3 Modernity and medium theory

Introduction

In this chapter we will chart some key media theories related to the broad theme of modernity. Central to discussion will be the most significant and controversial contribution to our understanding of media in modern times – medium theory. The term 'modernity' is generally understood to refer to the social, economic, political and technological developments that have characterized the transition from traditional (pre-modern) to advanced (modern) civilizations. Figure 3.1 outlines the main features of modernity in contrast to traditional societies. However, what particular developments best capture the characteristics of modernity in any given culture or society are contested. Some theorists emphasize capitalist principles and institutions as the key factors of modernity (e.g. McGuigan 2006) while others point to the importance of secularization and instrumental rationality (e.g. Turner 1990). The history of modernity is contested too. It is sometimes aligned to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – also known as the Age of Reason – and sometimes to the spread of Western imperialism in the sixteenth century. It has also been dated as far back as the fourth century (Kroker and Cook 1988) but, for the purposes of media theory, it suffices to situate the emergence of modernity somewhere around the second half of the fifteenth century along with the invention and expansion of the first mechanical media technology – the printing press.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernity (modern societies)</th>
<th>Pre-modernity (traditional societies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism/Markets</td>
<td>Subsistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>Agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
<td>Aristocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Religion/Superstition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule of Law</td>
<td>Barbarism (lawlessness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Oral Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic</td>
<td>Communal/Tribal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Characteristics of modernity and pre-modernity
Marshall Berman (1988) refers to three phases of modernity: first, the start of the sixteenth century in which ‘people are just beginning to experience modern life’; second, a revolutionary age beginning in the 1790s with the French Revolution and running into the nineteenth century when ‘a great modern public abruptly and dramatically comes to life’; and third, the twentieth-century globalization of modern life coupled with the rise of modernism as a radical art form (Berman 1988: 16–17). The second phase is especially significant to the growth of ‘daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale’ (Berman 1988: 19). It was the vast expansion of modernization in the name of industrial capitalism that heralded the culture of modernism. Modernism is not the same as modernity. Modernism refers specifically to ‘the experimental art and writing of c.1890–c.1940’ (Williams 1983a: 208). Modernist art, literature and criticism are centred on the idea that individual creativity is threatened by a hostile environment of oppressive politics, advanced economies, technologies and other social forces, including mass media. Although modernity and modernism have different meanings, this chapter interweaves ideas from both media theorists of modernity and modernist critics of media. This is because the art of modernism can be understood as a response to the social consequences of modernity. For media theory in general but the specialist field of medium theory in particular, the rapid development of mass media technologies is the most pressing aspect of modernity. In contrast to many other perspectives, however, medium theory assumes technology to be a powerful and mostly positive force for social change.

Innis: The Bias of Communication

The first medium theorist, Harold Innis, draws on historical evidence to outline a theory about what he calls the bias inherent to media technologies. Any medium of communication will be biased towards its utility either across time or space:

Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay or stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. The latter are suited to wide areas in administration and trade.

(Innis 1986: 5)

It might seem odd to think about stone and paper as media of communication, but historically these materials were among the only forms of media
available for communicating messages. Stone's utility was biased towards
time; paper's towards space. Innis argues that empires of power — both poli-
tical and economic — 'persist by overcoming the bias of media which over-
emphasizes either dimension' (Innis 1986: 5). This bias needs to be overcome
in order for empires to rule through a combination of centralized and
decentralized power. Media biased towards time concerns (like stone) serve to
keep economic and political power within centres of bureaucratic authority,
but empires can only maintain their power by delegating some of it to
external agencies. Therefore, media biased towards space concerns (like paper)
help to decentralize and spread an empire's power. According to Innis,
institutions such as governments and big businesses have used a mix of media
communications to accomplish and protect their power.

Innis extends his theory of media bias to the issue of how knowledge and
information are disseminated in societies. He uses historical examples to
show that the medium through which knowledge and information is circu-
lated has more impact on societies than the character or content of that
knowledge or information. As such, media technologies determine human
affairs to the extent that new technologies can create new ways of living: 'the
advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of
a new civilization' (Innis 1951: 34). His main evidence for this argument is
the historical shift from oral to written communication that was set in
motion by Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in Germany
circa 1450. Prior to the printing press, the Medieval Church in Europe
enjoyed a monopoly over religious information in the form of hand-written
scribes that were slow and expensive to reproduce. In 1453, the first print
version of the Bible — now known as the Gutenberg Bible — helped to de-
stabilize this monopoly. Printing and paper technologies enabled versions of
the Bible to be disseminated much more widely than previously. Ordinary,
god-fearing people were encouraged to become literate (i.e. able to read
written communications) and for the first time Christian beliefs could be
gleaned first hand, rather than from more corruptible second-hand sources
such as clergymen. The central power once exercised by the Church via time-
biased media was consequentially weakened by the spatial bias of print media
that led to a vast decentralization of power to Christian people.

Innis's theory finds support from at least two noteworthy studies that
followed him. First, Walter J. Ong (1993) suggests that literate cultures which
emerged in the wake of print technologies developed different sensory
experiences than traditional, oral cultures. For instance, oral memory by
necessity was highly sophisticated and frequently drawn on. By contrast, the
ability to read and 'write down' information — to produce a material record of
that information — reduced the necessity for and capacity of human memory
exertions. Less reliance on human memory is inextricably linked to the
decentralizing power of space-biased print media. Second, Benedict Anderson
(1991) argues that the printing press helped to develop what he calls ‘print-languages’ which assembled the vernacular of different dialects into the accepted linguistic code of a nation. In turn, print technology and capitalist economics ‘created the possibility of a new form of imagined community’ (Anderson 1991: 46) in which local communities became united through a common language and national identity. Innis is not without his critics, however. The idea that media technologies in themselves determine social, political, economic and religious change – that they have a life of their own beyond the human beings that invent and use them – is far from convincing. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’s (1979) far more comprehensive history of the printing press is highly critical of ‘the sweeping and sensational claims made by Innis and McLuhan’ (Eisenstein 1979: 171) that, she argues, lack historical context. The second name mentioned by Eisenstein is Innis’s best-known student, Marshall McLuhan, whose even more emphatic claim that technology revolutionizes society is considered now.

