Critical Media Studies
AN INTRODUCTION SECOND EDITION

“Two gifted media scholars, Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack, here explore the role of new and developing media in personal, social, and cultural development. They provide clear and workable explanations of terms that are often taken for granted, such as new media or postmodernity. This is an invaluable book for student and professional alike. It helps the reader not only to understand media but to take an active role in critiquing it so as to understand what it does.”

Larry Rasmussen, University of Texas at Austin, USA

“Critical Media Studies is both theoretically sophisticated and accessible. With examples that span the full spectrum of contemporary media, the text is sure to engage students while also challenging them to think through the complexities of media and its impact on us.”

Lisa A. Prosser, University of Colorado - Boulder, USA

Fully revised to reflect today’s media environment, this new edition of Critical Media Studies offers students a comprehensive introduction to the field and demonstrates how to think critically about the power and influence of media in our daily lives. Material new to this edition includes a chapter on sociological analysis and reveals new ways audiences use media in their everyday lives to manage social roles, relationships, and contexts. Readers will also appreciate the extensive updating of previously discussed examples to reflect contemporary industry standards, textual forms, and audience behaviors and the inclusion of more international material to reflect contemporary media’s global reach.

Continuing its well-received writing style that is both engaging and accessible, the book’s twelve perspectives provide readers with a diverse array of critical approaches to media studies, including original approaches such as erotic, sociological, and ecological analysis. Combining the best of well-tested theory with cutting-edge scholarship, this new edition of Critical Media Studies, offers invaluable insights into our current understanding of the nature and consequences of media in today’s world.

Updated and enhanced online resources for instructors – including PowerPoint slides, test bank, study guides, and sample assignments – can be found at www.wiley.com/go/criticalmediastudies.

Brian L. Ott is Associate Professor of Media Studies in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado - Denver. He is the author of The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age (Wiley Blackwell, 2007) and co-editor of It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era (2008).

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About the Authors

Brian L. Ott (right) is Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Colorado Denver. He is the author of *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age* (Wiley Blackwell, 2007) and co-editor of *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (Routledge, 2008). Brian enjoys all things sci-fi and was a huge fan of *Breaking Bad*. His favorite film is *Lost in Translation*, which he believes perfectly captures life in the contemporary moment and, as such, provides the inspiration for the book’s cover art.

Robert L. Mack (left) is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies at the University of Texas, Austin. His scholarship concerns the text-audience interface with a focus on the medium of television. Rob enjoys tabletop board games and passionately believes that Janeway was the best *Star Trek* captain. His favorite subgenres of film include class warfare period pieces, films that attempted to introduce computers to the masses before the technology was widely available, and movies where Whoopi Goldberg evades danger in large, metropolitan cities.
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Preface

To our billions of readers, welcome to the second edition of Critical Media Studies: An Introduction! Okay, we recognize that is an optimistic first sentence, but it sounds more impressive than, “Hey, Ian, Gordana, and crazy Uncle Carl, thanks for reading our book.” Besides, who knows how many readers we have on Kobol (hello, fellow fans of Battlestar Galactica!).

When we began work on the first edition of the book nearly five years ago, it was tentatively titled Critical Media Studies: An Interstellar Guide to Fabulous Dinner Conversation. In the ensuing time, the book has undergone numerous changes, not least of which was a rethinking of its title. Apparently, “some” (who shall remain nameless, Elizabeth!) thought that the reference to dinner conversation might be confusing and misleading. We remain convinced, however, that it would have been an effective way to target fans of the Food Network—a demographic that has, in our opinion, been ignored by academic publishers for far too long (hello, fellow fans of Iron Chef America!). Although we harbor no hard feelings about this change, we nevertheless hope that readers will discuss the book over dinner (or any meal-like activity, including tea time: hello, British readers!) and that the ensuing conversation will be fabulous.

Another significant development has been the book’s cover art. Initially we wanted an image of two squirrels “doing it” . . . a metaphor, of course, for the frenzied but emotionally hollow exchange that occurs between media producers and consumers. But as with the title, more sensible heads prevailed, resulting in the equally enticing image of Tokyo at night. We, nevertheless, would like to thank our friend, Greg, for bravely approaching said squirrels, snapping a picture, and almost losing a finger in the process (hello and apologies, Greg!). Despite our disappointment that the squirrel-on-squirrel image was not selected, we believe that the existing cover is equally appropriate to the themes raised in the book. The rain symbolizes the steady stream of media messages that relentlessly pour down upon us each day. Meanwhile, the unfamiliar signs of the cityscape invite readers to wonder about their meanings just as Critical Media Studies asks readers to wonder about the role of media in their lives. Finally, the array of brilliant colors that comprise the image reflects the array of critical perspectives contained in the book, each shedding its own light on the media.

