As 1995 begins and the twentieth century draws to a close, the following items have come to our attention as illuminating examples of popular culture, the subject of this chapter.

- The top-rated show on Music Television (MTV) involved the adventures of cartoon teenagers named Beavis and Butthead, who delight in burning objects and blowing up frogs.
- More people visited Disneyland and Disney World than toured the nation’s capital. Only Mecca and the Vatican drew more pilgrims.
- Two of the most popular radio talk-show hosts were Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern, who specialize in making fun of gays, feminists, immigrants, and First Lady Hillary Clinton.
- Some of the highest paid employees in the United States were professional athletes.
- The second-biggest American export to the rest of the world was “pop cult”—movies, television programs, and fashions (especially baggy pants and baseball caps) worn backward.

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### The Study of Popular Culture

**Popular culture** consists of products designed for mass consumption, typically consumed when a person is not at work or asleep, that is, in *leisure time*. Some scholars use the blanket term *entertainment* to cover the variety of products and processes studied by students of popular culture: everything from comic books to classical music, from baseball cards to ballet (Denisoff and Wahrman, 1985).

Popular culture in the United States is also very big business. It provides employment and wealth to those who produce it, an opportunity for self-expression and pleasure to those who consume it, and endless fascination to those who study it. In other words, popular culture has two aspects: one is based on the human impulse to play and to create (Biesty, 1986), and the other is based on the need of an advanced capitalist economy continually to create new markets (Rojek, 1989).

In this chapter, we can only skim the surface of this fast-growing field of study. We will first examine the role of popular culture in mass society, issues of control and social class, and the processes whereby fun and games are institutionalized. Then we will take an in-depth look at three major subfields: the mass media, especially as a source of news, popular music, and sports.

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### Popular Culture in Mass Society

**The Rise of Leisure** As a species, humans have benefited from the impulse to play and to create things of beauty (artistry). Leisure activities reduce personal anxiety and relieve social tensions. The production of things that give pleasure to the senses brings people together. As Durkheim taught us, commemorative rituals and objects enhance social solidarity, even when the events being celebrated may have been controversial (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991). Thus, popular culture tends to support the social order by providing entertainment for individuals and unifying symbols for the collectivity.

Such personal and group benefits become important in modern societies where leisure time is often defined as the pause that refreshes weary workers and prepares them to resume the rigors of employment. Because play or creativity is an end in itself, it is *expressive behavior*. Work, in contrast, is *instrumental*, a means to other ends. Popular culture thus becomes an expressive outlet that balances the instrumental demands of the workplace and is especially functional in societies with an intense commitment to instrumental rules: “The harder we work, the harder we play.” Indeed, one survey found that 94 percent of Americans saw their free time as “recreative,” a necessary period for recharging one’s energy (Spring, 1992).

The idea that leisure time is “free time,” however, obscures the degree to which it is structured by economic and political factors (Wilson, 1994; Butsch, 1990; Hirsch et al., 1991). Employers and politicians determine the extent of leisure time, as well as when and where people can play. Notice, for example, how much public recreation is devoted to games primarily played by males and also how few public facilities are located in the poorer sections of town.

Contrary to popular belief, the leisure time of employed Americans has *decreased* over the past two decades—by several hours per week on average— as have paid days off (Schor, 1992). This is partly due to the logic of capitalism. It is less expensive for an employer to pay overtime to some workers than to train and extend benefits to additional employees. The decline of leisure also reflects the reduced power of labor unions to hold onto the gains of the past, much less demand a shorter workweek and longer vacations. In addition, because of the declining standard of living provided by a single paycheck, workers must put in extra hours to stay even. Fi-
Happy Father’s Day! Sort Of

Because they define the occasions and relationships that must be taken seriously and those that permit a degree of humor and even expression of hostility, greeting cards provide a fascinating insight into the popular culture and the management of emotions. A content analysis of Mother’s Day and Father’s Day cards by sociologist Mario Kravania (1993) found that sentiments directed toward mothers were universally positive. As a person of little social power, she is not perceived as a legitimate target of a put-down.

Fathers, however, are much more ambiguous figures in the lives of their children—more distant, less nurturant, but representatives of male authority. As a consequence, Father’s Day cards tend to be of two types: (1) cards that convey a generalized, but never mushy, “Thanks, Dad,” on standard-size paper in “male” colors (browns especially) or (2) cards that have negative undertones of humorously expressed hostility, although channeled into culturally acceptable complaints, such as snoring, being a couch potato, or messing up at a sport or home repairs. Kravania concludes that, although the fault-finding diminishes the father’s power over the sender, it also pushes him even further from the family’s emotional center, a form of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

nally, because many women in the labor force are also full-time homemakers, their “free time” has been greatly reduced.

By harnessing people’s need for play and games to commercial gain, available leisure time has become another arena for profit making and the manipulation of pleasure. The discontented and overworked can be “cooled out” by the illusion of personal freedom in play that deflects anger from employers and other authorities. Every now and then, however, the masses will slip their controls and engage in “rituals of rebellion” such as riots at sports events or doing drugs in the workplace.

Play as Work. Popular culture supports the American value system in another way. The work ethic described in Chapter 3 is in part based on the early Puritan distrust of play (“Idle hands are the Devil’s workshop”), and many Americans still feel guilty about pure enjoyment. But if leisure activities can be turned into something like work, the discomfort is lessened, such as when play is transformed into a money-making activity or when winning is the only goal (Lewis, 1982). Many how-to books for leisure play sound very much like an operating manual for a machine, using the same goal-directed way of thinking that characterizes the work ethic: If all the right steps are taken in the precise order, success will be yours. Jogging to the point of exhaustion is work, not pleasure. Only after single-minded dedication to a hard day’s work or play have you earned that foaming glass of beer.

A mass culture is made up of those elements of popular culture that forge common values in a heterogeneous society and are produced and distributed through the mass media.

Mass Culture and Value Consensus. Those elements of popular culture that are produced and distributed through the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, and magazines) make up a mass culture that some scholars believe is essential to forging common values in a heterogeneous society. Because industrialization is based on specialization and the separation of occupational and status groups, the popular culture may be the only culture shared to some degree by most citizens. Whatever else divides us, the World Series and Super Bowl bring us together (Goethals, 1981).
Conflict Analysis

The terms popular and mass culture suggest something emerging from the creativity of "the people." Yet the production of culture, like any other activity, is socially structured. Who are the artists and entertainers? When, where, and how do they work? Who pays them and distributes their output? Who consumes their products? Who defines standards of excellence? Who benefits?