**McLuhan: the medium is the message**

McLuhan is perhaps the only media theorist to have become a media celebrity. During the height of his fame he even played a cameo role in Woody Allen’s acclaimed film, *Annie Hall* (1977). Beginning with Innis’s ideas about the impact of the printing press on information monopolies, McLuhan’s medium theory states that any advanced modern society is shaped by the various media technologies that are available to it. Media have powerful effects on societies. Moreover, media become extensions of ourselves; extensions of our human senses. What matters, then, is not the content of these media technologies but the technologies themselves. Take television, for instance. It matters not in the least whether we refer to a soap opera, a news bulletin, a serial drama, a documentary, and so forth. What matters is the medium, not the message, because ‘the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs’ (McLuhan 1964: 8). In other words, the messages contained in any medium are inseparable from the medium’s human consequences, and it is these consequences that matter most. Therefore, ‘“the medium is the message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’ (McLuhan 1964: 9). Television, then, is an electrical medium that transmits sequences of audio-visual material across vast distances (and sometimes across nations) to its viewers. Televisual images and sounds are the messages sent out by television. What those images show or those sounds emit are inconsequential to the grander scheme of things in which television transformed patterns of leisure, domestic life, education and – for those employed by television and its related industries – work.
We can best understand McLuhan's medium theory by examining how it compares the properties of different media. McLuhan's principal distinction is between 'hot media' and 'cold media'. Hot media require low levels of audience participation because they 'extend one single sense in “high definition”' and are 'well filled with data' (McLuhan 1964: 22). A typical photograph, for example, requires little effort in defining what it represents. A cartoon, in comparison, is a cold medium because - with less visual data - it requires higher levels of sensory participation (i.e. eye work) in order to be defined. A similar distinction can be drawn between film and television. Film is a hotter medium than television because its richer visual resolution requires lower audience participation. The celluloid and projection technologies of film, McLuhan claims, provide high-definition visual data in comparison to the scan lines transmitted through television. Even high-definition television (HDTV), while hotter than standard television images, cannot compete with the heat of 35-millimetre movie images. You have to work harder as a television viewer than a film spectator. Some other hot and cold media comparisons are listed in Figure 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOT media</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>COLD media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Photograph</td>
<td>Cartoon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Television</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid newspaper</td>
<td>Broadsheet newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>Seminar/Tutorial class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.2** Hot and cold media

McLuhan argues that this distinction in the properties of different media technologies effectively shapes how we use and learn from them. Hot media tend to function as easily forgotten and highly disposable entertainment forms; cold media, by contrast, afford greater capacity for learning because they require higher levels of sensory participation, concentration and literacy skills. This distinction is thoughtful but – to be critical – does not always allow for clear-cut examples. The internet, for instance, requires higher levels of participation (including computer literacy skills) than television in one sense, but in another sense – speed of information – it requires less participation. If I want to know the news headlines, the internet is likely to involve the least participation in terms of time because television news headlines only appear at intervals (every 15 minutes on rolling news channels typically). The internet is therefore a hotter medium than television in some sense and a cooler medium in another.

McLuhan's emphasis on (hot or cold) medium over message, format over
content can appear somewhat abstract and is certainly open to debate. Before we address some criticisms of medium theory, though, we should consider McLuhan's argument in a wider historical context. We tend to take television for granted today, but it is a relatively recent media technology that only became widespread in developed countries during the middle of the twentieth century, and in many developing countries a good deal later. The impact television made on human actions and behaviour – as we discussed in the previous chapter – is still difficult to measure, and could only really have been felt by a particular generation of people who witnessed its advent and subsequently adopted it. So imagine an event like the one that occurred on September 11th 2001. Two planes crash into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. How did the vast majority of the world’s population experience this event? Of course, they watched the shocking images on television. But what if an event similar to 9/11 had occurred in 1801 rather than 2001? The event (and the message sent out by its terrorist perpetrators) would have still been shocking to hear about, but ‘hear about it’ – through word-of-mouth or, if we were wealthy and educated, reading about it in a newspaper – is all we could have done, because in 1801 television and other electrical media did not exist. The medium is the message here in the sense that the medium through which a message is sent to its receiver dictates the power of that message. Today's media technologies are, on the whole but with a few exceptions, hotter than yesteryear's cool technologies.

