A group of people gather to watch a television program together.

2

MEDIA AUDIENCES AND USES

INTRODUCTION

1. *What are some of the reasons you think people have for choosing to watch certain shows or movies? What benefits do you think they get from this kind of activity? What is the difference between watching as a group and watching on your own?*

2. *How often do you think about who creates the content you consume?*

3. *Are you ever worried about what effects the amount or type of media you consume is having on you? Why or why not?*

Consumers today take in exponentially more media content than those of previous generations. As a result, they need to better understand who is sending the content to them, what benefits they get from that content, and what concerns they should have about their media diets. This chapter will explain how to define a mass media audience, outlining the key factors that help place individuals into useful groupings. It will also explain what drives people to consume media, what benefits they get out of consuming it, and what drawbacks are associated with it. It will also introduce the idea of "demassification," the process through which media has become more individualized and how individuals can reach interested audiences without going through traditional media conglomerates. Finally, it will outline why understanding these basic media concepts can help you better navigate the media world around you.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

1. Define a mass media audience using demographic, psychographic, and geographic information.

2. Describe the importance of media literacy.

3. Explain why people consume media content, including the specific needs it satisfies.

4. Assess the concerns people have about media consumption and its effects on users.

5. Explain the concept of "demassification" and how it relates to today's media world.

FROM AGE TO INTERESTS: A BRIEF LOOK AT HOW TO DEFINE AN AUDIENCE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 1: Define a mass media audience using demographic, psychographic, and geographic information.

As a culture and a species, we have an innate need to know what's going on around us and why it matters, although what we care about and why we care can vary greatly from person to person. When we seek information from traditional and digital content outlets that is relevant, useful, and interesting to us, we become part of a mass media **audience**.

For generations, the public relied on what was defined as traditional mass media: forms of communication like newspapers, radio, and television that provided the public with the same information in a prescribed way. However, as we will see throughout this text, the way in which we think about mass media has changed greatly over the past few decades, thanks to technological innovation and the massive increase in media outlets.

When we consider how best to reach audiences through any form of media, three key elements are crucial in helping media professionals understand and target an audience:

1. Demographics

2. Psychographics

3. Geographics

Let's take a deeper look at each of these items and why they matter.

Demographics

If you think about any survey you have filled out, it probably included questions about your age, your gender, your race, and your education. These are just a few of the facts contained in your **demographics**. Collectively, these data points allow researchers to categorize people based on information about their identity.

Demographics are relatively stable personal elements that allow researchers to create basic categories in hopes of forming smaller groups within a population. For example, children under the age of six are limited in their social experiences and basic knowledge, so a television show aimed at them will likely rely on simple themes that are easily resolved. Conversely, individuals over the age of forty have a wider array of personal and professional interactions, thus allowing a television producer to use more complex themes, plot twists, and layered narratives.

Color choices and word selection can be shaped by demographics as well. According to web design expert Jennifer Kyrnin, blue-collar workers prefer common color tones and direct language to create a sense of stability and familiarity. Highly educated people, however, find inspiration in rare color hues and complex verbiage that pique their interests and create excitement.[1] So, you would want to take a different overall approach to developing a website for a steelworkers' union than you would for one targeting postdoctoral physicists.

Overall, demographics provide a good way to make some rough judgments about your audience in a way that serves to eliminate the people you don't plan to reach. Think about it like an artist carving a statue from a block of marble: the initial chiseling effort doesn't do much to define what the statue will look like, but it does eliminate material that doesn't need to be there. With that in mind, if you want to get a more refined look at your audience, you need to dig more deeply into its interests and values.

Psychographics

If you look around your classroom, you will likely see why demographics can tell researchers only so much about a group of people. In the most basic sense, the room probably contains people of similar ages and levels of education. However, if your professor said, "You folks are all exactly the same," it would likely get a big laugh from you all. Your interests, cultures, and connections all vary widely. While demographics can be helpful in defining an audience, psychographics matter a lot more.

Psychographics are defined as those things that "focus on the interests, affinities, and emotions of a group of people—exactly the things marketers need to understand to best position their product."[2] These traits can shed light on people's "passion points" that help define their individual identities and differentiate them from other people in any particular setting. It's the reason you can't assume that people who live in Boston will all be Red Sox fans or that every person who lives in a rural town will love country music.

While demographics can tell you what surface-level connections people have to certain characteristics, psychographics will help you understand the degree to which something resonates with them. For example, if two people select "Catholic" as their religion of choice on a survey form, you can assume they both have some connection to that faith. However, psychographics will help you see the degree to which they identify with the faith. Person A might be an avid churchgoer, who never misses a Sunday mass, attends all holy days of obligation, and takes part in various outreach efforts. All of Person A's children are named after saints, and they have all taken part in the sacraments at the appointed times

of life. On the other hand, Person B might attend church only on Easter and Christmas because their family members force them to go. Other than that, Person B has no interest in anything having to do with the church or its tenets.

While demographics tell us "what" someone is, psychographics can fill in the "how" and "why" elements that make it easier to reach that person. Although these are more difficult to gather and interpret, the rewards for doing so are much more valuable.

Geographics

Geographics refers to a group of individuals' physical location. Although the internet has freed us from the bonds of geographic isolation, where we live and work still influences our personal experiences. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, approximately seventeen thousand car crashes occur on an average day,[3] a bit of information that might or might not interest you. However, when you are stuck in highway traffic, unable to move more than a few feet at a time for an hour, are probably *really* curious about what happened on the road ahead and how long it's going to take for you to get out of there.

When something occurs in a geographic area that somehow relates to us, we find it much more interesting than things happening elsewhere. For example, if you hear about a man on the news who was using a ladder to break into homes and steal people's pets, you might have a vague interest. If that report mentions your current neighborhood or your hometown, your interest is immediately heightened. This is why placing a premium on understanding geography matters in assessing an audience.

MEDIA LITERACY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 2: Describe the importance of media literacy.

The amount and type of media we consume can have short- and long-term effects on our overall sense of being. How media consumption affects our overall health starts to make a lot more sense when we think about it like the food we eat or the air we breathe. For example, on a hot, humid day, you might grab a soda pop out of your refrigerator and start guzzling away. The expected effects are easy to spot: the cold liquid quenches your thirst and makes you feel less overheated. The unexpected outcomes could be varied and undetectable in the short term. Gulping down that can of soda tosses an additional 170 to 200 calories into your body, or somewhere close to one-tenth of your recommended caloric intake for the day. If you drink a six-pack or more per day, you're likely to pack on a few pounds (or more) over time.

The sugar and caffeine in the beverage add a jolt to your system, pepping you up in the short term until you crash out a bit later. The chemicals in the soda might eventually lead to negative circulatory and digestive problems when you hit your fifties, sixties, or seventies. Heavy sugar ingestion can lead to the development of type 2 diabetes. And that's just a short list of what might occur. The point is, if you know all of these potential risks and benefits as you make your choice about whether to drink that soda, you're going to make better overall choices.

Media literacy follows the same basic premise, with the goal of helping you ask important questions about the media you encounter and allowing you to make smart choices about what you consume. The Media Literacy Now project defines this term as the ability to decode messages within the media, determine how those messages can create personal influence, and then act based on those understandings. In addition, the group notes that media literacy allows the creation of thoughtful and conscientious media content.[4] When individuals can thrive as literate consumers of media, they feel empowered to make improved media selections, analyze questionable media messages, and engage in improved personal and societal behavior.

