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<LRH>All Media Are Social</LRH>

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<ABSTRACT><TITLE>**Abstract**</TITLE>

This chapter defines the concept “media” and describes what it means to apply the “sociological imagination” to mass media. We begin by exploring the various meanings of the term “media.” Then, we discuss how social scientific approaches to studying mass media differ from humanistic ones, while recognizing the contributions of both qualitative and quantitative research. This section introduces several important concepts including social structure, power, technological determinism, and affordances. Finally, this chapter offers an overview of the goals and organization of the book.</ABSTRACT>

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<BODY>These days, we encounter media in the form of our Facebook feed on smartphones while we eat breakfast, on our laptops throughout the day, and on podcasts as we fall asleep. American adults spend an average of 12 hours per day using various forms of media (see [Figure 1.1](#LinkManagerBM_FIG_HR9XDbdh)). As sociologist Todd Gitlin has noted, “In a society that fancies itself the freest ever, spending time with communications machinery is the main use to which we have put our freedom.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Media are the primary means by which we learn the decisions our politicians make, but mass media play a role in socializing us about how we ought to dress, what we ought to eat, and how we see ourselves in relation to others. In other words, the media—the sum total of the organizations and the people who work for them, the users, and creators, the technology undergirding it all—are an incredibly important social institution in contemporary society. Media are essential to socialization, identity-construction, but also the dissemination of news in democratic societies. This book explores the landscape of the diverse field of media sociology. In this chapter, we will attempt to better understand both of those terms (“media” and “sociology”) and what it means to think about media in a sociological way.

<FIG><LBL>Figure 1.1</LBL> <CAPTION>Average Media Use by U.S. Adults, 2017 [Source: Statista]</CAPTION></FIG>

<HEAD1><TITLE>**All Media**</TITLE></HEAD1>

Given how central a role media play in our lives, it is not surprising that the term, “media,” has taken on a variety of different meanings. Technically speaking, “media” is the plural of the word “medium” (i.e., “mediums”). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “media” is defined as “the main means of mass communication, *esp.* newspapers, radio, and television, regarded collectively; the reporters, journalists, etc. working for organizations engaged in such communication.”[[2]](#endnote-2) By this definition, “media” include technological platforms like books, social media web sites, TV, computers, and smartphones, but also specific TV shows, apps, and movies as well as the people who contribute to making these things.

*Black Panther* is an example of media. So are *The Washington Post* and Reddit.com. So are all the books in your local library and your favorite fitness tracking app. Journalists, coders working for Google, and the Hollywood movie stars are all members of the media. This one word means all of those different things. As the mildly pedantic title of this book suggests, the grammatically correct way of conjugating the word “media” is “the media are” because media are plural.

Nonetheless, language has a sneaky way of changing when the grammatical purists and dictionary writers aren’t looking. Occasionally, students will think of media as referring to just the digital tools that facilitate social interaction like text messaging apps, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Since the late-2000s, we have tended to refer to these web sites and apps as “social media” because they allow us to engage in some forms of mediated social interaction. But the truth is that social media are just one type of media and all forms of media, including ones that feel solitary, have profoundly social dimensions. For example, reading a book can connect you with the experiences of people in very different places and points in time, deepening empathy and understanding, even if you are sitting in a room by yourself. Hence, the title of this book and this chapter, *All Media Are Social*.

Another more narrow use of the term comes from the realm of politics, in which “the media” is sometimes used to refer to mainstream news outlets, journalists, and other members of the press. Ironically, in this usage, the definite article (“the”) in front of the word “media” seems to imply a singular entity—not just any media, it’s *the* media. It may be obvious to point out, but news organizations like CNN and *The Wall Street Journal* (*WSJ*), reporters like Maggie Haberman and Bob Woodward, and pundits like Sean Hannity and Chris Matthews are most certainly not a single entity. But, perhaps, this shortcut reflects a sense that “the media” are a sort of chatty, homogeneous social club with shared cultural and ideological assumptions. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see grammatically incorrect claims that “the media is” one thing or another.

Todd Gitlin also sees the grammatical error (“the media is”) as linked to the view that media are monolithic, but argues that it extends far beyond just politics. Gitlin claims that our sense of “the media” as a singular entity stems from a deep homogeneity across entertainment media, news media, the Internet, TV, etc. As he writes, “something feels uniform—a relentless pace, a pattern of interruption, a pressure toward unseriousness, a readiness for sensation, and anticipation of the next new thing.”[[3]](#endnote-3) While Gitlin’s interpretation is both critical and expansive, the underlying point is that part of the reason that people sense a unity across all the various types of media is because they tend to share cultural and aesthetic qualities and often links of ownership and shared financial incentive.