Like Innis's theory of media bias, McLuhan's medium theory can only be understood through an historical lens. Medium theory is inseparable from the processes of modernity undergone by advanced industrial societies. McLuhan refers to three eras of media history within the wider context of modernity (see Table 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Type of medium</th>
<th>Dominant medium</th>
<th>Time period (approximate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tribal</td>
<td>Oral (word-of-mouth)</td>
<td>Speech/song</td>
<td>Before 1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detribalization</td>
<td>Mechanical</td>
<td>Print</td>
<td>1500–1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retribalization</td>
<td>Electrical</td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>After 1900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to the invention of the printing press, a tribal era holds sway. Human beings communicate with each other through media of speech and song. Oral literacy is the only type required. Gutenberg’s invention, as discussed earlier, changes the course of media history and sets the wheels in motion for modernity. Print media – books, pamphlets, letters – begin to dominate human communications and more traditional notions of literary
(reading and writing skills) become a requirement for social progress. As individuals and groups turn to the written word for cool instruction and education, an era of detribalization sets in. It is no longer necessary for people to live, speak, listen and be governed in the intimacy of tribal gatherings now that print media can be mass-produced and widely distributed. Detribalization brings with it, however, new forms of decentralized power and authority. Centres of power hoard new mechanical technologies in order to determine the content of books and other print media destined for 'the masses'. Before the French Revolution, print media disseminated by aristocratic powers succeeded in homogenizing France: 'Frenchmen were the same kind of people from north to south' (McLuhan 1964: 14). French culture and language were standardized throughout the nation from their Parisian stronghold.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, however, an era of retribalization has evolved in tandem with the electrical age of media communications. Telephone, television and the internet, for instance, are shrinking the world and bringing people closer together via audio and visual media. This is the inspiration behind another well-known phrase coined by McLuhan: 'the global village' (McLuhan and Fiore 2001). We no longer live in tribal villages in the literal sense, but in the metaphorical sense electrical media have expanded our horizons to such an extent that we feel a vicarious intimacy with people and places all over the world. The advent of the internet and email communications has helped to revive McLuhan's medium theory and specifically his ideas about an era of retribalization in today's global village. eBay, for example, is a McLuhan-esque web venture - The World's Online Marketplace - with its own virtual community (tribe) of buyers and sellers located in over thirty different countries. MySpace also resembles a global village in which users spatially distant from each other can converge - in a virtual sense - around common tastes and interests. Nonetheless, medium theory has undergone sustained criticism and McLuhan has as many opponents as exponents (see discussion of Williams later in this chapter). Particularly problematic is the assumption that media and communications technologies revolutionize all parts of social and economic life. This contradicts a theory of social exclusion which incorporates the idea that less affluent societies and social classes do not gain the same access to or benefit from technologies enjoyed by those who can afford to invest in them. eBay might be a boon to business enterprise in the 'markets' within which it operates, but it does nothing to improve the lives of would-be entrepreneurs in parts of the world without the necessary communications infrastructure.

One of McLuhan's exponents, Neil Postman (1987), begins with a sympathetic rendition of medium theory but applies it to a far more cynical picture of contemporary media influence. In contrast to the Age of Exposition - meaning 'thorough explanation' - so helpfully forged by print media, Postman argues that the invention of the electric telegraph in the United
States in 1837 signalled (no pun intended!) a new era – the Age of Show Business. The telegraph provided far faster communication across greater distances than any medium had done before. While McLuhan suggests that the telegraph catapulted society into a phase of mighty progress and advancement, Postman suggests that it attacked the literate culture nurtured by print media in ‘introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence’ (Postman 1987: 66). Unlike print communications such as letters, telegraphic messages tended to lack context or detail, did not answer complex questions or dilemmas, were often addressed to a general audience of no one in particular, and did not sufficiently afford the right to reply. Along with telegraphy, another new technology that became known as photography, likewise, brought with it an idiosyncratic series of responses: ‘For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing’ (Postman 1987: 76). The Age of Show Business had arrived as image and sound-bite overcame the more cultured Age of Print. Like children, we have learnt to enjoy visual rather than textual pleasures and now live in a ‘peek a boo world’ that resists intellectual substance. Moreover, children are now more like adults. The past dominance of print media such as books required a schooling period for children in their intellectual development, but the Age of Show Business is equally accessible to child and adult alike, hence the disappearance of childhood (Postman 1983).

The main object of scorn for Postman is not telegraphy or photography but their offspring, television. Such is television’s influence on contemporary life that it has created a new epistemology. ‘Epistemology’ is a complex term meaning a theory of knowledge, and more specifically, how we come to know about things that claim to be true. Television is ‘an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of ways of knowing as well’ (Postman 1987: 80). Television’s epistemology is defined by its overriding feature as a medium – it is for our vision more so than any other human sense. And its audience sees countless images without any coherent structure (commercial breaks, for example) that function primarily as infantile entertainment. Television entertains even when the intention is to inform, such as during news bulletins:

The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining ... Everything about a news show tells us this – the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show ... They are not assembling the news to be read, or broadcasting it to be heard. They are televising the news to be seen. They must follow where the medium leads.

(Postman 1987: 89-90)
Television news values are based on the drama of spectacle; by contrast, the values of news print media can still be based on sustained, intellectual debate and dialogue. Postman fears that electrical technologies like television are effectively leading to ‘culture-death’. Elsewhere, the author has suggested that the United States has become the first ‘Technopoly’, meaning it is the first nation that has submitted ‘all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology’ (Postman 1993: 52).

**Benjamin: art and mechanical reproduction**

Writing long before McLuhan and Innis, Walter Benjamin in his classic essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (first published in 1936) draws a similarly optimistic theory about the revolutionary qualities of media technologies. Benjamin considers that mechanical technologies, especially photography and film, have ‘transformed the entire nature of art’ (Benjamin 1973a: 220) rather than diminished it. This transformation is due to their reproducibility. Mass reproduction of art meant that, for example, great paintings such as the ‘Mona Lisa’ could be seen in a replica (i.e. photographic or filmic) form by millions of ordinary people – not just by a privileged class who owned or could afford to access these works of art. Reproduction comes at a price, however: ‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’ (Benjamin 1973a: 214).

Original works of art contain this missing element, which explains why they take on an ‘aura’ – a mystical sense of authenticity that makes them special and extremely sought after. This sense of aura is threatened, though, when an original work of art is reproduced on a mass scale (see Figure 3.3). The ‘Mona Lisa’ original is unlikely to be a first sighting of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting for visitors to the Musée du Louvre in Paris today. The fascination has worn off to some extent. On the other hand, those people lucky enough to see the painting up close in the pre-mechanical age would have no doubt been awestruck in expectation at what they might see.