To better understand this topic, here are a series of issues related to media literacy:

1. Credibility

2. Bias

3. Fairness

4. Outcome

5. Critical thinking

Let's take a deeper look at each of these issues and how they affect your media literacy.

Issues of Credibility: Who Gets Our Trust?

In life, we tend to develop relationships based on trust from an early age. Depending upon our personal experiences in those situations, we determine whom we are willing to trust, how much we are willing to trust them, and what it will take to make or break those bonds of trust. Making those choices helps us define who and who does not have **credibility**. Credibility is the nature of being trustworthy, believable, and dependable. It reflects an honesty of character and reliability.

Think about the primary relationships you experienced as a child. It might be with a parent or a grandparent who showered you with affection or kept you from hurting yourself. That person's repeated "good acts" gave you confidence that future interactions with them would be being worthy of trust. For example, if your grandmother gave you a cookie, you would probably not question it and eat it. The idea is that the source is true and good, therefore, the cookie is probably tasty and safe.

However, if you had an older brother who constantly tricked you by making you smell his gym shoes or drink milk laced with hot sauce, you would probably not trust anything he gave you. Thus, if the cookie came from your brother, you would likely see those previous "bad acts" as pretty good reasons to reject the cookie. You expect that source to be untrustworthy and you know six seconds after you ate the cookie, he'd start laughing and say, "The *dog* just *sat* on that!"

We apply similar concerns to choose people to trust in our daily media diet. Trust builds when someone achieves a consistent level of living up to the expectations of the audience. When Walter Cronkite anchored the CBS evening news, he was deemed "the most trusted man in America," because he provided content

From the 1960s into the 1980s, Walter Cronkite was a mainstay at the CBS News anchor desk and earned the title of "the most trusted man in America." A trusted source can be more important than the information itself when it comes to what some people believe.

MBI/Alamy Stock Photo/Getty Images

in a way that gave people a reason to believe him.[5] Today, Lester Holt, David Muir, Norah O'Donnell, and Anderson Cooper are frequently among the anchors cited as being the "most trusted" in the field.[6]

Other sources aren't so lucky, because they have committed acts that led media consumers to view them as untrustworthy. Jayson Blair was a young and promising reporter for the *New York Times* in the early 2000s, when he covered everything from the Washington, DC, sniper case to the return home of fallen soldiers. However, when it turned out he had fabricated much of his reporting, the *Times* fired him and published a 7,000-word correction and retraction of his work. In 2022, *USA Today* found that reporter Gabriela Miranda likely fabricated interviews and sources in multiple stories. The paper pulled twenty-three of Miranda's stories from its website after conducting an internal audit of her work, and Miranda resigned from her position at the paper.[7]

Today, you have more media sources vying for your trust and attention than ever before. Traditional outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and broadcast news stations provide you with opportunities to consume their content on **legacy platforms**, such as print publications and televisions. In addition, they offer opportunities for you to engage with them via social media platforms and hosted websites. If that's not enough, the individual broadcasters, writers, reporters, editors, and other staff members can provide you with chances to follow their individual thoughts through those same social media venues.

Those sources, however, are dwarfed by the swarm of nonaffiliated media outlets and single-source **citizen journalists** who provide you with content solely through digital media. A citizen journalist can be anyone who serves as a source of information through an internet connection and a digital media device. Those people can be the goofy uncles who forward conspiracy tweets about how the government is behind a Twinkie shortage or venerable professors and media experts who host respected podcasts. Perhaps the most important citizen journalists are individuals who use the media tools at their disposal to capture important events that are unfolding in front of them. In 2021, the Pulitzer Prize board presented teenager Darnella Frazier with a special citation for recording George Floyd's murder on her phone. While walking to a store, she saw Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for about nine minutes while handcuffing him. The video captured Floyd pleading for his life, saying "I can't breathe," and it became a touchstone for subsequent protests against police brutality. The board noted that the video demonstrated "the crucial role of citizens in journalists' quest for truth and justice.[8]

George Floyd protests.

Robert K. Chin/Alamy Stock Photo

The traditional media outlets are often the subject of attacks by these outside sources, who sometimes raise reasonable questions about the fairness and equity of their coverage. Others use social media to demean any factual reporting they dislike or distrust as **fake news**.

A DEEPER LOOK: FAKE NEWS AND MEDIA TRUST

During his 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent time as president, Donald Trump derided the mainstream media as perpetually providing incorrect information to the American people. Trump popularized the term "fake news" in his speeches, news conferences, and social media

posts, arguing that newspapers, television stations, and other venerable institutions were lying to audiences. Trump is not unique in his attacks on the media as being "fake news," as politicians throughout the legislative hierarchy and across party lines have openly argued that the media isn't being honest and accurate.

In the wake of this assault on the free press, researchers and media professionals wondered what kind of impact this was having on how citizens came to think of the media they consumed. What they found was that people often had varying definitions of what "the media" actually included, but overall, they didn't trust "the media" very much anymore. A 2018 *Columbia Journalism Review* study placed the media among the least trusted social institutions in the United States. Only Congress ranked lower, while the president, the Supreme Court, the military, and law enforcement all received higher ratings.

Media trust appeared to peak in the mid-1970s at just over 70 percent of people saying they believed what they read in newspapers and saw on broadcast news. After a slow and steady decline in trust over the next few decades, Gallup polls revealed that media trust hit rock bottom in 2016, with only 32 percent of respondents reporting faith in journalism.

So how can media professionals regain trust? Researchers at Louisiana State University found that these outlets can start by simply fighting back. Their field experiment revealed that the importance of fact-checking content and media transparency remain valuable in showing the public that it should trust journalism. The study also revealed that when journalists responded to accusations of bias from the public, people tended to trust the journalists more. In addition, media practitioners who used honesty, transparency, and clarity in their interactions with the public tended to fare much better than those who did not.

Issues of Bias: Does the Source Have an Agenda?

The goal of journalism is to remain objective in the reporting, editing, and publishing of content, regardless of the source or the platform. It's an admirable goal, but it's a lot like trying to catch sand in a sieve: It's almost impossible and, even if you succeed, you still won't be perfect.

Bias, a prejudice for or against a specific topic, individual, or concept, has a way of seeping into all sorts of media coverage in big and little ways. For example, a reporter might write, "Fortunately, firefighters were able to extinguish the blaze before it destroyed the house." Someone could easily argue that if this were truly a "fortunate" situation, the fire wouldn't have happened in the first place. Still, this kind of opinion inclusion isn't going to land a reporter in front of an ethics panel.

