Perspectives and Issues in Mass Media

Before You Read

Main Idea
The three sociological perspectives differ in how they view the purpose of mass media. Sociologists are concerned with the media's impact on social and civic life and on public opinion.

Reading Focus
1. How do the sociological perspectives of mass media differ?
2. What are some contemporary mass-media issues?

Vocabulary
knowledge-gap hypothesis
digital divide
social capital
spiral of silence
agenda setting
gatekeepers
opinion leaders

TAKING NOTES Use a graphic organizer like this one to take notes on sociological perspectives on and major issues in mass media.

Mass Media	
Perspectives	Issues

First on the Scene

SOCIOLOGY CLOSE UP

Can anyone report the news?
New communication technology is changing the way the news is reported and viewed. Ordinary people—everyone from high school students to retired army generals—have taken to the streets to provide their take on the news. Some use camera phones to capture events. They then post their photographs and videos to Web sites such as Flickr and YouTube. Other "citizen journalists," armed with laptop computers, post reports on events as they happen to weblogs, or online journals.

These photographs, videos, and weblogs can be viewed by anyone with Internet access. In addition, e-mails, text messages, and links on other Web sites can

draw thousands of viewers in a matter of minutes. Total viewership of some of these postings often exceeds the audience that most national television newscasts can expect.

This "we" journalism, or moblogging (the first syllable is pronounced MOH, as in *mobile*), is in the early stages of development, and many people wonder if it will have a lasting effect on journalism. The major media companies certainly have taken notice. Television news programs often lead off reports on breaking events with photographs, videos, or eyewitness accounts provided by citizen journalists. Also, some media outlets have set up their own Web sites, both visual and written word, to report the news as it happens. ■

Sociological Perspectives on Mass Media

What purpose do mass media fulfill? Different sociological perspectives have contrasting views on this question. The functionalist perspective focuses on the ways in which mass media help to preserve social stability. The conflict perspective focuses on how mass media reinforce the existing social order. The interactionist perspective looks at the impact of mass media on social interaction.

Functionalist Perspective Functionalists believe that the mass media perform functions that support the stability and smooth operation of society. These functions include keeping track of what is happening in the world, interpreting information, transmitting cultural values, and entertaining people.

Who's on Television? Media critics have challenged producers and directors to be more aware of diversity when casting television programs. A recent study shows that the racial and ethnic breakdown of television and drama roles is as follows:

72.3% White

14.5% African American

6.3% Hispanic

3.4% Asian/Pacific Islander

0.2% Native American

3.3% Unknown or Other Race

Skills Focus INTERPRETING DATA How might a conflict theorist use these statistics to argue that the media reinforce social inequality?

Source: Screen Actors Guild, 2007

To be productive members of society, people need to know what is going on around them. Through e-mail, text messages, and instant messages, family members and friends can let each other know what is happening in their lives. Newspapers, magazines, and news programs on television, radio, and the Internet keep people informed of local, national, and world events. In addition to providing information, the media also interpret it. Movies, television, and books—both fictional and factual—try to explain why events happen. Editorials and commentaries in the news media also discuss the importance and meaning of recent developments.

Mass media influence socialization. Some media, such as school textbooks, make a conscious effort to pass on society's basic values and beliefs. Other media transmit culture inadvertently. For example, the stated purpose of a television police drama may be to entertain. However, it may also remind viewers that the United States is a society of laws.

Entertainment is probably the most obvious function of mass media. The majority of TV channels and radio formats are designed to entertain rather than to inform. The same is true of movies. Most people go to the movies for entertainment, not for information.

Conflict Perspective Conflict sociologists believe that the purpose of social institutions is to maintain the present social order. Some conflict theorists believe that the role of mass media is to persuade people to accept the existing power structure. The media can accomplish this goal, these sociologists assert, because they are able to control the flow and interpretation of information. In other words, the media can decide what information is provided and how it is presented. Because the media are owned by members of the power elite, conflict sociologists argue, this information and its presentation represent the power elite's point of view.

Other conflict sociologists believe that mass media in the United States encourage the acceptance of the power structure by encouraging a culture of consumerism. According to this theory, if people are busy increasing their collection of material possessions, they have no time to think about society's inequalities.

Certain conflict sociologists suggest that the knowledge gap provides an example of how the media maintain social inequality. The **knowledge-gap hypothesis,** first advanced by Phillip Tichenor, George Donohue, and Clarice Olien, states that as new information enters society, wealthy and better-educated members acquire it at a faster rate than poor and less educated people. Therefore, a gap in knowledge widens between these two segments of society. This gap develops even if access to information is equal.

