Pamela J. Shoemaker & Stephen D. Reese

Mediating the Message in the 21st Century

A Media Sociology Perspective

Mediating the Message in the 21st Century

Hailed as one of the "most significant books of the 20th century" by *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, this new edition of the classic media sociology textbook now offers students a comprehensive, theoretical approach to media content in the 21st century. *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century* provides a broad perspective on the ways in which mass media content is subject to external influences, ranging from the content producer's personal values to national ideologies, and argues that in order to understand the effects of media, it is first necessary to understand how media content is created. This updated edition expands upon Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese's earlier editions, with an added focus on entertainment media and the Internet. The updated edition of *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century* is an essential text for media effects scholars and students of media sociology.

Pamela J. Shoemaker is John Ben Snow Professor at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Her books include *News Around the World*, *How to Build Social Science Theories*, and *Gatekeeping Theory*. She is co-editor of the journal *Communication Research*. She is former president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Stephen D. Reese is Jesse H. Jones Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin, where he has been on the faculty since 1982 and was previously director of the School of Journalism. He is co-editor of *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*.

Page Intentionally Left Blank

Mediating the Message in the 21st Century

A Media Sociology Perspective

Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese

CONTENTS

Page Intentionally Left Blank

FOREWORD

Living in what they viewed as a new modern world experiencing rapid social change, the classical 19th century social science theorists worried about the relationship between the individual and society. They phrased this issue in a myriad of ways: What does the individual owe society? What kind of responsibility does a society have for the individuals who live in it? Does social change result from individual or group action and if from both factors, how are they related to one another? How do ideas circulate around a society and among individuals? What is the relationship between an individual's ideas and the institutions of which she is a part?

As Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese remind us in *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*, we are once again living in a period of critical change and these compelling questions still resonate throughout the social sciences, especially when it comes to understanding the transformation of the media. Today as yesterday, the media filter our experiences and shape our understandings of the world. At the turn of the 19th century, European social critics charged that, with its emphasis on romantic love, the then newly popular novel was undermining parents' ability to arrange the marriages of their children and so was undermining the stability of society. Today, a new generation of critics bemoans how violent digital games encourage aggression and disrespect; they also claim that the new social media are not only hampering the academic achievements of young people, but even their ability to make friends in face-to-face interactions. Whether voiced in the 19th or the 21st century, these sorts of accusations can be understood as attempts to untangle how individuals, the media, and societies influence one another. As Shoemaker and Reese also explain, it is difficult to discuss where the media have been, how they have been changing, and where they are going without addressing the complex relationships among global forces, nations, institutions, organizations, and individuals.

Those relationships are rendered more complex by the evidence that each of these kinds of social organization have both direct and indirect effects upon each other. The days when social scientists drew a simple diagram to explain the interactions among these levels of social organization has gone the way of the large-circulation, independent, afternoon "ink" newspaper. Each is difficult to find, but finding and understanding a seemingly basic diagram or a successful old-fashioned newspaper makes it easier to analyze more contemporary and complex media arrangements, such as how bloggers act as both media users and media producers, how networks transcend nation states, and how new forms of digital literacy are emerging.

Reese and Shoemaker's solution to explaining the complexity of today's media is to discuss what they call "the hierarchy of influences"—a necessarily simplified

map showing how levels of social organization influence media and also affect one another as they link patterns of symbols to each other and to the societies in which they are embedded. As Reese and Shoemaker explain their model, they move from large sociocultural units, such as international corporations and nation states, to smaller ones, such as the individual. Consistent with American ideology, the individual stands at the center of their diagram and is affected by routines that have been developed within (usually capitalist and bureaucratic) organizations, which in turn are affected by social institutions contained within social systems. But, they instruct us, reality—the world in which we live—is much more complex. Some of the great 19th century social scientists stressed how the actions of individuals affect larger social structures, while others emphasized the impact of the larger structures on a person's life. So, too, Reese and Shoemaker note that some research moves from the inner level of their hierarchy to the outer and larger one. One scholar might explore how individuals may organize social movements that use the media to affect social change and how the media resist their efforts, while another analyzes the impact of global organizations—how the great transnational oligarchies influence everything from national ideologies to even how people express their appreciation (:-D) or likes and dislikes (👍👎). I read their hierarchy as a guide to asking questions about the impact of the media on society and on the people who have given the media a significant place in their lives—even if they have not meant to do so. Like capitalism, the media are omnipresent.

Today as more and more activities are performed through the media, both mass and interactive, other institutions and organizations have shaped themselves to conform to media logic, a process called *mediatization*. Like the media themselves, this process is everywhere. Students take online courses, whose readings, lessons, and assignments are designed to conform to the logic of the Internet. In secular Western societies, people are increasingly attending religious services on their televisions, tablets, and smart phones; participation in organized religion is waning, and religious belief is becoming an individual matter; some denominations are trying to present themselves in ways that will attract an audience (as opposed to "real-life" congregants) and so encourage religious belief. Politics are geared to the media. Even as campaign finances revolve around the high cost of media ads, politicians use social media to attract supporters and raise money. To seem vote-worthy, they try to have their activities covered on news shows, and, to display what they believe to be their appeal, they appear as "guests" on news, talk, and comedy shows. Media have even become implicated in self-presentation, as people boast about how many "friends" and "followers" they have on Facebook and Twitter. Students standing or walking alone on campus seem to have their cell phones pasted to their ears as though announcing to observers that they do indeed have friends.

