screens of the world, which defined the trial as a global event.

Just before the outbreak of hostilities in the first Gulf War in 1991, Baudrillard wrote a newspaper article entitled 'The Gulf War cannot happen'. When war was declared and a bloody conflict took place, it might seem obvious that Baudrillard had been wrong. Not a bit of it. After the end of the war, Baudrillard wrote a second article: 'The Gulf War did not happen'. What did he mean? He meant that the war was not like other wars that have happened in history. It was a war of the media age, a televisual spectacle, in which, along with other viewers throughout the world, George Bush Senior and former President of Iraq Saddam Hussein watched the coverage by CNN to see what was actually 'happening'.

Baudrillard argues that, in an age where the mass media are everywhere, in effect a new reality – hyperreality – is created, composed of the intermingling of people's behaviour and media images. The world of hyperreality is constructed of **simulacra** – images which only get their meaning from other images and hence have no grounding in an 'external reality'. A famous series of advertisements for Silk Cut cigarettes, for example, didn't refer to the cigarettes at all, but only to previous ads which had appeared in a long series. No political leader today can win an election who doesn't appear constantly on television: the TV image of the leader is the 'person' most viewers know.

John Thompson: the media and modern society

Drawing in some part on the writings of Habermas, John Thompson has analysed the relation between the media and the development of industrial societies (1990, 1995). From early forms of print

Most of what we know about politicians comes from the television, or what we read in the newspapers.

through to electronic communication, Thompson argues, the media have played a central role in the development of modern institutions. The main founders of sociology, including Marx, Weber and Durkheim, Thompson believes, gave too little attention to the role of media in shaping even the early development of modern society.

Sympathetic to some of the ideas of Habermas, Thompson is also critical of him, as he is of the Frankfurt School and of Baudrillard. The Frankfurt School's attitude to the culture industry was too negative. The modern mass media, Thompson thinks, do not deny us the possibility of critical thought; in fact, they provide us with many forms of information to which we couldn't have had access before. In common with the Frankfurt School, Habermas treats us too much as the passive recipients of media messages. In Thompson's words:

Media messages are commonly discussed by individuals in the course of reception and subsequent to it. . . . [They] are transformed through an ongoing process of telling and retelling, interpretation and reinterpretation, commentary, laughter and criticism. . . . By taking hold of messages and routinely incorporating them into our lives . . . we are constantly shaping and

TROUBLETOWN   BY LLOYD DANGLE

ALL I NEED TO KNOW IN LIFE I LEARN FROM LITTLE SYMBOLIC MEDIA TIDBITS!...

BLACKS BELIEVE O.J.!

A HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE WAS ASKED TO LEAVE A **GAY BAR** FOR EXCESSIVE PUBLIC KISSING & GROPING!

CONCLUSION: **THEY DISCRIMINATE TOO!** THIS MAKES OUR INTOLERANCE COMPLETELY JUSTIFIABLE.

A SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY WAS CHARGED WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT FOR KISSING A FEMALE CLASSMATE!

HA! I KNEW SEXUAL HARASSMENT WAS JUST A THING DREAMED-UP BY CRAZY, OVER-SENSITIVE FEMINISTS!

McDONALDS WAS ONCE SUED BY A PERSON WHO SPILLED HOT COFFEE ON HERSELF!

ANY COMPLAINT AGAINST A CORPORATION IS A FRIVOLOUS EXTORTION ATTEMPT!

A MURDER WAS COMMITTED IN FLORIDA OR TEXAS BY SOMEONE WHO WAS **OUT ON PAROLE!!**

ALL CRIMES SHOULD CARRY MANDATORY LIFE SENTENCES— AT THE VERY LEAST!

THEY'RE BITE-SIZED, EASY TO REMEMBER, AND THE OUTRAGE LASTS FOR DAYS! SYMBOLIC MEDIA TIDBITS ARE MY KEY TO ENLIGHTENMENT!

