

UNIT 19

The Mass Media

Unit Contents

The Functional and Dysfunctional Media
Becoming a Critical Consumer of Media

The world without the media—without television, newspapers, and the Internet, for example—would be unrecognizable. It would be a world without celebrities, without daily drama, without instant access to what is going on in the stock market, in the world of entertainment, and in trouble spots throughout the world. In this unit you'll learn

- ▶ how the media work
- ▶ how you can become a more critical consumer of the media

Throughout *Human Communication: The Basic Course*, Media Watch boxes identify some of the most salient aspects of mass communication and relate these to the study of other aspects of interpersonal, small group, and public communication. In this unit we look more specifically at the mass media and especially at the positive and negative functions the media serve, what you can do to become a more critical consumer, and how you can be a force for moving the media in more positive directions.

Before beginning this discussion take the following self-test to identify some of what you know and may not know about how the media function.



TEST YOURSELF

What Do You Know about the Media?

Record T (true) if you think the statement is always or usually true and F (false) if you think the statement is always or usually false.

- ___ 1. Heavy television viewers and people who watch little television do not differ in the way in which they see the world.
- ___ 2. People can easily be persuaded directly by the media.
- ___ 3. Newspapers are still the primary means for people to get the national and local news.
- ___ 4. The more a person becomes informed about what is happening in the world, the more actively he or she will participate in society.
- ___ 5. Although television tries to make its characters appear realistic, viewers know quite clearly where reality begins and illusion ends.
- ___ 6. We listen most to and are persuaded most by people who are most like us.

How did you do? Generally, most media theorists and researchers would claim that all six statements are false.

Some reasons why the statements are false: (1) As we see in the Unit 4 Media Watch box on cultivation theory, heavy television viewers are more likely to see the world as television presents it rather than as it really is. (2) People are persuaded through numerous different channels; interpersonal, group, and public messages interact with the media's messages to produce eventual persuasion. (3) Television and, increasingly, the Internet provide people with the information they used to get from newspapers, which are still influential but not the primary means for securing information. (4) As explained in the discussion that follows, the media may actually lull people into believing that knowing about something is equivalent to doing something about it; as a result, people often feel that because they now know what is going on, they have done something about it. (5) As explained in the Unit 10 Media Watch box on *parasocial relationships*, people often do not make the distinction between television and reality that on the surface seems so obvious. (6) Actually, people seem most persuaded by those who possess the characteristics that they wish they had. If you look closely at the media, you'll see that the most influential people—people such as Barbara Walters, Dan Rather, and even the popular talk show hosts—are richer than we are and generally appear better informed.

What will you do? The best immediate preparation is to become more knowledgeable about how the media work. The text's Media Watch boxes and this unit are just the beginning. Commit yourself to learning more about the mass media, how they work, and how they can influence you. ✓

THE FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL MEDIA

As with all forms of communication, the messages from the media have effects on readers, listeners, and viewers. As shown in the Unit 14 Media Watch feature on diffusion of innovations theory, not everyone is influenced at the same time or to the same degree; some people are innovators and some are diehards, for example. An early theory,

called the one-step theory of media influence, argued that the influence of the media was direct and immediate: It occurred in one step—from the media to you. You read a newspaper or watch television and are persuaded by what they say. A variant of this theory, called the silver bullet theory of media influence, holds that the media work like bullets aimed at a target. If the gun is loaded correctly and aimed accurately, the bullet will penetrate the target (Schramm & Porter, 1982). Notice that in these views of media effects, the audience is relatively passive; the audience is a target that cannot resist being penetrated.

A more sophisticated explanation is the two-step theory of media influence. In this view the media influence opinion leaders (step one), and these opinion leaders then influence the rest of the people (step two).

A still more complicated approach, the multistep theory of media influence, claims that media interact with interpersonal channels. So, for example, the media might influence certain people and these people might interact with others, who then would attend to the media themselves as well as interact with other people, and on and on. The influence is viewed as a product of all these influences from the media and from interpersonal interactions.

You can view the mass media as serving five basic functions: to help, to play, to relate, to inform, and to influence. You may wish to read the following material in connection with the uses and gratifications theory discussed in the Unit 2 Media Watch box.