Other forms of bias are much more problematic. For example, Instagram influencer and celebrity Kendall Jenner endorsed the failed Fyre Festival via her Instagram account. Jenner intimated that she
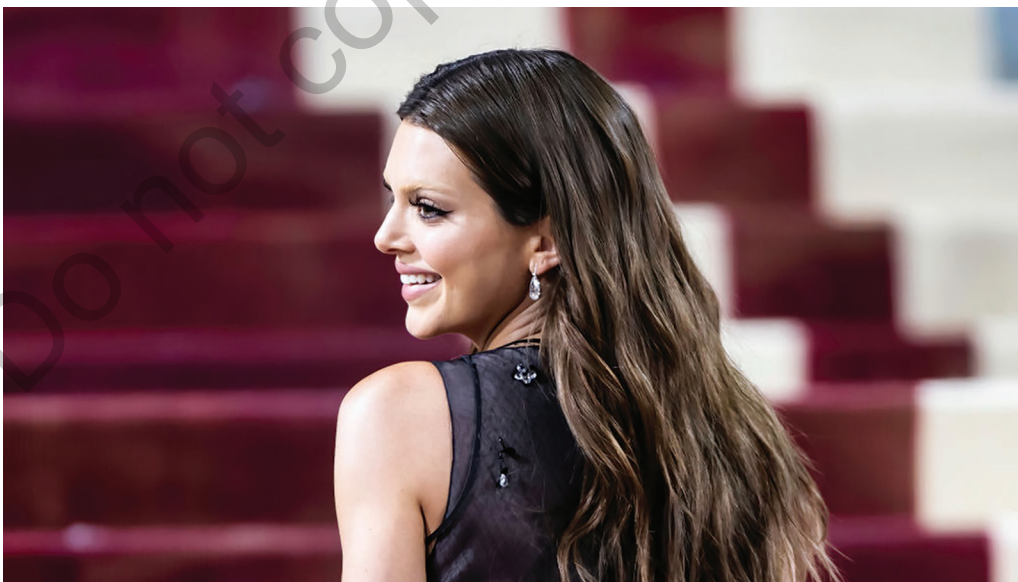
Influencer and celebrity Kendall Jenner promoted the Fyre Festival event.

Kristin Callahan/ZUMA Press/Newscom

and other major celebrities would be there, and that her brother-in-law, musician Kanye West, would be performing as part of the festivities. Jenner failed to disclose to her followers that she was paid $275,000 to make that post and that she hadn't researched the festival before endorsing it.[9] The festival turned out to be a disaster that cost participants and investors more than $26 million, and Jenner paid $90,000 in 2020 to settle a lawsuit regarding her involvement with the event.

Controversies like these have underscored the need for basic rules to promote honest content. Sources in a story that promote the benefits of a project should disclose their attachment to that project. When a news organization investigates a topic, it should disclose if its parent company has any connections to that topic or the organizations associated with it. If they don't tell you about these potential **conflicts of interest**, there is a risk that you are being played when you consume the content. Who knows if a star athlete really enjoys drinking Gatorade or if a musician really loves playing a Gibson guitar? It could be they enjoy chugging milk and strumming a homemade six-string instead, but they were paid to endorse those brand-name products.

Being media literate is about looking for biases within the sources you use and the content they provide. Then, you can better assess the degree to which you should trust those sources, even if they aren't perfectly objective.

Issues of Fairness: Just Because We Can, Does It Mean We Should?

The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics states that media professionals should "show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage."[10] The goal is to remind journalists that just because we can do something, it doesn't necessarily mean that we should do so. This goal has taken on new meaning in the age of digital content sharing and the lack of shared ethical standards.

For example, in 2006, a teenager named Nikki Catsouras slammed the black Porsche she was driving into a concrete toll booth while driving nearly one hundred miles per hour. The crash scene was so grisly, her parents weren't allowed to identify her body. However, photos of her bloody body, still wedged into the crumpled wreck, leaked to the internet. Although many legacy media outlets did not reproduce the images, many websites posted them for public consumption. As Nikki's family pleaded with outlets to take them down, the question became less what was legally right and more what was ethically responsible.[11] Similar concerns became the focal point of a 2022 court case involving the widow of basketball great Kobe Bryant. After Bryant died in a helicopter crash in 2020, first responders took unnecessary close-up photographs of his body and that of the Bryants' daughter, Gianna, and then shared the images with other people. Vanessa Bryant sued Los Angeles County as a result, with her lawyer arguing that these images could go viral at any point if one person decided to post them online. The jury sided with Vanessa Bryant and awarded her sixteen million dollars.[12]

The same responsibility that individuals have to consider the implications of their online behavior applies to media outlets. What lengths did a media organization go to in order to get content for a story? Does the outlet have a sense of public decency that matches your personal sense of right and wrong? How would you personally feel if this content were about someone you knew or loved? What standards does the outlet ascribe to in every part of its content gathering and dissemination process? These questions and others should play a large role in what you consider to be an acceptable media source and how much merit you ascribe to its content.

Issues of Outcome: What Happens as a Result of Media Use and Content?

Every generation thinks that the next generation is being corrupted by overindulgence in certain types of media. In the postwar era, parents thought comic books would make kids dumb. In the 1960s and 1970s, social critics feared that TV would lead to the widespread "dumbing down" of society. In the 1980s and 1990s, some felt that video games were going to be the downfall of children everywhere.

Today, portable digital media devices are ubiquitous, with every generation of people seemingly plugged into laptops, tablets, and phones on a twenty-four/seven basis (see Figure 2.1). The ability to remain connected to the world at large anywhere and at every time can lead to a variety of outcomes. Being aware of those outcomes is crucial to understanding media literacy.

FIGURE 2.1   ■   Growth in Media Use, 2008 to 2018
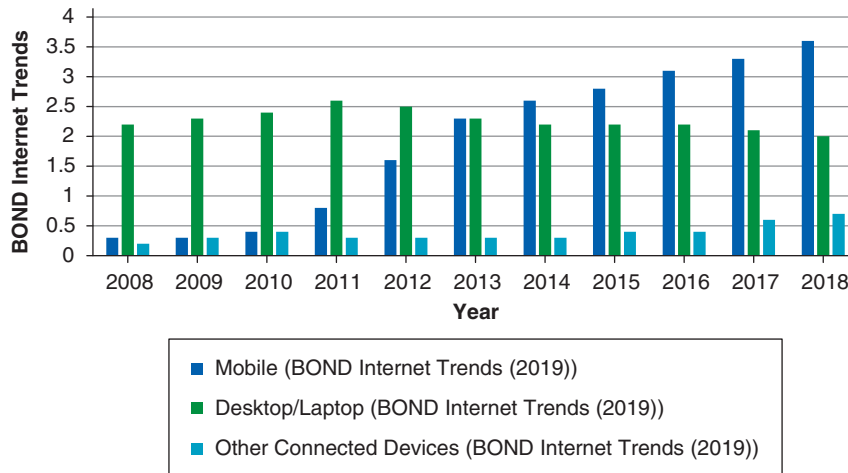
With increased media use, researchers are concerned about the impact the sheer volume of content is having on people.

Source: "Daily Hours Spent With Digital Media, United States, 2008 to 2018." Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/search?q=daily+hours+spent+with+digital+media.

The Pew Research Center asked experts on digital life how technology affected their own lives. The experts noted that they were stunned at how long they were attached to computers and other digital devices during the day. In addition, individuals who were deprived of access to digital media for a protracted period of time noted a personal shift in terms of what they experienced in other parts of their daily lives. Some noted that they were less distracted and more able to focus. Others said they felt a level of withdrawal symptoms akin to being taken off an addictive substance, with one person noting, "I can't seem to get my brain to calm down and focus. It is all over the place."[13] Beyond the outcome associated with the technology itself, the content spread by this technology can make life psychologically problematic. Douglas Massey, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, told Pew researchers that information overload, hate mail, and personal attacks make it difficult for people to remain social and productive.[14]

Pew's 2022 look at teenagers and social media reflected similar concerns, with respondents saying they felt overwhelmed by the need to project only a positive version of themselves. In addition, teens reported high levels of interpersonal drama while interacting with their peers online.[15] Although the students reported making valuable connections to friends via social media, nearly half (46 percent) said they have experienced cyberbullying on these platforms.[16] Even more, instances of online harassment have led to severe negative outcomes for teens, including self-harm and even suicide.