In closing, we wish to acknowledge our debt to the sensible heads mentioned above. In particular, we would like to express our gratitude to the team at Wiley-Blackwell, especially Elizabeth P. Swayze, Senior Editor, and Julia Kirk, Senior Project Editor. Their guidance and support has been invaluable. We feel fortunate to have had such a dynamic, creative, and thoughtful team guiding us. We also wish to
thank Dave Nash for his persistence and good humor in securing various copyright permissions. Finally, we extend a very special thanks to Kathleen McCully, who copy-edited the manuscript, and Nora Naughton, who oversaw the manuscript through its copy-editing, typesetting, proofreading and indexing stages (Kathleen and Nora, thank you for your tireless efforts to correct our many mistakes!). Since it is cliché to say that any remaining mistakes are solely our own, we instead locate the blame squarely with the Illuminati (hello, Illuminati!).

Cheers,
Brian and Rob
October 14, 2013
1 Introducing Critical Media Studies

How We Know What We Know

Everything we know is learned in one of two ways.1 The first way is somatically. These are the things we know through direct sensory perception of our environment. We know what some things look, smell, feel, sound, or taste like because we personally have seen, smelled, felt, heard, or tasted them. One of the authors of this text knows, for example, that “Rocky Mountain oysters” (bull testicles) are especially chewy because he tried them once at a country and western bar. In short, some of what we know is based on first-hand, unmediated experience. But the things we know through direct sensory perception make up a very small percentage of the total things we know. The vast majority of what we know comes to us a second way, symbolically. These are the things we know through someone or something such as a parent, friend, teacher, museum, textbook, photograph, radio, film, television, or the internet. This type of information is mediated, meaning that it came to us via some indirect channel or medium. The word medium is derived from the Latin word medius, which means “middle” or that which comes between two things: the way that television and the Discovery Channel might come between us and the animals of the Serengeti, for instance.
In the past 30 seconds, those readers who have never eaten Rocky Mountain oysters now know they are chewy, as that information has been communicated to them through, or mediated by, this book. When we stop to think about all the things we know, we suddenly realize that the vast majority of what we know is mediated. We may know something about China even if we have never been there thanks to Wikipedia; we may know something about King George VI even though he died long before we were born thanks to *The King’s Speech* (2010); we may even know something about the particulars of conducting a homicide investigation even though we have likely never conducted one thanks to the crime drama *CSI*. The mass media account, it would seem, for much of what we know (and do not know) today. But this has not always been the case.

Before the invention of mass media, the spoken or written word was the primary medium for conveying information and ideas. This method of communication had several significant and interrelated limitations. First, as the transmission of information was tied to the available means of transportation (foot, horse, buggy, boat, locomotive, or automobile depending upon the time period), its dissemination was extraordinarily slow, especially over great distances like continents and oceans. Second, because information could not easily be reproduced and distributed, its scope was extremely limited. Third, since information often passed through multiple channels (people), each of which altered it, if only slightly, there was a high probability of message distortion. Simply put, there was no way to communicate a uniform message to a large group of people in distant places quickly prior to the advent of the modern mass media. What distinguishes mass media like print, radio, and television from individual media like human speech and hand-written letters, then, is precisely their unique capacity to address large audiences in remote locations with relative efficiency.

*Critical Media Studies* is about the social and cultural consequences of that revolutionary capability. Recognizing that mass media are, first and foremost, communication technologies that increasingly mediate both what we know and how we know, this book surveys a variety of perspectives for evaluating and assessing the role of mass media in our daily lives. Whether listening to an iPod while walking across campus, sharing pictures with friends on Facebook, receiving the latest sports scores via your smartphone, sharing your favorite YouTube video over email, or settling in for the most recent episode of *The Big Bang Theory* or *Downton Abbey*, the mass media are regular fixtures of everyday life. But before beginning to explore the specific and complex roles that mass media play in our lives, it is worth looking, first, at who they are, when they originated, and how they have developed.

**Categorizing Mass Media**

As is perhaps already evident, *media* is a very broad term that includes a diverse array of communication technologies such as cave drawings, speech, smoke signals, letters, books, telegraphy, telephony, magazines, newspapers, radio, film, television,
smartphones, video games, and networked computers to name just a few. But this book is principally concerned with **mass media** or those communication technologies that have the potential to reach a large audience in remote locations. What distinguishes mass media from individual media, then, is not merely audience size. While a graduation speaker or musician may address as many as 40,000 people at once in a stadium, for instance, neither one is mass mediated because the audience is not remote. Now, of course, if a Lady Gaga concert is being broadcast live via satellite, those watching at home on their televisions or streaming it live over the internet are experiencing it through mass media. Mass media collapse the distance between artist and audience, then. Working from this definition, we have organized the mass media into four sub-categories: print media, motion picture and sound recording, broadcast media, and new media. These categories, like all acts of classification, are arbitrary, meaning that they emphasize certain features of the media they group together at the expense of others. Nonetheless, we offer these categories as one way of conceptually organizing mass communication technologies.