One major issue from the conflict perspective is that of control over the production of popular culture—the issue of cultural hegemony referred to in Chapters 3 and 9. If popular culture is not a spontaneous outpouring of mass creativity, then some people and groups must decide what is made for whom and what vision of the world is portrayed. Popular culture is manufactured in the same way as any other product: There are industries that turn out movies, books, television and radio programs, newspapers and magazines, records, rock concerts, sports events, and art exhibits—primarily for profit, though sometimes for prestige.

Conflict theorists are also interested in another form of control: Who defines what is authentic or false, good or bad? When does "good" become "what we think is good for you?" This is the activity of tastemakers or gatekeepers, people whose occupation or social position permits them to open or close the gates of success and to impose their standards of value (Greenfield, 1988). Gatekeepers and tastemakers form a cultural elite, typically drawn from the upper middle class.

The belief that "good" music or "fine art" (in contrast to common, or unfine, art) exists in some abstract realm of eternal beauty completely overlooks the cultural, social, political, and economic influences that determine what is produced in any historical era and what is preserved (Lang and Lang, 1988; McClary, 1991). It makes a difference whether a composer is financed by a wealthy patron or must depend on pleasing the general public. Or whether the painter has been hired to decorate a cathedral or a dining room. Artistic products are influenced by nonartistic factors, as when an aria is deleted from an opera score because the tenor cannot reach high C. Even an artist's style may change depending on her or his location in social networks or artistic stratification systems (Finney, 1993). Where profit making is a crucial consideration [when programming classical music concerts, for example, or producing elegant restaurant food], the outcome is determined by the interplay between the artist's creativity (aesthetics), audience taste, and the needs of the management (Fine, 1992a; Gilmore, 1993).

Tastemakers have often created and maintained a distinction between elite culture—items consumed and sponsored by the educated and wealthy—and "mass culture" enjoyed by the majority. For example, to set themselves apart from the "lower classes" and Irish immigrants, the commercial elite of Boston founded a symphony orchestra and a museum of fine arts that were then placed off-limits to the masses (DiMaggio, 1982b). Thus, cultural capital is reserved for the upper strata, and the class system is preserved over time (Bourdieu, 1984; Chapters 9 and 15).

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.
—Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, p. 60

Gatekeepers and tastemakers may also have a moral agenda, such as when religious/political leaders attempted to censor art thought to be obscene and corrupting of public virtue. For example, in 1887 in New York City, a leading art dealer was arrested for selling photographic reproductions of nude paintings (Beisel, 1995). One century later, the religious leader of Iran banned a novel and issued a death threat against its author on grounds of blasphemy (Afshari, 1990). And in the United States in the 1990s, Senator Jesse Helms has successfully curtailed federal funding for artistic products of which he might disapprove (Dubin, 1992).

A final concern of conflict theorists is the possibility of using popular culture to resist or oppose the established order (Ross, 1989). Musical styles have been especially important as a channel of protest or of comfort for groups outside the mainstream, most clearly exemplified in the songs of American slaves. Much of the pain of white working-class lives can be heard in the sound and lyrics of country and western. Themes of resistance can be found also in classical music, such as when the servants outwit their master in The Marriage of Figaro or, in the past century, in the various schools of "modern" painting that have shocked each generation of viewers.

How effective are these gestures of resistance? Most analyses suggest that the long-term effects are minimal. Although people may feel temporarily empowered, the power of dominant institutions is overwhelming. For example, working-class leisure patterns have long been a center of struggle between workers and employers (Rosenzweig, 1983; Nasaw, 1994). In the early days of the factory system, leisure and work were combined as employees drank and gambled on the job. By the end of the nineteenth century, employers had tightened discipline, and drinking moved to the saloon, the haven of working-class men. By the 1920s, the saloon gave way to vaudeville or the movie house, also controlled by the middle
Watching Weight and Preserving Virtue: Health Nuts and Food Faddists

Among the most interesting aspects of popular culture are the health and fitness fads that periodically sweep the country. Social historians have shown how these trends are shaped by broader currents of change in the society. The history of physical fitness fads is greatly enlivened by the larger-than-life eccentrics who led various health reform movements (Goldstein, 1992).

Particularly fascinating are the three men who founded the food empires that will dominate our breakfast tables: Sylvester Graham, C. W. Post, and J. H. Kellogg. Graham's crackers were a "natural" food answer to widespread fears about the negative health effects of city life and factory work for the urban masses. In addition, members of the newly emerging class of white-collar workers, fearful that they might be "feminized" by the shift from manual to nonmanual labor, were reassured that their masculinity could be preserved by eating natural foods.

C. W. Post, too, was keenly aware of the differences between manual and nonmanual workers. His Grape-Nuts were originally marketed as "brain food" for middle-class employees. Post and others were also worried about declining birthrates in the white middle class, in contrast to the high fertility of recent immigrants and African Americans. All types of health foods were being promoted in the early 1900s to restore virility to WASP middle-class males.

But the most unusual character in the history of health foods was J. H. Kellogg, who had a Puritanical obsession with original sin and the evils of unbridled sexuality. His breakfast products—especially Corn Flakes—were good for you because they reduced the sex drive, eat enough of them and other wholesome grains and you would be freed of sin (Boyle, 1993).

What the three had in common, along with so many other health and fitness leaders throughout our history, was a very American belief in individual responsibility for one's state of physical and moral health. Ill health, therefore, could not be the fault of working conditions or blamed on employers. Such an emphasis on the individual also works against collective efforts to improve the workplace or to narrow life-style differences between middle- and working-class families.

American eating habits have also been shaped by a Puritanical fear of gluttony as sin. Because leanness is thus perceived as the outward sign of inner virtue, American women and men have endured great pain and deprivation to become or remain slim. Perhaps the most unusual approach to weight loss was proposed by Horace Fletcher in the early part of the twentieth century. Fletcher advocated chewing food at the rate of 100 Chris per minute and demonstrated its effectiveness through his own weight loss of 50 pounds in a short period of time. Thousands of Americans spent their entire dinner hour chewing a few spoonfuls of food. Eighty years later, Americans spend billions of dollars on diets, visits to spas, and fat-removal surgery.

class. Thus, workers lost the struggle over both leisure and control of the workplace.