To Help

The media help you in hundreds of ways every day. It is through the media that you learn what the weather will be so you can decide how to dress and what to pack for your weekend trip. The media help you locate the traffic trouble spots and the alternate routes that will get you to work earlier and with less hassle. The media help you maintain your health and physical fitness by telling you about the newest advances in medicine and health maintenance—the values of the Mediterranean diet, the dangers of cholesterol, and the proper way to treat everything from acne to back pain. The media help you find ways to preserve your rights as a tenant, as a consumer, and as a worker. The media also help you look your best (for example, by presenting the latest

hair and clothing styles in fashion magazines and on television personalities you see every morning) and actualize your potential (by offering advice in a vast array of self-help books and websites, advice columns, and televised interviews with medical, psychological, and communication experts).

At the same time that this help is so easy to come by, it's important to realize that much of this media "help" is often not very helpful. For example, the relationship advice Sally Jessy Raphael, Montel Williams, or Jerry Springer gives to a battling family may sound reasonable, but it may not work very well when you try to apply the same insights to your own family problems. The 60-second medical report may leave out information that is crucial for you to know before taking the herbal remedy or starting the new exercise program. In fact, one summary of research on accuracy in media reports on medical studies found that such reports were sensationalized, had key information omitted, and were often contradicted by reports in other media (Aix & Aix, 1992).

Similarly, advice columnists present advice without knowing even a modicum of information about who you are, what difficulties you may be experiencing, and what you really need. And of course the astrology columns and the psychic hotlines that purport to help you make decisions about work, money, and relationships, though presented as scientifically sound, are totally without research support. Newsgroups and chat groups dealing with health issues are proliferating across the Internet, though their actual value in helping people has been neither demonstrated nor refuted (Lebow, 1998; Cassell, Jackson, & Chevront, 1998).

Realize, too, that the mass media's primary function is to make money and that they do this by selling your attention to advertisers. The more you tune in to a commercial TV channel or radio station, for example, the higher the price these media can charge their advertisers. So the media will present what you will attend to, not necessarily what will help you deal with your problems or improve your life—even though networks and publications may present their programs or articles as if helping you were their one and only goal.

Because the media function to make money, at least in a capitalist society, they cater to majority tastes. Not unlike the "bread and circuses" argument that underlay the shows at the Roman Colosseum—give the people food and spectacle and

you'll be able to keep them happy and control them—the aim of today's mass media is to give the audience what it wants. The problem this creates is that the steady diet of soap opera romance that keeps the afternoon viewer tuned in long enough to hear the commercial may not do much to promote meaningful interpersonal relationships. The beautiful people who inhabit the soap operas are a far cry from the average person that we meet and interact with every day; by comparison, real life and real people look pretty pale and uninteresting, setting up a general dissatisfaction with our own life and relationship partners.

To Play

The media also serve the play function; they entertain. On television there are soap operas, situation comedies and dramas, game shows, sports, and “reality” programming; there are interactive Internet games, crossword puzzles, magazine features, comic strips, comic books. All function to entertain you, to provide you with a break from work.

The entertainment offered by the media is so engaging and so interesting that it can easily lure people away from the realities of work and interpersonal responsibilities. One of the major problems faced by businesses today is that workers spend an inordinate amount of time surfing the Web and sending personal e-mail to friends and relatives—time that technically is supposed to be devoted to work. The same is true of college students, who may go to the library prepared to look up information for a history paper but then get diverted into humor websites and sometimes pornography. This situation has become so prevalent that many college libraries are installing surveillance programs to monitor this type of Internet access.

To Relate, to Create Ties of Union

In much the same way that interpersonal and small group interactions enable you to feel *ties of union*—a sense of belonging to some larger whole, to a group—so do the media. Consider the lone television viewer, sitting in his or her apartment watching television while eating a TV dinner. The television programs make this lone soul feel a part of some larger group—for example, of the soap opera family, the fans at the stadium, or the contestants on the quiz show. The shy individual who

spends hour after hour in chat rooms does in fact connect with others and develops a wide circle of people with whom to interact, of whom to ask questions, and from whom to seek advice.