How religions present themselves, how individuals find love and found families, how politicians woo supporters—all these matters have varied historically and cross-culturally. Centuries ago in the West, such social institutions as political regimes and economic markets conformed to the demands of the church, but, with

the advent of contemporary forms of globalization, politics and religion began to conform to the market. As, at the turn of the 21st century, the media became increasingly independent of national and international regulation, they also become ever more powerful—so dominant that they can demand that economic markets transform their operations to meet media logic, so important to individual success that when corporate managers are hiring new personnel, they consult the social media to learn about job applicants or hire firms that specialize in discovering what individuals have recently deleted from their social-media pages.

Throughout their text, Shoemaker and Reese refer to the research on the social construction of news published in the 1970s and early 1980s, a significant period of "media sociology" in which I myself was involved. In this period, cable television was beginning to flourish, and personal computers were entering the homes of the educated upper middle classes, who lived on the prosperous side of the digital divide. Recognition of the power of media permeates the pages of these studies. However, looking back, I don't think that the authors of those newsmaking studies—Mark Fishman, Herbert Gans, Todd Gitlin, Harvey Molotch, Michael Schudson, and I—realized that we were documenting what Dan Hallin has since called the "high modernism" of American journalism, a period when newsworkers pledged obeisance to codes of professionalism and claimed their news coverage was independent of the financial interests of the large corporations, then beginning to consolidate their grasp on the media landscape and eventually to hold it in thrall.

We were all sociologists. With the exception of Gans, all of us were at the start of our careers. (Fishman, Gitlin, Schudson, and I started our work on news as research for our dissertations. Molotch had been recently tenured.) We knew one another. I recall a conversation with Professor Gans, while I was still working on my dissertation. I read a draft of Schudson's book, and I think he read a draft of mine. Gitlin and I had lunch in New York, and I lent him the pages about "framing" written for the first draft of *Making News*. While still a graduate student working with Harvey Molotch, Fishman read drafts of my work, and I read chapters of the excellent dissertation that was to become his *Manufacturing the News*. Molotch and I had extensive conversations about news during the year that he was a visiting professor of sociology at State University of New York, Stony Brook. Together with his student Marilyn Lester, we taught an informal graduate seminar on phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology; it probably influenced their classic article "News as Purposive Behavior," published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1974.

All of us had started our work on news in a period when political debate was lively and passions ran high. Mostly, we identified with the political left. I cannot speak for others' political experiences, though Gitlin makes no bones about his involvement with Students for a Democratic Society. In my case, as a moderately radical graduate student in sociology at Brandeis University, I was surrounded by people who cared deeply both about the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. To me and others, understanding the forces that shaped news coverage seemed essential to analyzing why news organizations provided seemingly favorable coverage

of "responsible" political actors, were highly critical of radical social movements, and cultivated a belief in the free press as the bulwark of democracy.

At the time, I had wanted to use phenomenological sociology to analyze how the routinization of work influences news as a form of knowledge. That concern permeates the early pages of *Making News* that I had shared with my colleagues. They were based on "Telling Stories," an article about framing that I had published in the *Journal of Communication* in 1975, the year after Goffman had discussed theater and novels in his path-breaking *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. So far as I know, "Telling Stories" was the first work to apply Goffman's concepts about the organization of experience to newswork. I felt fairly confident about the thrust of my treatment of framing, because Erving Goffman had also read a draft of *Making News*, mentioned it briefly to me, and discussed it more extensively with my editor, the now legendary Gladys Topkis, who then worked at Free Press. (Some ten years after the publication of *Making News*, a prominent researcher told me I had misinterpreted Goffman's use of "frames" and "strips," but I have always felt that Goffman had given me his imprimatur.)

I don't know whether other researchers read political concern into the media sociology that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s, although such British researchers as Stuart Hall used our works. Certainly, the theories that I used—the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz, the constructivist approach of his students Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, the ethnomethodological ideas of Aaron Cicourel and Harold Garfinkle, and Goffman's frame analysis—were not at all politically radical. However, that set of ideas explicitly rejected the functionalism that had dominated both American sociology and communication research on gatekeeping. These new theories and the temper of the times enabled all of us to ask new questions, and those new questions inevitably led to new answers. After all, question and answer are inextricably linked. In different ways, while investigating newsmaking, each of us explored aspects of the power of media, especially the formation of ideology.

In *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*, Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese present the hierarchy of influence to help us to think about the power of the media today. They also present new ways to think about older questions that still seem vital as mass media and social media permeate our lives: who we are and how we fit into the families, organizations, institutions, and nations in which we are embedded.

Gaye Tuchman
University of Connecticut
November 2012

PREFACE

Mediating the Message in the 21st Century has been in the works a long time. It began with the 1991 and 1996 incarnations of our original book *Mediating the Message*, which we wrote during an early phase of our academic lives. The framework of this book remains much the same as the previous two editions, but much has happened in the media world and along our scholarly paths. Returning to this topic brings an opportunity to be retrospective and consider "the making of" *Mediating the Message*. Through this completely revised book, we've been able to take stock of a project that has figured prominently in both of our careers.