Popular culture has also periodically been an arena of gender struggles. Baseball was originally encouraged in the 1870s to amuse the immigrant masses and to allow them an escape from the emerging women's suffrage movement (Lipsyte, 1994). Newly liberated young working women in American cities in the nineteenth century developed styles of leisure activity and dress that challenged the power of parents and employers (Peiss, 1985). Yet at the same time, women were effectively closed off from the liberating currents of the world of modern art, reflecting as it did a basically male world of bars and city streets where men could wander as they please (Wolff, 1990). When museums were organized, they too became male institutions, modeled after business organizations; although women's assistance in raising funds was appreciated, the governing boards remained all male and upper status until recently (McCarthy, 1991).

Mass Culture: Variations and Themes

When we examine what people do in their leisure time, the range of possibilities is enormous. In a society as heterogeneous as the United States in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, and social class, great differences will be seen in the experience and expression of popular culture. For example, Irish men spend more time in bars than do Jews; white middle-class men are the major market for pornography; and women of all ages and social classes buy dozens of paperback romances each year. There are also regional cultures, with particularly marked differences between the South and Northeast, and the East and West coasts. Popular music styles differ greatly by race and ethnicity, although there are strong "crossover" effects.

Aspects of popular culture also vary by social class, independently of the relationship between class and religion, race, or ethnicity. The leisure pursuits of the wealthy are very different from those of the less affluent, partly as a consequence of having more money and partly from being socialized to contrasting ideas of fun and play. Upper-status games, for example, tend to be more individualistic—sailing, tennis, golf, skiing, and squash—than such team sports as baseball, basketball, and bowling.

The distinction between elite and mass cultures contains a large element of snobbery, with the elite version assumed to be more pure and worthy in con-
A number of taste cultures exist in the United States, appealing to different portions of the public. For some, an evening at the ballet is wonderful; others enjoy different kinds of dancing. What are your preferred taste cultures?

Contrast to watered down and vulgar culture forms—the difference, for example, between attending a ballet or a bar dance. The audience for elite culture is extremely small, which gives it its distinction, but which also makes it difficult for non-elites to enjoy because the cost of doing so is very high. Who but a few hundred people can buy "important" art?

CRITICISMS OF MASS CULTURE. Mass culture has been attacked on many grounds: (1) that it appeals to the lowest levels of taste; (2) that it corrupts the standards of excellence by offering instant fame and fortune to crowd pleasers; (3) that it dulls critical capacities; and (4) that it is not really "art," because it is produced only for profit (Denisoff and Wahrman, 1983; Blau, 1986).

These arguments echo a long-standing fear by elitists that "too much" democracy has had a negative effect on Americans. It is not difficult to find easy targets of ridicule: Mother’s Day cards as poetry, movie soundtracks as serious music, television game shows as intellectual contests, and professional wrestling as athletics.

There is a darker vision: mass audiences as passive receivers of entertainment rather than as active agents of their own fate, left vulnerable to the appeal to demagogues (rabble-rousers). The theme of mass culture as a symptom of moral decay has a long tradition in Western thought. How often have you heard the argument that pleasing the masses caused the fall of Rome, or that barbarians are always at the gates, ready to destroy civilized peoples?

IN DEFENSE OF MASS CULTURE. Contemporary scholars of popular culture tend to view the distinction between elite and mass cultures in less sharp and less value-laden terms. Throughout most of Western history, both ordinary citizens and the wealthy enjoyed many of the same pastimes and entertainments. For most of the nineteenth century in the United States, for example, Shakespeare’s plays were regularly performed for working-class audiences, and volumes of his work were second only to the Bible as the most common book in people’s homes. It was only at the end of the century, with the influx of non-English-speaking immigrants, that the urban middle class was successful in distinguishing a "legitimate" theater from the "common" music hall, and in defining Shakespeare as too demanding for a mass audience (Levine, 1988).

As a result, certain entertainments came to be the exclusive privilege of the middle and upper classes, who soon turned them into status symbols. This trend reached its most refined point in the late 1980s, when wealthy New Yorkers could rent the Museum of Modern Art for $30,000 a night for a dinner party (Taylor, 1989). Major American corporations also underwrite art gallery exhibits where it is unlikely that material offensive to their corporate sponsors will be displayed (Martorelli, 1990).

Nonetheless, there has been much crossover between elite and mass culture. Clothing styles, especially, filter up and down. Elite fashions soon appear in less expensive versions in American malls, while "grunge"-type styles are adopted by wealthy youngsters (Rubinstein, 1994). The ultimate in crossover art probably occurred in the mid-1980s, when elite gallery owners declared that the work of graffiti writers—underclass youth who specialized in spray painting subway cars—was "true art" and wealthy patrons immediately began to bid up the price of their work (Lachman, 1988). Nor are the audiences for elite and mass culture so sharply segregated; individuals typically have both "high" and "low" tastes—both can be found at a professional hockey game, although in different sections of the arena. Conversely, readers of the National Enquirer are an entirely different audience from subscribers to the upscale New Yorker (Weiss, 1994).
The Uses of Leisure

On any given weekday, Americans have approximately 5 1/2 hours of leisure time (Leisure Trends, 1992). One-third of the total is spent watching TV, another 6-7 percent each are devoted to reading and to socializing, and 4 percent involves do-it-yourself activities. All other uses take up less than 3 percent of leisure time. Much the same distribution applies to weekends, when people have an additional two hours to spend, typically on shopping. Interestingly, for a society presumably obsessed with sex, on no day—even Saturday or Sunday—did sexual activities take up as much as one percent of respondents' leisure time.

Taste Cultures. The validity of all forms of popular culture has been forcefully argued by Herbert Gans (1974), who uses the term taste cultures to suggest the great variety of culture audiences without implying value judgments. Far from being a passive homogenized mass, consumers of popular culture are active participants in interpreting their experience in the light of their own identities (Gottlieber, 1985). Thus, for example, Native Americans' reactions will differ from other Americans when watching a film about the "Wild West." Members of each group will find something that affirms their own traditional values (Shively, 1992).