CHILD BEAUTY QUEENS!

reshaping our skills and stocks of knowledge, testing our feelings and tastes, and expanding the horizons of our experience. (1995: 42–3)

Thompson's theory of the media depends on a distinction between three types of interaction (see table 15.2). *Face-to-face interaction*, such as people talking at a party, is rich in clues used by individuals to make sense of what others say (see chapter 5, 'Social Interaction and Everyday Life'). *Mediated interaction* involves the use of a media technology – paper, electrical connections, electronic impulses. Characteristic of mediated interaction is that it is stretched out in time and space – it goes well beyond the contexts of ordinary face-to-face interaction. Mediated interaction takes place between individuals in a direct way – for instance, two people talking on the telephone – but there isn't an opportunity for the same variety of clues.

A third type of interaction is *mediated quasi-interaction*. This refers to the sort of social relations created by the mass media. Such interaction is stretched across time and space, but it doesn't link individuals directly: hence the term 'quasi-interaction'. The two previous types are 'dialogical': individuals communicate in a direct way. Mediated quasi-interaction is 'monological': a TV programme, for example, is a one-way form of communication. People watching the programme may discuss it, and perhaps address some remarks to the TV set – but, of course, it doesn't answer back.

Table 15.2   Types of interaction

Interactional characteristics	Face-to-face interaction	Mediated interaction	Mediated quasi-interaction
Space–time constitution	Context of co-presence; shared spatial-temporal reference system	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space
Range of symbolic cues	Multiplicity of symbolic cues	Narrowing of the range of symbolic cues	Narrowing of the range of symbolic cues
Action orientation	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients
Dialogical/ monological	Dialogical	Dialogical	Monological

Source: Thompson (1995), p. 465

Thompson's point is not that the third type comes to dominate the other two – essentially the view taken by Baudrillard. Rather, all three types intermingle in our lives today. The mass media, Thompson suggests, change the balance between the public and the private in our lives, bringing more into the public domain than before, and often leading to debate and controversy.

Ideology and the media

The study of the media is closely related to the impact of *Ideology* in society. **Ideology** refers to the influence of ideas on people's beliefs and actions. The concept has been widely used in media studies, as well as in other areas of sociology, but it has also long been controversial. The word was first coined by a French writer, Destutt de Tracy, in the late 1700s. He used it to mean a 'science of ideas'.

In the hands of later authors, however, the term became used in a more critical way. Marx, for example, regarded ideology as 'false consciousness'. Powerful groups are able to control the dominant ideas circulating in a society so as to justify their own position. Thus, according to Marx, religion is often ideological: it teaches the poor to be content with their lot. The social analyst should uncover the distortions of ideology so as to allow the powerless to gain a true perspective on their lives – and take action to improve their conditions of life.

Thompson calls de Tracy's view the *neutral* conception of ideology and Marx's view the *critical* conception of ideology. Neutral conceptions 'characterize phenomena as ideology or ideological without implying that these phenomena are necessarily misleading, illusory or aligned with the interests of any particular group'. Critical notions of ideology 'convey a negative, critical or pejorative sense' and carry with them 'an implicit criticism or condemnation' (1990: 53–4).

Thompson argues that the critical notion is to be preferred, because it links ideology with power. Ideology is about the exercise of symbolic power – how ideas are

used to hide, justify or legitimate the interests of dominant groups in the social order.

In their studies, members of the Glasgow Media Group, discussed below, were in effect analysing ideological aspects of TV news reporting and how it biased covered. They found that news tended to favour the government and management at the expense of the strikers. In general, Thompson believes, mass media – including not only the news but all varieties of programme content and genre – greatly expand the scope of ideology in modern societies. They reach mass audiences and are, in his terms, based on 'quasi-interaction' – audiences cannot answer back in a direct way.

Bias and the media: the Glasgow University Research Group

TV news

Sociological studies of television have given a good deal of attention to its coverage of the news. A substantial proportion of the population no longer reads newspapers; TV news is thus a key source of information about what goes on in the world. Some of the best-known – and most controversial – research studies concerned with television news have been those carried out by the Glasgow University Media Group. Over the last three decades, the group has published a series of works critical of the presentation of the news, including *Bad News*, *More Bad News*, *Really Bad News* and *War and Peace News*. They followed similar research strategies in each of these books, although they altered the focus of their investigations.