Researchers have found social media to be psychologically harmful, even when people aren't being harassed. Social media users across multiple platforms reported that the more they used social media, the more socially isolated they felt. In other words, the more "social" they were online, the less connected to other people they actually felt. This can be a serious problem, as the researchers point out, because perceived social isolation is associated with substantial levels of morbidity and mortality.[17]

How much thought we put into the idea of consuming media and what it does to us is crucial for our ability to become media literate. As we will explain later in the chapter, media use doesn't have an immediate impact, but rather it leads to a gradual mental shift for consumers. The difference between direct and cumulative effects is the difference between downing a bottle of poison and eating fifty Twinkies a day for life: both will kill you, but the former is more immediate and obvious, so we perceive it as a risk and avoid it. The latter, however, still can do serious damage, even though we might not see it as problematic until it is too late.

Issues of Critical Thinking: How Much Do We Question Our Media Content?

One of the crucial elements of media literacy involves critical thinking. The Foundation for Critical Thinking defines **critical thinking** in a variety of ways, but the simplest of these calls it "the art of

taking charge of your own mind."[18] The goal of critical thinking is to overcome the laziness of human thought and thus train the mind to work harder to avoid mistakes in how we think.

From an activity standpoint, the mind wants to be a cognitive miser. Just like it's so much easier to sleep in, eat junk food, and play games on our phones than it is to exercise, eat healthful foods, and read challenging literature, our minds seek the path of least resistance when taking in information. This creates problems in that we rely on stereotyping to make decisions, allow misinformation to pass unchallenged, and generally accept whatever we are given without thinking twice. In doing so, we fail to really think about what it is that we are consuming and what we are doing with that information once we get it.

Let's take a look at a real-life example of how this could play out. In February 2022, an email purported to be from Pollard Middle School stated that school would be canceled that day because of icy roads.[19] The cognitive miser within each of us would likely be willing to accept that information for a variety of reasons:

- It comes on a platform you're used to using (email).

- It appears to comes from a trustworthy source (the school).

- It supports an idea you like (no school).

Thus, you're likely to share that message through your various media platforms and start planning your day of binge-watching the latest Netflix series that all your friends have already gotten into. However, it's clear that very little critical thinking has occurred here.

Media literacy and critical thinking would have you digging deeper into this email and the information it provides to you. Some of this mental pushback could be relatively easy, such as carefully reading the email for nuance and tone. (One of the parents quickly noted that the email wasn't written in the same way as other emails from the school administration.) Additionally, you could look outside and see if the streets are really icy or if traffic is moving around on clear streets like any other day. However, true critical thought would involve a few bigger questions for you:

- What are other sources saying about this cancellation, particularly official sources like the school's website or social media accounts? (A subsequent email from the principal quickly debunked this "no school" claim.)

- How has the school historically treated weather situations like this, and does this fit with that pattern?

- As much as I want this to be true, how likely is it that we will no school, given what I know about other important factors, such as our school's "snow-day policy" and its use of digital technology for distance learning options instead of simply canceling school?

These are just a few of the critical thinking questions we would want to ask before deciding to quickly retweet the information and pass it along as fact. The Media Literacy Project emphasizes the importance of examining all possible issues in any news source and then reaching rational conclusions about what it is we expect to see happen as a result. The more often something is repeated, regardless of its truthfulness, the more likely it is people will start to believe it. That makes it important for us to understand what it is we are sharing, how we have examined it before we share it, and what we think will come out of it after we share it.

Building Critical Thinking Skills: The Three "A's"

Building critical thinking skills can seem to be a daunting task, but it becomes easier if you break down your analysis using three basic concepts called the three "A's": accuracy, association, and approach. You can apply each of these approaches to the content you receive to make sure that it passes muster.

Accuracy: Fact-checking the content you receive is probably the most important thing you can do prior to believing the information or forwarding it on to other people. You want to make sure the content itself has a clear and coherent set of facts that would allow you to rely upon them if you were to share this content with other people.

Here are some questions to help you assess the accuracy of the content:

- Is this the only source that is telling me this, or do other media reports support it?
- Does the information fit with other things I have learned about this topic over a long period of time?
- Does the piece cite primary sources, or is it relying on a few cherry-picked pieces?
- Is everything cleanly written, including grammar, spelling, and style?
- Is the material up to date, or is it too old to remain valid?

Association: Where the information comes from is often vital in determining how believable it is. Most people who put content out for public consumption have associations with groups or organizations that can create bias in their work. For example, if your mother works as a salesperson at a Toyota dealership, it's likely she thinks Toyotas are better than Hondas, Fords, and Chevys, because she's associated with the brand. Additionally, it likely follows that if you love your mother and you've heard her talking about how great Toyotas are, you'd be more inclined to think more highly of them than other brands.

Questions to ask about association:

- Does this author acknowledge a potential bias based on their association with the topic?
- Does the group the author is associated with benefit by convincing me the content is right?
- Are other nonaffiliated sources of information providing me with the same or different information?
- Am I giving this source too much credit because the material here supports the things I already believe or with which I am also associated?
- Is this information associated with a source that has proved credible in the past?

Approach: How someone communicates information to you can be almost as important as what it is they are trying to say. Quality media outlets rely on supportable, coherent information that will help you analyze the topic and come to your own logical conclusions. Weak media outlets will attempt to coerce you through less-than-scrupulous methods or apply propaganda techniques to cajole you into buying into what they're selling.

Questions regarding a source's approach include:

- Is this meant to be a fact-based piece, or is it based primarily on the author's opinions and assertions?
- Does the author rely on data and sourcing or on hyperbolic and exaggerated language to make key points?
- Is the content backed by information that can be proved true or false?
- Has the author engaged in labeling techniques, such as name-calling or glittering generalities meant to push me toward agreeing with them?
- Does the piece ignore or dodge relevant counterarguments instead of addressing and defeating them?

This process is meant as guide, more than a checklist, so keep that in mind as you assess the media you consume. An opinion piece can be perfectly valid, while one based on facts can lead you to erroneous conclusions. The point of media literacy is to help you make smarter choices through critical thinking. To help you improve in this area, we will be applying these methods of analysis throughout the text.

MEDIA LITERACY MOMENT: EXPLORING OUR BIASES

When you are media literate, you can understand the meaning behind the content you consume, evaluate the sources of the messages, determine the value of the messages, and react accordingly. Like most good habits, media literacy requires you to engage in certain activities repeatedly until they become second nature to you.

The benefit to strong media literacy is that you will become a critical thinker, a good communicator, and a quality producer of media content. People who lack media literacy often find themselves victims of scams, lies, and other fake-outs because they take what they have been given at face value and never look more deeply into it.

Here are four key biases that can affect your media literacy.

Anchoring bias	● The first piece of information people receive on a topic will "anchor" their judgment, regardless of that information's accuracy. ● Additional arguments presented to people are judged in relationship to that initial piece of information, not on their own merits.
Confirmation bias	● People favor and recall information that supports their prior viewpoints, regardless of the validity of those viewpoints. ● Regardless of the options available, people tend to select the ones that tell them what they want to hear.
Familiarity bias	● People prefer things they see most frequently, choosing the familiar item over the unfamiliar item. ● The more often people receive specific information, regardless of the message's accuracy, the more likely they are to believe it.
Availability bias	● People place added importance on things they can most easily recall, regardless of their true relevance and value. ● The more recently people received a message, the more concerned they are about its content, and they will likely act irrationally because of that information.

Most of these biases are intrinsic, meaning we cannot "cure" ourselves of them. However, knowing they exist makes us more able to push back against them when we get messages through the media. This is where the application of the three A's comes into play.

