The Mass Media

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During the process of writing, the writer is usually isolated, alone in a room with whatever instrument she or he uses for writing: pen, pencil, typewriter, computer. Yet every word, every visual image has to be created with the thousands and even millions of people who will be watching or listening in mind. When you write for a mass medium, you are writing for a mass audience. The nature of that audience must constantly be in the forefront of your mind and be the key to what you create.

Although millions may hear or see what you have written, they will experience it individually or in small groups: a family at home in a living room, a few youngsters in a schoolyard, several college students in a dorm's common room, an individual on a bus or subway, a person alone in a bedroom, a commuter in a car. The Internet audience is even more individualized, one person sitting alone at a computer; yet, at the same time, potentially millions of people throughout the world are seeing and hearing at the same moment what you wrote. You are simultaneously writing for an individual, for a small number of people who have a lot in common, and for a large number of people who may have little in common.

Reaching such an audience effectively is especially difficult because it is not a "captive" audience. Most of what airs over television, radio, and cyberspace is free. Unlike the theatre or movie audience, which has paid a fee and is not likely to leave unless seriously bored or

offended, the television, radio, or Internet audience can press a button, turn a dial, hit a key, or click on an icon to move to something else if it doesn't like what it sees or hears.

People who go to a play or film usually know something about what they are going to see from reading reviews or being influenced by ads. Although some television viewers carefully select shows, most viewers tune in to particular **formats** (evening soaps, family **sitcoms,** police programs, reality shows, et al.) and to specified continuing series, including local and network newscasts, by force of habit. Many people will switch to another program if the one they are watching does not hold their interest, or they will watch only half-heartedly or intermittently, missing some of the story content and, most important from the point of view of the network and station, the commercials. Radio listeners do the same. They may tune in to a particular music or talk-show format, but if the music or discussion subject is not exactly what they want at the moment, it's easy for them to flip the dial to something more interesting. Many viewers and listeners shop around the dial at random until they find something that grabs their attention. Internet users have an even wider choice than do radio and TV users. Although the latter may have hundreds of channels to choose from, the former can browse the World Wide Web and choose from hundreds of thousands of sources.

What does this mean for the writer? You must capture the attention of the audience as soon as possible and hold it. Every picture and every word must be purposeful, directed toward keeping the audience's interest. As a writer you must make certain that no irrelevancies and no extraneous moments are in your script. Write directly, sharply, and simply! The mass media audience is as diverse as the population of wherever the given program reaches—in cyberspace, the entire world. The opinions, prejudices, educational, social, and political backgrounds, economic status, and personal creeds of people watching and listening vary from A to Z.

In recent years, however, radio has changed drastically. Terrestrial radio at one time was highly localized, serving the special needs and interests of each station's specific community. As a result of the vitiating of virtually all anti-monopoly rules by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and through subsequent FCC rulings, radio has become by and large a consolidated industry. Large conglomerates bought up as many stations as they could afford, and by the mid-first-decade of the 2000s most small independent radio stations that had been dedicated to providing local service disappeared. In some larger cities as many as eight stations are owned by the same company, which saves money by consolidating personnel and services. Large conglomerates program their owned and operated stations from central sources sometimes hundreds of miles away from the stations, frequently with the exact same programming to distant local areas that may have little in common. Concomitantly, many of these consolidated stations have had drastic personnel reductions—some with no local programmer or on-air personality—thus eliminating any possibility of serious or informed local service. In part because radio listeners in many communities no longer have their special interests in music being served, subscribers to satellite radio (XM, Sirius) have greatly increased, and listeners are at least able to have a choice of many more music genres and greater opportunity to find that which most suits them. Although

terrestrial conglomerates and satellite providers have attempted to provide news and weather directed to some regions and cities, local news has faded seriously, especially in small markets. An example: Officials tried to warn the people of a community of a toxic spill from a train accident, but the local radio station, conglomerate-owned and computer-operated, had no one on duty. Local radio service might have prevented the resulting illness and death. (If you are going into radio, you may wish to consult the 2005 Hilliard-Keith book, *The Quieted Voice: the Rise and Demise of Localism in American Radio.*)

Because financial rather than artistic or social considerations control programming decisions and content, the producers and advertisers try to reach and hold as large a segment of the viewing or listening population as possible. In television, the easiest and most effective way to do this is to find the broadest common denominator—which frequently turns out to be the lowest. The term *LCD* is used to describe this lowest common denominator programming target. Despite increasing **narrowcasting** programming—programs oriented toward specialized audiences, reflecting the growing number of program and distribution sources such as multi-network and multi-channel cable and satellite systems—the primary aim of video producers too often still seems to be to present material that will not offend anyone.