The Production of Culture. In contrast to an earlier emphasis on the people who create and consume culture, many sociologists today are primarily concerned with structural aspects of the production of culture: markets, industries, distribution chains, organizations, and other systems that determine what is produced and offered to the public (Ryan, 1985; Crane, 1992). In this view, the final product is the result of an interaction among (1) the object itself; (2) the profit-making producers and distributors of the item; and (3) the social groups that consume it. What is produced and how it is marketed are largely determined by economic factors such as control over markets, dealing with competitors, avoiding regulation, generating consumer demand, and bottom-line profitability.

Yet because sociologists are also interested in the meaning people attach to the products they desire and purchase, the study of popular culture has an interactionist dimension. Popular culture is learned and shared, within families, peer groups, and particular subcultures. But by far the most important element in the spread and homogenization of popular culture—the very condition that makes mass culture possible—is the existence of mass media in modern society.

Media is the plural of medium, which means a channel through which something is transmitted. The term mass media refers to the agents of communication in a mass society: (1) the print media—books, magazines, and newspapers—and (2) the electronic media—television, radio, and recordings. In the decades ahead, the two will increasingly be combined in the "information highway," whereby print media can be called up on the electronic screen of a home computer.

These are the modern equivalents of the storytellers and singers who were the earliest media of information and entertainment. Such face-to-face communication has been replaced by mass-produced items for use by a wide public. This means that many products must appeal to large numbers, so that the economic requirements of mass production become at least as important as the quality of the product.

This mass-produced cultural product is what critics have condemned for its vulgarity, but sociologists are analysts of culture, not art critics. The topics of interest to us are the manifest and latent functions of the mass media. Manifest functions include selling a product and making a profit. Latent functions, by definition hidden and unintended, are more difficult to pinpoint. How do mass communications support the status quo? What values and behaviors are reinforced? What status groups are co-opted or cooled out? How do the conditions under which information and entertainment are produced affect the product? These are the issues we examine in the following sections.

Importance of the Mass Media. The two most common leisure activities of Americans are watching television and reading newspapers, accounting for at least 40 percent of their leisure time. Ninety-nine percent of American homes have at least one radio, and 98 percent have at least one television set. Sixty-one percent of households receive cable programs,
and 77 percent are equipped with a videocassette recorder (VCR). Only slight differences are found in proportions watching television by age, race, education, income, and employment status. In contrast, newspaper reading is strongly and directly related to education and income; the higher the income, the more likely an individual is to read at least one newspaper a day (U.S. Bureau of the Census Statistical Abstract, 1994, p. 567).

The mass media also comprise an important sector of the economic system, employing more than a million workers and accounting for tens of billions of dollars in payrolls alone. In addition, over $135 billion will be spent on advertising in the print and electronic media in 1995. Most important, the mass media—in content and advertisements—are crucial for maintaining the demand for goods and services essential to the continued growth of a capitalist economy. The vision of America presented in our media reinforces the values and ideology of materialism (Bogart, 1991). The United States is also unique in the degree to which the media are privately owned, with an extremely limited public sector (McChesney, 1994).

It has been argued that the mass media have homogenized the culture, muting differences among regions and social classes, and have inhibited creativity (Rothman and Lerner, 1988; Crane, 1992). Yet it can also be claimed that the possibilities are greater today than in the past for a wider variety of media products; there is something for everybody on the information highway, from the raunchy to the righteous. Computer networking, cable TV, programming, and desktop publishing have greatly expanded the number and type of product that can be tailored to a specific audience.

Censorship, American Style. Although our media are relatively free of direct government censorship (see Chapter 14), they are subject to other pressures, such as the political agendas of their owners, the power of advertisers and special interest groups, and the public temper. Owners, either directly or through the executives they hire, have close to absolute power to determine what is seen or read by the public and how the story is slanted. At the owner's whim, stories can be killed and others played up, usually with a specific political outcome in mind.

Next in power are the advertisers, through their ability to pick and choose the programs that they will sponsor. This is especially important on regular network radio and television, where the sale of commercial time is the sole source of revenue; newspapers and magazines are less dependent on advertising because some of their money comes from subscriptions and newstand sales; and cable television is partly funded by viewer fees. Because radio and television advertisers want their product to be associated with positive emotions, it is difficult for the networks to sell time on programs with controversial content or that show the seamiest side of the society. For example, many regular sponsors withdrew from an episode of "Seinfeld" in which the topic of masturbation was indirectly mentioned and from an episode of "Roseanne" involving a visit to a lesbian night club. Because these programs were top-ranked, the network was able to replace the advertisers immediately, but any less popular program might well have been cancelled. As one media executive noted: "Sex and violence become love and adventure" when the show is a hit (Carter, 1992). But what is still forbidden on the major commercial networks is now largely "old hat" on cable television.

Special interest groups have long tried to influence program content (Montgomery, 1989). Women, African Americans, Latinos, the elderly, and homosexuals have all protested negative stereotyping. Racial stereotypes have been particularly difficult to dislodge; Clair and Cliff Huxtable of "The Cosby Show" were originally cast as the maid and chauffeur in an upper-class household, yet transforming them into a lawyer and doctor is equally misleading in its obscuring of powerful structural barriers to upward mobility (Jhally and Lewis, 1992). Similarly, from a feminist perspective, it could be argued that moving women out of the home in order to be stalked and raped elsewhere is not much of an improvement. Indeed, the media appear to flourish on unrealistic images of both men and women (Craig, 1992; Press, 1991; Douglas, 1994).

At this writing, the most powerful interest groups are those representing conservative religious constituencies seeking to promote "family values." Letter-writing campaigns have targeted both the networks and advertisers with threats of boycotting their products. Many members of Congress and the general public would like to see limitations placed on the networks. The possibility of government intervention is disturbing to supporters of the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of the press. They note that attempts to regulate radio and TV content and ownership have not been very successful in the past and that the possibility of thought control is more frightening than the depictions of sex and violence that parents could censor in the home simply by pulling the plug. The most recent attempt at regulation, the Children's Television Act, merely requests stations to document an effort to serve the educational needs of children, which they promptly did by redefining cartoons as educational. G.I. Joe, for example, teaches patriotism; the Jetsons are a model of family life; and Superboy presents the triumph of good over evil according to the networks (Andrews, 1993).