For example, a popular meme that floated around the internet pitched the incredible health value of pineapple juice. It noted:

Did you know that pineapple juice is 500% more effective at helping you to stop coughing than cough syrup is? Well, it's true, and it's all on account of the fact that fresh pineapples contain a substance known as Bromelain: a specific type of enzyme that has anti-inflammatory characteristics which can combat infections and eradicate bacteria.

When we see a claim like this online, it's often the first time we are hearing about the topic, thus creating a potential anchoring bias. For people who dislike medicine or the corporations that market it, this could trigger a confirmation bias that there are better, natural cures than what "Big Pharma" sells us. The ease at which a meme like this can be shared can help it go viral quickly, which can give us a chance to see it frequently and subsequently trigger familiarity and availability biases.

To push back against those biases, let's go through each "A" to assess this piece of information.

Accuracy would have us look into other potential media sources that would support this information. A quick search of the internet shows multiple other media sources that directly contradict this statement and outline the research that supports the reasons why the original statement is false. Conversely, the original statement does not provide any reference to where this information originated or when it came about, thus violating two other tenets of accuracy.

Association requires us to examine how the source of this message is tied to the message itself. In this case, we don't have any sense of where the original information came from. We can't determine to what degree this source is credible in and of itself.

Approach has us determine how this message is presented. The message is meant to be fact-based, but it lacks the supporting data one would expect for a medical claim of this type. The message also relies on hyperbole, such as the use of "500%" to draw readers in and engage them, even though this number's source is unclear. The author has engaged in a technique meant to provide readers with a baseless claim that is supported only through the author's repetition of phrases like "it's true" or "the fact that."

It will always take additional effort to critically examine the content of media messages and determine to what degree you should believe them. However, improved efforts to push back against biases and analyze this material before you believe it or share it can make a big difference in the quality of content we consume.

THE NEXT STEP: Select a media message that matters to you from a media source you frequently use. Go through the four forms of bias and analyze how each of these relates to the message and why you selected it. Then, go through the three A's and examine the message based on the questions listed under each A. How many of these did you answer with "I don't know" or something similar? How much do you think you know about the sources and messages you consume, based on the outcome of this examination? Compose an essay that outlines your findings and details your own sense of how media literate you feel.

WHY DO WE CONSUME MEDIA?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 3: Explain why people consume media content, including the specific needs it satisfies.

Most early research into mass communication tried to understand what media did to us. Did it push us to do or buy things we wouldn't normally do or buy? Did it have a direct effect with a singular message creating a singular action, like a hammer breaking through a pane of glass? Did it have a cumulative effect, like a lake eroding a shoreline?

A second form of media research emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, flipping the question and the approach of communication studies on its head: why do we consume media? This approach, often referred to as **uses and gratifications** research, saw the audience members as taking an active role in consuming media.

Uses and gratifications theory is one of the most significant innovations in the field of media scholarship because of its approach to how people and media content interact. Researchers found that people related to media the same way that they related to other things they needed. In short, just as a thirsty person knew enough to drink water without drowning, media consumers could find content that satisfied their needs without becoming zombies.

Studies in this area showed that media users made choices about what they read, saw, and heard with the goal finding content that met their needs.[20] When media users found content that satisfied those needs, they returned to that source when the need arose again. For example, let's say you found a

person on TikTok who posted something that made you laugh. You would not only follow that person, but you would likely go back to that person's channel when you found yourself in need of a laugh.

This active-audience approach to understanding media use has become particularly important in the digital era, because the media people use most has a strong interactive component to it. Traditional media platforms, like television and radio, gave the audience few options, so people pretty much had to take what they got, much like when your dinner comes with a choice of green beans or Brussels sprouts for a side dish. Today's media is like a never-ending buffet of content, and it requires people to actively seek media on various social media platforms and internet sites. This means that understanding what the audience members want, how they make their choices, and why they continue to use certain media will matter a lot to anyone studying mass media.

Uses and gratifications researchers found several needs (or gratifications) that people satisfied (or tried to satisfy) through their media use. The terms have shifted over time, and the nomenclature has varied based on the researchers. Table 2.1 outlines a few reasons people tend to use media.

TABLE 2.1 ■ Needs Frequently Studied in Uses and Gratifications Research		
Need	**Explanation**	**Example**
Surveillance	People feel a need to be aware of what is happening around them.	Checking a traffic app to see if any accidents have occurred that might make your daily commute longer.
Education	People have a need to become more informed on topics that matter to them.	Reading a blog post to learn how to keep your plants from dying.
Entertainment	People want to content to amuse them and make them feel good.	Watching a YouTube video of cats that can play the piano.
Social utility	People need to feel connected to other people in society.	Reading a "book of the month" to discuss it at an upcoming book club meeting.
Personal identity	People enjoy seeing content from people to whom they can relate.	Listening to a podcast from a fellow college student who talks about how bad the food is on campus.
Escape	People want to mentally free themselves from the problems they experience in their daily lives.	Playing a video game in which the main character flies through space and saves the universe.

Let's a deeper look at each of these needs.

Surveillance and Education

Surveillance is a term that describes people's need to be aware of their surroundings. While this need goes back to the days of cave dwellers, who needed to know when wild animals could cause danger or when rival groups might attack them, today, surveillance is less about base-level survival. Nonetheless, some concerns that mattered to early humans remain part of our surveillance interests. For example, we check the weather before we leave home to make sure what we're wearing will keep us comfortable.

Education takes the need for surveillance a step further, in that it attempts to deepen our understanding of a concept. People have an innate need to improve themselves both for their own edification as well as the needs of other people who matter to them. This could be anything from an infant's learning how to crawl to a physicist's journey in self-discovery that could improve all humankind. Education builds our knowledge of a subject. For example, you could visit YouTube to watch a video of how to fix a toilet after one of your roommates had a massive party and "somehow" the toilet got clogged. You could grab a tablet to read your textbook in advance of a quiz you have in a class later today.

Self-awareness is also a byproduct of education. Watching a television show could inspire you to try working out more often to shed unwanted pounds or get in shape to run a marathon. Listening to a meditation app could lead to a breakthrough in a problem that previously stumped you.

Entertainment

In 1961, Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow spoke at a National Association of Broadcasters meeting and complained that television had become a "vast wasteland" of content that added little to the sum of human knowledge. Minow's speech did little to stop television from gaining a prominent place in the homes and lives of American citizens, primarily because people have an overwhelming desire for **entertainment**, events and performances that provide amusement and escape.

In some cases, media users are less interested in being entertained and more interested in avoiding boredom. Researchers have found that people will often consume media or interact with digital devices when they have nothing else to do. You might find yourself playing a simple puzzle game while waiting to get through the line at the grocery store. You might also find yourself texting friends or flipping through your Twitter feed while your professor is trying to explain something to the class.

Social Utility

Humans are social animals: we find value in connecting with other people in meaningful ways. **Social utility** relates to how we use media to stay connected with the people in our lives. This could be by seeing the movie or reading the book everyone is talking about, just so when someone asks us, "Have you read X yet?" we can say, "*Yes*! Can you believe the ending?" This kind of social need to connect with meaningful others is often thought of as a sense of belonging, with our goal of not losing the ability to connect.

In other cases, it might be that we actually want to be part of a group that is watching or reading something. This could be reading a book so we can discuss it at a monthly book club or going to a Sunday Night Football party to watch a game with people at an area bar. Whether we are physically present with people to share a moment or if we want just to talk about it with people later, the social needs connected to media consumption are valuable to us.