In 1999, the second edition was designated by *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* as one of the most significant journalism and communication books of the 20th century. It was an unexpected honor, and we were grateful to have been recognized in a list of such distinguished company, especially since it was published in the final decade of the century. It was gratifying to see our work's value ratified by our scholarly peers, a judgment we assume stemmed from the book helping to legitimate and bring helpful conceptual tools to what had been a marginal, far flung, and rather eclectic part of the communication field. It was difficult to create a fully satisfactory title to reflect this new area, and we had considered simply calling it *Media Sociology*. That's a familiar term, coming closest to what we are interested in (and an adequate descriptor we continue to use), but labeling it "sociology" would have limited the disciplinary scope of the subject (an issue we discuss further in Chapter 1). So, we've stuck with the original title, which emphasizes mediation: particularly the construction, production, and control of specific patterns of meaning contained in media *content*. Although our goal is the same, this book is a new work that reflects the changing media world and the rich scholarly world we now review. We finally recognized that we were writing a book that included almost completely new material when compared to the 1996 edition. Our new publisher Routledge agreed and so *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century* was born. Note that *media sociology* made its way into the secondary title, emphasizing our preferred name for this area of scholarship.

Of course, we still embrace our original editions of *Mediating the Message*, particularly given how widely they have been cited over the years, therefore keeping the "brand" intact. But doing so has presented a challenge. Little of the subject matter in the 1996 edition has escaped the transformations at work in the media and larger society: Forces of technology and globalization have made our objects of study themselves newly problematic, including the news profession, the boundaries of the media organization, and the institutional media–society relationships. The

intensification of social relations transcends national boundaries, making it important to acknowledge that the US- and UK-based version of media sociology must be extended and understood more globally. We both have travelled widely in this interim and have collaborated with international colleagues in research projects, and so we are more sensitive to the global context. Nevertheless, we are admittedly much more aware of trends and examples from the USA. We do try to be cautious, however, in universalizing them.

Reflecting upon the earlier books, we found ourselves striking a polemical tone, advocating for greater attention to this area even as we critiqued it and drew together the various strands of existing work into a more unified theoretical framework. Now the tone has changed, because what we advocated has to a great extent come to pass. A burgeoning amount of work now does take the production and control of media seriously, and this part of the field has grown steadily. Our books' organizing device has become more formally known as the Hierarchy of Influences Model and has been widely adopted. A major section of the *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, the most comprehensive map to date of the research field, was set aside for the related area "Media Production and Content." But this proliferation of scholarship has made more difficult our job of synthesizing it in a useful way.

We approach *media* broadly, recognizing that there is much to be done in applying the Hierarchical Model to the entertainment industry; however, our backgrounds and research interests still means that this new book has a focus on the public sphere, in which journalism plays such an important role. And journalism, in spite of the crisis in the US news industry, has enjoyed major international growth as a focus of training and an academic research subject in the last two decades. The International Communication Association, for example, launched a journalism interest group which quickly grew to division status; the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication has continued to grow in size; and new journals with international editorial boards with a focus on journalism have been launched in recent years: *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism* and *Journalism Studies*, to be followed soon by *Digital Journalism*. So this surge in journalism scholarship—driven in large part by scholars outside of the USA—naturally brings renewed interest in media sociology. With this global impulse spurring research collaboration across national lines, the Hierarchy of Influences Model seems to adapt well to cross-national comparative media studies. By beginning work early on in this field we've been the beneficiaries of these subsequent trends.

We both come out of the Wisconsin-Madison tradition of doctoral training, which then and now emphasizes variable analysis and theory building, with media content (and exposure of content) as a cause that leads to effects. But *Mediating the Message* was and is still more about the forces that shape media content, with content variables as effects. One could say that our book has been a reaction to the "audience and effects" tradition we absorbed in graduate school. We recognize that this new book intersects with other intellectual traditions that don't fit as easily into that variable-analytic language, including the more humanistic Zelizer approach to

journalism as an *interpretive community*, the critical study of ideology with its dynamics of *hegemony*, and the *network society* model of Castells (2007) that describes "articulations" rather than effects. Indeed, the online world naturally lends itself to new spatial models, with *public spheres*, *fields*, *networks*, and global news *arenas*. Destabilized and reconstituted relations among citizens, media, and society make it harder to easily partition and completely contain the influences we examine within specific levels of analysis. Nevertheless, we still take from our Wisconsin years the value of explicating concepts, developing models, and proposing analytical frameworks—in short, theoretical thinking. We continue to see the value of thinking systematically about even these slippery phenomena, so that we can bring some order to an eclectic area and thus make it easier for scholars to better collaborate, share, and accumulate insights.