Studies show that a **digital divide**—the gap between those with access to new technologies and those without—exists and may be widening. Access to computers and online media is of particular concern. The groups that lack access include minorities, the children of single mothers, and people with lower incomes and less education. Steps are being taken to close this digital divide, most notably by providing schools with computers and Internet connections. However, such actions may not help to narrow the knowledge gap. Some studies indicate that the "information rich"—those who have better information skills and more resources—are likely to benefit more from greater access to the new technology than are the "information poor."

Some conflict theorists suggest that the misrepresentation and nonrepresentation of minorities in the media reinforce social inequality. Several studies of the print media have found that coverage of minorities is limited. One found that in day-to-day coverage, the mainstream media have few stories about minorities, except stories involving crime, sports, or entertainment. Some of these stories contain stereotypes and biased reporting.

Studies of the entertainment media have made similar findings. A review of prime-time television and movies in 2007 found that women, Hispanics, Asian Americans, low-income wage earners, senior citizens, and people with disabilities were all underrepresented. Also, where minorities are cast, they usually play minor roles. Some sociologists are concerned that the absence of minorities from the media may encourage minority children to be less ambitious and expect less from life. Others argue that stereotypical coverage of minorities may encourage white Americans to view minorities negatively.

Perspectives on Mass Media

Functionalist Perspective The mass media support social stability by keeping track of what is happening in the world, interpreting information, transmitting cultural values, and providing entertainment.

Conflict Perspective The mass media maintain the present power structure and reinforce social inequalities by controlling the flow and interpretation of information.

Interactionist Perspective The mass media have a major impact on social interaction. Some interactionists feel that the mass media create social isolation, while others suggest that the mass media help to create new social networks.

Attention to this issue has begun to have an effect. Organizations such as the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) have pushed for an increase in the presence of minorities in positive television and movie roles.

Interactionist Perspective Interactionist sociologists are interested in how mass media shape everyday social interaction. As you read earlier, most Americans spend several hours a day using media. So, considerable opportunity exists for this shaping to take place.

Some interactionists point out that people often plan social events around the media. For example, families and groups of friends may gather to watch a major television program such as the Super Bowl, coverage of an election, or the season-ending episode of a drama or situation comedy. Watching television, then, becomes almost a primary-group activity. Other interactionists, however, characterize watching television as essentially a solitary activity that encourages social isolation.

The Internet has also produced conflicting views among interactionists. Some see the Internet, with its chat rooms and social networking Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace, as an avenue of new, creative, and exciting forms of social interaction.

Further, they add, the multitude of Web sites on the Internet enables people to find information about practically any subject. This tends to broaden people's outlook and shapes how they interact with the world.

Other interactionists see the Internet in completely opposite terms. Internet-based social networks, they point out, are virtual, not real. No face-to-face interaction takes place. Reliance on these new forms of interaction, they suggest, is a sign of social isolation, not connectedness. They add that the Internet does not necessarily broaden people's horizons. On the social-networking sites, people tend to choose others just like themselves as "friends." Also, people are able to control what they see on the Internet, so they can avoid anything that differs from their point of view. Rather than broaden people's outlook, the Internet may underscore long-held prejudices.

Reading Check **Contrast** How do the three perspectives differ in how they view mass media?

Contemporary Mass-Media Issues

One of the major topics covered by mass media is the media themselves. Stories abound on the relationships between the media and a host of social issues—everything from teen suicide to the breakup of the family. Media critics have focused on the effect that the media have on children, the way the media affect civic life, and the power that the media wield.
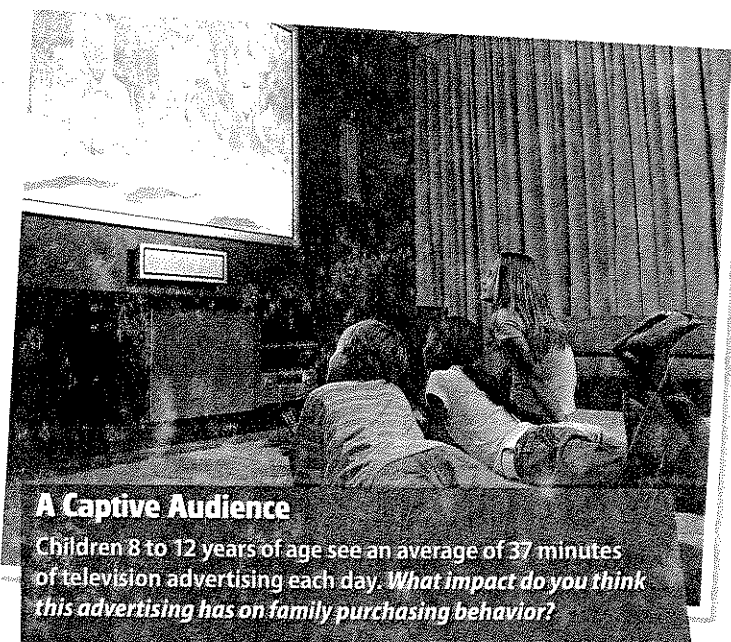
A Captive Audience
Children 8 to 12 years of age see an average of 37 minutes of television advertising each day. *What impact do you think this advertising has on family purchasing behavior?*