Personal Identity

For some media users, the connections can run more deeply between themselves and the content they consume than those they form with other people. Individuals who begin watching videos or listening to podcasts so they can gain knowledge or to pass the time can also make connections with the people showcased in the media itself. For example, a person with an interest in cooking on a limited budget could watch a series of videos on how to turn two cans of tuna, a few overripe tomatoes, and a box of pasta into a feast for her friends. After watching those videos, she also might buy the host's book, sign up for the host's newsletter, and even attend a local event the host is presenting. The connection between the individual and the material has now become more of a connection between the viewer and the host, based on the sense of a shared **personal identity**.

People can find themselves in **parasocial relationships** when they draw strong parallels between the lives of a novel's protagonist or a movie character with their own lives. For some people, this is simply finding comfort in seeing people who are like them living lives to which they aspire. Viewers can enjoy seeing themselves and their friends reflected in a show that presents four single women living their best lives as they take on the big city. These kinds of connections can become problematic for some media users who have difficulty separating fiction and reality. However, in most cases media use based on finding people of similar backgrounds, interests, or activities can give people that sense of socialization they used to only find in human-to-human contact.

Escape

Sometimes, life isn't all that great. School provides stress, with a huge pile of tests and homework. The boss is being a real pain at work, and no matter how much you work, you always seem to be broke. The

person you really like in one of your classes isn't interested in talking to you, while all your friends seem to be enjoying perfect relationships. Things can seem downright miserable and depressing.

Media users often turn to various platforms to **escape** from the day-to-day misery of their lives. A video game offers the student who has failed four tests an opportunity to be successful in keeping aliens from colonizing what's left of Earth. A TV show featuring some loser who can't ever get a date can make a two-month dry spell on the dating market seem a lot better by comparison. That parking ticket you got last week? That's nothing compared with what happened to the people in the movie about street racers who got caught in an international plot to assassinate the president, and their only hope is to drive really, really fast.

Escape can be simply about getting away from the doldrums of life or the things that make your life feel lousy. It can also be about feeling better through downward social comparison, which allows you to look at other people and think, "Wow. My life isn't nearly as screwed up as theirs are." Some reality TV shows present characters who give viewers aspirations for themselves, but even more of them showcase human disasters who serve as cautionary tales, giving the audience a chance to feel superior.

IS MEDIA USE RISKY?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 4: Assess the concerns people have about media consumption and its effects on users.

As you can see, people use media for many reasons, and as you will see elsewhere in the book, media has specific effects on people over time. Here are some of the primary questions and concerns associated with media use and what researchers have found in studying these issues:

1. Will negative media imagery harm us?

2. Do we end up in our own media bubbles?

3. Is there such a thing as too much media?

Let's go through each of these questions and try to answer them.

Will Negative Media Imagery Harm Us?

One of the primary concerns about media use relates to what we see and how it affects us. As noted in Chapter 1, several studies have examined what media does to us in general. Some researchers, however, are more interested in the specific impact of content that exposes us to negative images and outcomes.

Scholars have long examined the relationship between viewing violent television actions and increased aggression among viewers, noting that individuals often mimic behavior that they observe.[21] In the early 1960s, psychologist Albert Bandura conducted a series of studies that assessed how children would react to violent behavior in different situations. His "Bobo doll" study had a group of students watch a video of a person acting violently toward a human-sized doll that looked like a clown. After watching the video, these children were placed in a room that had a similar doll as well as other toys. Bandura found that the kids who watched the violent video behaved much more aggressively toward the clown-doll compared with a control group that did not see the film.[22] A follow-up study revealed that when the violent film included someone rewarding the child for attacking the doll, the research participants subsequently acted more aggressively toward the doll themselves. Conversely, participants who saw a video in that the child attacking the doll was punished were less likely to hit the doll themselves.[23]

Media images can have a long-term effect on viewers. Research has indicated that watching violent or sexually explicit material not only inspires viewers to replicate the behavior, but it also desensitizes them to the content itself. In other words, it's not just a stimulus-response situation in which a person

Participants in Albert Bandura's media experiment who saw a video of a child acting violently toward a "Bobo doll" mimicked the actions of that child when placed in a room with a similar doll.

sees one violent act, replicates it, and then returns to "normal." The additive nature of content can lower people's sense of concern when observing violence in real life; they may have fewer emotional reactions themselves when dealing with violence and act out violently, even when not directly primed to do so.[24]

A greater concern about media use emerged about thirty years ago when video games became not only more prevalent in daily life but also far more visually graphic. Cartoonish 1980s games like Dig Dug, in that you could use a bicycle pump to overinflate an enemy, were replaced with 1990s fighting games like Mortal Kombat, in that the player could tear the spinal column out of a foe as a "finishing move." Although studies varied in terms of the direct and indirect effects associated with playing these games, large-scale studies like the one conducted by psychologist Craig A. Anderson showed that playing violent video games is linked to aggressive behavior and thought processes and a lack of empathy for victims of violence.[25] A follow-up analysis that looked at specific elements, like racial or gender differences, supported these concerns.[26]

The question that remains for media consumers is where the line exists between occasionally playing a game of Pac-Man or glimpsing a swimsuit model in a catalog and becoming fully immersed in a world of violence and sexual degradation. It is clear that the more people use media that provides these, and other, negative images, the more problematic it is for users and the people with whom they associate. However, it remains unclear where a specific breaking point occurs or whether it varies based on individual factors that remain unknown.

Do We End Up in Our Own Media Bubbles?

The explosion of media channels at our disposal has allowed us to become much more finicky in our approach to the content we consume. Although this ability to pick and choose as we see fit has many benefits, it can limit our ability to understand large swaths of society that we aren't exposed to. This continual filtering of content can produce what researchers refer to as **media bubbles**, where we exist in an isolation chamber of information and fail to see beyond it.

Social media often takes the blame for breeding bubbles, but this concept of filtered digital content reaches back to the mid-1990s. Nicholas Negroponte, a pioneer in the field of computer-aided design, proposed the concept of a "Daily Me" in his 1995 book *Being Digital*.[27] Negroponte foresaw a future in which people would tell their computers the topics they wanted to read about, as well as subjects they

Mortal Kombat's Scorpion character executes a "fatality move," in which he tears his opponent in half. Researchers have found that playing violent games is linked to aggressive behavior and lack of empathy toward others.

Contraband Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

disliked. The computers would search the media world each day, collecting stories on each person's likes and avoiding those the person disliked. Then, the computer would print a personalized newspaper for each individual with nothing but the preferred information. This vision reflects the way in which algorithms push content into our social media feeds. It also illustrates how our media choices can eliminate things we either don't care about or actively dislike.

The problem associated with creating media bubbles, in which we each exist in our own little world, is that it makes it more difficult to reach a collective understanding about key events or topics. For example, a Pew Research Center report regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential election noted that about one-fifth of Democrats and Republicans were fully entrenched in political media bubbles. The survey data revealed that partisans in each party actively filtered out content that provided positive information about the other party or that reflected negatively upon their own party. In addition, they sought content only from outlets that like-minded political peers relied upon for information.[28]

Media practitioners note that this continued exclusion of information outside of our comfort zones will make us "victims to our own biases" and lead to the destruction of democracy.[29] At the very least, the lack of connective tissue between what we consume in a society can limit our ability to discuss important topics, settle crucial debates, and create shared values.

Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Media?

Aside from looking at concerns related to the use of specific platforms or viewing certain types of content, researchers often wonder if the omnipresence of media in our lives will have negative consequences.