We have been thinking about this revision since the 1996 edition, as we have each pursued our respective independent yet complementary research programs. We've included examples of that research where relevant. Both of us have embraced an international perspective, with Shoemaker, for example, conducting large-scale empirical cross-national work in *News around the World* (2006) and Reese considering globalization more generally as it relates to journalism (2010). We have both continued to teach courses organized around the book's chapters and have extended our thinking about many of these concepts since those early efforts. In *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*, we have reversed the presentation of the levels of analysis, now moving from macro to micro (an argument can be made to logically proceed in either direction). We have also switched some chapter responsibilities to reflect our new understanding of media sociology. Reese took primary charge of the introduction, the introduction of the Hierarchical Model, the chapter on influences on content from individuals, and the social institutional (what we earlier referred to as extra-media) level. Shoemaker drafted the mediated reality (patterns of media content) chapter, the social system level (formerly ideology), the routines level, and the organizational level. We both contributed to the final chapter on research conducted using the Hierarchical Model. Much of our earlier material can be identified in this new book, but it is surrounded by new research and thinking.

Much has changed in the communication world, and we've worked hard to overhaul each chapter to also reflect the evolution of our own thinking. Although some chapter titles have changed, the format remains the same:

- Chapter 1, now titled "Media Content and Theory" instead of "Studying Influences on Media Content," describes the focus of the book, the major conceptual issues, and establishes the value of a levels of analysis approach to understanding the influences on content.

- Chapter 2, still titled "Beyond Processes and Effects," takes a historical perspective to explain why 20th century media scholarship so strongly emphasized media effects. Our old chapter "Linking Influences on Content to the Effects of Content" has been folded into discussion of the model.

- Chapter 3, "Mediating Reality," is more theoretical than previously. Instead of just describing *Patterns of Media Content*, we now consider the symbolic environment created by the media and how this interacts with the social reality of people. We even consider whether reality as we know it actually exists.

- Our new macro-to-micro organization results in Chapter 4, "Social Systems," beginning with a consideration of how macro variables within this level can affect content, including those from structural functionalism, Marxism, critical and cultural studies, hegemony, political economy, democratic pluralism, and world systems. This extends the previous "Ideology" chapter.

- What we now call the "Social Institutions" level (Chapter 5) was awkwardly titled in earlier editions as "Influences on Content from Outside Media Organizations." This was often shortened as the *extra-media* level and seemed to consist of "everything else." We now take a more theoretical perspective, accounting for the growing work in fields, institutions, and the shifting boundaries among them—an area that features some of the most interesting research now underway, as the media reshape themselves along with their relationships with other powerful institutions.

- Chapter 6 still covers influences from "Organizations," but it has expanded to include theories of how people interact in organizations, plus the transformation of media on the Internet. We now talk about the many new types of media organizations in the world, including social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

- Chapter 7, "Routines," now addresses how the practices of traditional media have meshed with those of similar media on the Internet and with the social media.

- Chapter 8, "Individuals," recognizes new international work, the more politicized environment for understanding media workers, and the critical debates over journalism education itself.

- Chapter 9, "Studying the Hierarchical Model," takes stock of the theoretical progress of media sociology studies. Our old chapter "Building a Theory of News Content" has been replaced with an analysis of research that has used our model over more than 20 years.

As we looked back over the research cited in previous editions, we realized that several decades have gone by since some of the studies were conducted. Some of these, such as the 1950s studies of gatekeeping and social control and the pioneering ethnographies of sociologists like Herbert Gans, have become classics, and we have retained them for their timeless insights and as models for what was to follow, while also being sensitive to a significantly different world. Other work seemed dated and has been refreshed with more current insights. And, of course, we've tried

to provide more current examples and to update trends where necessary (without becoming too topical and easily dated). In providing such a range of material, from the classic studies to current research, this book takes on more of an historical aspect than previous editions.

Sometime back in the early 1990s we planned to write a related, more historical book, with Reese taking the lead, and featuring *key works* in media sociology. Our goal was to identify works that exemplified each level—with insights solicited from the authors into their historical and intellectual context. Regrettably, that book never came to fruition, but we gained some insights and material that we've folded into this volume—a portion of which was published in Reese and Ballinger (2001) and Reese (2009b). We thank Herbert Gans, David Weaver, Todd Gitlin, and the late David Manning White and Warren Breed for sharing their reflections on their scholarly works. Gaye Tuchman was also in that group, one of a confluence of sociologists in the 1970s discovering the news media as a worthy subject, and we are delighted that she agreed to write the Foreword for this edition.

We have been working on this book for many years and would thank our colleagues who have used these ideas in their own research and teaching and who encouraged us to keep at it and finish the job. To see that our ideas have been useful for research in other parts of the world has been particularly gratifying, and we greatly appreciate the invitations and hospitality from our many colleagues abroad. We thank our supporters at the University of Texas and Syracuse University, particularly the many graduate students who over the years have contributed to our intellectual life and growth. As always we are grateful to our families for their love and support, and with this book we commemorate a collaborative friendship that now has reached the 30-year mark.

Stephen D. Reese
Austin, Texas

Pamela J. Shoemaker
Syracuse, New York
February 2013

Page Intentionally Left Blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the many people in both our professional and personal lives—with many occupying special places in both—who helped us make this book possible. Because the work has spread over virtually the course of our careers, acknowledging everyone who had a hand in it would be an encyclopedic and daunting task. Going back, however, to those who helped launch our efforts, we single out our doctoral advisers at Wisconsin, Steve Chaffee (Shoemaker) and Dan Drew (Reese), followed by the chairman at Texas who hired us both in 1982, Dwight Teeter, and our colleague and collaborator at Texas, Wayne Danielson. Every scholar should have such excellent mentors in the early years.