Media Goliaths. The greater threat to press freedom today, however, comes from increasing concentration of media ownership. Throughout most of American history, mass media ownership was widely dispersed
and fiercely competitive, so that many competing voices could be heard. The trend over the past two decades is for relatively small, independent, and regional media outlets to be absorbed by nationwide chains. A handful of “media Goliaths” now determine the content and editorial policy of a majority of American newspapers, magazines, and book publishing companies, despite anti-monopoly laws. A similar trend is found in other modern industrial nations, with ownership increasingly concentrated among a few media empires (Tunstall and Palmer, 1991).

Where once several newspapers competed in the same market, there is now typically only one, and that one is probably owned by the same company that controls a local radio or television station (Bagdikian, 1993).

Cross-media ownership refers to the same owner having controlling interest in various media in the same community, giving them total control over the flow of information in that area. At the national level, media Goliaths such as Time-Warner, Paramount Communications, and Rupert Murdoch’s American News Corporation have extensive holdings in companies that produce, distribute, and show moving pictures; in companies that produce, distribute, and show television and radio programs; and in all forms of publishing (including the publisher of this book)—and all without a murmur of protest from the antitrust division of the Justice Department. Indeed, in 1992 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to allow a single corporation to own as many as thirty AM and 35 FM stations, up from a limit of only seven each in 1985.

In the mid-1980s, the independence of the three major national networks was reduced further, as each was sold to a new corporate owner. NBC was purchased by General Electric; ABC merged with Capital Cities, a media chain; and a large share of CBS stock was sold to a family whose fortune was made in New York real estate. The new corporate owners did not disguise their primary interest in bottom-line profit, quickly dropping quality programs that failed to attract a large audience, and scaling back the very expensive but high-prestige news-gathering operations (Auletta, 1991). In most major cities, as a result of arrangements with local affiliates, the televised national news program—once the symbol of network prestige—is now shown at 6:30 so that high-profit game shows can occupy the more popular 7:00 slot. At this writing, two major networks are in the process of being sold once more, this time to two of the largest Goliaths—Time-Warner, Inc., and the Walt Disney Company.

Effects of the Mass Media

Criticism of the mass media is based on the assumption that what people see and hear has a strong and direct effect on attitudes and actions. Conservative critics blame the media for lowering intellectual standards and appealing to the lowest common denominator, while critics on the left see the masses being manipulated by the elites. Both perceive media consumers as a relatively passive audience of individuals. But, people absorb information in particular situations; they have past experiences, hopes, and expectations that condition their reactions to what they see and hear, and they are embedded in social networks. Reasons for viewing will also vary by sex, class, and age (Chayko, 1993). Thus, although it is difficult to believe that the media do not have a direct impact on beliefs and behaviors, the research evidence is unclear (Schudson, 1991; Lang and Lang, 1992).

Effects on Children. Most research has examined potential negative effects on children from watching televised violence. Although some early studies suggested a link between viewing violent programming and aggressive behavior in some children, most research has found such effects to be weak and temporary (Gutman, 1985). These data, moreover, come from laboratory studies, under artificial conditions removed from the multiple influences of everyday life.

Cross-media ownership occurs when one company controls a variety of media outlets in a single market. The media have strong influence on the formation of public awareness or ignorance of political and social issues that influence people’s everyday lives. In its gatekeeping function, media executives decide what to cover, for how long, and in what context, thereby defining what is “news.”
Number of television sets per 1,000 people in each country. Does the spread of television worldwide help or hinder a better understanding of other cultures? Why or why not?


One community study of Canadian towns before and after the introduction of TV did find some negative effects on children's reading skills and socializing. However, the outcomes were little to do with the content of the programs than with the fact that watching television took time from other activities (Williams, 1986). In addition, other researchers have found that TV viewing can stimulate cognitive development (Hodge and Tripp, 1986) and that high-viewing subgroups have lower rates of violent crime (Messner, 1986).

Television viewing may have more subtle long-term effects that have not yet been measured. For example, what messages about race and gender are constantly conveyed in children's media in which the world of action and adventure remains largely male and white (Jewell, 1993; Merlo and Smith, 1994)? Because girls will watch programs and read books that have boys as the main character but boys will not watch or read stories that feature girls, the obvious choice for programmers and book writers is to reach the largest audience and omit female characters.

Adults are exposed to similar messages; they see supermasculine men and superfeminine women, all of whom appear to be totally absorbed with their own bodies (Barthel, 1988). A dominant theme of the 1990s in books, movies, and television was the extreme physical violation of women, and often their equally extreme physical retaliation. These "backlash" effects suggest a great deal of ambivalence, hostility, and fear in intimate relationships (Gitlin, 1991).

Although there appears to be an imitative response to media reports of a major accident or celebrity suicide, which tend to be followed by a temporary increase in suicide or accidental death (Phillips, 1982; Stack, 1987b), the impact of most media images is too diffuse to be determinative. There is so much to absorb and our interests tend to be so diverse that it is difficult to argue either that audiences are passive captives or that they have been empowered by the new communications technology (Neuman, 1991).

**Agenda Setting.** Where the media appear to have their strongest effect is in setting the agenda—the list of topics that come to the forefront of public attention. This is a gatekeeping function, so that in their choice of what to cover, for how long, and in what context, the media create reality and define what is "normal" or "problematic." The agenda-setting model appeals to social scientists because it combines an emphasis on media power with an appreciation of the active role of the consumer (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1991; Neuman et al., 1992). We must be aware of the context in which consumers process information and entertainment, as well as the institutional context in which such items are created and produced (Safarstein, 1994; Bielby and Bielby, 1994). These considerations are crucial in the analysis of media presentations of current events.
All the News that Fits

It is often assumed that newspapers and newscasts present the news, that is, pure factual information. Most media researchers would disagree, as indicated in the titles of their work: Making News (Tuchman, 1978); Manufacturing the News (Fishman, 1980); Inventing Reality (Parenti, 1985); and Negotiating Control (1989). The basic theme of these studies is that the gathering and presentation of the news is shaped by the structural conditions under which reporters work and in which editors make decisions about what stories to cover and broadcast. The crucial questions are: Where are the cameras and reporters? Who are the sources? What are the deadlines? How can the material be made understandable to the public?