Benjamin’s theory of aura is based on the claim that ‘the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function’ (1973a: 217). Original artistic productions are therefore experienced in ritual contexts, which means they acquire a set of customs and traditions associated with their existence. For example, paintings are experienced in art galleries; music is heard at concerts. By contrast, reproduced art – distributed through media technologies such as television or magazines – is freed from customary ritual and instead serves an exhibition function: ‘With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products’ (Benjamin 1973a: 218–19).
Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, for instance, is no longer tied to the ritual of the concert hall – where a ticket might cost a month’s wages – when it can be exhibited in the living room via CD or MP3. This transition from ritual to exhibition marks a simultaneous transition, moreover, from original use value (or ‘cult value’) to reproducible ‘exhibition value’. What Benjamin means is that the use value of a mechanically-produced, original art work (its ownership value) is less significant than its exhibition value (its value as a commodity that can be distributed and sold in multiple copies). By the same token, an original Hollywood film recording is worth nothing in comparison to an original da Vinci painting, but the mass reproducibility of a Hollywood film – its exhibition value – can be very lucrative indeed.

What are the consequences of mass reproduction of art in modernity? According to Benjamin, art and cultural products more generally have become increasingly political. Freed from ritual contexts of aura and freed from the ownership of powerful elites, contemporary art forms such as

Figure 3.3  Mona Lisa reproduced in an ad
popular music – in all its recording formats – are produced and consumed by millions of people, sometimes to express oppositional politics in the face of oppressive regimes. Bertolt Brecht, the famous playwright and friend of Benjamin, produced and directed films for political ends. Informed by Benjamin's theories, he developed his own theories about the political purpose of art – particularly theatre and film – which in turn informed his friend (see Benjamin 1973b). Armed with new technologies, Brecht intended to change the way in which audiences responded to plays and films. His theory of alienation stated that audiences should be encouraged to become actively involved in what they watched; to think about and analyse situations; to take sides and hone opinions on controversial topics; and not to feel sympathy or empathy for characters or predicaments. Of course, Brecht had a political axe to grind – he was a communist whose Marxist sympathies are expressed in plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949) – but through alienation, he sought to foster intellectual detachment in audiences so that they could make their own, informed political judgements (see Brecht 1979). The Marxist beliefs of Brecht and Benjamin were taboo in Germany during the rise of Hitler and fascism. Both men were forced to curtail their intellectual activities and, ultimately, had to flee their native country for fear of imprisonment and possible execution. Brecht escaped to the United States but Benjamin lost his life in 1940 while in exile in France.

A later adaptation of Benjamin's theories is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Berger's argument is that today's flood of publicity and advertising images share much in common – their layout, motifs and messages – with eighteenth-century oil paintings. The major difference is that while oil paintings were once addressed to the 'spectator-owner', advertising images are addressed to the 'spectator-buyer':

The oil painting was addressed to those who made money out of the market. Publicity is addressed to those who constitute the market, to the spectator-buyer who is also the consumer-producer from whom profits are made twice over – as worker and then as buyer. The only places relatively free of publicity are the quarters of the very rich; their money is theirs to keep.

(Berger 1972: 142)

As this quote suggests, Berger has a dimmer view of publicity images than Benjamin's view of photography as a radical art form. Nonetheless, there is a political dimension to mass-reproduced advertisements, albeit a sinister one that favours those in power: 'Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of a significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society' (Berger 1972: 149). While Third World
countries see publicity images as symbols of free choice and democracy, the truth according to Berger is that advertising restricts choice and disengages Western people from serious political issues. Technology as a flagship feature of modernity is being used in dystopian rather than progressive, utopian ways. Brecht’s revolutionary art is being directly challenged, then, by a profit-driven media culture of advertising, plugging and endorsements that deals more in candy and catharsis than intellect and politics (see discussion of Adorno in Chapter 7 for a similarly pessimistic account of technology from a political economy perspective).

The Leavises and the Lynds

Theories of modernity such as McLuhan’s medium theory are indebted to a related but slightly different phenomenon known as ‘modernism’. As discussed earlier, modernism is a literary and aesthetic tradition particularly associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernism, in stark contrast to medium theory, expresses cynicism about modernity and technology. Brecht’s plays are modernist in their attack on fascism and rampant capitalist greed. Typically, a golden age of high morality and humanity is evoked in modernist art and juxtaposed with the barbarism of the present. Two key exponents of modernist criticism are F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, probably the most famous of all intellectual couples.

F. R. Leavis’s modernist theories are based on the premise of an elite minority culture that he identifies as having emerged to counter the threat of banal, mass-produced entertainment:

In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends ... Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age.

(F. R. Leavis 1930: 3, 5)

For F. R. Leavis, an elite group of educated cultural critics is paramount for the provision of moral guidance to mass civilization. Hollywood films, for the majority of their unthinking audience, ‘involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals’ (F. R. Leavis 1930: 10). This quote smacks of media effects, but it is rooted in a broader cultural theory about the forces of modernity. Cinema, radio, best-selling novels, large-circulation newspapers and magazines are, according to Q. D. Leavis (1932: 193), ‘standardizing forces’ that threaten intellectual culture. Popular
films and novels work to the same formula: they ‘must promise romance or fail’ (Q. D. Leavis 1932: 320). The Leavises are concerned with the ‘levelling down’ – or what is known these days as the ‘dumbing down’ – of popular culture via mass media. The authentic poetic voice of what T. S. Eliot (1951) – another modernist – called the ‘individual talent’ has been usurped by the profit-seeking motives of capitalist-driven media corporations.