This observation should not come as a surprise. The media *are* many things, but the media *is* a social institution. Just as the family is an institution, but individual families are different from each other in many ways, so, too, the media are an institution with norms that constrain the action of individual actors and organizations, but there are also real differences across various types of media. Media sociologists are interested in all the different component parts that make up “the media,” including different technologies, organizations, media workers, ownership models, cultures, and the ways that audiences respond to and are affected by media.

<HEAD1><TITLE>Are Social</TITLE></HEAD1>

What does it mean to study media sociologically? Many different disciplines, including communications, media studies, technology studies, law, historians, and literary studies, are interested in examining media. Some of these disciplines, like literary studies, are fundamentally humanistic in nature. They tend to approach a given media artifact, say, Jordan Peele’s 2017 horror movie *Get Out* and interpret the various meanings in this “text.” For example, one fairly apparent reading of that movie is that it acts as an allegory for race relations in the contemporary U.S. However, scholars with differing emphases might read the text for its innovation in the horror genre, its gender politics, and so on.

Unlike these humanist disciplines, sociology is a social science, meaning we use systematic methods to collect various forms of data. In sociology, these data could be quantitative (e.g., surveys, experiments, count-based content analyses, etc.) or qualitative (e.g., interviews, ethnography, observation, etc.). While some sociologists specialize in developing social theory that informs and is reinforced by empirical findings, one characteristic that separates sociologists from some disciplines studying media is that we rely on social scientific methods to answer questions.

Substantively, sociology attempts to understand the dynamic relationship between individuals and society.[[4]](#endnote-4) How do *social structures*, or stable patterns of routines and relationships organized through institutions and individuals within a society, enable or constrain individual behavior? How do individuals use their *agency* or free will to reinforce or change features of society? Media sociology tries to ask these questions within the context of the social institution of mass media. For example, an important question in media sociology involves the underrepresentation of women and people of color in Hollywood movies (more on that in chapters 8 and 9). Many people see underrepresentation as a problem, but who actually has power over deciding who stars in movies? Many casting agents and even studio executives, who seem pretty powerful, claim they would like to have more diverse casts, but feel constrained by the structure of a capitalist marketplace and audience preferences.[[5]](#endnote-5) But if it is the system to blame, where did that system come from? What continues to hold it in place? And how can things change?

The deeper questions undergirding this example are about power. Who has it? When do they get to use it? Sociologists, in general, tend to be interested in how power works both through social structures, but also through *culture*. It’s not just laws, job titles, access to resources, and other structures that constrain behavior. It also happens through social norms, cultural tastes and preferences, and *ideology*, or a system of beliefs people hold. For example, relatively few people even in a wealthy society like the U.S. earn most of their money from the stock market, so why does the nightly TV news broadcast give us a daily stock market report? There’s no law saying they have to. Rather, it is reflective of an ideology that the overall well-being of major companies is important. For that reason, most journalists and producers working on these broadcasts probably feel unempowered to change it because there is a strong social norm to report what the Dow Jones did today. The point is that culture and structure are often linked and both exercise great power over how media work.

Even though structure and culture shape behavior in powerful ways, there is such a thing as taking an idea too far. In 2017, *The Atlantic* ran a story with the headline, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”[[6]](#endnote-6) This headline is a perfect example of *technological determinism* or the view that social outcomes stem directly from the introduction of new technologies. Smartphones are invented and, BOOM, a generation is destroyed. Media sociologists tend to be critical of such arguments for a few reasons. While new technologies can shape behavior, people also have agency. More importantly, as sociologists Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport argue, “[I]t is people’s usage of technology—not technology itself—that can change social processes.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Rather than thinking of technology as determining some outcome, media sociologists increasingly think of technologies in terms of technological *affordances* or “the range of functions and constraints that an object provides.”[[8]](#endnote-8) For example, compared to a printed book, one affordance of e-reader devices is that the user can search for a particular word or phrase. We need not make the assumption that any outcome must occur simply because a technology offers particular affordances. Researchers have elaborated their theorizing of affordances by observing that people must perceive that an affordance exists in order to make use of it, and that technology’s affordances may not be equally available to all users. For example, people with physical disabilities may lack the dexterity to make use of all affordances of touch-screen devices.[[9]](#endnote-9) Viewed from this perspective, it is obvious that to the extent that young people’s behavior is changing, it is probably not caused by the devices themselves, but by some of the ways that young people use them.

Media sociologists are not alone in asking questions about power, structure and agency, culture, and technological affordances. Many researchers in communications and media studies are interested in the same questions. Some of the most fruitful collaborations have come from researchers who collaborate across disciplinary lines. Moreover, many communications departments have incorporated more courses with a sociological perspective into their curriculum. But what makes a question about media inherently sociological is if it considers how structure, culture, and agency interact to place limits or create new opportunities for people.

Despite this shared focus, let’s be clear about something: media sociology, like sociology in general, is a low-consensus field. Sociologists have ongoing debates about preferred methods, whether scientific objectivity is possible, whether scholar-activism is desirable, and how much evidence there is to support various claims. We, as the two authors of this book, have frequently disagreed about any number of questions within media sociology.