Mass Media and Children Most children spend many hours each week watching television. It is the primary after-school activity for most students. Social scientists and the general public have a strong interest in how television affects children. One area of concern is the connection between television violence and aggressive behavior among young people. Dozens of studies have been conducted on this subject over the years. The findings of these studies include the following:

- Television depicts a great deal of violence.
- Television violence encourages viewers to act in aggressive ways and to see aggression as a valid way to solve problems.
- Television violence encourages viewers to be less sensitive to the suffering of others.
- Television violence appears to make viewers fearful of the world around them and less trustful of others.

During the 1990s the U.S. government and the American public began to pressure the television industry to do something about violent programming. In response, television networks established a rating system in 1997. The ratings provide parents with information about the content and age appropriateness of programs. In addition, the Telecommunications Act, enacted by Congress in 1996, requires all new televisions to have a V-chip. This V-chip allows the viewer to block reception of unwanted programming.

Another area of concern is the relationship between television and performance at school. A study of fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-graders found a link between the amount of time spent watching television and test scores. Students who watched five or more hours per day of television scored lower than students who watched very little. Exactly what this link means is unclear. It may indicate that heavy television watching contributes to poor performance at school, or it may simply show that students who perform poorly in school watch a lot of television.

Regardless of the medium children use— magazines, radio, television, or the Internet— they are bombarded by advertisements. The average 8 to 12-year-old sees more than 30,000 commercials each year on television alone.

Businesses spend about $15 billion on advertising directly targeted at children. This figure is of great concern to many people who believe that children are a vulnerable audience. In other words, children do not have the information or skills to make objective decisions about advertisements, particularly those children who watch a lot of television, because they accept advertising claims more readily. In addition, many younger children cannot distinguish between advertisements and regular programming. Advertisers have been requested to take more care when developing commercials targeted at children. For example, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 encouraged advertisers to use a rating system similar to that used by the television networks.

Mass Media and Civic and Social Life In his book *Bowling Alone* political scientist Robert Putnam argues that since the 1960s Americans have become more and more disconnected from civic and social life. To illustrate this disengagement, Putnam offers an array of statistics. Voting and participation in political activities have fallen over the years. Membership in civic organizations such as the PTA has declined. So, too, has church attendance. In addition, people are entertaining family and friends less often than in the past. Putnam argues that this disengagement has resulted in a decline in the country's social capital. In essence, **social capital** refers to everything that makes up a community. It includes the social networks and the reciprocal norms associated with these networks that encourage people to do things for each other. Social capital includes everything from the civic, social, and religious organizations to which people belong to the friendship networks people develop through their neighborhoods, schools, and sports teams.

Putnam attributes a large part of the decline in social capital—perhaps as much as 25 percent—to television. He points out that television is everywhere. Practically every household in the country has a television set, and most have at least two. Americans spend a lot of time in front of these sets, perhaps as much as 50 percent of their free time. Watching television is the favorite nighttime activity of the vast majority of adult Americans, often

Bowling Alone
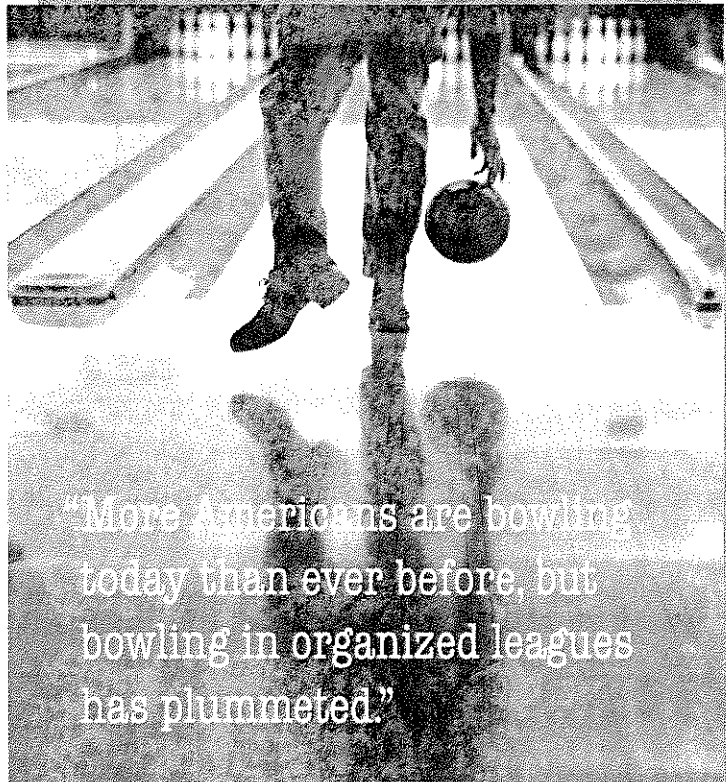
"More Americans are bowling today than ever before, but bowling in organized leagues has plummeted."