The media, however, also establish the opposite of ties of union and relationships—namely, *privatization*, or individuals' tendency to retreat from social groups into a world of their own. The tremendous quantities of information almost forced on us by the media can overwhelm us and make us feel inadequate. Intense reports on wars, disasters, inflation, crime, and unemployment make some people feel so helpless that they retreat into their own private worlds. In many cases privatization takes the form of excessive focus on trivial issues—such as which pair of designer jeans to buy or what restaurant to visit.

Currently there is considerable debate but little conclusive evidence over whether communication via the Internet helps the individual to develop more and better interpersonal relationships or actually prevents such development. This is an issue that we explored in Unit 10 but is one to be kept in mind as we think of both the positive and the negative functions of the media.

And, mentioned in the self-test earlier, the media can encourage viewers to develop *parasocial relationships* with media personalities—and even with dramatic characters on soap operas, sitcoms, and dramas (see the Media Watch box in Unit 10). And this, as has been noted, can both help and hinder the individual.

On first appearance it might appear that people become stars or celebrities and the media then highlight them. And that is probably partly true. But what is equally or perhaps even more true is that the media create celebrity. Think back in history, for example, about the celebrity enjoyed by Elvis Presley or the Beatles. Before these performers appeared on television, they were minor stars; after television they became megastars and cultural icons. By the same token, the cover of *People* magazine highlights the star status of some individual—but also enlarges and increases the status of the star, often turning a minor celebrity into a major one.

To Inform

Most of the information you acquire comes not from school but from the media. You learn about music, politics, film, art, sociology, psychology,

economics, and a host of other subjects from the media. You learn about other places and other times from seeing a good movie as well as from reading a history textbook. You may read about the principles of effective interviewing in a book such as this or on the Internet, but you regularly see on television actual examples of effective and ineffective interviews that may well influence your own interviewing more than any textbook unit.

As you think about the information function of the media, recall that information is expensive; that access to the Internet, cable television, and sophisticated print sources costs money; and that not everyone has equal access (see the Unit 17 Media Watch discussion of the “knowledge gap hypothesis”). Also, as pointed out in the discussion of gatekeepers in the Unit 15 Media Watch, media information passes through a variety of people who may exclude certain parts of it, add editorial comment, or combine it with additional information.

The media also inform you as to who counts and what matters; the media confer status. Your personal list of the 100 most important people in the world would almost certainly consist of people to whom the media give a great deal of exposure. Without such exposure the people would not in fact be important—at least not in the popular mind. “If you really matter,” note media theorists Lazarsfeld and Merton (1951), “you will be the focus of mass attention and, if you are at the focus of mass attention, then surely you must really matter.” Conversely, of course, if you do not get mass attention, then you do not matter. Even the name brand clothing you buy has had status conferred on it, and that is why many people are willing to spend more money for a product if it has a high-status name (see the Unit 8 Media Watch box on “legible clothing”).

In short, as noted in the discussion of *agenda-setting* theory in the Unit 12 Media Watch box, the media establish our agenda. The media tell us what is and what is not important; they tell us what we should and what we should not pay attention to. And so, for example, CBS tells us that we should pay attention to what’s happening on *Survivor* because this benefits CBS, not because the outcome of the show is important to your health, financial status, or education.

One of the most interesting and most overlooked aspects of the media’s informative function is what has been called the *narcotizing function*: the fact that when the media provide information

about something, the receiver believes in some way that some action has been taken. As a result, the viewer is drugged into inactivity as if under the influence of a narcotic. The viewer comes to confuse knowing about problems with doing something about the problems (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1951).