One of these profit-driven corporations under attack from the Leavises was Lord Northcliffe’s popular newspaper press. The rise of Northcliffe’s popular press in early twentieth-century Britain – evidenced by the Daily Mail, one of the first million-selling newspapers – may have given the public what they wanted, but not what was good for them. Northcliffe’s news values were about eye-catching presentation and entertainment, as opposed to the serious politics and foreign affairs covered by broadsheet newspapers in the nineteenth century. While ‘The old journalist was controlled by a sense of the dignity of his [sic] profession’, by contrast ‘the modern “cynical”, cheaply sophisticated journalist who gives the public what it wants is, and considers himself, a businessman, and he has precisely the same code and outlook as the next man who is out to sell his goods’ (Q. D. Leavis 1932: 181). This business-like style of the new journalism was grounded in sensational human interest and crime stories that appealed, the Leavises argued, to the base emotions of uneducated readers. Economic interests held sway over moral standards. Northcliffe was the first press baron to set advertising rates in proportion to circulation figures. Following the success of the Daily Mail, Northcliffe took control of several other newspapers including The Times during an inter-war period that witnessed intense concentration of press ownership. This led to the decline of provisional newspapers and – to prove the Leavises’ point – increased standardization of editorial content and decision-making in the interests of sales and advertising revenue.

The cheap values represented by Britain’s commercial press were symptomatic of wider American cultural and economic influences. The fear of Americanization as a pervasive feature of modernity is perceived by F. R. Leavis in the pages of a book written by anthropologists Robert and Helen Lynd called Middletown (1929):

There we see in detail how the automobile (to take one instance) has, in a few years, radically affected religion, broken up the family, and revolutionized social custom. Change has been so catastrophic that the generations find it hard to adjust themselves to each other, and parents are helpless to deal with their children.

(F. R. Leavis 1930: 6)

The implication is that Americanization in all its cultural and media forms – automobiles, Hollywood films, and so on – will drift across the Atlantic to
Britain and beyond (see Hebdige 1989). The book being referred to is an ethnographic account of everyday life during the 1920s in a place given the pseudonym 'Middletown', which was in fact the small city of Muncie, Indiana, in the United States. Rather than simply detailing the customs and habits of Middletown at a given period in history, though, the Lynds compared their own research with similar ethnographic data gathered in the same town during the year 1890. Interestingly, Lynd and Lynd are able to compare an age when mass media had only a limited presence in the lives of Middletown's residents (i.e. 1890) with a period of history 35 years later when the impact of radio, cinema and phonograph – as well as the expansion of print media – were growing in prominence within American culture. According to the authors, these new mass media were re-making leisure in Middletown by standardizing people's pastimes and outlooks on the world beyond their community. Unlike life in 1890, Middletown leisure pursuits in the 1920s were more passive and less creative. Organizational forms of leisure such as sports and music clubs were being superseded by the lure of movies and automobiles.

The advent of media technologies in Middletown had ultimately shifted people's leisure-time from public to semi-public or private activities. Popular leisure pursuits such as travelling in cars and listening to the radio had a 'decentralizing tendency' in drifting away from community-based clubs and organizations in favour of 'individual, family or small group affairs' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 265). In addition to this 'decentralizing tendency', media were impacting in two other important and interrelated ways in the lives of Middletown's inhabitants. At the same time that technologies such as radio were affecting a standardization of habits and opinions, by letting in the outside world they also had the beneficial effect of 'rolling back the horizons' and 'lifting Middletown out of the humdrum of everyday' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 269, 271). McLuhan's retribalized global village, it would appear, was at least tangible in a small, 1920s American city. The authors suggest that media influences on Middletown are considerable, stating that 'these space-binding leisure-time inventions imported from without - automobile, motion picture, and radio - [are] reshaping the city' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 271). To some extent this 'reshaping of the city' is a positive development in that it enables individuals to educate themselves in politics and world affairs. On the negative side, though, external influences are diluting the local character of places like Middletown. In 1890, it was better able to display its peculiarities, but by the 1920s, Middletown - both the place and the people - was being reshaped into an American city like any other. It seems like McLuhan failed to account for this dark side of the global village. The modernist fears of the Leavises are largely realized, therefore, in the Lynds's account of how forces of modernity - particularly new media and communications technologies - are threatening traditions and standardizing people's lives.
Riesman and Hoggart: other-directed character and its uses of literacy

Modernity's darker side is also evidenced in theories of mass media and culture, including two seminal works from either side of the Atlantic: David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (first published in 1950) and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (first published in 1957). Both books are concerned with the consequences of widespread public literacy brought on by both mass media technologies and an ostensibly progressive facet of modernity, namely the expansion of education. Riesman identifies three types of 'direction' in the character of American people that have evolved during the course of modernity:

1. **Tradition-direction:** this condition was typical in early America. Lack of social mobility means that individuals remain tied to fixed clans and castes (social classes), and behavioural conformity is a social expectation.

2. **Inner-direction:** increased personal mobility, expansion of wealth and new employment opportunities characterize this type. Direction is 'inner' because an individual's role in society is 'implanted early in life by elders' (Riesman 1961: 15).

3. **Other-direction:** this type of direction is prevalent in contemporary America. Inner-directed patterns of discipline and family values are displaced as individuals become directed towards 'others' of their own age and background (i.e. peers) as well as the influences of media and popular culture.

Other-directed character 'types' are indicative of a young generation of metropolitan, middle-class Americans – well-educated and highly literate – working in service and financial industries. However, within the realm of leisure and consumption, Riesman considers the other-directed to be inferior to the inner-directed character. Inner-directedness is guided by didactic training and good practice, such as playing a game of chess. With other-directedness, on the other hand, 'mass media serve as tutors' and effectively replace parents, teachers and other elders (Riesman 1961: 290). Instead of productive leisure pursuits, emphasis is directed towards what Riesman calls 'consumership' – which film to watch, which album to buy.

