INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

A note to the teacher

Understanding the Media is an introductory text for first-time undergraduate media and communications students. Using a variety of pedagogic devices, it invites novice students to engage with a range of questions about the mass media in the early twenty-first century. This book aims to be student-friendly and is consciously written in an accessible and straightforward manner. Drawing upon a wide variety of examples, it encourages students to think critically about recent changes and developments in the traditional and newer forms of mass media. This second edition has been significantly expanded and updated.

The ‘imagined readers’ of this textbook are largely those living, studying and using the media in the developed or Western world. With this in mind, we have carefully selected a range of illustrative materials that will pertain to a maximum number of student readers. The practical exercises that form a core part of this book have already been used with some success in the classroom by the author. They are intended primarily to encourage greater reflexivity or critical reflection among media students and their teachers. It is hoped that they will be used as the basis of either collective or individual assignments either at home or in the classroom and help stimulate some lively and informative discussions and debates on the contemporary mass media. In my own experience as a teacher, I have found that these practical exercises have worked to bring theoretical concepts – such as discourse, hegemony, ideology, structure or agency, for example – to life for undergraduate students and for that key reason a particular emphasis is placed upon them in this textbook.

The need for critical eclecticism

Reflecting my training as a sociologist and my experiences in teaching about the mass media at the University of Limerick and elsewhere, there is an obvious emphasis in this book on the importance of examining the mass media in a social context. Although not exclusively written from a sociological perspective, the importance of examining the media in a social context is clearly reflected in many of the themes chosen for
discussion. This textbook recognizes the contribution that a sociological approach can give us in our analysis of the media in the form of tried and well-tested methodological and theoretical principles (see, for example, Croteau and Hoynes, 2003; Gamson, 2004; Hanson, 2005; McCullagh, 2002). That said, sociology is not alone in having an interest in the significance of the mass media. Rather, *Understanding the Media* – as well as being indebted to the sociological tradition – draws upon a range of illustrative materials that owe much to the diverse range of academic disciplines and approaches – such as communications studies, cultural studies, feminist studies and media studies to name but four – that seek to make sense of the media. It is only through using what Halloran (1998: 19) terms a ‘critical eclecticism’ of this kind that we will further our own and our students’ appreciation of the complexities involved in studying the contemporary mass media. This complexity demands that we be far-reaching and open-minded in our overall approach in attempting to critically understand the mass media and its central role in everyday life.

Media saturation and the complexities contained therein form a recurring theme of this book. An approach to understanding the complexities of the mass media requires us to be both critical and systematic and we would argue that the sociological tradition, bolstered by a range of approaches developed within other academic disciplines and fields of study, arms us with the toolkit necessary to attempt this important and challenging task. We are, in this textbook, attempting to put the noted US sociologist C. Wright Mill’s (1976) call to ‘defamiliarize the familiar’ into practice, in our examination of the media-saturated world in which we live. This requires all of us to stand back and examine our everyday, familiar and often mundane media experiences and ask critical and hopefully sometimes awkward questions. Continuing in this vein, Gitlin proposes that we:

\[
\ldots \text{stop – and imagine the whole phenomenon freshly, taking the media seriously, not as a cornucopia of wondrous gadgets or a collection of social problems, but as a central condition of an entire way of life. Perhaps if we step away from the ripples of the moment, the week or the season, and contemplate the torrent in its entirety, we will know what we want to do about it besides change channels. (2002: 210)}
\]

In attempting to look critically at our media-saturated world, Gitlin’s key phrase is that the mass media represent ‘a central condition of an entire way of life’. His challenge to all of us as scholars, as students and as citizens is to engage critically with the everyday media world in which we live. Given the conditions – such as ongoing media globalization, the restructuring of media ownership and rapid technological change – that have given rise to the historically unprecedented levels of media saturation and social change, this is not a simple task.