The most popular commercial network shows—sitcoms, action adventure, police, hospitals, reality, talent programs—follow that formula. Programs willing to deal in depth with ideas or to present controversial material are in the minority. There are exceptions. The drama series, *Boston Legal*, invariably includes a controversial social or political issue in its scripts, frequently taking an irreverent view. *60 Minutes* does from time to time deal with significant issues, although the degree of controversy the program is willing to tackle is usually mild. Its original success prompted a spate of similar shows, such as *Dateline, 48 Hours,* and *20/20.* They sometimes cover key events and touch on serious issues, but mostly limit their contents to non-controversial human interest features. News and documentary programs that do deal with controversial issues in depth don't last long. A prime example was Michael Moore's *TV Nation* in the 1990s. It satirized America's and the world's sacred cows and garnered critical acclaim as well as an Emmy award. It was dumped by both CBS and FOX despite tens of thousands of letters from the public supporting the show. The same fate befell *Politically Incorrect* in 2002 when the host, Bill Maher, dared to exercise his constitutional freedom of speech to question the policies of the president and the government in power at that time. Since then, self-censorship of controversial ideas, with the occasional exception of comedy satire, has taken hold.

Some PBS and NPR news and public affairs programs still challenge the status quo, but government pressure on—and de facto censorship of—public broadcasting to reflect the government's political and social conservative viewpoints in the first decade of this new century has resulted in timid programming. Perhaps the most controversial programming in the mass media today, aside from the alternative programming that has found a home in the Internet, is on talk shows. However, inasmuch as the mass media (including newspapers and magazines) are owned predominantly by political conservatives, virtually all television and cable network and syndicated radio talk shows—there are some exceptions—range from moderate right-wing to radical right-wing.

Although traditionally and consistently politically conservative, the media have become less and less conservative in terms of social behavior. Partial nudity, profane language, undisguised sexual situations, and non-judgmental recognition of the real-world's alternative life styles are staples of early 21st century programming. Although obscene material is banned from the airwaves, indecent and profane material, euphemistically labeled adult programming is permissible under certain circumstances. The Federal Communications Commission defines indecent program material as "language or material that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs." Therefore, the writer for the media is cautioned to check with the appropriate legal representative of his or her organization, while at the same time exercising every effort to maintain the integrity of what is being written.

Demographics

When network radio, which was comparable to network television today, disappeared in the 1950s as television took over the older medium's most attractive programs and stars, radio, to survive, became fragmented into local audiences. Individual stations developed formats that appealed to specifically targeted groups of listeners. As noted earlier, the elimination of monopoly controls and the rise of conglomerates have resulted in a diminishing of programming specifically designed by a local programmer for a local audience. Nevertheless, ideally, the writer should attempt to prepare material that appeals to and is needed by a specific local audience.

The makeup of the potential audience for a given program or station is called **demographics.** The principal demographics are age and gender within the given market's locale. Some demographic studies go deeper, into job or profession, income, and education. When the audience's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are included—such as political affiliation, religion, where the viewer or listener shops, and what brands he or she buys—it is called psychographics. These conditions and interests of the audience determine the kinds of writing that appeal to the given audience, as well as the product or service the audience is most likely to purchase. The demographics of radio audiences sometimes are even more precise than those of television audiences. Because radio is virtually all music—with the exception of some full-service stations, talk, all-news, all-sports, religious, and a few other specialized formats—each station attempts to program to a specified group of loyal listeners who are attracted to a particular music type and format. Radio stations may even break down their potential audiences into which interest groups might be listening in a particular place (home, work, car) and at a particular time of day or night. Cable audiences are fairly easily targeted because most cable channels are quite narrow in scope, and Internet audiences, with the exception of some browsers, are usually interested in a given site's subject matter.