Increasingly the mass media have blurred the distinction between information and persuasion, between fact and inference, between reportage and editorializing, between news and advertising. It is commonplace today to hear TV newscasters “report” stories that function only to advertise their network’s upcoming shows. Thus, “news” of players on *Survivor* is frequently made a part of the “news” shows in an attempt to gain a wider audience for the network. The news shows broadcast before the late-night talk shows announce the guests scheduled to appear with Jay Leno or David Letterman as if this information were on the same level as the fire in New Jersey or the President’s speech. Even in newspapers and magazines, you’ll find advertisements styled and laid out like editorials or news stories; although the word *advertisement* appears in small print at the top of the page, advertisers know that readers don’t pay attention to the small print. Designing advertisements to look like regular news features gives them a certain credibility that an ad that looks like an ad wouldn’t have. Infomercials are often given the look of talk shows, some complete with audiences, which gives the viewer the illusion of information rather than persuasion. And many religious shows disguise themselves as news—again, giving the impression that what they are presenting is information rather than persuasion. For example, the *700 Club*, Pat Robertson’s television program, is presented as news in a news-style format but is actually a religious program aiming a specific religious message at viewers. Perhaps the medium with the greatest potential for distorting news and presenting rumor and disinformation is the Internet. Here anyone can publish lies and make false statements—disguised as objective and factual information—that will reach millions in minutes (Ulfelder, 1997).

The problem that all this creates, or rather the task that all this presents, is for you, the viewer, to effectively distinguish what is news from what is hype, what is information from what is persuasion. It’s a task that is not always easy. What the media present is not the reality that is “out there” in the objective world. Rather, the media create a reality

UNDERSTANDING THEORY AND RESEARCH

The Third-Person Effect

How effective are the media in influencing you as compared to, say, a group of your peers? Are you influenced less than your peers, about the same as your peers, or more than your peers? In a variety of studies conducted on college students, researchers found that students believed that their peers were influenced more by the media than they themselves were (Davison, 1983). Whether the topic was political advertising, rap music, or pornography, students felt they were less susceptible to media influence than were their peers (Hoffner, et al., 2001). This belief, called the third-person effect, is strengthened when the media message is a negative or socially unacceptable one (for example, messages of violence, racism, or sexism) and is weakened when the message is a more acceptable one (for example, public service announcements).

Working with Theories and Research. Try testing out this theory. For example, survey 10 or 20 people and ask them how influenced they feel they are by, say, media violence or racism. Then ask them if their friends and relatives are influenced more—or less—than they are. Then select a more socially acceptable issue; ask them how influenced they feel they are by, for example, media messages dealing with the value of education or promoting the importance of periodic physical checkups or proper diet. And follow this up with how influenced your interviewees feel their friends and relatives are by these same messages. Do you find a third-person effect?

that they hope the viewer and reader will accept and treat as real. News stories that in reality are of minor significance, for example, are regularly made to appear earth-shattering because the media need to hold your attention. And they know that you won't pay attention to news of "minor" incidents or "minor" new discoveries.

To Influence

Of course, the most obvious function of the media is to influence or persuade (Emmers-Sommer & Allen, 1999). Persuasion comes in a variety of forms: reinforcing or strengthening attitudes and beliefs; changing a person's attitudes or beliefs; activating a person to do something; and ethicizing, or providing a person with a system of values. Although the media's persuasive function is seen in its most blatant forms in advertising (see the Unit 16 Media Watch box) and public relations (see the Unit 15 Media Watch box), all media messages exert influence—even the situation comedy.

It is difficult for anything to convert someone from one attitudinal extreme to another. And the

media, with all the resources and power at their disposal, are no exception. More often, the media reinforce or strengthen your existing beliefs or attitudes. People who support democratic government will expose themselves to democratic persuasion and will emerge reinforced from the experience. Similarly, religious people will expose themselves to messages in line with their beliefs and will emerge reinforced or stronger in their convictions.

The media can, however, convert some people who are undecided on any issue. Thus, those who are torn between Republican and Democratic candidates in a political election, for example, may well find themselves converted to one side or the other on the basis of the media messages to which they attend. The media also produce lots of changes on issues that we would consider trivial. For example, changes in our toilet paper-buying behavior may well be greatly or even totally influenced by the media. Except to toilet paper manufacturers, our choice of toilet paper is unimportant. Political preferences, religious attitudes, and social commitments—especially those about which we feel strongly—are not so easily changed.