We certainly thank the many students at our home institutions, Syracuse and Texas, who have read and responded to our work for many years, and we appreciate our many colleagues, both locally and around the world, using *Mediating the Message* in their own classes and research. We are grateful to those who generously invited us for lectures and visits, creating many warm memories and friendships. Through it all, they have helped encourage us to pursue this new volume. Special thanks go to the Syracuse assistants who helped with the final push, Jaime Riccio and Christi MacClurg.

Closer to home, Pam thanks her husband and son, John and Jack Parrish, for loving her and keeping her sane. Steve thanks his family for their love and support: Carol, Aaron and Kate, and Daniel.

Page Intentionally Left Blank

Media Content and Theory

In this book we examine the forces that shape media content, the *messages* that constitute the symbolic environment. This is an ambitious task, given the multitude of factors that exert influence on the media. Not only that, but questions of media operation, bias, and control have moved to the center of the public arena, with an increasing number of media-literate citizens developing and promoting their own views. Media questions are often highly normative and highly politicized. Thus, the scholarly research questions we consider are very much in the public sphere, closely related to press criticism that circulates among activists, policy elites, and media professionals themselves. Reconciling these conflicting and often partisan-based charges can be difficult. What is more, a cynical public appears increasingly skeptical of the possibility of settling questions with evidence, substituting instead a combination of ironic detachment and impressionistic theories of personal media experience. But systematic media research on even the most controversial subjects is possible. That is why we must bring conceptual and theoretical organization to this area of research, to build understandings and research into a more comprehensive pattern. The same research tools used so extensively to examine media effects can be turned on those media and their links with culture, other organizations, and institutions. In developing *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century*, we hope to strengthen the case that these questions can be generated and examined with rigor given a clear and accepted conceptual framework. We expect the field of communication to devote the same sustained research to the creation, control, and shape of the mediated environment as it has to the effects on audiences of that environment.

Our approach to studying media messages comes from a social science perspective: We try to be clear about our definitions, assumptions, and perspectives, developing a model to locate our questions and suggesting how that model can be used to organize research and to suggest other hypotheses and fruitful areas for additional study. We call the model we have developed the *Hierarchy of Influences*, or more formally the Hierarchical Influences Model, and use it to organize the major chapters and studies discussed in this book. This model takes into account the multiple forces that simultaneously impinge on media and suggests how influence at one level may interact with that at another. The personal bias of an individual journalist, for example, may be relevant to reporting, but journalists of a particular

leaning often self-select into organizations because of their preexisting policies, history, and organizational culture. The media organizations and their employees, in turn, must function within the ideological boundaries set by the larger society.

We do not assume that the Hierarchical Model captures all of the complex interrelationships involved in the media. Models, by definition, are meant to simplify, highlight, suggest, and organize. But in doing so, they can exert a powerful guiding effect in determining how questions are posed and defining the relationships singled out for investigation. In retrospect, the model used in our work has had a greater impact on the field than we imagined when we brought out the 1991 edition of *Mediating the Message.* Certainly a survey of the current field shows that research has grown, classes have been organized, and professional academic organizations have been launched. In addition, this area of study has been legitimated, and we suggest some reasons why this has been so. In part this can be attributed to the model providing a compelling way to think about the subject matter and more firmly integrating it into the existing communication field. As we prepare this work for the third edition, we take the opportunity to reflect further on how our ideas have changed, why we chose to emphasize certain ideas before, and why we have made different choices today. So, in setting out the book's plan we may at several points draw comparisons with our previous editions and set them in historical context. We hope that this may be of interest in revealing our own thinking as we re-confront and make sense of this growing field.

We use the term *media sociology* to refer to the scholarship in this book, because it comes closest to describing what we are interested in. The term, however, does come with ambiguities and disadvantages. Certainly, many of the newsroom and other media ethnographies are typically referred to as media sociology, particularly given their use of traditional sociological fieldwork methods. But within the "influences on content" perspective we also include the more psychological studies of individual media workers and how their personal traits affect their decisions. Outside of the US fieldwork tradition, media sociology has been used in international contexts—particularly Europe and Latin America—to refer to the entire context of media production and performance, the entire social structural context. We use media sociology to refer to this larger body of interests concerning how patterns of symbols are linked to social structure—how the mediated symbolic environment gets constructed—by individuals within a social, occupational, institutional, and cultural context. Before laying out a broader model, we review below some of the key issues that must be understood.

MEDIA CONTENT

Analyzing the shaping of this symbolic environment means a central role for the concept of media *content*. As we develop a theory of media content, the shape of the symbolic environment is obviously a crucial component to be established. By media content, we mean the complete range of visual and verbal information carried in

what were once called the mass media and increasingly by smaller more interactive and targeted channels. The features of this content have been measured in a number of ways, and we attempt to include a variety of perspectives—quantitative and qualitative. In some ways, *content* is a sterile-sounding term, but we will elaborate it with discussion of its specific shapes and patterns. As it takes on certain culturally significant features, it becomes more importantly the *symbolic environment*. Understanding content, even as a general term, is a crucial bridge between key areas of research: what shapes it and what impact it has (Reese & Lee, 2012).