**Print media**

In an electronically saturated world like the one in which we live today, it is easy to overlook the historical legacy and contemporary transformations of print media, the first mass medium. German printer Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type printing press in 1450, sparking a revolution in the ways that human beings could disseminate, preserve, and ultimately relate to knowledge. Printed materials before the advent of the press were costly and rare, but the invention of movable type allowed for the (relatively) cheap production of a diverse array of pamphlets, books, and other items. This flourishing of printed materials touched almost every aspect of human life. Suddenly knowledge could be recorded for future generations in libraries or religious texts, and social power increasingly hinged upon literacy and ownership of printed materials. Most importantly, the press allowed for an unprecedented circulation of knowledge to far-flung cities across Europe. Although still limited by class distinctions, access to information from outside of one's immediate context was a real possibility. Mass media was born.

Not long after the settlement of Jamestown in the USA in 1607, the colonies established their first printing press. Located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the press was printing popular religious tracts such as the *Bay Psalm Book*, a 148-page collection of English translations of Hebrew, by 1640. Although much of the early printing in the colonies was religion-oriented, novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Tom Jones* (1749), imported from England, were also popular. Religious tracts were eventually followed by almanacs, newspapers, and magazines. The most well-known early almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which included information on the weather along with some political opinions, was printed from 1733 to 1757 by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. Although various cities had short-lived or local non-daily newspapers in the 1700s, the New York *Sun*, which is considered the first
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successful mass-circulation newspaper, did not begin operations until 1833.\(^3\) The failure of earlier newspapers is often attributed to the fact that they were small operations run by local printers. It was not until newspapers began using editors and receiving substantial financial backing – first from political parties and later from wealthy elites like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst – that the newspaper industry mushroomed.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the newspaper industry experienced rapid growth. This trend continued until 1973, at which point there were 1,774 daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 63.1 million copies.\(^4\) This meant that about 92 percent of US households were subscribing to a daily newspaper in 1973. Since then, however, newspaper production and circulation has steadily declined. In 2011, the total number of daily newspapers printed in the USA was 1,382 and they had a combined circulation of 44.4 million copies or less than 40 percent of US households.

In many ways, the history of the magazine industry in the USA closely mirrors that of the newspaper industry. It began somewhat unsteadily, underwent tremendous growth, and is currently experiencing a period of considerable instability. The first US magazine, American Magazine, was published in 1741. But the magazine boom did not really begin until the mid-nineteenth century. And though the industry continued to experience growth throughout the twentieth century, more recently it has suffered a decline in both the total number of titles (Table 1.1) and paid circulation (Table 1.2). Table 1.1 illustrates that the number of consumer magazine titles in the USA grew by 30 percent from 1990 to 2000 before declining by nearly 25 percent from 2000 to 2010.

Moreover, as Table 1.2 shows, the total paid circulation of the top 10 magazines in 2012 is more than 30 million less than the total paid circulation of the top 10 magazines 20 years earlier. Interestingly, the highest circulating magazine in 2012, Game Informer Magazine, had existed for only 1 year in 1992, while the second highest circulating magazine in 1992, TV Guide, no longer exists. The book publishing industry has, until very recently, not experienced the deep losses occurring in the newspaper and magazine industries over the past two decades. But in 2012, unit sales of traditional paper books fell by about 9 percent for the third year in a row; adult non-fiction was the hardest hit, falling 13 percent.\(^5\) Despite declining circulation and unit sales in the newspaper, magazine, and book industries, Americans are still reading. But how they are reading – thanks to e-books and online newspapers and magazines – is changing both rapidly and dramatically.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1.1</th>
<th>Number of consumer magazine titles in the USA</th>
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<td>Number of titles</td>
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Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations.
Introducing Critical Media Studies

Motion picture and sound recording

Sound recording and motion pictures may seem like an odd pairing at first, but their histories are deeply intertwined thanks in large part to Thomas Edison. In the span of 15 years, Edison and his assistant, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, created what would later develop into the first two new mass media since print. Edison's first invention, of the phonograph in 1877, was a device that played recorded sound, and his second, the kinetoscope in 1892, was an early motion picture device that showed short, silent films in peep-show fashion to individual viewers. But Edison's goal was to synchronize audio and visual images into a film projector that would allow for more than one viewer at a time. Although sound film did not become possible until the early 1920s, improvements in film projection, namely the development of the vitascope, gave rise to the silent film era in the meantime. The eventual synchronization of sound and film launched talking pictures, or “talkies.” The first commercially successful, feature-length talkie was a musical film, The Jazz Singer, in 1927. Hollywood was about to enter its Golden Age of the 1930s and 1940s, in which “the studios were geared to produce a singular commodity, the feature film.”

With the motion picture industry firmly established, sound recording was now receiving independent attention and the record industry began to dominate the music industry, which had previously been involved primarily in the production of sheet music. By the start of the twentieth century, profits from the sale of sound recordings quickly eclipsed profits from the sale of sheet music.