The basic concept of demographics use is illustrated in the following example: Take the same product and stress in the advertising spot the specific appeal that would be most effective with a given audience.

For an audience in a highly urbanized area: "The new Powerhouse Six is the latest in automobile styling. Its sleek, long look and ample interior, however, belie its length of only 86 inches, short enough to fit into some of the smallest parking spaces."

For an audience in a middle-class suburban area: "The new Powerhouse Six is the latest in automobile styling. Its ample interior is large enough to carry six children and assorted soccer, band, and school picnic equipment."

For an audience in an upscale suburban area: "The new Powerhouse Six is the latest in automobile styling. Its long, sleek look makes it a perfect second car that reflects the superior workmanship and appointments of its interior and exterior."

For an audience in a rural area: "The new Powerhouse Six is the latest in automobile styling. Its rugged exterior and roomy interior match the supercharged engine's remarkable 32 miles per gallon."

Well, you get the idea! Factor in what you know about the audience's age, gender, income, political milieu, religious affiliations and other available information and you can pinpoint the content that might be most effective. When you get to the different formats in this book, practice writing your assigned scripts for different demographics.

An important part of demographics is the racial and ethnic makeup of the specific market. Station formats reflect the interests of the audience. In 2006, with Spanish-speaking individuals making up some 15% or about 40 million of the United States population, it is not surprising that Spanish-language radio stations had become the third-largest format in the country, behind News/Talk and Adult Contemporary stations and ahead of Contemporary Hits, Country, and Rock formats.

A successful program type or format prompts repetition. When *Survivor's* ratings soared, a plethora of reality shows followed. By the middle of this new century's first decade, reality programs of various types dominated the airwaves and the rating charts. The success of *Law and Order* in the mid-1990s resulted in the program cloning itself—three times. Two of the clones along with the original show were doing very well a decade later.

Formula writing dominates most television series. Several decades ago, after a study of competition and responsibility in network television broadcasting, the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** stated, "By and large, episodes of television series are produced on the basis of 'formulas'—approved in advance by the network corporation and often its mass advertisers—which 'set' the characters, 'freeze' theme and action, and limit subject matter to 'tested' commercial patterns." Things haven't changed! But there are exceptions. Some individual program series present individual episodes of high quality. Opportunity does exist for the writer to develop scripts of high artistic value as well as scripts requiring a mastery of formula technique.

The Electronic Media

Thus far we have dealt, principally, with the television and radio media. What about films made for TV? What about **cable?** Is there a difference between a script prepared for a cable pay channel and that written for a local cable access channel? Is a different writing approach needed for material distributed by satellite? Does one write differently for the

Internet? What about other systems that make up the panoply of *electronic mass media?* In most cases the means of distribution are irrelevant. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, writing is writing is writing. No matter what technology is used to send out and receive the video or audio signal, the program form is essentially the same. The demographics may differ among people watching a local cable access channel or a local station broadcast channel or a channel received on a home satellite dish. The material permissible on an over-the-air station can differ from that seen on a pay-per-view "adult" channel. But the techniques of writing programs for a type of format, whether for broadcast or cable, remain the same. *Television* is the term used here to describe all video writing, and *radio* is the term used to describe all audio writing for the mass media.