Media Mirror?

When discussing content, particularly news content, there is a tendency to ask how "objectively" it reflects reality. For the sake of completeness, in our previous editions we included a reference in this discussion to the mirror hypothesis—the expectation that media reflect social reality with little distortion. This lack of distortion is sometimes vigorously defended in self-serving attempts by professionals to argue the accuracy of their work by holding it up as a "mirror to society." In a subtle version of this idea, media are rendered neutral or objective by reflecting the self-regulating and balancing compromises between those who sell information to the media and those who buy it. This notion—the repudiation of which has launched countless media critiques—now seems rather quaint and self-evidently untrue (although that has not been sufficient to squelch it altogether). Certainly, the problematic issue of content—a disconnect between *reality* and its mediated counterpart—is a basic scholarly premise, not to mention an article of faith of the many media watchdog groups that monitor press performance. They find fault with those media for not adequately representing the reality they have in mind.

The notion of *bias* used by many press watchdog groups itself suggests that media deviate in some measurable way from a desirable standard that can be independently known. Of course, it is problematic to think of a reality out there with which we can compare mediated content. The postmodernists have been ridiculed by lay critics for rejecting the more traditional concept of a single, unified external reality, which suggests that there can be no independent standard for distinguishing among rival interpretations. But we all apprehend reality within the framework provided by our senses; even the concept of "empirical" reality refers to those things that can be measured using our senses. The simple fact is that we ultimately cannot lift ourselves out of our human context and apprehend reality apart from it. We address this more in Chapter 3.

We need not get too hung up on such philosophical problems. On a practical level we will often find it useful to compare *media reality* with *social reality*, people's view of the world that is socially derived, what society knows about itself. Our assessment of social reality relies on numerous sources of information, including opinion polls, census surveys, historical records and other documents, all of which have their socially constructed qualities. But to the extent that media reality differs

in systematic ways from these other forms of social self-knowledge, we can draw important conclusions about the structures underpinning these differences. Even if we were to accept the possibility of objectively portraying a "world out there," the numerous studies over the years of media distortion have compared media content with other *social* indicators of reality. We assume that the media portray people, events, and ideas in ways that differ systematically from their occurrence in both various social realities.

Viewed another way, media content is fundamentally a social construction, and as such can never find its analog in some external benchmark, a "mirror" of reality. Distortion in this sense becomes irrelevant; social reality is meaningful in and of itself. Media-constructed reality has taken its place alongside other social constructions, such as mental illness, criminality, sexuality, gender, race, and other identities that are no longer considered self-evidently "natural." If content is a con-struction, then to understand its special quality it is essential to understand the "constructing." This realization in turn assigns greater importance to the research in media sociology, which is about exactly that. Therefore, it is a basic premise of this approach, rather than some tentative theoretical perspective, that the media exert their own unique shaping power on the symbolic environment, a shaping that is open to explanation using various theoretical perspectives—which we combine into the Hierarchy of Influences Model.

BUILDING THEORY

We attempt to place the subject of this book within the larger context of the field by locating it in relation to content. Accepting the problematic nature of content calls for a larger organizing theoretical framework. Therefore, when we first con-ceptualized this area, we took the idea of media content as a jumping off place, and we took pains to critique the "content research" that we were able to identify. It may seem self evident that content is the basis for media effects and needs to be closely examined, but many of the field's most important lines of research have often not done so. Studies in the communication field that describe the features of media content proliferated, but they were largely unconnected and lacked any consistent theoretical framework. We noted in earlier versions of *Mediating the Message* how early, largely descriptive content research made little attempt to connect across studies, which often limited themselves to measuring the "number of" and "image of" (fill in the blank). We previously identified Warren Breed (1955) and David Manning White (1950) as among the first scholars showing the influences *on* content in a more research-based mode, with their examinations of social control in the newsroom and the news gatekeeper, but others did not follow their lead in com-munication until more recently (Reese & Ballinger, 2001), something we'll explore more fully in the next chapter.

Our first effort to organize media sociology was strongly oriented toward theory building, and we began with a discussion of hypothesis testing. If the traditional

communication field emphasized the transmission of effects from media to audiences, we argued for a just as important need to explain how those media and their messages were acted upon by a variety of influences. Thus, we promoted the idea of regarding media content within a variable analytic framework: that is, treating content as a dependent variable with which a number of independent variables were related and could be said to shape it. But if the traditional field was marked by surveys and controlled experiments, isolating an effect of interest, the media sociology domain has been much more diverse and messy, ranging across many levels of analysis and research traditions. Looking back we recognize that not all useful perspectives bearing on media sociology can be reduced to such straightforward linear relationships. Many of them are qualitative, interpretive, and naturally resistant to being described in more quantitative variable analytic terminology. Nevertheless, it seems more evident to us now that placing this messy area into a more clearly defined container—the stricter language of variables and influence—imposes a drive toward clarification, definitions, assumptions, empirical indicators, and relationships that are the hallmark of useful investigation.