But this is a big tent book. In the coming chapters, we incorporate theoretical and empirical studies, qualitative and quantitative research, studies with a range of orientations regarding questions about objectivity and activism, and findings regarding both the U.S. and the wider global media system. We believe that one of sociology’s great strengths as a discipline is the diversity of perspectives and methods we bring to bear on questions about society. None of which is to say that we ought to hold back on critique. Constructive critique, too, is an essential part of any healthy discipline. In this book, we aim to offer a broad overview of some of the most crucial sociological insights on media as well as some of the remaining unanswered questions and ongoing debates within media sociology.

<HEAD1><TITLE>What this Book—Or any Other Book—Cannot Do Well</TITLE></HEAD1>

Books are a slow medium. That’s partially for technological reasons. Compared to a tweet, which publishes instantly, it takes a lot of time to typeset the manuscript, print on paper, glue on the binding, and ship the physical book to a bookstore. But to avoid a purely technologically deterministic outlook, books are also slow for cultural reasons. Rarely do publishers print a 280 character or even a 500-word book. Rather, a book like this one contains about 70,000 words and it takes time to do the necessary research, write up drafts, and edit them. Our socially constructed expectations of what a book should be like make it a plodding process.

Because books are slow, there are some things they cannot do well. They cannot stay on top of the latest breaking news stories, technological innovations, or changes of policy. In Chapter 5, we describe the pendulum swing of policy over Net Neutrality. In the course of writing this book, we observed that swing happening in real time and we have no idea what the current policy will be by the time you are reading this. Similarly, the most popular media platforms and technologies are changing at an extraordinary pace. Just as blogging and early social media platforms like MySpace declined in the 2010s and gave way to Facebook and Twitter, so, too, it is quite possible that by the time you read this, the current forms of social media may have been replaced by augmented reality glasses (or something that we lack the foresight and creativity to imagine).

Still, books have some special affordances that have continued to make them valuable even as new technologies have emerged. Books are particularly well-suited for extended arguments and explaining big ideas. Books allow for the kind of complexity and nuance that requires a few hundred pages. They also encourage the reader to engage in a type of sustained attention that is not as easily achieved on a device that pops notifications up every 30 seconds.

With these affordances of the medium in mind, what we attempt to do in this book is to offer frameworks that conceptualize how the institution of mass media works. Readers can then use these frameworks to make sense of new developments in media as they occur. It is also true that there are some enduring conditions of mass media that have stayed constant since at least the mid-20th century and seem likely to continue. In such cases, the challenge for the reader is not to apply a well-established insight to the moment, but, instead, to stretch one’s imagination to consider how things might change for the better.

<HEAD1><TITLE>Organization of the Book</TITLE></HEAD1>

This book is organized into four sections. The first section, which includes this chapter and Chapter 2, offers an overview of media sociology and the prevailing theories in the field. The next three sections roughly match up with three broad levels of analysis in media sociology: production, content, and audiences.

In the Production section (chapters 3–6), we explore how economic and political structures as well as the cultural context affect media production. In Chapter 3, we consider how the various sources of funding for media (e.g., subscriptions, advertising, public-funding, etc.) shape the types of incentives media organizations have to produce certain types of content. In Chapter 4, we evaluate the debates over how concentrated media ownership grants extraordinary power to relatively few people and may serve to create less diverse media content. Then, in Chapter 5, we turn to exploring the role of governments in regulating and managing media. Lastly, Chapter 6 maps out the culture of media workers with a particular emphasis on the field of journalism.

The Content section (chapters 7–9) highlights research examining which topics and types of people are either represented or left out in various forms of mass media. Chapter 7 explores how news organizations cover politics and considers debates over issues like liberal bias in the news, the growth of partisan news outlets, and the role of new forms of media in politics like citizen journalism and social media. In Chapter 8, we explore representations of gender and sexuality in mass media, giving particular attention to entertainment media and rising concerns about gendertrollling online. Similarly, Chapter 9 covers representations of race and social class in media and how they often intersect.

Finally, in the Audiences section (chapters 10 and 11), we ask how media content affects people and how people push back against it. Chapter 10 examines the expansive body of research on how people use media and how media can shape what people think about and how they think about it. But lest we conclude that people are helpless in the face of mass media, Chapter 11 returns to the concept of agency and describes forms of resistance and activism to challenge media messages and systems of representation.

Every book involves choices. As the authors of this book, we attempt to offer an overview of the field that represents all three levels of analysis, rather than doing a deep dive on just one. The thought of how many important areas of research, intriguing sociological questions, and cool studies we have had to leave out of *All Media Are Social* weighs heavily on us. But we see this book as a starting point and as an invitation to media sociology. We hope that what you learn here will spark an interest that will lead you to read more in the field and conduct some research of your own.</BODY>

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