One of their primary concerns is the degree to which people consume "too much" media. What accounts for too much media is up for debate, but several factors have contributed to increased use. The effect of that use has led to serious concerns regarding physical, mental, and emotional impacts.

According to a Pew study, the amount of time people in most age groups are engaging with social media platforms continues to grow each year.[30] Although the platforms may differ—with people over age fifty using Facebook, while those in the eighteen-to-twenty-four demographic are spending time on Snapchat—the overall findings suggest that media use continues to grow each year. Research conducted by eMarketer revealed that in 2019, the average U.S. consumer spent twelve hours and nine minutes per day online, up slightly from the year before, but by 2021, that number had reached thirteen hours and thirteen minutes and continued to hold steady through the first half of 2022.[31] If we were to assume that the average adult gets about seven hours of sleep per night,[32] this means that less than four hours of our days are spent without media. Put another way, we spend more than three times the amount of our waking hours engaging with media than we do without it.

Researchers have not found conclusive proof that social media use or the advent of the digital era has destroyed cognitive abilities or permanently crippled our attention spans. (Parents complaining about their kids' media use is nothing new. A previous generation of adults would tell children that watching too much TV would "rot your brain.") However, scholars have noted that the brain is malleable with regard to operating techniques and information intake.[33] This has led to concerns regarding how heavy media use, particularly the content consumed constantly through ubiquitous digital devices, will affect society. The overstimulation of our minds with the constant influx of content has led to concerns that our brains are becoming overloaded and overstressed.[34] For example, studies of human empathy indicate that although most people feel they have compassion and caring for others, heavy digital media use has actually led to a drop in concern for the problems of other people.[35]

Social media use has also been shown to overwhelm people, leading to feelings of despair and anxiety. A study of social media use in the workplace showed that individuals often have trouble finding ways to cope with mental overload and the invasion of work into their lives, and they experience anxiety related to uncertainty in their lives.[36] Research involving children produced similar results, with heavy digital media use being tied to anxiety and depression.[37]

This is not to say that media use itself is not beneficial, or that being on your phone will lead to some sort of irreversible degeneration of your ability to think clearly. Also, as we noted in our discussion of media violence, scholars have not established a clear bright line in which people who use exactly X hours and Y minutes of any media will sustain serious cognitive impairment. However, as with most habits, heavy use tends to inspire continued and expanded use over time. When we will max out on time spent with media or what its ultimate impact on our well-being will be is not known, but it is something that should concern all of us.

THE ERA OF "DEMASSIFICATION"

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

LO 5: Explain the concept of "demassification" and how it relates to today's media world.

Starting at the end of the twentieth century and continuing to this day, the mass media model has changed dramatically and irrevocably. The giants of media operation, like newspapers and network news outlets, found themselves struggling financially and unable to maintain a stronghold on information dissemination. Investments in traditional platforms and media products became unwise, as citizens suddenly seemed to become disinterested in what these venerable outlets were able to provide.

What we have experienced over the past twenty-five years or so can best be described as the era of **demassification**, a time in which a multitude of choices and options for media consumption have broken down content-based monopolies while at the same time mergers and financial maneuvers have created ownership monopolies. The ability of digital publishers to reach giant audiences without investing giant sums of money has allowed more people to enter the media space as content providers.

One way to think about this change is to consider the change that has occurred in family dining patterns. It used to be that "Mom" made a single meal that everyone ate at the same time, sitting around the dining room table. Today, families are less likely to gather at a single time to eat, and with a multitude of options for home delivery and online ordering, we all can eat whenever and wherever we want. In this way, people who enjoy salads get their salads, while other people can fill up on sweets and ice cream. The benefits are clear, but so are the drawbacks. For now, let's look at what constitutes this era of demassification and what it provides to us as content consumers.

One-to-Many Becomes Many-to-Many

The communication models we discussed in Chapter 1 outline a direct pathway from a sender to a receiver. This approach made sense in explaining the way in which humans interacted individually, such as in a conversation between a parent and a child or a letter written from one friend to another. As mass media became a prevalent form of communication, society saw a shift from a **one-to-one** to a **one-to-many model**. A newspaper could print thousands of copies that were disseminated from its printing plant to subscribers throughout a metropolitan area. A radio station broadcast news and music through its tower, its signal reaching anyone within range, providing information and entertainment to anyone with a receiver. Each form of mass media, from book publishers to television operations, could provide material to a wide group of the public.

In the one-to-many model, the entire audience received essentially the same content from a singular source. This model gave these sources importance because the audience members trusted that what they learned from the television anchors or the newspaper reporters was correct. In addition, the model provided significant power to the source, as advertisers, politicians, and celebrities understood how the media outlets could draw attention to positive or negative news. Thus, they often placed advertisements with those media, curried favor with their reporters, and sought to gain value through connections with these outlets. The one-to-many model stood for decades, for reasons we will discuss later in the chapter and later in the book.

However, as communication technology continued to develop and access to audiences no longer relied on monolithic sources of content, the model of communication shifted from a one-to-many to a **many-to-many model** (see Figure 2.2). Initial changes began with the growth of the cable television industry, when viewers received dozens of channels, thus breaking the oligopoly held by the three broadcast networks. The advent of the internet allowed readers to access publications online that were once available only to citizens in certain geographic areas. Social media allowed audience members to pick and choose among their interests in ways that had previously not existed.

Suddenly, the major media outlets that had once enjoyed an exalted status needed to fight harder to keep their audiences. Many of them have failed, as you can see from the losses in revenue among broadcast stations and the crumbling of the print industry. Consumers no longer said, "We will rely on

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FIGURE 2.2 ■ From One-to-Many to Many-to-Many
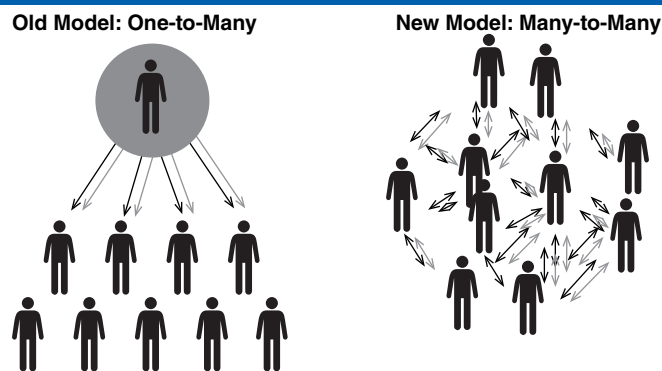
In traditional mass media, a singular source, like a newspaper or TV station, serves as the sender of content, with audience members serving as receivers. The many-to-many model enables multiple individuals and organizations to operate as senders and receivers of content.

you because we have always relied on you," but rather, "What have you done for us lately?" Sources that provided content the audience members valued retained their audiences, while those that failed to pass muster were cut loose.

Barriers to Media Entry Fall

One of the primary reasons a many-to-many model could succeed was because it took a lot less time and effort for people to become sources within the communication ecosystem. The easier and cheaper it became for people to participate in forms of mass communication, the more people took advantage of the opportunities that were once only afforded to a select few.

Prior to the full emergence of digital communication, reaching a mass audience was prohibitively expensive. Publishing a newspaper required obtaining a printing press, a staff to run it, workers to fill it with content, and a network of individuals to distribute it. To reach people through the airwaves was even more problematic because the costs were even higher than those associated with printing and the technology was much more complex. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission oversaw who had the right to broadcast, on which channels, and with what strength of signal. It became virtually impossible for anyone without significant financial backing to make inroads in these media spheres.