Bad News (Glasgow Media Group 1976), their first and most influential book, was based on an analysis of TV news broadcasts on the three UK terrestrial channels available at that time between January and June 1975. The objective was to provide a systematic and dispassionate analysis of the content of the news and the ways in which it was presented. *Bad News* concentrated on the portrayal of industrial disputes. The later books concentrated more on political coverage and on the Falklands War of 1982.

The conclusion of *Bad News* was that news about industrial relations was typically presented in a selective and slanted fashion. Terms like 'trouble', 'radical' and 'pointless strike' suggested anti-union views. The effects of strikes, causing disruption for the public, were much more likely to be reported on than their causes. Film material that was used very often made the activities of protesters appear irrational and aggressive. For example, film of strikers stopping people entering a factory would focus on any confrontations that occurred, even if they were very infrequent.

Bad News also pointed out that those who construct the news act as 'gatekeepers' for what gets on the agenda – in other words, what the public hears about at all. Strikes in which there were active confrontations between workers and management, for instance, might get widely reported. More consequential and long-lasting industrial disputes of a different sort might be largely ignored. The view of news journalists, the Glasgow Media Group suggested, tends to reflect their middle-class backgrounds and supports the views of the dominant groups in society, who inevitably see strikers as dangerous and irresponsible.

The works of the Glasgow Media Group were much discussed in media circles as well as in the academic community. Some news producers accused the researchers of simply exercising their own biases, which they thought lay with the strikers. They pointed out that, while *Bad News* contained a chapter on 'The trade unions and the media', there was no chapter on 'Management and the media'. This should have been discussed, critics of the Glasgow Media Group argued, because news journalists are often accused by management of organizations facing strikes of bias against them, rather than against the strikers.

Academic critics made similar points. Martin Harrison (1985) gained access to transcripts of ITN news broadcasts for the period covered by the original study. On this basis he argued that the five months analysed in the study were not typical. There was an abnormal number of days lost because of industrial action over the period. It would have been impossible for the news to report all of these, and therefore the tendency to focus on the more colourful episodes was understandable.

In Harrison's view, the Glasgow Media Group was wrong to claim that news broadcasts concentrated too much on the effects of strikes. After all, many more people are normally affected by strikes than take part in them. Sometimes millions of people find their lives disrupted by the actions of just a handful of people. Finally, according to Harrison's analysis, some of the assertions made by the Media Group were simply false. For example, contrary to what the Group stated, the news did normally name the unions involved in disputes and did say whether or not the strikes were official or unofficial.

In replying to such criticism, members of the Group noted that Harrison's research had been partly sponsored by ITN, possibly compromising his academic impartiality. The transcripts scrutinized by Harrison were not complete and some passages were included that ITN did not in fact broadcast at all.

In recent years, members of the Glasgow Media Group have carried out a range of further research studies. The latest edition of the *Bad News* series, *Bad News from Israel* (Philo and Berry 2004), examined television news reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The study was carried out over a two-year period and was supported by several senior television news broadcasters and journalists who were involved in panel discussions with members of an 800-person sample audience. As well as looking at the television coverage of the conflict, the authors were interested in how the coverage related to the understanding, beliefs and attitudes of the audience.

The study concluded that the television news coverage of the conflict confused viewers and substantially featured Israeli government views. The study found a bias towards official 'Israeli perspectives', particularly on BBC 1, where Israelis were interviewed or reported more than twice as much as Palestinians. In addition, American politicians who supported Israel were often featured. The study also found that the news gave a strong emphasis to Israeli casualties, relative to Palestinians (although two to three times more Palestinians than Israelis died). There were also differences in the language used by journalists to describe Israeli and Palestinian attacks. For example, journalists would often describe Palestinian acts as

'terrorism', but when an Israeli group was reported as trying to bomb a Palestinian school, they were referred to as 'extremists' or 'vigilantes' (Philo and Berry 2004).