**Aims and objectives**

*Understanding the Media*’s main aim is to familiarize neophyte students with a variety of salient questions about the media. As well as introducing them to the
theoretical debates that are taking place about specific issues, the structure of the book actively encourages its readers to go further in their quest for understanding and knowledge. Each chapter contains detailed case studies, class and individual exercises, boxes with further discussion of key concepts and theories, details on the key thinkers who have informed specific debates, critical questions for consideration, three carefully chosen extracted readings from experts in the field, discussion points and questions for further consideration as well as signposts for further reading and research. The practical exercises have an important role to play not only in getting students to think more critically about their own (and others’) experience of the mass media, but also in introducing them to some of the methodological approaches that may be used in media analysis. This practical dimension to Understanding the Media will make it appealing to students and teachers alike and should ideally form the basis of tutorial or practical work, typically associated with course lectures delivered through both traditional and non-traditional means. As we document below, a website for teachers and students which accompanies this textbook, focuses on regularly updated illustrative materials as well as a ‘Quick Questions’ section for student readers.

Understanding the Media aims to equip its student readers with the appropriate theoretical and methodological tools in their initial efforts to deepen their understanding of the media. Although individual chapters are written as self-contained units, and may be read as such, the book – as is demonstrated in more detail in Chapter 1 – follows a deliberate organizational sequence. The succession of chapters in this book is based upon giving equal weighting to the ‘trinity’ of production, content and reception. Understanding the Media is therefore an unapologetically traditional textbook in this regard. As we document in Chapter 1, we encourage our readers to think critically about media texts in terms of how they are created, their structure and content and their reception by audiences. All three aspects are crucial in taking what some might term a more holistic approach to media analysis in an age of media globalization. While the postmodern approach to media analysis may, on the face of it, seem tantalizing, this textbook takes the view that we need to continue to examine the production, content and reception of mass media texts in a systematic way. The mass media are changing with great rapidity but the old questions remain:

- questions about the ownership and control of the global media industries;
- questions about the power of media content to disseminate dominant and other forms of ideology which shape audience attitudes and beliefs about the social world;
- questions about how the mass media represent and perpetuate social inequalities in terms of class, ethnicity and gender and
- questions about the power of audiences to negotiate and renegotiate media texts.

Having introduced the student to the rudiments of media analysis, through a number of case studies and an examination of their own personal media use and exposure by means of keeping a media diary, Understanding the Media goes on to examine the themes of media globalization; media ownership; media professionals
and the production of media texts; ideological and discursive analysis; media representation of class, gender and ethnicity, and media audiences. The final chapter has been extended to provide a more detailed account of audiences and fandom.

The practice of media studies

The term 'explosion' is sometimes used to describe both the expansion of the mass media themselves and the consequent rise of media studies. In reflecting the excitement typically associated with media analysis, *Understanding the Media* draws upon illustrative materials from a wide range of media and from diverse geographical territories, thus ensuring its broad appeal as an undergraduate textbook. Its aim is to whet the appetite of the first-time media student and to nurture, in the longer term, a more critical interest in the analysis and study of the mass media.

A note to the student

This textbook is designed with first-time media students in mind. The book’s main aim is to develop your understanding of the media through a mixture of theoretical discussion, empirical research findings and practical research exercises. To facilitate this, each of the chapters contains the following:

1. A synopsis of the theoretical debate about specific chapter themes.
2. Critical questions throughout the text – signified by this icon ?
3. Boxes containing further theoretical discussion, research findings or details about the key thinkers who have attempted to understand the issues at hand.
4. Useful links between chapters identified by this icon ☛☑
5. Three extracted readings.
7. Discussion points/questions for further consideration.
8. Under the heading ‘Going Further’ you are provided with a short list of annotated references if you wish to delve further into a specific chapter theme.
9. Web links to the ‘Quick Questions’ website that accompanies your textbook.

In addition to these features, there is a glossary at the end of the book which aims to define and demystify the key concepts used throughout the text. To obtain the greatest benefit from this textbook, it is best to read the individual chapters in the sequence in which they are presented here. *Understanding the Media* introduces you to some of the main approaches that you can follow in asking critical questions about the media. As a student reader, you will gain most by engaging with the theoretical discussion, examples of research findings and the suggested practical research exercises at the end of each chapter. Individual chapters are punctuated with guidelines as to when you should undertake the suggested exercises and study the extracted readings. For the purposes of introducing the variety of analytical
approaches to the media, we present each approach separately. However, we encourage you to read the textbook in its entirety and consider the ways in which the approaches discussed here may be used either separately or in combination in order to further your understanding of the media.