Therefore, no distinction is made in this book among writing for broadcast, cable, or satellite transmission except where the demographics or other special considerations mandate different format or technique requirements. This is not true, however, for the Internet. Still in its developing stage in these early years of the 21st century, the Internet nevertheless has been moving steadily from using little-changed adaptations of television and radio writing ("streaming" programs from the older media was the most direct way of enlarging broadcasting's audience base) to using its interactive ability as a creative base for entertainment programming. Writing for the Internet's full potentials requires different approaches and techniques. A story headline in *Time* magazine in mid-2006: "Spending more time with your computer than with your TV? Then TV's coming to find you." NBC's *The Office* began streaming mini-episodes that people at computers could watch when they had a little time to spare. ESPN, Comedy Central, Discovery, MTV, HGTV and other cable networks began implementing broadband channels. NBC and CBS were planning on-line-only reality shows. CBS launched an online channel, "innertube," for programming developed solely for the Internet and supported by advertising. In addition, CBS began showing episodes of a number of its TV programs on the Internet the day after they appeared on television. One of the network's premiere programs, *CBS Evening News*, was offered free, in full, for Internet streaming. The hit reality show from Fox TV, *American Idol*, went on the Internet and even Internet radio began using television materials, with a number of channels playing the music of Idol contestants. While most people studying to write for the electronic media concentrate on television and radio, many observers insist that the Internet is clearly the medium of the future for much of the current TV and radio programming. Others, however, such as the Forbes 2006 report on media changes, state that the new media will not replace the older media but will result in television and radio growing and adapting to new models.

Production techniques may seem irrelevant to the writer. But the writer should know at least some of the key production elements in order to understand what each medium can do. The writer must be able to write for the eye and ear, in addition to mastering the use of words. For example, the film format for television is not the same as the format for a **live-type** show recorded before a studio audience. Within each format, reflecting different aesthetic as well as physical approaches, are varying production techniques, made possible by different equipment and technical devices. The writer must understand the production

elements just as a painter understands different brushes, canvasses, and paints. The writer's basic tools are covered in Chapter 2.

Although other technologies developed after radio and television, such as cable and satellite, are often referred to as "new media," they are essentially distribution systems. Except for programming in the larger sense—such as narrowcasting, given the multiple channels and fragmented video audiences here in the United States—their aesthetics are essentially the same as the older media. That is, they rarely require special or different writing techniques for their programs. They merely distribute through an additional service the programs that otherwise would be aired over traditional television or radio.

But cyberspace is different. The Internet sets up a number of special technical, aesthetic, and psychological parameters that the writer must understand and use if he or she is to prepare a script that has optimum impact in the new medium. In this sense, the Internet is to the writer today what television was when it first opened up to programming. For example, the approaches used for writing a drama or documentary for film or a play for the stage or any program for radio had to be adapted to the needs and potentials of television. The same principle applies to writing for the Internet today.

Television and the Mass Audience

Television can combine the live performance values of theatre, the mechanical abilities of film, the sound and audience orientation of radio, and its own electronic capacities. Television can use the best of all previous communication media.

Television combines both subjectivity and objectivity in relation to the audience, fusing two areas frequently thought of as mutually exclusive. With the camera and various electronic devices, the writer and director can subjectively orient the audience's attentions and emotions by directing them to specific stimuli. The television audience cannot choose its focus, as does the stage audience, from among all the aspects of any given presentation. The television audience can be directed, through a **close-up,** a **zoom,** a **split screen,** or other camera or **control board (switcher)** movement, to focus on whatever object or occurrence most effectively achieves the purpose of the specific moment in the script. Attention can be directed to subtle reaction as well as to obvious action.

Objectivity is crucial to lending credibility to non-dramatic programming such as newscasts and documentaries. Creating an objective orientation is accomplished by bringing the performer more openly and directly to the viewer, for example, through the close-up or the zoom, than can be done in the large auditorium or theatre, even with a live performance, or in the expanse of a movie house. Unlike most drama, where the purpose is to create illusion, the performer in the non-dramatic program (television host/hostess, announcer, newscaster) wants to achieve a non-illusionary relationship with the audience. At the same time, the small screen, the limited length of most programs, and the intimacy of the living room create effects and require techniques different from those of a film shown in a movie theatre.

Stemming from the early days of television when all productions were live with continuous action, non-filmed television continues to maintain a continuity of action that

differs from the usually frequent changes in a picture that one sees on the movie screen. Some television programs are still done as if they were live: recorded with few breaks in the action. In this respect, television borrows a key aesthetic element from the theatre.