Bad News from Israel also argued that there was little coverage devoted to the history or origins of the conflict. The great majority of viewers depended on this news as their main source of information. The gaps in their knowledge closely paralleled the 'gaps' in the news. The survey argued that, again, this worked against the Palestinians, by giving the impression that the problems 'started' with Palestinian action (Philo and Berry 2004).

In their earlier volume, *Getting the Message*, the Glasgow Media Group collected together recent research on news broadcasting. The editor of the volume, John Eldridge, points out that the debate provoked by the original work of the Glasgow Media Group still continues (1993). To say what would count as objectivity in news reporting will always be difficult. As against those who say that the idea of objectivity makes no sense (see 'Baudrillard: the world of hyperreality', pp. 601–2 above), Eldridge affirms the importance of continuing to look at media products with a critical eye. Accuracy in news reporting can and must be studied. After all, when the football results are reported, we expect them to be accurate. A simple example like this, Eldridge argues, reminds us that issues of truth are always involved in news reporting.

Yet the point holds that the news is never just a 'description' of what 'actually happened' on a given day or in a given week. The 'news' is a complex construction that regularly influences what it is 'about'. For example, when a politician appears on a news programme and makes a comment about a controversial issue – say, the state of the economy and what should be done about it – that comment itself becomes 'news' in subsequent programmes.

Audiences and media effects

The effect that ideological bias has on the audience depends upon the theoretical position one takes over the role of the audience in the mass media. Here, we turn to the question through a brief analysis of audience studies.

Audience studies

One of the earliest, and the most straightforward, models of audience response is the *hypodermic model*. This compares the media message to a drug injected by syringe. The model is based on the assumption that the audience (patient) passively and directly accepts the message and does not critically engage with it in any way. The hypodermic model also assumes that the message is received and interpreted in more or less the same way by all members of society. The concept of *narcotization*, associated with the Frankfurt School (see pp. 600–1), draws on the hypodermic model. Under this view, the media is seen as 'drugging' the audience, destroying its ability to think critically about the wider world (Marcuse 1964). The hypodermic model is now out of fashion, and was often little more than an unstated assumption in the works of early writers on the mass media. However, the model's assumptions about the media can still be found in the works of contempo-

The hypodermic model assumes that media messages are passively received by viewers. Such ideas are often implicit in arguments about the effects of television on children.

rary writers who are sceptical about the effects of the mass media on modern society.

Critics of the hypodermic model have pointed out that it takes no account of the very different responses that different audiences have to the media, treating them as homogenous and passive. Most theorists now argue that audience responses go through various stages. In their work on audience response, Katz and Lazarsfeld drew on studies of political broadcasts during US presidential elections, and argued that audience response is formed through a *two-step flow*: the first step is when the media reaches the audi-

ence; the second comes when the audience interprets the media through their social interaction with influential people – 'opinion leaders' – who further shape audience response (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

Later models assume a more active role for an audience in response to the media. The *gratification model* looks at the ways in which different audiences use the media to meet their own needs (Lull 1990). Audiences may use the media to learn more about the world they live in – finding out about the weather or stock market for example. Others may use the media to help with their relationships, to feel part of

a fictional community (from watching TV soaps, for example), or to get on with friends and colleagues who also watch the same programme. (We discuss soap operas in the box opposite) Critics of this model have argued that it assumes that audience needs already exist, not that they are created by the media.

Later theories of audience response have looked at the ways in which people actively interpret the media. Stuart Hall's account of *reception theory* focuses on the way in which an audience's class and cultural background affects that way in which it makes sense of different media 'texts' – a term that is used to encompass various forms of media from books and newspapers to films and CDs. Some members of an audience may simply accept the preferred reading 'encoded' in a text – such as a news bulletin – by its producer. This preferred reading, Hall argues, is likely to reflect the dominant or mainstream ideology (as the Glasgow Media Group, whose work is discussed above on pp. 606–8, found). However, Hall argues that the understanding of a text also depends on the cultural and class background of the person interpreting it. Other members of an audience may take an 'oppositional' reading of a text, because their social position places them in conflict with the preferred reading. For example, a worker involved in strike action or a member of an ethnic minority is likely to take an oppositional reading of a text such as a news story on industrial or race relations, rather than accept the dominant reading encoded in the text by its producer (Hall 1980).