From the advertiser's point of view, the most important persuasive function of the media is to activate—to move consumers to action. The media try to get the viewer or reader to buy Wonder Bread or to use Gillette razors, to choose Clairrol instead of L'Oreal. Once an attitude is formed or a behavior pattern is established, the media function to channel it in specific directions. For example, once the pattern of paying \$100 for a pair of jeans is established, the media can channel that behavior relatively easily to Guess?, Armani, or Sassoon, or in fact to any jean with a high-price label, preferably a label that is well known and can be easily seen.

Another form of persuasion is the media's *ethicizing function*. By making public certain deviations from the accepted norm (such as politicians' engaging in extramarital affairs, teachers' giving students the answers to examination questions, or corporations' making unreported political gifts), the media arouse people to change the situation. They provide viewers with a collective ethic. For example, without the media coverage of President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, it seems unlikely that there would have been such a public condemnation of what happened. Without the media coverage of Watergate, it's unlikely that there would have been such a public outcry that Richard Nixon was forced to resign.

The media may also influence viewers in directions that are harmful. For example, advertisers routinely influence people to buy foods that are unhealthy and vitamins and herbal preparations that are unnecessary and potentially harmful. The media may also function as a means for cultural imperialism; that is, the most powerful and influential media tend to dominate the values and attitudes of people throughout the world. Because the world's media are led by those of the United States, the values and attitudes dominant in the United States tend to spread throughout the world, often replacing the specific cultural values of entire nations; see the discussion of cultural imperialism in the Unit 3 Media Watch box. This, as we saw in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, can contribute to bitter resentment among some societies that may espouse very different attitudes and values.

Still another potentially harmful persuasive influence is created by media depictions of violence. Many researchers—though certainly not all—argue that media violence promotes violence on the part of viewers (see the Unit 13 Media Watch box on violence and the media).

The media—movies and television especially—also perpetuate stereotypes of various cultural groups (Gorham, 1999). Some recent research shows, for example, that the media have detrimen-

BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Identifying Critical Thinking Violations

Watch television for one evening and collect as many violations of the critical thinking guidelines discussed in this unit and in Unit 7 as you can. That is, try to find examples of:

- ▶ intensional orientation (the tendency to view people, objects, and events in the way they're talked about, the way they're labeled)
- ▶ allness (the assumption that you can know all or say all about anything)
- ▶ fact–inference confusion (confusing fact and inference and treating an inference as if it's a fact)
- ▶ static evaluation (the tendency to retain evaluations without change while the reality to which they refer is changing)
- ▶ indiscrimination (the failure to distinguish between similar but different people, objects, or events because they are covered by the same label)
- ▶ polarization (the tendency to look at the world in terms of opposites and to describe it in terms of extremes, often neglecting the vast middle)

tal effects on Asian Americans by neglecting and overlooking them and by emphasizing White standards of attractiveness. The media also often fail to show the diversity within the Asian American population and thus contribute to the illusion that all members of these cultures are the same (Mok, 1998a, 1998b).

BECOMING A CRITICAL CONSUMER OF MEDIA

For all their negative features, however, the media are here to stay and will undoubtedly continue to grow in influence. So we need to develop ways to deal with the effects of the media in our lives; we need to become critical consumers of media messages.

Learn How the Media Work

One obvious way to become a more critical consumer is to understand the functions that the media serve. The preceding discussion has provided you with a template for exploration and learning about media functions. Thus, you can make a conscious effort to become a more critical consumer of the advertising that passes for news and the soap opera relationships that pass for real-life friendships and loves. Incorporate into your own thinking some of the realities already identified here; for example:

- The media blur the distinctions between information and persuasion, fact and inference, reportage and editorializing, news and advertising.
- The media distort reality.
- The media's primary motive is to make money, and media organizations do this by selling your attention to advertisers.
- The media establish your agenda; they tell you who and what are and are not important.
- The media perpetuate majority positions and give little attention to minority opinions, regardless of the logic or value of the positions.

Make Use of a Wide Variety of Media

A second way to become a more critical consumer of the media is to expose yourself to a wide variety

of media perspectives. Instead of reading just one newspaper, take a look at several. Most newspapers now maintain websites that are available free, making this suggestion easy and pleasant to follow. The same is true of magazines, television stations, and just about any media you can think of.