Being a good consumer is vital for other-directed individuals in securing peer-group approval. Other-directed types exhibit 'an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others' (Riesman 1961: 22) which leads to behavioural conformity. Unlike tradition-directed conformity that was an expectation instilled from positions of authority, however, other-directed
conformity is a social contract that people accept voluntarily. Elsewhere, Riesman’s theory of other-directed character is evidenced in research on teenage popular music consumption (Riesman 1990). He analysed interviews with teenagers about their music tastes and drew a distinction between a majority and a minority audience. Differences in how the two groups listened to and talked about popular music are shown in Figure 3.4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority</th>
<th>Minority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pop bands and star singers</td>
<td>Underground ‘hot’ jazz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-group conformity</td>
<td>Peer-group rejection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial tastes</td>
<td>Alternative (non-commercial) tastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Rebellious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-free judgement</td>
<td>High standards of technical judgement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.4 Majority and minority audiences for popular music

As we can see from these differences, the majority of teenagers listen to popular music in an other-directed manner: ‘The functions of music for this group are social – the music gives them something to talk or kid about with friends’ (Riesman 1990: 8). For young people keen to join the majority audience along with their peers ‘the fear is to be caught liking what the others have decided not to like’ (Riesman 1990: 12). In stark contrast, the minority audience is critical of both the majority attitude and expresses a ‘resentment of the image of the teenager provided by the mass media’ (Riesman 1990: 10). Although the comparison is not strictly a fair one, we can nevertheless see similarities in Riesman’s minority audience and the minority culture expounded by the Leavises in the fight against standardized mass entertainment.

Hoggart, like Riesman, examines popular music and its impact on vulnerable people, and more specifically, the working-class youth of Britain (especially industrial northern England). The increasingly literate and wealthy, but poorly educated, young in 1930s Britain remain ‘substantially without a sense of the past’ (Hoggart 1958: 190). If some youth groups ‘still sing some of the songs their grandparents sang’ (Hoggart 1958: 158), this is only due to their being directly taught them; not due to their having sought to learn of them. It is behind this backdrop that Hoggart outlines his theory of cultural classlessness. The working classes – along with more affluent groups – are ‘becoming culturally classless’ because mass media such as popular songs ‘cannot reach an audience of the size they need by cutting across class boundaries’ (Hoggart 1958: 342). Mass media are quite literally broadcasted. For instance, mass-produced songs cause ‘weak communalism’ (Hoggart
1958: 228) and threaten working-class traditions. Hoggart suggests that while older forms of communal singing were 'both personal and public', in newer forms such as crooning 'there is a huge, public effect ... The singer is reaching millions but pretends that he is reaching only "you"' (Hoggart 1958: 227). The uses of literacy are being wasted on these sentimental, phoney, 'candy floss' forms of mass entertainment. More recently, Hoggart (2004) has continued this theme of mass media contributing to a mass, culturally deprived society without a true sense of identity and belonging. In another work, he outlines his solution: 'Broadcasting will be on a local scale; it will be something people take part in, not something that they are simply given' (Hoggart 1972: 88). Hoggart's remedy is a retreat from advanced modernity back to a nostalgic age of class traditions – a blend of cultural pessimism and conservatism where elders hold sway over peer-group and media influences, akin to Riesman's theory of inner-directedness.

Williams: technology and cultural form

Medium theory is criticized most often for its technological determinism. Raymond Williams – particularly in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (first published in 1974) – has been one of the most ardent critics of this concept, which he defines as follows:

The basic assumption of technological determinism is that a new technology – a printing press or a communications satellite – 'emerges' from technical study and experiment. It then changes the society or the sector into which it has 'emerged'. 'We' adapt to it, because it is the new modern way.

(Williams 1983b: 129)

The deterministic approach states that technologies have an autonomous power to 'create new societies or new human conditions' (Williams 2003: 6) notwithstanding the fact that they are invented, produced and used by human beings. In the case of medium theory, McLuhan insists that the introduction of any new medium will shape how people live their lives. Williams argues against such an idea by showing how 'a technical invention as such has comparatively little social significance' until it has been adapted to existing social and economic conditions (Williams 1983b: 129–30). For instance, the printing press may have been invented in the fifteenth century but 'The rise in reading, and in quality, was in fact steady' (Williams 1965: 181) and it was not until over three hundred years after the Gutenberg invention that literacy had become widespread enough in Britain to identify a middle-class reading public. Working-class literacy, by contrast, was only
achieved much later as a foremost consequence of social and political processes – namely, the 1870 Education Act that introduced compulsory schooling – as opposed to technological ones.

Unlike McLuhan’s account which he attacks as ‘wholly unhistorical and asocial’ (Williams 2003: 131), Williams draws on a series of historical examples of inventions in media communications to show how each technology was always foreseen for a previously devised purpose before it was discovered. Moreover, the effects of each media technology were anticipated before that technology came into use: ‘In no way is this a history of communications systems creating a new society or new social conditions’ (Williams 2003: 12). Rather than focus on the causes of technologies – as does McLuhan – Williams addresses what causes them. In the main, technologies of all kinds, and not just media ones, develop for commercial, political and military purposes. In the case of railways and telegraphy (the predecessor of telephony), both developed in the USA and Britain for commercial reasons, to drive industrial development by enabling the efficient transportation of raw materials to factories and distributing the finished products across nations. These two technologies combined to ignite what the renowned social historian Asa Briggs calls a communications revolution: ‘Railways and telegraphs ... were directly related to each other. There was, indeed, a continuing link between physical and electrical communication’ (Briggs 1966: 8). McLuhan also mentions the role of railways in industrialization, but is surely wrong to argue that these technologies created new societies ‘quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium’ (McLuhan 1964: 8). The railway medium, on the contrary, contained a message such as ‘coal’ that fuelled the fires to create steel, textiles and other essential materials for the Industrial Revolution.