Each medium also has space and time limits: 22 1/2 minutes on the televised evening news; a fixed number of pages, depending on advertising revenues, for newspapers and magazines; and 3 to 5 minutes per hour of radio time. Stories must then be sifted and shaped to meet these constraints.

For example, of the thousands of events that take place throughout the world every minute, only a dozen or so will become that day’s “news.” Much depends on where the three or four major news services have their reporters and equipment. In addition, most national and international news comes to reporters in the form of handouts from carefully cultivated sources within governments. These items are passed along without critical commentary. When reporters become too critical, their “sources” dry up. Conversely, total dependence on official sources turns reporters into agents of the establishment, as seen in the Persian Gulf war, when the media acted more as cheerleaders than information gatherers (MacArthur, 1993). Iraqi bombs were called “weapons of terror;” while U.S. missiles were “marvels of technology,” striking only military targets. Iraq was a “dictatorship,” while the equally totalitarian governments of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were described as “moderate” (Solomon, 1991).

Thus, what finally emerges as the news is a negotiated reality, the end product of hundreds of decisions by reporters and editors concerning what is newsworthy, what people might want to know about, where the news crews are located, and what information has been given by sources (Protess et al., 1991). The editors, and especially the anchorman, then select the items that fill the available slots. Not only do the media set the agenda, but they also serve as the collective memory of the nation, selectively remembering, forgetting, and reconstructing the past (Schudson, 1992).

Framing. Once the story is selected, it must be placed in some frame of reference that makes it understandable to the public. Sports imagery is a common frame, such as when candidates are in a “horse race.” The words, tone, and placement of a story are important framing devices. Notice how stories about art and artists are invariably reported with a snicker and placed at the end of a telecast where the audience expects the amusing and trivial (Ryan and Sim, 1990).

Framing is also accomplished through the use of code words, such as when America’s enemies abroad are “terrorists” and our equally bloodthirsty allies are “freedom fighters.” Racial framing is especially important for its attribution of cause and effect. Heavy metal music, a basically white form, is dangerous on an individual level; black rap music is a serious threat to society as a whole (Blinder, 1995). White-collar crime is typically interpreted as a product of our society’s materialistic values; black street crime is a matter of personal pathology, committed by antisocial savages (Iyengar, 1991). We leave you to discover the common gender frames for reporting news.

Illustrations are powerful framing devices; even charts and graphs can be drawn to present a particular view of the data, as Ross Perot discovered to great effect (Orcutt and Turner, 1993). An interesting exercise would be to analyze all the illustrations in your favorite newsmagazine and ask yourself what messages the editors are trying convey. What cues are positive or negative?

Whose News? Is the news influenced by the social background and political biases of the largely white, middle-class, college-educated elite who own, manage, and staff the media? Conservatives complain of a liberal bias, and liberals claim that reporters are too respectful of powerful elites. Even if individual reporters and anchorpersons have a liberal bias, the media as a whole must be considered more conservative than not (Lotz, 1991). Often, ideological support for established institutions is very subtle, such as when striking workers in Communist Poland were described in glowing terms at the same time that striking American workers were dismissed as without legitimate grievances (Rachlin, 1986; Puette, 1992).

The great majority of American newspapers, owned by members of the economic upper strata, have consistently supported conservative candidates. Talk radio is dominated by extremely conservative voices from Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern to local call-in hosts who hear primarily from people who dislike feminists, immigrants, gays, minorities, and President and Mrs. Clinton (Berke, 1993c).

This debate, however, may be rendered meaningless as network news programs become less oriented toward journalism and more focused on entertainment gimmicks in order to win the “ratings” battle (a head count of consumers) and generate profit for their corporate owners (Greisman, 1987). "Infotain-
The media's coverage of sensational stories involving murder, sexual assaults, and rape is consumed in mass quantities, as witnessed by the dramatic popularity of numerous true life drama programs, such as "Rescue 911" and televised court proceedings. When O.J. Simpson, subsequently accused of murdering his ex-wife and her friend, fled from the L.A. police, 95 million Americans watched the low-speed freeway chase, and hundreds of fans made posters, ran out to the curb, and cheered him on. Why was this event covered by every major network when so many other stories are hardly noticed?

ment" programming has already replaced many of the time slots formerly devoted to in-depth reporting of social issues. For example, "A Current Affair," scheduled in prime time in many regions, is a very different news program from "Nightline," which airs late at night.

Even the national newscasts have increasingly come to resemble "Hard Copy." In 1994, for example, when the future of international peacekeeping was being decided in Bosnia and when our nation's health care system was being debated, the top news items concerned the marital problems of a couple named Lorena and John Wayne Bobbitt, the alleged sexual tendencies of singer Michael Jackson, an attack on an Olympic skater by a rival, the trials of a pair of wealthy teenagers who murdered their parents, and the live coverage by all major networks of pretrial hearings in the O.J. Simpson double-murder case. But this is apparently what the audience wants. When CNN—an all-news television network—cut away from the Bobbitt trial to cover a press conference by the President of the United States, the phone lines were jammed by complaining viewers (W. Goodman, 1994). And when all the networks cancelled their regular afternoon programs to cover the Los Angeles earthquake in 1994, viewers also took to the phone to protest the preempting of their favorite soap opera.

For the O. J. Simpson case, however, they remained glued to their sets during hours of slow questioning.

Nonetheless, the major networks retain some power to affect the public mood over historically significant events. Through their joint coverage of sacred moments, such as the funeral of a President, a royal wedding, or a visit by the Pope, they confer symbolic significance and allow ordinary citizens to participate in the great occasions (Dayan and Katz, 1992). The choice of what stories to cover or not to cover can have an impact on public policy. In 1992, heart-rending pictures of starving Somalis, shown night after night, appear to have changed American attitudes about intervening in that nation and forced the government to act. Yet in another part of Africa, the Sudan, millions of people were also starving to death, and no one at the United Nations suggested a relief mission. The difference was that there were no TV crews in the Sudan, hence there was no nightly reminder and therefore no pressure on political leaders (Goodman, 1992). If the camera does not see you, you are truly invisible.