This is what we have tried to do, even if calling that container "theory" may sound grandiose. Looking back, our goal was simply to begin to think seriously about assumptions, relationships, and ways of measuring. This makes it possible to draw connections, find similarities, and in short to build theory. Audience and effects theories have a longer tradition and are more finely drawn and focused, such as the social-psychological approaches to attitude change and, more recently, information processing. Perhaps, we should have been more cautious in making such a daunting claim to theory in assembling previously disparate strands of research. Nevertheless, we did just that and are glad others have found it useful. Hooking up the audience and effects side of the field with the shaping and control of content—within a consistent style of explanation—makes it easier to conceptualize the extension of the field into this less studied domain (as illustrated in Figure 1.1). For example, the intuitively appealing idea of media *agenda-setting* popularized by McCombs and Shaw (1972) suggests the powerful ability of the media to tell people what they should attend to. Given the extensive body of research into the idea of how the media set the agenda for the public, it is an easy rhetorical step to ask an equally important question: What sets the media's agenda? Just by locating such a question within the framework of communication research gives it a certain legitimacy (Reese, 1991).

Integrating Effects on Content with Effects of Content

The broad field of mass or mediated communication research can be laid out as a combination of these two kinds of effects, with the content agenda itself as the bridge and a crucial element in our formulation (Figure 1.1). In our previous editions, we stressed the importance of incorporating measures of content into research, and much of the research in this book addresses the forces operating to shape specific
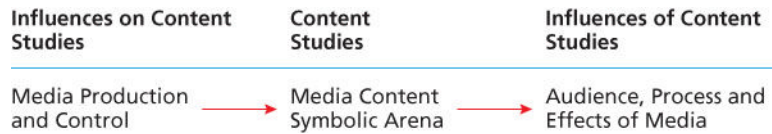
Influences on Content Studies	Content Studies	Influences of Content Studies
Media Production and Control	Media Content Symbolic Arena	Audience, Process and Effects of Media

FIGURE 1.1 *Communication research foci: Influences on content compared with influences of content*

media messages. Others have taken media content into account, but have linked it either primarily to audience evaluations (such as, how certain content features affect television ratings, print circulation, or website traffic) or directly to effects on those audiences (for example, agenda-setting research requires some measure of the media content agenda, and experimental studies of media effects evaluate some aspect of the message). In other studies, media content is not assessed directly. These research areas include examinations of the active audience (the uses and gratifications tradition of media use), traditional effects studies measuring media behavior of audiences (exposure and attention), without explicitly measuring the nature of the content they consume.

In the next chapter we discuss why the field chose its particular emphases, but suffice it to say here that the more we know about how content is shaped and what form it takes, the more guidance we have in developing theories of effects—historically the main question of interest. Because many of the field's theories come to us second-hand, particularly from social psychology and political science, we argue that the development of mass communication theory, by being largely derivative from other disciplines, was stuck on a plateau and would not grow until it began to deal with media content as a crucial feature, itself open to explanation. Much of the early theorizing in the field seized on media opportunistically as just another setting in which to examine individual response and behavior. Elaborate models of voting behavior, for example, may include one box, among many others, labeled "media." Media use measures, included in countless surveys, show that news consumption is positively related to other desirable outcomes—such as informedness, political interest, and likelihood to vote. It seems like a simple idea to state that exposure to a medium is not the same as exposure to specific content, but many studies work around the task of specifically measuring it. The content of that media consumption remained implied rather than examined directly, and we have cited Gerbner's many studies of television violence as an example of this idea (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978). His research typically asked respondents how many hours of television they watched, and from this it was inferred the number of acts of violence they would have likely seen. (Of course, in his case, numerous of his previous content studies of the "television world" confirmed key patterns of representation.) The "communication mediation model" of communication effects developed by the Wisconsin group falls in this category, targeting in the political realm, for example, the effects of exposure to campaign advertising

and news consumption on political behavior, a relationship mediated by personal reflection and political discussion (Cho et al., 2009).

Audience research has tested how people feel about various media, including more recently mobile phones, the Internet, and video games—and current studies of news behavior are repeating this tendency. A recent study of young news consumers, for example, asked about their behavior and attitudes toward newspapers, local television, cable television, and "the Internet" (Brown, 2005). Of course, the Internet incorporates information from all of these sources; a news portal on the web is simply another vehicle for delivering content, "aggregated" and with a different format. Keeping track of specifically what content people consume, already a difficult task, is made more difficult with the proliferation of media and should at least hasten the need to abandon simplistic survey measures, such as "where do you get your news?" Eventually, however, we must move beyond issues of "use" and grapple with the specific features in the symbolic mediated environment, linking these to larger social pressures and audience outcomes.

Visualizing these research questions within the larger context of the field, we hope to show that some questions are open for investigation particularly because of their connection to media content. As we have said before, it is easy to take media content as a given, not questioning its origins, especially if we assume it to be a starting point for dealing only with the level of audience evaluation and response. Connecting media to the influences that impinge on them opens up a host of normatively charged questions—but questions that can and should be examined empirically. That is why the notion of media framing has become so popular as a research concept. It takes content seriously, tying those frames to larger structures, and develops new ways of capturing the power of media to define issues visually and verbally, thereby shaping audience perceptions (Reese, 2001a, 2009a).