Television is restricted by the comparatively (in relation to movies) small screen, which limits the number of characters and the size of the setting (note how poorly large-scale films look on television), and by the limited time available for a given dramatic program (approximately 21 minutes of playing time for a half-hour show and 42 minutes for the hour show, after commercial and **intro** and **outro** time has been subtracted). Television uses virtually every mechanical technique of film, adding electronic techniques of its own to give it a special versatility and flexibility. Even so, the most successful shows still reflect a cognizance of the small screen and limited time, concentrating on slice-of-life vignettes of clearly defined characters.

There is a negative side to television's mechanical and electronic expansion. After videotape's advent in 1956 with its editing capabilities, television gradually moved from live to taped and filmed shows, and the center of television production, which had been in New York City with its abundance of experienced theatre performers, moved to Hollywood. Soon the Hollywood approach dominated television. Some television critics argue that much of television has become a boxed-in version of the motion picture. Conversely, some film critics believe that television techniques imported to Hollywood have negatively affected films, and have made them "smaller, busier, and blander."

The writer must always keep in mind that television is visual. Where a visual element can achieve the desired effect, it should take precedence over dialogue; in many instances, dialogue may be superfluous. A story is told about a famous Broadway playwright, noted for his scintillating dialogue, who was hired to write a film script. He wrote a 30-page first act treatment in which a husband and wife on vacation reach their hotel and go to their hotel room. Thirty minutes of witty and sparkling conversation reveal that the wife has become increasingly disturbed over her husband's attention to other women. An experienced movie director went over the treatment and thought it presented a good situation. However, for the 30 pages of dialogue he substituted less than 1 page of visual directions in which the husband and wife enter the hotel, perfunctorily register, walk to the elevator, enter the elevator where the husband looks appraisingly at the female elevator operator, and the wife's face expresses great displeasure as the elevator doors close.

A simple test can show that many television writers have not yet learned the visual essence of their medium. Turn on your television set and turn the brightness down until the picture is gone, leaving only the audio. Note in how many programs, from commercials to dramas, you will "see" just about as much as you would with the video on. Is much of television, as some critics say, still just radio with pictures?

Radio and the Mass Audience

Radio is not limited by what can get presented visually. By combining sound effects, music, dialogue, and even silence, the writer can develop a picture in the audience's mind that is

limited only by the listener's imagination. Radio permits the writer complete freedom of time and place. There is no limitation on the setting or on movement. The writer can create unlimited forms of physical action and bypass in a twinkling of a musical bridge minutes or centuries of time and galaxies of space.

Before the advent of television, when drama was a staple of radio, writers set the stage for what were later to become the science fiction favorites of television, such as *Star Trek* and its clones, and of film, such as *Star Wars.* Writer Howard Koch's and director Orson Wells's *War of the Worlds* is still famous for its many provocative radio productions throughout the world. Radio in America has become virtually all music and talk. Except for commercials and occasional features, artistic writing and directing in commercial radio are virtually dormant. But they are not totally dead, and there are still some opportunities for those who want to explore the aural medium's potentials.

The radio audience hears only what the writer-director wants it to hear. Audience members "see" pictures in their imaginations. The radio writer can create this mind picture more effectively than can the writer in any other medium because in radio the imagination is not limited by what the eye sees. Radio's subjectivity enables the writer to create places, characters, and events that might be extremely difficult or too costly to show visually.

The writer can place the audience right alongside of or at any chosen distance from a character or performer. Voice distances and relationships to the microphone determine the audience's view of the characters and of the setting. For example, if the audience is listening to two people in conversation and the writer has the first person fade off from the microphone, the audience, in its imagination, stays with the second person and sees the first one moving away. Of course, different listeners may imagine the same sound stimulus in different ways because each person's psychological and experiential background is different. Nevertheless, the good writer finds enough common elements to stimulate common emotions and reactions. No television show, for example, has ever created the mass hysteria of radio's *War of the Worlds.*

A scene must be set in dialogue and sound rather than established through sight. This must not be done too obviously. Radio often uses a narrator or announcer to set the mood, establish character relationships, give information about program participants, describe the scene, summarize the action, and even comment on the attitude the audience might be expected to have toward the program, participants, or performers. The background material, which sometimes can be shown in its entirety on television through visual action alone, must be given on radio through dialogue, music, sound—and silence.