POPULAR MUSIC

In this brief section we can only indicate the ways in which popular music—perhaps the aspect of the culture with which you are most familiar—illustrates the concepts discussed in this chapter. It is tempting to think of all forms of music and art as spontaneous expressions of one person's creative impulses. But items of culture, even those ultimately considered "classics" and thought to exist in a realm of timeless beauty, are produced in a particular context, at a particular time and place, within a circle of friends, audiences, gatekeepers, and critics (Subotnik, 1991; Shepard, 1991).

Popular music is possibly the art form most influenced by its context (Ennis, 1993). Rhythm and lyrics emerge from the immediate experience of composers and performers, reflecting subcultural differences, and speaking to both personal and public issues. Yet not every song is recorded, played on the air, or stocked in a music store. Sociologists are interested in the chain of events that transforms one person's inspiration into an object of the popular culture.

The Popular Music Industry

As with any industry, the product—a song, album, group, concert, or video—is packaged for profit making. Today, a few major conglomerates dominate the industry, with the eight top companies producing more than 95 of the top-selling records and albums in 1990 (Lopes, 1992). The conglomerate will own several recording studios, a number of radio and television stations that play the item, the com-
pany that distributes recordings and videotapes, a chain of music/video retail stores, as well as the talent agency that represents the artists and arranges concert tours. Many scholars feared that this level of industry concentration and the emphasis on bottom line profit would limit expressive freedom and lead to the same kind of homogenized product found on network television (Firth, 1987). Some evidence indicates that cooperation between record companies and radio stations ensures that a few numbers will be played until listeners "burn out," to be followed by another offering in a similar artistic style, or genre (Rothenbuhler, 1987).

More striking, however, is the enormous range of variation, specialized genres, and stylistic mixtures of contemporary popular music. In part this outcome is due to the record companies' openness to innovation and diversity, which in turn reflects the fragmentation of the music audience into specific markets (Lopes, 1992). From country to grunge and "gangsta" rap, with dozens of genres and subgenres in between, and with increasing numbers of minority and women artists, the pop music scene is a kaleidoscope, in which the elements are continually shaken up to produce new combinations. It is perhaps the perfect art form for the postmodern mentality, where nothing remains quite the same for long (Kaplan, 1987).

The Music Television Revolution. This diversity in popular music owes much to the emergence of MTV, where it is on display every moment of every day. Music television stations emerged in the 1980s as part of the expansion of cable broadcasting, which opened up the possibility of specialized markets. Unlike network television, with its limited number of broadcast bands, cable programming can be economically successful by targeting a relatively small segment of the audience and staying with it 24 hours. Today, over 60 percent of American households receive cable programming, with round-the-clock video music channels as part of the basic service.

Originally highly conservative in its presentation and choice of artists, MTV has become increasingly radical in terms of topics, range of performers, and willingness to tolerate controversial views. Certainly, nowhere else on television will suburban audiences be exposed to the realities of working-class and inner-city life, the positive strengths as well as deepest resentments of people rarely shown on mainstream TV except as objects of fear or ridicule (Rapping, 1994). In addition to the expected commercials for the music and other products, MTV now features relatively irreverent news programs, full-length coverage of charity concerts, and documentaries on racism and homophobia, often more probing than those offered on network TV.

At the same time, many of the songs and videos celebrate the supermacho, gay-bashing, women-hating boasting that strikes a responsive chord in its audience, primarily white working-class adolescents and young men painfully aware of their limited chances of upward mobility. MTV is also a world oriented to consumerism and immediate gratification, as befits a profit-making institution. In this sense, music television fully reflects a society in which even emotions of anger and protest can be turned into commodities, and working-class youth can be "cooled out" by the illusion of power.

Music as Protest

The origins of popular music in everyday experience make it a more immediate vehicle for protest than is the case for most other art forms. In American history, from "Yankee Doodle" to "We Shall Overcome," songs have expressed resistance to authority and hopes for change (Dunaway, 1987). The music of African Americans is especially illustrative, creating new sounds and rhythms to capture both the pain of slavery and the possibility of liberation, first in spirituals, then in soul, and now in rap.

In the early days of this century, the labor movement provided new words to traditional folk melodies: "Joe Hill," "Union Maid," and "Solidarity Forever" rallied the white working class. In the 1930s, anticapitalist and prounion messages were an integral part of the work songs and "field hollers" of the time.

Today's popular music is characterized by a wide range of musical styles and tastes that reflect the fragmentation of music audiences along class, race, gender, and age lines. Seattle has been home to a number of trend-setting musicians: Jimi Hendrix grew up there and, more recently, groups such as Smashing Pumpkins, Nine Inch Nails, and Pearl Jam (pictured here) have created the Seattle Grunge scene. Pearl Jam recently got into a battle with Ticketmaster, which they claim was charging their fans too much for tickets.
part of the Broadway musical theater. The songs of the Civil Rights Movement and antiracist movement of the 1960s followed this tradition, not only in the soulfulness of the sound and emotional longing of lyrics such as "Blowin’ in the Wind," but also in the belief that united efforts could change social policy (Garofalo, 1992).

In contrast, contemporary protest music emerges more as a howl of anger rather than an attempt to bring people together in the cause of profound social change. Punk, hard rock, heavy metal, and rap—all words that signify inflicting pain—test the limits of culturally permissible sound and lyrics. The sound is harsh, the words match, and middle-class adults react by "democratizing" the genre and trying to discredit the artists and their audience (Weinstein, 1992).

Heavy metal is the unique genre of white working class youth, lashing out in anger at the world that they know is hemming them in—"the Downward Spiral" of Nine Inch Nails or Pantera’s "Far Beyond Driven." The brute strength of the music itself, the names of the bands, and concert behaviors such as thrashing and "moshing" can be viewed as rituals of male bonding that momentarily empower the socially powerless (Weinstein, 1991; Walser, 1993). Attempts to contain the nastiness through a system of voluntary labeling have probably done more to increase sales than to raise consciousness.

The unique protest genre of urban African-American male teenagers is rap, or hip hop, combining the ghetto game of playing the dozen or "snapping" (increasingly exaggerated and boastful verbal contests) with the beat of punk and rock, and a touch of Caribbean rhythm. In the late 1980s, when groups like Run-D.M.C. were given air time, rap achieved crossover success, accepted by the white audiences who compose the vast majority of concert goers, record buyers, and MTV viewers.