Robert Putnam uses these words to frame his argument that Americans are increasingly disengaged from social life. Bowling alone, he suggests, is a kind of informal social connectedness that lacks organization and purpose. However, the bowling league, with its rules, regulations, and diverse membership, represents a form of social capital—in other words, a community. *Do you think the decline of bowling leagues is a good measure of social disengagement? Why or why not?*

at the expense of social activities outside the home. As a consequence, television privatizes people's leisure time. Putnam suggests that television watchers tend to be loners, not joiners. The more television people watch, the less likely they are to participate in civic and social activities.

Several studies suggest that the Internet may also encourage disengagement from civic and social life. A two-year study of 169 Internet users found that the more time people spent online, the less face-to-face interaction they had with family members and friends. Another survey of more than 4,000 Internet users produced similar results.

Some recent studies, however, have challenged these findings. A 2008 report noted that 45 percent of users said that the Internet was an important way for them to maintain social relationships. The report also found that Internet users spend more time than nonusers in face-to-face interaction with family and friends. The true impact of the Internet on social life, then, remains in question.

The Power of the Media One major criticism of the news media is that they wield too much power. A poll taken in 2008 found that nearly 75 percent of the American population believes that the news media have too much power and influence in politics. Observers of the media who agree often cite two examples of news-media power—the spiral of silence and agenda setting.

Sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann suggests that the media are incredibly powerful sources of information that can shape public opinion. She points out that the different forms of news media tend to cover the same stories, often bombarding the public with the same information and the same opinions on these stories. As more and more people accept these opinions, people who disagree are less likely to voice their views. Noelle-Neumann believes that this **spiral of silence** gives the media even more power to influence the way people think.

Other sociologists suggest that the news media do not tell the public what to think but what to think about. They argue that the media set the boundaries of public debate by deciding which issues will receive coverage and which will not, a process known as **agenda setting.** Agenda setting is undertaken by **gatekeepers**—media executives, editors, or reporters who can open or close the "gate" on a particular news story.

However, many people believe that the power of the media is greatly overstated. Some people point out that there are simply too many news outlets for the media to effectively control the flow of information. The public will always be able to find alternative news sources. Others suggest that messages from the media do not directly influence behavior or opinions. Rather, this influence takes place through a multistep flow of communication. The messages are first reviewed and evaluated by **opinion leaders**—respected individuals in the community—who then pass on the information to friends and acquaintances. Still other media watchers note the growth of citizen journalists—people with no ties to the media who share their views of the news, usually on the Internet. Nonetheless, mass media, whatever their real power is, play a large role in American society.

Reading Check **Summarize** What issues have been of concern to media critics in recent years?


Online Quiz THINK central thinkcentral.com

Reviewing Main Ideas and Vocabulary

1. **Define** What is the knowledge-gap hypothesis?

2. **Identify** According to Robert Putnam, what are the major components of social capital?

3. **Explain** What role do gatekeepers play in the process of agenda setting?

Thinking Critically

4. **Support a Position** Which perspective is the most useful in analyzing the social impact of mass media? Why?

5. **Make Judgments** What impact do you think the rise of citizen journalists will have on the way that the media report the news? Give reasons for your answer.

6. **Summarize** Using your notes and a graphic organizer like the one here, select one of the mass-media issues and describe how each sociological perspective might view it.

Media Issue
Functionalist
Interactionist
Conflict
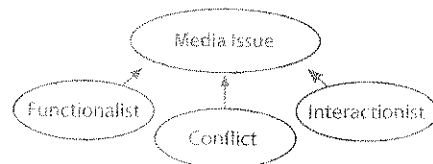
FOCUS ON WRITING

7. **Expository** Write two paragraphs explaining how you think new communication technologies have changed individual and societal behavior. In writing your paragraphs, consider how societal norms and values have changed because of these new technologies.