The internet offered a democratization of media because many of the costs of media creation or distribution were eliminated or significantly reduced. Smaller and cheaper devices came on the market, so anyone could print a flyer or record a song. Suddenly, anyone who had the ability to code a webpage and pay for internet access was able to take part in a global discussion.

As the digital age moved from the 1990s into the early 2000s, barriers continued to fall. Computer software eliminated the need for people to learn HTML or other coding languages to build websites. The WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) movement did for web design and creation what Apple's graphic interfaces did for the personal computer. Furthermore, the costs of internet access began to fall. With lower costs associated with access, as well as cheaper web hosting, more people were willing to take chances to create content. Furthermore, those who sought to monetize their efforts were able to do so by selling advertising that not only reached specific people but did so at a much lower cost than that associated with legacy media.

For example, social media star Raye Boyce began with a Tumblr blog, where she and others exchanged hair and beauty tips. Her popularity encouraged her to expand to full video tutorials on YouTube when the video site was more of a hobby with limited financial opportunities. However, after establishing her own channel, ItsMyRayeRaye, she found a strong following that now exceeds 1.8 million subscribers. Her Instagram account also has approximately 1.6 million followers, and her estimated net worth has grown to more than one million dollars.[38]

Beyond costs, the explosion of mobile technology opened even more doors for senders and receivers of content. Users found themselves able to consume content whenever and wherever they saw fit. Instead of having to buy a large desktop computer and a device to connect it to the web, consumers could access content on their phones or other portable digital devices. Thus, instead of making active choices to connect with content, by sitting down at a desk in a specific "computer room," people developed habits that allowed them to check in on websites via their phones when they were bored in class, stuck in a long line, or sitting at stoplights while driving.

Today, anyone with a thought in their head and a phone on which to type, film, or record can enter a global discussion without making a heavy financial investment. The degree to which this is a good or a bad thing will likely be the source of debate for generations to come. However, much like inexpensive newspapers brought information to the masses in the 1800s, these changes brought publishing opportunities to more financial classes of people.

Beauty influencer Raye Boyce.

Tasia Wells/Contributor/Getty Image

Microtargeting

With lower costs to enter the market and improved ways to reach exponentially more readers and viewers, people with an interest in publishing online found themselves able to shift their focus away from a mass media model. Instead, they were able to engage in **microtargeting** efforts that provided interested individuals with a deep dive on narrow topics.

In the dominant days of mass media products, publishers had to be wary of maintaining too narrow of a focus in their work. If the topics being discussed in a newspaper or magazine failed to appeal to a wide audience, the publication wouldn't sell enough copies or draw enough advertising dollars to remain economically viable. Thus, newspapers that covered everything of interest in a geographic distribution area and general interest magazines, like *Time* and *Life*, attempted to be all things to all people.

The rise of the digital era gave almost anyone the chance to publish anything they wanted with lower costs and fewer risks. In addition, many groups, organizations, and individuals had felt ignored or marginalized by the mass media efforts of large metropolitan newspapers or broadly focused magazines. Now, they could provide content of interest on previously uncovered topics in a way that would reach fewer people but do so on a grander scale.

The concept of reaching an audience that had an interest in a topic with quality content written at their level remained constant from the approach that legacy media took. However, additional options helped make these microtargeted sites a success. For example, people who loved cooking could share thoughts, hints, tips, suggestions, and experiences every day, all day, on websites dedicated to food preparation. More focused information could be provided on even more specialized sites on specific types of cuisine, cooking for special events, or even discussions about cooking appliances and utensils. Advertisers could reach these special-interest groups more efficiently or engage them through chatrooms and contact forms on these sites.

The exponential growth of direct-contact apps also helped lower barriers that prevented senders and receivers from connecting. Rather than having to recall a website or bookmark a place on the web that we liked going, apps gave us the ability to simply click and go. Even more, the development of free apps for content consumption helped the social media revolution emerge on an extremely large scale. Aggregating platforms like Hootsuite or TweetDeck helped pull social media channels and interests into a single access point for consumers. These digital media operations helped give people a better opportunity to operate in a "pull" environment, in which they sought content, decided what mattered, and filtered out the rest.

CHAPTER REVIEW

LO 1   **Define a mass media audience using demographic, psychographic, and geographic information.**

- A mass media audience is a collection of individual information consumers who seek content that is relevant, useful, and interesting to them.
- Demographic information helps determine the composition of a mass media audience through measuring personal characteristics, such as age, gender, and level of education.
- Psychographic information helps determine the composition of a mass media audience by measuring individuals' interests, goals, and passions. While demographics measure the presence of a trait (religious preference), psychographics measure the degree of importance an individual places on that trait.
- Geographic information helps determine the composition of a mass media audience based on the physical location of the person or that person's connections to specific places.

LO 2   **Describe the importance of media literacy.**

- Media literacy is the ability to decode messages within the media, determine how those messages can create personal influence, and act based on those understandings.

- Gaining media literacy allows individuals to make improved media selections and examine media messages for their value and accuracy.
- Media literacy also allows individuals to act better as informed members of society.
- The application of the three "A's" (accuracy, association, and approach) can inspire critical thinking about the media you are consuming.

LO 3   **Explain why people consume media content, including the specific needs it satisfies.**
- People have psychological needs they can satisfy through the consumption of media content.
- Surveillance is the need people have to be aware of their surroundings and what is happening in them.
- Education is the need to gain knowledge about topics that have a societal or personal value.
- Entertainment is the need people have to enjoy performances or be amused by content they consume.
- Social utility is the need people have to find meaningful connections to others in their social groups.
- Personal identity is the need people have to find content that relates to who they are and what they value.
- Escape is the need to get away from things happening in everyday life.

LO 4   **Assess the concerns people have about media consumption and its effects on users.**
- Researchers have found that people who consume graphic content are likely to mimic what they see in a negative way.
- People who are repeatedly exposed to graphic content will become desensitized to it and show less empathy toward others.
- People often gravitate toward content that supports their way of thinking, creating their own "media bubbles." These bubbles limit encountering important information or alternative viewpoints that might provide a wider and more diverse view of a subject.
- People continue to increase their overall media consumption each year, which has some scholars worried that we are becoming more socially isolated from one another.

LO 5   **Explain the concept of "demassification" and how it relates to today's media world.**
- Demassification is the breakdown of media dominance from a few, large, traditional content providers and the emergence of a wide array of smaller, narrow media options.
- The ability for anyone to enter the media world as a source has given rise to more opportunities to create content and more options for the creation of specialized content.

KEY TERMS

Audience	Many-to-many model
Bias	Media bubble
Citizen journalist	Media literacy
Conflict of interest	Microtargeting
Credibility	One-to-many model
Critical thinking	One-to-one model
Demassification	Parasocial relationship
Demographics	Personal identity
Entertainment	Psychographics
Escape	Self-awareness
Fake news	Social utility
Geographics	Surveillance
Legacy platform	Uses and gratifications

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the key demographic, psychographic, and geographic elements you think influence your specific interests in what media content you consume?

2. How media literate do you feel you are, especially when compared with others around you, such as your peers and your family members?

3. Of the specific needs listed in the chapter that media use is known to satisfy (surveillance, education, personal identity, social utility, and escape), which one is most compelling to you when it comes to your consumption habits and why? Which is the least important to your media consumption and why?

4. Based on the research noted in the chapter, how concerned are you about the issues of media mimicry, media bubbles, and overuse of mass media?

5. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of demassification?