Asking questions about the mass media: an example

Let us consider briefly an example of the sorts of questions you might ask of a widely circulated media text. As a media student, you might wish to undertake some research into a popular television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (see Box 0.1). In addition to examining the production values employed in making the series (the quality of the camera work, scripts and storylines etc.), your research might focus on the ownership, production and distribution of such a series. In this regard you might want to pay particular attention to the commodification of popular culture and examine how products such as *Buffy* are a major source of profit for their owners. Profits are generated not only from selling the series’ syndication rights throughout the world but also through a wide range of merchandising associated with the series. You might want to examine the diversity of personnel who are involved in the making of *Buffy* – the owners, the creator, the scriptwriters and the team who cast the series. You might focus on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a multimedia phenomenon by examining how it has crossed over into a range of media genres such as DVD, computer games, official and fan-created websites as well as books, comics, soundtracks and magazines. Alternatively, you might examine cross-cultural audience response to the programme or how it represents gender relations, alternative sexualities or spiritual beliefs in the postmodern era. Does the reading or interpretation of *Buffy* vary according to the location of audience members in terms of region, age, gender and cultural contexts (such as religious beliefs or ethnicity)? Given the programme’s emphasis on the many trials and tribulations associated with being an adolescent, you might focus specifically on the meaning that female teenage fans take from *Buffy*. You might choose all or any of these four approaches in analysing the series in question. In reading *Understanding the Media*, you will learn about the implications of choosing one or other or all these approaches in analysing a media text.

**BOX 0.1 BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER**

Joss Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* began life as a movie in 1992. This was followed by a seven-year run as a television series – initially on Warner Brothers and then on the United Paramount (UPN) network in the USA. The seven seasons of *Buffy* had immense appeal to teenage female audiences across the globe chronicling the story of its heroine Buffy Summers, between the ages of 16 and 22. The recurring

(Continued)
theme of adolescent angst was of major importance in helping to create the connection that teenage fans felt with the series.

Whedon’s creation inverts the usual ingredients of the horror genre which typically portrays female characters as being helpless. As a media text that uses the key elements of a number of genres such as horror and comedy as well as some aspects of intertextuality, *Buffy* is seen by many critics as being representative of so-called ‘girl-power’, where young women are portrayed in heroic roles. Of significant commercial importance to both Warner Brothers and UPN, the programme gave rise to a range of spin-offs such as the television series *Angel*, *Buffy* comic books and novels, as well as official and unofficial websites and discussion forums.

Many of *Buffy’s* fans continue to communicate with each other on the web. Following the series discontinuation in 2003, some fans went so far as to write their own eighth series of the programme. The programme has also attracted a considerable amount of interest from academics within the field of media and cultural studies. Labre and Duke (2004), for example, examine the construction of *Buffy* in a videogame based on the television series. Bloustien (2002) explores the relationship between female adolescent fans of *Buffy* in an Australian context. She uses an ethnographic (see chapter 7 in your textbook) approach in attempting to understand more about the significance of globalized texts such as *Buffy* in the everyday lives of younger female fans. The academic interest in *Buffy* has even given rise to a peer-reviewed journal called *Slayage*. (For more details see: http://slayageonline.com)

### Organization of the textbook

In the light of the overall approach adopted in this textbook, the chapters are organized as follows. Chapter 1 examines the ways in which we can better understand the contemporary mass media. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the changing contexts in which the media operate. They discuss the significance of media globalization, the rapid changes occurring in the structure of ownership and control of the media, and the social impact of changing forms of media technology. Chapter 4 is concerned with the initial ‘making’ of media texts and concentrates upon an examination of the constraints on media professionals both within and without media organizations. Chapter 5 revisits the somewhat problematic issue of the ideological power of the media. Chapter 6 explores how the media represent inequality in terms of class, ethnicity and gender. Chapter 7 examines the role of the audience in general and of reception in particular. The revised chapter has a focus on audiences and fandom.

### Understanding the Media website
References