Question the Credibility of the Media

The media are accorded great credibility in the mind of the general public (see the Unit 18 Media Watch box on media credibility). In some cases this attribution of credibility is justified, but in others it may not be. Because the media are so powerful and so influential, many people seldom consider the possibility that a media spokesperson may be ill informed or may even be deliberately misleading the audience. Similarly, many people simply assume, if a high-credibility spokesperson or newspaper or institution is reporting a story, that it is necessarily true. High credibility is never equivalent to evidence.

Exercise Critical Thinking

Watching a televised news show, reading a post on the Internet, or reading a newspaper or news-magazine has to involve serious critical thinking. For example, you need to distinguish fact from fiction, reporting from editorializing, and accuracy from inaccuracy. You need to become aware of the stereotypes that the media perpetuate and to look for diversity among stereotypical portrayals of members of different cultures, genders, and affectional orientations. The ways to use verbal messages effectively that were discussed in Unit 7 offer useful critical thinking guidelines:

- Distinguish between the way the media present or talk about something and what exists in reality. Beware of intensional orientation.
- Recall that the media cannot say all about anything; always assume there is more to be said, more to learn. Beware of allness.
- Distinguish between facts and inferences; treat inferences as inferences and not as facts. Beware of fact–inference confusion.
- Remember that the world and people are constantly changing; what was true in a news broad-


cast six months ago may no longer be true today. Update your conclusions frequently. Beware of static evaluation.

- No two things, no two people, no two cultures are the same. In the media's effort to simplify and cover the entire world in 30 minutes, they frequently oversimplify and treat different people or groups as if they were the same. Beware of indiscrimination.
- Recall that most attitudes, most people, most of everything exists between the extremes. In order to grab attention, however, the media often present people's stories in extremes, or polar opposites. But extremes actually include only small sections of reality; most of reality exists between these opposites of good and bad, positive and negative, healthy and unhealthy. Beware of polarization.

Talk Back to the Media


Another way to be a critical consumer is to fight against the narcotizing effect of the media and to talk back to the media. This task may sound difficult but actually is relatively simple. Although the media are generally analyzed for their effects on individuals, recognize that viewers and readers also affect the media—radio, television, newspapers and magazines, film, CDs, and the Internet (Jamieson & Campbell, 1997; Postman & Powers, 1992). Here are some of the ways you can talk back to the media. As you consider these methods, recall the “spiral of silence” theory explained in the Media Watch box in Unit 9.

Register individual complaints. For example, you can write letters to (or call) a television station or an advertiser expressing your views on the content of a program or on topics that you think should get more attention. You can also write letters to a public forum, such as letters to the editor of a newspaper, or call a television talk show. And of course you can write letters to the Federal Communications Commission or to other regulatory agencies, which in turn will exert pressure on the media. E-mail has made this especially easy. These letters, phone calls, and e-mails count a great deal more than most people think. Because most people do not write or call, the media give such messages considerable weight.

Exert group pressure. When you join with others who think the same way you do, you bring group pressure to bear on television networks, newspapers, advertisers, and manufacturers. Threatening a boycott or legal action can quickly gain attention and often some measure of compliance (and potentially, at least, damage the economic base of an organization). The Internet has made it relatively easy not only to register individual complaints but also to band together to exert pressure. For example, www.e-thepeople.com  offers useful ways to start an online petition.

Protest through an established organization. Obviously, the larger and more powerful the organization you use to influence the media, the more persuasive your appeal will be. The AIDS epidemic has led to the creation of a wide variety of organizations that have exerted pressure for increased research funding and services to people with AIDS. ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) is perhaps the most visible of such organizations. MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) is another organization that has had considerable influence in establishing driving regulations and penalties for infractions.

Protest through a social movement. People have used this technique throughout history to gain civil rights, workers' rights, and rights for minority groups and women. The practice of “outing” discussed in the Unit 6 Media Watch box is one example of this type of protest. Forming such movements or aligning yourself with an established movement can help you secure not only a large number of petitioners but also media coverage that will help you put forth your position.

Create legislative pressure. You can exert influence at the local, state, or federal level by influencing your local political representatives (through your own voting, calls, letters, and e-mails), who will in turn influence representatives at higher levels of the political hierarchy. For example, www.rollicall.com  offers contact information for your representatives as well as information on how they have voted and lots more; this website is a good starting place for contacting those you wish to influence.

