INTRODUCTION

We spend most of our lives surrounded by media. Think about yourselves today. You may have watched the morning news. Then you might have put on the radio or flipped through a magazine or listened to some music on your iPod. Tonight you might go out to a film, or spend the night online. The odds are that by the time you sit down to read this chapter you will have already had a discussion about the football or the weather, how much you’re looking forward to The Big Bang Theory or Game of Thrones, or how hot Kate Upton or Robert Pattinson look. Simon Frith describes these popular culture discussions as “the currency of friendship … trading pop judgments is a way to “flirt and fight”” (Frith 2004: 32).

The point is that this is how we all spend our lives: surrounded by media, immersed in media, interacting with media, each and every day. Media informs the way that we speak, the way that we think and the way that we navigate our way through the world.

In this chapter we look at:

– how media work
– the relationship between different types of media
– what the public sphere is
– how media contribute to the public sphere.
HOW DO MEDIA WORK?

Importantly, media do not work in isolation. Different media forms speak to each other as much as they speak to an audience. Television dramas refer to stories that have appeared on the news. Music clips parody films. Magazines detail the public and private lives of celebrities. Indeed, media forms refer to each other all the time. They make fun of each other and often require knowledge of each other to make sense.

We call this knowledge cultural currency—the knowledge we acquire from consuming media. The more media we consume, the more cultural currency we acquire, allowing us to be in on the joke and more familiar with the way media work.

The Simpsons

On the television series The Simpsons, Homer Simpson is working as a bodyguard for Springfield’s corrupt Mayor Quimby. Facing down a group of gangsters in a crowded dinner theatre, Homer struggles to find something he can use as a weapon. Mark Hamill (appearing at the dinner theatre in Guys and Dolls) calls out to Homer from the stage: ‘Use the forks Homer, use the forks!’

Television series such as The Simpsons, Family Guy and South Park make lots of jokes that refer to other media. So do magazines such as MAD and films such as The Naked Gun and the Austin Powers series. You can still find these situations funny in themselves, but to be ‘in’ on the joke or to be able to recognise the pop culture reference, you need to consume lots of other media.

For example, to get this joke in The Simpsons you’d need to recognise Mark Hamill as the actor who played Luke Skywalker in the original Star Wars films—and recognise that one of the lines most associated with that film is ‘Use the force’.

We call this knowledge cultural currency—the knowledge we acquire from consuming media. The more media we consume, the more cultural currency we acquire, allowing us to be in on the joke and more familiar with the way media work.

THE SHOT–REVERSE SHOT

Sometimes this knowledge is so deeply ingrained that we forget that we acquired it from other media forms. Think of the way film and television series cut between two actors when they are talking, showing an image of one speaker, then an image of the other speaker.

This is called a shot–reverse shot. The only reason why we know these two people are talking to each other is our familiarity with the device from other film and television series. There’s rarely anything in the shots themselves that suggests they’re in the same vicinity, let alone talking to each other.

In this way we can think of media forms as parts of an ongoing conversation. They refer to earlier forms, earlier conventions and shared knowledges. They also add to the conversation and move the conversation forward, with new ideas and new technologies.

Sometimes this is explicit, as in the jokes in The Simpsons, the pop culture references in Buffy the Vampire Slayer or the sampling of an earlier piece of music in a dance track. Sometimes it is more subtle, like the acquired knowledge of conventions—the way a shot–reverse shot works, the ordering of stories in a news bulletin or the reading of manga from right to left and back to front.
In each of these examples, media forms are engaging each other in dialogue through jokes, references, reading conventions or cross-promotional opportunities. We can therefore characterise the relationship between different media forms as dialogic.

The relationship between media and their audiences is similarly dialogic. Media forms encourage their audiences to enter into dialogic relationships with them: to contribute, to question, to solve the mystery, to follow the narrative and to seek resolution.

Talkback radio is predicated on this dialogic relationship between a broadcaster and their community of listeners. So are television talk shows, such as The Project and The Ellen DeGeneres Show, or letters to the editor in newspapers, comics and magazines.