At first it might seem strange to compare the railway medium with those technologies more familiarly referred to as ‘media’ today, such as television. Williams, however, attempts to make these comparisons by showing how the history of communications follows the same pattern in different societies: business and transport communications develop first, caused mostly by economic demands, and then there emerge forms of information and entertainment communications, caused mostly by social and cultural demands. So television was slow to develop in comparison with, say, the telephone, because it did not initially demonstrate obvious economic benefits. In contrast to medium theory, then, technologies are shown by Williams to develop as an outcome of human needs and intentions. Technologies do not emerge from the isolation of a laboratory and then determine the needs that humans require. Television, argues Williams, was invented due to social demand – as well as political and economic demands – and the use to which it was put was intended before the first television sets were sold.

Like the radio, Williams suggests that demand for television resulted
from a social tendency which he terms 'mobile privatization'. This concept refers to 'an at-once mobile and home-centred way of living' (Williams 2003: 19) that became commonly experienced in late industrial societies during the first half of the twentieth century. People are increasingly living as 'private small-family units' or as 'self-enclosed individuals' but at the same time 'there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies' (Williams 1983b: 188). For instance, the family home becomes increasingly privatized and self-sufficient as people's working and living conditions - and wages - improve, but this privacy and self-sufficiency are dependent on external factors such as job opportunities and social welfare. From this state of affairs results 'the need and form of a new kind of “communication”: news from “outside”, from otherwise inaccessible sources' (Williams 2003: 20-1). It was this need for a continuous 'flow' of communication that television fulfilled. Another example of mobile privatization is car traffic. From the outside, 'traffic flows and their regulation are clearly a social order of a determined kind' in which technology appears to determine and dehumanize our lives, but this is 'not at all how it feels inside the [car] shell, with people you want to be with, going where you want to go' within the privatized, 'conditioned atmosphere and internal music of this windowed shell' (Williams 1983b: 188-9). Williams's theory of mobile privatization is simultaneously about regulation and self-determination; containment and freedom; technology and cultural form. As such, mobile privatization is able to overcome 'the unholy alliance' (Williams 1983b: 143) in the great debate about modernity - on the one hand, medium theory and its flawed technological determinism; and on the other hand, the Leavisite tradition of modernist criticism and its cultural pessimism with respect to the 'levelling down' effects of mass communications technologies.

**Habermas: media and the public sphere**

How have media changed the character of public opinion through the course of modernity? This is the question addressed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first published in 1962). Habermas argues that a bourgeois (middle-class) public sphere of intellectuals that helped to supplant medieval aristocracies and served an important political function in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in countries such as Britain, France and Germany has become obsolete during the phase of late modernity or advanced capitalism. No longer is it possible for a public sphere made up of private citizens to engage in critical debate likely to have repercussions for contemporary politics, art, and so on. However, in the coffee houses and social clubs of eighteenth-century London and Paris - among other centres of power and struggle - such critical debate and its
political consequences were wide-ranging. This bourgeois public sphere of academics, shopkeepers and others collectively generated ideas and policies in critical dialogue with aristocratic counterparts – often circulated through self-produced periodicals, sometimes known as ‘moral weeklies’ – that effectively steered the course of politics, art, science and morality in the world outside and beyond. Institutions of the public sphere, such as coffee houses and clubs, had three criteria in common: all participants were treated as equals and status was disregarded; debate was focused on issues rarely questioned by the powerful nobility; and ‘everyone had to be able to participate’ (Habermas 1989: 37) in this inclusive arena of discussion. Unfortunately according to Habermas, from the 1830s onwards, the political influence of the bourgeois public sphere weakened as a result of its small-circulation periodicals suffering direct competition from the large-circulation commercial press.

The decline of the bourgeois public sphere was partly due to the rise of mass media along with wider trends in the concentration of economic capital. Newspaper presses merged and bought out one another, combining their economic and technological prowess to reinforce and strengthen their market share. In nineteenth-century Britain this resulted in rapid concentration of media power (see Curran and Seaton 2003). Trends in the media industry were not peculiar to wider trends in different sectors – textiles, steel, food, financial and other sectors all experienced takeovers and mergers that concentrated capital in the hands of a few wealthy industrialists. For Habermas, this advanced capitalist phase of modernity effectively transformed the public sphere from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming one. As the author notes, ‘rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception’ (Habermas 1989: 161). Television, radio and other mass media – as the Lynds observed – separated the private from the public sphere by detrimentally affecting participation in organized forms of leisure and social (including political) activities. Political debate still receives airtime across today’s media but such debate has lost its critical edge and no longer speaks to public concerns because the umbilical cord that formerly connected private individuals to the public sphere has been severed. As such, ‘The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only’ (Habermas 1989: 171) and far removed from the golden age of a culture-debating public sphere. Today’s mediated political debates function as ‘a tranquillizing substitute for action’ (Habermas 1989: 264) in which participants carefully hone their self-presentation so as to manage public opinion about their political positions.

For Habermas, two main factors that have diluted the public sphere and dragged it into the ‘levelling-down’ pit of the mass media are advertising and public relations. Figure 3.5 outlines how Habermas distinguishes between three phases of news print production that developed chronologically in
European countries, although these phases did not apply to the development of news print media in the United States, which from the outset was an advertising-driven, commercial enterprise.

