

INTRODUCTION

The pervasiveness of media at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the controversial question of the role of media in shaping today's world point to the need for an accurate historical perspective on media and society. Here, as in all other aspects of human experience, the benefits of historical understanding include an awareness of alternatives (a reminder "that the choices open to us are often more varied than we might have supposed" if we were to focus exclusively on the present situation); the exposure of myths – of misleading and sometimes dangerous beliefs based on a distorted view of the past; and a clear appreciation of "what is enduring and what is ephemeral in our present circumstances."¹ Discussion of the role of the media in society has too often been characterized by assumptions that present-day media arrangements are somehow natural and unavoidable, by too limited an awareness of the range of possibilities for media structure, content, and influence, and by questionable and erroneous ideas about the "lessons" of media history.

In the last two decades a burgeoning scholarly literature has provided the basis for a sound historical perspective on media and society. It is true, as Kevin Williams has observed in a fine recent survey of the history of mass communications in Britain, that the "historical development of the mass media, and how media forms and representations have changed over time, have been traditionally of less interest in the growing amount of research, writing and musing on the mass media and modern society and culture."² Nonetheless, there is now a substantial body of works on aspects of media history, with newspapers, the film industry, radio, television, advertising, and propaganda the subjects of first-rate works by historians and other scholars. Yet with the exception of Ken Ward's 13-year-old *Mass*

Communications and the Modern World,³ we have lacked a survey that brings together the findings of specialized research on media history in a number of countries, attempts to make sense of developments over the whole course of the twentieth century, and provides an introduction for readers unfamiliar with the field. This book is designed to meet that need. As a successor to Ward, it draws on the considerable body of historical writing on media published since 1989, as well as providing historical perspective on the rapid and extensive developments in media and communications since the 1980s.

The book begins with the emergence of the mass press in the late nineteenth century and ends with media and globalization in the early twenty-first century. Within that broad framework it takes up various themes. These include the importance of the context – political, social, cultural, economic – in which mass media have developed and been adopted; the interaction between technological and social change; the relationships between media institutions and the state; and the interrelationships of different media. Our main focus is on the development of newspapers, film, radio, television, and the new media that arose at the end of the century; on their use for purposes of information, persuasion, and entertainment; and on their cultural and political impact. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine the emergence and development of the three main mass media before World War II. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 deal with the use of media for purposes of economic and political persuasion through advertising and propaganda. The post-1945 history of television and older media is the subject of chapters 8 and 9. Chapters 10, 11, and 12 are concerned with crucial late twentieth-century developments concerning the role of media in war and international relations, the rise of new media, and globalization. The study does not claim to be comprehensive. Limits on length have not allowed a fuller treatment of magazines and book publishing, or of links between media and the popular music industry, for example. We hope nonetheless that the final choice of media to be covered and themes to be pursued satisfies readers in relation to the dominant mass media and the major issues that have arisen concerning their role in society.

The study is comparative as well as historical: it is based on the firm conviction that an understanding of media and society requires not only an analysis of change over time but a comparison of the experience of different societies. Evidence is presented from a range of countries, but particular attention is given to the United States and the United Kingdom. Limitations of space partly account for this emphasis, but it is justified also by the global influence of US and British media developments and by the fact that most work in the field has concerned these two societies.

The role of the media in society has been contentious since the beginning of the mass-circulation press and the film industry in the 1890s. It is a controversy that has been evident both in popular discussion and in various theoretical approaches that have emerged. These provide a backdrop to this work. “Mass society” approaches have been especially influential. The term “mass” gained currency just as communication possibilities were expanding rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century. As Williams notes, “The history of mass communication is in one sense a history of the fear of the masses . . . [who became] increasingly visible with the growth of the media and communication industries.”⁴ The concept of a “mass society” created by the products of the mass media was part of the pessimistic assessment of the impact of industrialization that developed early in the twentieth century. This approach dominated critical thinking for a long time. Writers such as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis drew negative conclusions about the effects of mass media. They distinguished high from low culture, considered “packaged” popular culture inferior, and deplored the undermining of individual cultural experience by media products.⁵

Members of the Marxist “Frankfurt school,” including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse (who left Nazi Germany for the United States in the 1930s), developed another version of mass society theory in their efforts to explain why capitalism had survived. Extending Marx’s theory, which he had developed before the advent of mass communications, they suggested that the mass media had encouraged the working class to be passive, thereby diminishing the likelihood of proletarian revolution to overthrow capitalism. According to this view, capitalist society maintained social control and cohesion through ideology; the culture industry reproduced the values necessary to maintain capitalist society; and the mass media made people passive recipients of the dominant ideology.

There have been other variants of this “ideological control” thesis, which depict media messages or particular media as supporting those in power and subordinating working people. Thus television is portrayed as a tool of capitalism, a means of maintaining ideological control. It gives a false view of reality, makes viewers unquestioningly accept existing social conditions; its programs reduce critical consciousness and encourage hypnotic passivity. Louis Althusser and other theorists developed these views in the 1960s, arguing that the maintenance of capitalism depended on manipulation of the ruling ideology so that workers would submit to it.

Questions about the relative importance of “mass culture,” of the influences that shape the products of mass media, and of the impact of media messages – whether associated with political ideology or with the values

and aspirations of consumer culture – remain very relevant. An opposing view of the media has also been influential: the idea that they are important in ensuring freedom and democratic rights, and in providing channels for popular participation. This was especially influential in relation to newspapers as they developed on a mass scale. The press was seen as “the fourth estate,” playing a watchdog role as a check on government. Similar views feature in contemporary discussion of the potential of new media, such as the Internet, to offer citizens means of active participation and unrestrained access to information.

This study advocates a skeptical view of extreme conceptualizations of the role of mass media – either as means of social control, or as ensuring democratic freedoms. The emphasis here is on the need to examine the broad range of factors that influence both the particular medium and its role in society during a specific period. The corollary of this is that relations between media and society do not remain static. This is pertinent not only to discussion of new media, when technological change has facilitated rapid developments, but to the entire period studied here.