Crime series such as How to Get Away with Murder, CSI, Criminal Minds, Inspector Morse and Miss Marple feature episodic mysteries that encourage viewers to solve the mystery along with the detectives. Revenge, Lost and The X-Files feature long-running mysteries (‘story arcs’ over several episodes or seasons) that similarly encourage viewers to seek resolution, to find the answer to what is going on. And some series, such as the short-run Veronica Mars, feature both of these types of mysteries. In Veronica Mars, episodic mysteries were based around events at Veronica’s school, while the ongoing mystery arc of ‘Who killed Veronica’s friend Lilly Kane?’ ran for the first season. By posing a question for the audience, these media forms invite the audiences into a dialogue to answer the question.

Soap operas (such as The Bold and the Beautiful), romantic films (such as Pretty Woman) and dramatic television series (such as Grey’s Anatomy and Sex and the City, and the earlier Moonlighting and Northern Exposure) encourage audience engagement by putting impediments in the way of their lead characters coming together. Here the dialogic relationship begins with the question: ‘Will X get together with Y?’

Even broadcast news is structured in this way. Newsreaders and reporters address audiences directly. Headlines engage audiences with the stories that will be covered, while sports and weather reports encourage us to stay to the end.

Advances in technology mean that the dialogic relationship between users of media and their audiences is becoming virtually instantaneous. Twitter enables its users to post text-based tweets of up to 140 characters on their profile pages, constantly updating their followers as to what they are doing at any point in time. Other social networking sites, such as Facebook, work in a similar way. Voting via mobile phones enables audiences to determine the outcome of talent quests such as Australian Idol or X-Factor—just as it used to determine who was evicted from the Big Brother house. Emails enable audiences to voice what issues are concerning them on morning news programs, actually shaping the content of these series. Some of these ideas are discussed in more detail in Chapters 2, 18 and 19.

---

**Breaking Bad**

The AMC series *Breaking Bad*, created by Vince Gilligan, traces the evolution of dying chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston) into the legendary blue crystal meth drug manufacturer, Heisenberg, so he can (at least initially) provide for his family. Across five seasons, the series traces the impact this has upon Walter’s morality, his family and the larger drug and criminal culture of Albuquerque, New Mexico (where the action is set). As such, *Breaking Bad* involves its audience...
Part 1 Introducing Media and Journalism

THE MEDIASHERE

If we think of the media as being structured like dialogue, we can move from thinking about discrete media forms (television series, web pages, films and newspapers) working in isolation, to chains or webs of media all talking back and forth to each other. This is the mediasphere: thousands of media forms connected to each other in subtle and obvious ways. Of course, where there are connections between media, there is also the possibility of someone controlling those connections. As Thwaites, Davis and Mules (2002) note, engaging in dialogue is a fundamental part of social action, but it also means that media can be used to impose cultural dominance and offer forms of resistance. This means that the mediasphere is also connected to power and control.

FIGURE 1.1 The Mediasphere

in both the larger serial narrative (Walter’s journey) and several smaller discrete arcs (Walter’s relationship with Jesse, the threat of Gus Fring, whether Walter’s brother-in-law, DEA agent Hank Schrader, will discover the truth etc.) while engaging the audience in a broader dialogue around moral choices, moral consequences and the possibility of redemption. As creator Gilligan notes, his original conception was to reference classic characters; in this case, turning Mr. Chips into Scarface because: ‘Television is historically good at keeping its characters in a self-imposed stasis so that shows can go on for years or even decades … When I realized this, the logical next step was to think, how can I do a show in which the fundamental drive is towards change?’ (in Klosterman 2011). As such, Breaking Bad functioned on a number of dialogic levels, not least of which was through references in other media texts as its popularity grew, including parodies, T-shirts with key phrases (‘I am the one who knocks’) and even a Mr Potato Head toy called Fries-Enberg.
The science fiction television series *V*, which first aired in 1983–85 and was reimagined in 2009–10, deals with ideas of cultural dominance and resistance. In both versions, the series tells the story of Earth being visited by a vast fleet of flying saucers, piloted by apparently benign visitors who look just like us—but are actually cold-blooded reptilians scheming to exploit the Earth in some way (and process us for food). In both series they take control of the media and run a powerful public relations campaign arguing for trust and peace. Similarly, in both series a human resistance movement learns the truth and agitates for revolution against them. In 1983, for example, the movement is led by television journalist Mike Donovan (Marc Singer) and frequently fights for control of the media from the visitors, so they can show the worldwide audience what ‘they truly are’. Interestingly, the cultural dominance of the 1980s visitors is made clear through continual allegorical comparisons to the Nazis, through their SS-like black and red uniforms, their swastika-like symbol and their ‘visitor youth’ program. However, in the 2000s the visitors’ cultural dominance is made clear through constant allegorical comparisons to President Obama’s administration, including the reiteration of the buzzwords ‘hope’ and ‘change’ and the advocacy of ‘universal health care’. *V* therefore serves as an example of how ideas of cultural dominance can change over time (from the overt, to the subtle), but constantly depend on who ‘controls’ (or has access to) media.