THE HIERARCHICAL MODEL

Factors affecting media content can be usefully classified at several levels of analysis, leading us to organize them into a larger model. Various theoretical perspectives have been laid out previously on the shaping of media content, including as follows the suggested categories of Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1980).

- *Content is influenced by media workers' socialization and attitudes*. This is a communicator-centered approach, emphasizing the psychological factors impinging on an individual's work: professional, personal, and political.

- *Content is influenced by media organizations and routines.* This approach argues that content emerges directly from the nature of how media work is organized. The organizational routines within which an individual operates form a structure, constraining action while also enabling it.

- *Content is influenced by other social institutions and forces.* This approach finds the major impact on content lying external to organizations and the

communicator: economic, political, and cultural forces. Audience pressures can be found in the "market" explanation of "giving the public what it wants."

- *Content is a function of ideological positions and maintains the status quo.* The so-called hegemony approach locates the major influence on media content as the pressures to support the status quo, to support the interests of those in power in society.

A Theoretical Umbrella for Research

From these ideas, it is a logical next step to more formally propose an organized theoretical framework, which we have termed the Hierarchical Model. It comprises five levels of influence, hierarchically arrayed from the macro to micro: social systems, social institutions, organizations, routines, and individuals, levels that we will use to organize the chapters that follow. As seen in Figure 1.2, at the center is the micro *individual* level, which includes the characteristics of the individual communicator. The *routines* level includes the most immediate constraining and enabling structures, larger patterns, or routines within which the individual operates. The *organization* level is distinguished from routines in describing the influences of the larger organized entity within which the individual operates, the larger context of the routinized activities, which includes occupational roles, organizational policy, and how the enterprise itself is structured. The *social institution* level describes the influences arising from the larger trans-organizational media field, how media organizations combine into larger institutions that become part of larger structured relationships as they depend on and compete with other powerful social institutions. The macro *social system* level is the outer-most ring of the model, including influences on content from the system as a whole. This includes ideological forces in the sense that they concern ideas and meaning in the service of interests and power—encompassing how all the other levels add up to a larger result. This perspective also lends itself to cross-national comparisons of how the national and cultural context affect media performance. As we move through the levels, we take different expressions of power into account: from the momentary and situational to the more patterned and repetitive and from the structural and institutional to the systemic and societal.

As we discuss below—and return to in our concluding chapter—the sequence of these levels can be approached in different directions, and we don't mean to single out any one level as more powerful than another. In this case, however, the darker outer ring in Figure 1.2 implies primacy for the social systems level, which suits the order in which we will take them up. Progressing from darker to lighter shadings suggests that different emphases are possible depending on one's research focus. As a further refinement, the stronger border in the figure between the media organizations and social institutions levels simply reflects an intuitive media sociology distinction—between those things that reside within media organizations and the forces that lie beyond their boundaries.
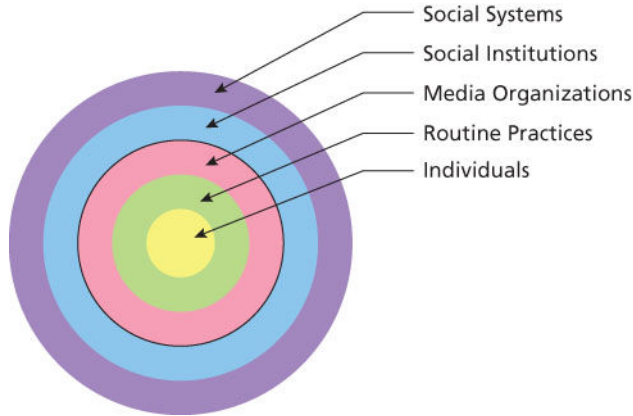
FIGURE 1.2   *The Hierarchy of Influences Model uses five levels of analysis*

In our previous books we paid relatively little attention in the first chapter on what we now understand as the appealing contribution of the Hierarchical Model. We organized our own thinking and chapter structure around these levels, but now we can see the ways that simply setting out such a model has affected research, by proposing important distinctions between levels of analysis and locating individuals within a web of organizational and ideological constraints.

Particularly for journalism, such a model untangles many criticisms of press performance, identifies their implicit normative and theoretical assumptions, and suggests appropriate kinds of evidence. For example, conservative media critics have located the source of bias with the individual journalist, calling for more balance in hiring practices and regularly scolding specific news anchors. Left-leaning critics, on the other hand, find fault more with the structure and ownership of the commercial media system, arguing for more public control and protections from the corruption of big advertisers. The irony is that journalists are more apt to give respectability to attacks from their right flank, which, even if targeting them as individuals, at least grants them the professional latitude to be blamed for bias in the first place. The left critique is less professionally satisfying, given that it relegates journalists to mere tools of a larger corporate system. Both critiques can be more easily understood when we know the level about which they are mainly conceived.

Studying Professionalism on Five Levels

The utility of such a model also helps us explicate key concepts on which research is based and unpack those that have multiple levels of meaning. Reese (2001b), for example, uses this model as a way of explicating the different levels of meaning associated with the concept of *professionalism* (whether journalistic or more broadly media), a basic interest within media sociology but one with widely varying connotations. Professionalism can be considered on one level as an individual value that