Because drama has almost totally disappeared from radio, except for some programming on public radio stations and as a key element in many commercials, we tend to ignore the aesthetic potentials of the medium. We sometimes forget that a staple of radio, commercials, can be highly artistic, and often are, in fact, mini-dramas.

You can easily tell the difference between the quality of a commercial expressly written for radio and that of a television commercial whose sound track is used for a radio

spot. Bernard Mann, former president of WGLD and other stations in North Carolina, who began as a broadcast writing student in college and whose experience has included serving as the president of the National Radio Broadcasters Association, stated:

> One of my great frustrations is that too little of the writing done for radio is imaginative. We have almost made it part of the indoctrination program for **copywriters** at our radio stations to listen to some of the old radio shows. During that time, listeners were challenged to use their imagination. Nothing has changed. The medium is still the same. The opportunity for the writer to challenge the listener is still there. It's just not being used very much. Of course, radio today has very little original drama, but every day thousands of pieces of copy are turned out with very little imagination. Often an advertiser will tell a salesperson, "I can't use radio, it must have a picture," but I think that's radio's strength. The picture leaves nothing to the imagination, but a description will be colored by the listener to be more toward what he or she wants or likes.

Radio is indeed the art of the imagination. Technologies such as multi-track and digital recording further enhance this aural medium's potential. The radio writer is restricted only by the breadth and depth of the mind's eye of the audience. A vivid illustration of this potential and, appropriately, an example of good scriptwriting, is Stan Freberg's award-winning promotional spot for radio, "Stretching the Imagination."

MAN: Radio? Why should I advertise on radio? There's nothing to look at . . . no pictures.

GUY: Listen, you can do things on radio you couldn't possibly do on TV.

MAN: That'll be the day.

GUY: Ah huh. All right, watch this. (AHEM) O.K. people, now I give you the cue, I want the 700-foot mountain of whipped cream to roll into Lake Michigan which has been drained and filled with hot chocolate. Then the royal Canadian Air Force will fly overhead towing the 10-ton maraschino cherry which will be dropped into the whipped cream, to the cheering of 25,000 extras. All right . . . cue the mountain . . .

SOUND: GROANING AND CREAKING OF MOUNTAINS INTO BIG SPLASH!

GUY: Cue the air force!

SOUND: DRONE OF MANY PLANES.

GUY: Cue the maraschino cherry . . .

SOUND: WHISTLE OF BOMB INTO BLOOP! OF CHERRY HITTING WHIPPED CREAM.

GUY: Okay, twenty-five thousand cheering extras . . .

Continued

SOUND: ROAR OF MIGHTY CROWD. SOUND BUILDS UP AND CUTS OFF SHARP! Now . . . you wanta try that on television?

MAN: Well . . .

GUY: You see . . . radio is a very special medium, because it stretches the imagination.

MAN: Doesn't television stretch the imagination?

GUY: Up to 21 inches, yes.

Courtesy of Freberg, Ltd.

The Internet Audience

The Internet audience is quite different from that for other media. It consists of single individuals in a one-on-one communication exchange, even though millions may be logged on to the same site at the same time. Through the Internet's interactive capabilities, each member of the audience may be a participant in the communication process, rather than a passive viewer or listener. The Internet has flexibility as well as control over the material being presented. Internet users have an even wider choice of selections than do radio and TV users. The latter have perhaps hundreds of channels to choose from, but the former can browse the World Wide Web and can choose from literally hundreds of thousands of sources. Most important is that although traditional media are controlled by multinational corporations and self-serving corporate executives—the gatekeepers who allow only the programming that serves their vested interests—there are few gatekeepers of the Internet—except where some governments attempt to control the Internet service providers (ISPs) and through them the programming. The Internet is open and free to alternative programming from any group or individual source. (Examples of these differences are illustrated in Chapter 5, News and Sports.)

What does this mean for producers, directors, and, for purposes of this book, script writers? A medium interprets what we have written for an audience. Writing for films is different than writing for stage, just as writing for radio is different than writing for film or stage, just as writing for television is different than writing for radio. We write to fit the aesthetic and technical requirements of the given medium.