Do recall that communication is inevitable and that silence communicates just as surely as do words

and gestures—principles emphasized throughout this text and especially in the “spiral of silence” Media Watch box in Unit 9. When you do not talk back to the media, the media interpret your silence

as approval. If approval is not what you wish to communicate, then you have little choice but to talk back.

REFLECTIONS REFLECTIONS

ON ETHICS IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Advertising and Ethics

The issues of media ethics stand in bold relief when we look at advertising, and in particular at the responsibilities that advertisers have to their audiences. When advertisers conduct audience research, they’re interested in learning about their audience so they can develop more effective persuasive strategies to help them make a greater profit by selling more products or services. And although the profit motive isn’t unethical, it does raise ethical issues when it takes precedence over audience welfare; for example, when advertising is directed at selling products that are dangerous or unhealthy for the audience or simply overpriced. Cigarettes and cigars, cereals and snacks loaded with sugar and high in fat, and certain high-priced brand name sneakers come to mind most quickly. In short, the aim of some advertisers’ audience research is quite different from the purpose of audience research as explained in the public speaking units of *Human Communication*. The objective of the public speaker is surely to be more persuasive, but the audience’s best interests and welfare must come first.

This isn’t to say that a speaker or an advertiser should never speak out of self-interest. It is to argue, however, that speakers and advertisers should never exploit their audiences or communicate out of a self-interest that may be harmful to the listeners. If a speaker or an advertiser asks an audience to do certain things, it should be for their ultimate benefit. It would be unethical, for example, to persuade an audience to take up arms in a self-destructive war, to buy homes in a flood zone, or to donate money to a fraudulent organization.

What would you do? *You’ve just been hired by a large advertising agency and put to work designing an advertising campaign to promote a cereal that is extremely high in sugar and saturated fats—both of which you know are not healthy. The job is a particularly good one, and should you succeed on this account, it’s likely that your future in advertising would be assured. Yet you wonder if you can ethically put your agency’s persuasive force behind this product, which is really not in consumers’ best interests. What would you do in this situation?*

SUMMARY

In this unit we looked at the mass media, especially the positive and negative functions they serve and the ways you can become a more critical consumer of the media.

1. The media, like all forms of communication, help viewers by providing needed information and ser-

vices—but may also present “helping” information that proves misleading or incorrect.

2. The media entertain us; they enable us to play but may also divert attention away from matters that are of greater consequence.

3. The media enable viewers to relate to others but may also lead viewers to form parasocial relationships to the exclusion of real-life interpersonal relationships.
4. The media inform us on a wide variety of topics but may establish our agendas—telling us what to attend to and what is and what is not important—for the benefit of the media conglomerates and not for our benefit.
5. The media persuade us most obviously through advertising and public relations but also, for example, through the attitudes and beliefs the characters in television dramas and soap operas espouse.
6. To become a more critical consumer of the media, learn how the media work, avail yourself of a wide range of media, question the credibility of the media, exercise critical thinking, and talk back to the media.

KEY TERMS

mass media

one-step theory of media influence

silver bullet theory of media influence

two-step theory of media influence

multistep theory of media influence

ties of union

privatization

parasocial relationships

agenda setting

narcotizing function

ethicizing function

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT

The Mass Media

1. How would you distinguish interpersonal communication from mass communication? What are some of the similarities between the two?
2. In what ways are the media that you attend to multicultural?
3. To what medium would you turn to learn today's weather forecast? Yesterday's baseball scores? The movies playing at your local cinema? The president's latest speech? Yesterday's stock market performance?
4. To which media do you attribute the most credibility on, say, political or economic issues? To which media would you attribute the least credibility on political and economic issues?
5. How much time—on an average day—do you spend watching television? On the Internet? Reading a book, magazine, or newspaper? In face-to-face interaction?
6. What ethical principles do the media you regularly attend to espouse? Can you identify specific ethical principles that are fostered by specific media products?
7. In what ways do the media influence you?
8. In what ways do you influence the media?