Following Hall, recent theories have focused on the way in which audiences filter information through their own experience (Halloran 1970). The audience may link different media 'texts' (programmes or genres, for example) or use one type of media to engage with another – questioning what they are told on the television compared to the newspaper (Fiske 1988). Here the audience has a powerful role, far removed from the hypodermic model. The *interpretative model* views audience response as shaping the media through its engagement or rejection of its output.

Media effects

The perceived effects of the media are manifold. The media has been blamed for alienation, copy-cat killings, producing apathy amongst the population, reinforcing prejudices and trivializing important issues (Watson 2003). Of course, the extent to which we blame the media for negative effects depends upon the view taken of how active or passive an audience is, as we have seen above. In this section we look at two areas in which the media is said to have a negative effect: violence and pornography.

The media and violence

The incidence of violence in television programmes is well documented. The most extensive studies have been carried out by Gerbner and his collaborators, who analysed samples of prime-time and weekend day-time television for all the major American networks each year after 1967. The number and frequency of violent acts and episodes of violence were charted for a range of types of programme. Violence is defined in the research as the threat or use of physical force, directed against the self or others, in which physical harm or death is involved. Television

Genres, audience response and soap operas

A genre created by radio and television came to be called 'soap opera' – now TV's most popular type of programme. Of the most watched TV shows in Britain each week, almost all are soaps – *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and many others. Soap operas fall into various different types, or subgenres, at least as represented on British TV. Soaps produced in the UK, like *Coronation Street*, tend to be gritty and down to earth, often concerned with the lives of poorer people. Second, there are American imports, many of which, like *Dallas* or *Dynasty* in the 1980s, portray individuals leading more glamorous lives. A third category is made up of Australian imports, such as *Neighbours*. These tend to be low-budget productions, featuring middle-class homes and lifestyles.

Soaps are like TV as a whole: continuous. Individual stories may come to an end, and different characters appear and disappear, but the soap itself has no ending until it is taken off the air completely. Tension is created between episodes by so-called 'cliff-hangers'. The episode stops abruptly just before some key event happens and the viewer has to wait until the next episode to see how things turn out.

A basic part of the genre of soap opera is that it demands regular viewing on the part of whoever watches it. A single episode makes very little sense. Soap operas presume a history, which the regular viewer knows – he or she becomes familiar with the characters, with their personalities and their life experiences. The threads, which are linked to create such a history, are above all personal and emotional – soaps for the most part do not look at larger social or economic frameworks, which impinge only from the outside.

Sociologists have put differing views forward as to why soap operas are so popular – and they are popular across the world, not only in Britain or America, but also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Some think that they provide a means of *escape*, particularly where women (who watch soaps in greater numbers than men) find their own lives dull or oppressive. Such a view is not particularly convincing, though, given that many soaps feature people whose lives are just as problematic. More plausible is the idea that soap operas address universal properties of personal and emotional life. They explore dilemmas anyone may face, and perhaps they even help some viewers to think more creatively about their own lives. The sociologist Dorothy Hobson, in her book *Soap Opera*, has written that soaps work not because they are escapist, but 'because the audience has intimate familiarity with the characters and their lives. Through its characters the soap opera must connect with the experience of its audience, and its content must be stories of the ordinary' (Hobson 2002).

Questions

1 Do you watch soap operas? Explain why or why not from a sociological perspective.
2 How do functionalist and conflict theories explain the popularity of soap operas?

drama emerged as highly violent in character: on average, 80 per cent of such programmes contained violence, with a rate of 7.5 violent episodes per hour. Children's programmes showed even higher levels of violence, although killing was less commonly portrayed. Cartoons contained the highest number of violent acts and episodes of any type of television programme (Gerbner 1979, 1980; Gunter 1985).

In what ways, if at all, does the depiction of violence influence the audience? F. S. Anderson collected the findings of sixty-seven studies conducted over the twenty years from 1956 to 1976 investigating the influence of TV violence on tendencies to aggression among children. About three-quarters of the studies claimed to find some such association. In 20 per cent of cases there were no clear-cut results, while