Today, 1980s rap appears almost lyrical, as each successive group, in the ghetto tradition of snapping, tries to outdo the other in outrageousness. The blending of rap and heavy metal by Public Enemy, Ice-T, Ice Cube, and N.W.A. has tapped a vein of black anger that also resonates to the rage of white adolescents. But when black artists speak of killing police and politicians, along with the usual sexual abuse of women, the lyrics are taken very seriously by the white establishment, leading to efforts at censorship, boycotts, and legal charges. All of these reactions feed into the performers’ claims of "telling it like it is," to the vast discomfort of the authorities. Their largely white audience revels in a temporary high on power, the vicarious experience of rebellion, shooting police, and raping women (Wurtzel, 1992b). Public Enemy’s "Fight the Power" has achieved the status of a classic statement of revolutionary anger and romanticism (Berman, 1993). Even upwardly mobile African-American college students find affirmation of their experience in rap music, especially when it is condemned by white elites (Kuwahara, 1992).

The most recent version, "gangsta" rap, with its roots in the extremely violent world of Los Angeles gangs, openly extols random murder and raping, not of whites but of other inner-city residents. Record companies sign up performers named Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dog on the grounds of presenting authentic ghetto voices to the enlightenment of the rest of the nation, and the records go right to the top of the charts. It is difficult to believe that anything can top these lyrics in portraying aimless violence and deepest hatred of women, but between now and when you read this book, a new subgenre will undoubtedly appear.

Hardest of all to classify is the genre loosely labeled as alternative, built on the punk rock subculture of the 1970s, proudly outside the mainstream and fiercely independent of commercial sponsorship. But the big-time music world has a way of absorbing all types of sound and artists, so that many alternative groups find themselves taken over by professional managers, regulated by concert contracts, and exposed to all the rewards and agonies of fame, as illustrated by the history of Nirvana and the inability of Kurt Cobain to deal with this kind of success (Ross, 1994).

The Lollapalooza festival also walks a fine line between commercial success and distancing itself from the mainstream. One problem is that one summer’s "alternative" is next year’s big money-maker; the other major problem is that one must still make deals with commercial promoters to find locations, arrange for technical support, and sell tickets. At this writing, Pearl Jam is locked in battle with Ticketmaster over the price of admission to events over which the ticket company has exclusive selling rights. As with so much of contemporary popular culture, business interests and the bottom line intrude on even the most authentic artistic impulses. The 25th anniversary of the Woodstock Music Festival of 1969, which had been attended by a half-million rock fans, most of whom paid nothing for three days of entertainment (they overran the ticket gates), cost the 1994 attendees at least $135 for two days (through Ticketmaster, of course). Although largely attended by footloose college-agers out for a good, non-political time, Woodstock II also ended in rain, mud, confusion, and tons of garbage.

Women in Popular Music

The world of rock music has not been kind to women, either in how they are depicted in the lyrics or in opportunities to perform (Lewis, 1990; Groce and Cooper, 1990). Until very recently, the rock music scene has been the exclusive turf of men—as artists and writers, agents, promoters, disk and video jockeys, arrangers, and company executives. In addi-
tion to the routine sexism of any business sector, the particular elements of the music (the beat, loudness, pounding power, and risk-taking) are masculine in sound, a mode of expression thought automatically to exclude women, or at least those who still wished to be perceived as feminine.

In the early 1990s, however, female rock groups began to attract a concert audience, and a few have been picked up by the major recording studios. Some are openly feminist and angry, with a sound as loud and abrasive as the men's groups, and a clear message: "Don't mess with us." Riot Grrrls, L7, Hole, and Liz Phair are not afraid to appear un feminine even as they explore the female experience. Interestingly, in spite of the openly feminist politics of many of the new groups, women in rock continue to be referred to and to call themselves "girls" (Wurtzel, 1992a). Their challenge to the sexist traditions of the field will depend on audience support. Are enough adolescent men willing to cross over in terms of sex as well as race? Are younger American women willing to appear so angry and indestructible?

The built-in dilemma of women in rock is that the very nature of the genre—reveling in open sexual-ity—turns performers into sex objects, which is precisely what the feminist artists are rebelling against (Powers, 1993a).

This dilemma is played out most clearly in music videos featuring girl groups, primarily African American, whose on-camera appearance and gestures are extremely provocative, yet who sing about female control over their sexuality and the men they chose to please them (Leland, 1994). The rap singer Queen Latifah is especially concerned about telling young black women that they aren't bitches or whores but are worthy of self-respect and the respect of men—not an easy task in the face of the enormous appeal of the gangsta rappers.

OTHER GENRES. Other music genres have been much more receptive to women artists than has rock. Country music and blues, in particular, with their softer sound and romantic themes, are naturals for women singing of unrequited love. No matter how badly he's treated her, she's lonely when he's gone and she would prefer to be mistreated than to be without him. Because of its origins in the world view of white rural folk in the most conservative parts of the nation, country music has been highly supportive of traditional views of gender, politics, sexual orientation, and religious faith.

But even here, the times are changing. Gender stereotypes are being revised, with the women more assertive and the men less macho than in the past. When superstar Garth Brooks sings about being free to love anyone we choose and to worship from a variety of pews, something new is being added to the usual mix of patriotism and piety (Altman, 1993).

These newer trends may also liberate country music from its obsession with marital problems, alcoholism, and alienation from work—all of which are associated with family violence and self-destructiveness. As reported in one study, the more airtime devoted to country music in the listening area, the higher the suicide rate for whites, regardless of the area's rates of divorce, poverty, gun ownership, or location in the South (Stack and Gundlach, 1992).

The importance of the female audience is also evident in the recent revival of the New Wave music of the late 1970s and early 1980s: Duran Duran, Cyndi Lauper, and the B-52s are back. Appealing to girls and women who would prefer not to be beaten and dismembered, as well as others not moved by rock and rap, the old-New Wave sounds are a welcome relief to listeners who have felt somewhat marginal to the pop music scene (Powers, 1993b).

As this brief overview suggests, the sociological analysis of popular music can illuminate the world of creators and consumers and tell us something about the public mood and about race and gender in our contemporary America. Can you apply this model to the form and content of the music that most appeals to you and your friends?