The popular, consumer-oriented press was ‘released from the pressure to take sides ideologically’ (Habermas 1989: 184) by the all-important profit motive, although Habermas points out that such a profit motive itself amounted to the declaration of a political stance that pandered to existing commercial interests and stood in opposition to the ‘hard talk’ of the critical bourgeois press. Consumer titles enjoyed substantial profits through advertising revenue and effectively allowed the public sphere – once an important arena of debate between private individuals and the nobility – to be invaded by privileged individuals (such as advertisers) with privileged private interests to publicize.

The public sphere as a platform for advertising also became, a little later, a platform for public relations and what Habermas refers to as the psychological techniques of opinion management. Public relations, like advertising, aims to achieve publicity – and subsequent profit through sales or public support – for particular private interests. However, public relations is more effective than advertising because it disguises itself as editorial penned by the ostensible integrity of ‘learned’ journalists:

The sender of the message hides his business intentions in the role of someone interested in the public welfare. The influencing of consumers borrows its connotations from the classic idea of a public of private people putting their reason to use and exploits its legitimations for its own ends. The accepted functions of the public sphere are integrated into the competition of organized private interests.

(Habermas 1989: 193)

The bourgeois public sphere – ‘a public of private people putting their reason to use’ – is therefore cynically reconstructed for the benefit of private
commercial interests. Public relations is a process of legitimating such interests for the public good. Like Riesman's notion of other-directedness, Habermas considers modern-day consumers to be hoodwinked into 'constant consumption training' (Habermas 1989: 192) that shapes public opinion into a soft exchange of views – about the latest washing-up liquid, or the new-release video game, or the next generation of mobile phones – instead of hard, serious discussion about the politics and policies of the day. Moreover, media-inflected public relations and advertising are leading to a 'refeudalization of the public sphere' (Habermas 1989: 195) because governments follow the example of private enterprises by addressing their citizens as consumers. These consumers suffer from 'the false consciousness that as critically reflecting people they contribute responsibly to public opinion' (Habermas 1989: 194) when in fact they are merely puppets being pulled by the strings of businesspeople and politicians. It is these powerful individuals with privileged access to the mediated public sphere of contemporary developed societies who represent a modern-day aristocracy (media barons no less) bestowed with great public authority like the feudal lords of medieval times.

Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been questioned by critics, especially in the way it romanticizes a golden age of bourgeois intellectuals before the advent of mass media and culture. Four criticisms cited by one critic are that Habermas equates the bourgeois public sphere with popular opinion, which is unconvincing in relation to historical evidence; that he assumes the public sphere granted access to all, when, in fact, eighteenth-century bourgeois society excluded a majority of poor and ill-educated people as well as women; that he has a simplistic view on contemporary media consumers as manipulated individuals; and that his model for more democratic public affairs in modern, diverse societies is vague and unworkable (Thompson 1995b). It could be argued that Habermas also fails to appreciate the wide-scale distribution or reproducibility (in Benjamin's terms) of moral and political debate across modern-day press and television – a far cry from the relatively inaccessible bourgeois public sphere.

Nonetheless, Habermas has identified a problem in how mass media represent – or rather, misrepresent – public opinion and public interests which can be traced back to an earlier period in our contemporary history. A team of sociologists and anthropologists in Britain, known as Mass-Observation, echoed Habermas's views on the refeudalization of the public sphere back in the late 1930s. They argued that 'People want inside information, they want to get behind the news' and that 'a growing number of people want less stories and more facts' about social life (Madge and Harrison 1939: 7 and 10):

The present position of the Intellectual Few is a relic of the times when the mass of the population consisted of serfs who could neither
read nor write. Then a few people at the top could easily impose their beliefs and rule on the multitude ... in many ways there is as much intellectual serfdom as ever.

(Madge and Harrisson 1939: 11)

Mass-Observation compared fact and 'objective reality' – which they tried to capture using social survey and observational methods – with the mass media and party politics, both of which were elitist institutions out of touch with the concerns of everyday people. In contrast to these elitist institutions, 'Mass-Observation shares the interests of most people in the actual, in what happens from day to day' (Madge and Harrisson 1937: 30). The reports and directive replies that were compiled and published by Mass-Observation aimed to represent an alternative public sphere whose voice could not be heard by a hostile, media-driven sphere of phoney public relations and propaganda. Elsewhere, Habermas (1985) has argued that the 'project of modernity' has so far failed because its social and cultural force has only been realized in one aspect: that is, its aesthetic form (modern art). Modern science and morality remain incomplete forms precisely because the public arena in which to debate and evaluate them is yet to be retrieved.

Summary

This chapter has considered:

• What modernity means; its social and historical context, and its relationship to modernism.
• Medium theory (Innis, McLuhan) and its revolutionary claims about the influence of media and communications technologies on social life.
• The reproducibility of mechanical technologies such as film (Benjamin) and their political function in modern societies.
• Modernist criticism of mass culture, also known as cultural pessimism (e.g. the Leavises).
• Theories of mass literacy (Riesman, Hoggart) that point to the unhealthy influence of mass media and modernity.
• Critiques of medium theory that emphasize the social, economic and political factors that determine technological use – and reject the idea of technological determinism (Williams).
• The decline of a culture-debating public sphere and its replacement by a culture-consuming, mass-mediated public sphere in late modernity (Habermas).
Further reading


Now in its sixth edition, this comprehensive overview of British media history is a tried-and-tested resource for all students interested in the relationship between media and processes of modernity such as industrialization and public regulation.


A polemical account of the relationship between media, modernity and Enlightenment thought. Chapters on media histories, media as technologies, and media and politics. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.


This book discusses McLuhan's ideas about media and their impact on our lives, as well as the author's updating of these ideas to shed light on our present-day digital age. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.


A diverse selection of essays from Morley on geographical and anthropological approaches to media technologies in modern life, including a fascinating approach to television as a visible object rather than a medium. Accessible to all media students, although some essays are better suited to advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.