**UNDERSTANDING MEDIA AND POWER**

There are two ways of understanding power relations in the mediasphere. The first is *hegemony* (Gramsci 1971), which is primarily involved in cultural dominance.

**How is hegemony articulated?**

French theorist Louis Althusser (1971) considered that cultural institutions (such as schools, religious groups and families) helped to construct hegemony by producing ‘cultural identities’ for people—convincing people that there were particular ways they should act or behave.

The media are clearly another cultural institution that functions in a similar way. Dominant groups use the media to persuade subordinate groups that they should remain in power. Here, the media encourages the subordinate groups to accept the leadership and ideas of the dominant power elite. We can refer to this influence as *hegemonic power*.

Importantly, hegemonic power is rarely a product of brute force. It is not like a soldier breaking into your home and convincing you, at gunpoint, that you must do this or that. Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, himself a founding member of Italy’s Communist Party and imprisoned by Mussolini for his political leanings, never thought that this concession of power or control by one group to another group was a part of hegemony. Hegemonic power is far more subtle than that. At its most subtle, hegemony is unseen and virtually unconscious.

Hegemony actually encourages subordinate groups to consent to the rule of the dominant power elite. This elite appears naturally superior and the subordinate group comes to believe that
the dominant group shares the same ideas and beliefs as themselves. Ultimately, hegemony makes it appear that subordinate interests are best served by this elite group being in power.

Who are these dominant power elites?

Some groups within a culture—normally those with the greatest economic or cultural capital—have a greater opportunity to promote their ideas to wider audiences, and to convince those audiences to accept their claim to power. (Schirato & Yell 2000: 81)

Dominant power elites might include politicians (such as Kim Jong-un in North Korea), dictators (such as the late Muammar Gaddafi in Libya) or media barons (such as Rupert Murdoch in general) who can exercise control over the media through political pressure or ownership.

Dominant power elites require great economic or cultural capital because hegemony can rarely work through just one media form. Usually, hegemony requires an accumulation of media: a repetition of the same message over and over again, across different forms. Therefore, dominant power elites have to control vast amounts of media in order to exercise their hegemonic power.

THE MEDIASPHERE AS A POLITICAL ECONOMY

A lot of the terms we are using in this chapter—hegemony, pluralism and even the concept of the public sphere—were first applied to politics, and then imported into media studies. This is partly reflective of a larger shift in society, where dominant value systems (previously the sole province of religion or politics) have come to be embodied, reproduced and contested in the mediasphere. It is also indicative of the way media are increasingly implicated in politics and economics, which leads to a corresponding desire by governments to censor or at the very least regulate the media.

It is therefore possible to think of the mediasphere as a political economy and to study “the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources” (Wasko 2001: 29).

Understanding these power relations is clearly important for concepts such as hegemony and pluralism, as discussed below.

Think again of Rupert Murdoch, who is a recurring figure in this book. Murdoch owns a number of newspapers and television stations in the USA, the UK and Australia, among other countries. Following a directive from Murdoch, passed down through his editors and news producers, the editorials in all of his newspapers—and the presenters on his Fox News service—adopted a pro-war stance in relation to the US intervention in Iraq in 2003. Murdoch was therefore using his media to support President George W. Bush’s policies in relation to the Middle East. Through the media, he was convincing subordinate groups that it was in their best interests that the US invaded Iraq.

PROPAGANDA?

We can link hegemony to ideas of propaganda. Hegemony is communication designed to persuade—as is propaganda. Hegemony aims to persuade us to think in a certain way, but whereas propaganda is usually overt, emotive and appeals to the nationalism of the audience, hegemony works on a far more covert level.