Although the Web is increasingly a source of distribution for film, video, and audio on a mass scale, and although producers of Hollywood films, television programs, and radio and music audio materials are increasingly preparing their materials to meet Internet requirements and potentials, many are simply using the Internet as a distribution medium without understanding that it is an entirely different creative environment for their productions than traditional film, television, or radio. Note the term "interactive." It is a key to writing for this medium. For example, journalists might assume greater responsibility for

accuracy and greater excellence in writing for the Internet, given the viewers' and listeners' opportunity to double-check any news story from an immediately available variety of sources and to compare the art and effect of a story with other reports. Further, the Internet news audience can have instant access to a wider variety of opinions and interpretations of the news and is able to bypass biased news, whether the bias is a result of nationalism or local pride or political or economic—that is, advertiser—pressure. Simply put, with news, as with all other aspects of the Internet relative to programming, the individual audience member is in control and participates actively and interactively, rather than—as with traditional video, audio, and film distribution—passively. The chapters on different formats include discussions on how the writer can take advantage of this interactive independence of the audience.

Although the receptor, or audience, in this medium is given unlimited interactive opportunities, the writer must remember that as the creator, the guide, the influencer, he or she must not lose control of the material. If the writer has a point of view, the writer does not want the audience to wander in cyberspace unguided and to come to just any feeling, thought, or conclusion. The writer has a purpose and must present as many opportunities for interactivity as possible, but for each of those activities the writer must also provide stimuli that, in any combination and from whatever source, can lead the receptor to the thought and feeling that the writer intends to convey. Even with an ostensibly totally objective format—such as hard news—the writer must be certain that all points of view and interpretations are available. If the older media are skewing the news—as they frequently do because of advertiser, owner, or, sometimes, producer-writer control—the Internet offers the possibility of implementing the presentation of alternative viewpoints to popular thought and belief otherwise usually unavailable. The receptor might do extensive Web browsing, but the writer can help orient the audience to sites that offset restricted attitudes and information.

Advertisers—and producers—on the Internet realize that it provides an instant global market. The trend in media generally is toward increasingly large monopolies and toward consolidation of media industries into fewer and fewer mogul gatekeepers, thus restricting creative options and diversity of views. (Writer-critic A.J. Liebling once observed that freedom of the press belonged to the person who owned one.) This, thus far, is less so on the Internet. The writer needs to be aware that literally the whole multicultural, multiopinion world is watching or listening. This creates different requirements for content and for technique than if the material is to be seen or heard principally in one's own country or in a limited region or locality.

Daniel Roth wrote in *Fortune* magazine that writers for the older media are having a hard time adjusting to the "techie"-culture types who continue to control the Internet. The older media types put content first and tend to look down on the technical emphases. Conversely, the techies are usually impatient with and sometimes even contemptuous of the video-audio people, believing that the latter cannot or will not adjust to the new technical-dominated communications world. Thus far, the techies have dominated, with the tools and processes of Internet communication considered by the new media

operators as more important than the material to be disseminated, but the gap is closing. Broadcasters are trying to maximize their proficiency and access. For example the National Association of Broadcasters Web site (www.nab.org) has links to new technology, convergence, and Internet information and advice on developments in the new media that affect broadcasters.

The Internet can have a salutary as well as a competitive effect on the more traditional media. In addition to its extension of popular music, the Web has made it possible for some otherwise dormant radio formats to revive. For example, a number of people in many different communities might like to hear science fiction drama or listen to the Library of Congress "books-on-tape" series. With not enough people in any one community to make such programs economically feasible for any given radio station, such programs are rarely presented. On the Internet, however, an otherwise "dead" program could reach enough people nationally and internationally to be successful.

Subject Matter

The writer not only has to exercise talent in producing quality material, but also has to exercise judgment in the specific material used. Television and radio writing particularly are greatly affected by censorship.

Censorship comes from many sources. The production agency, whether an independent producer or a network, usually has guidelines about what materials are acceptable. Advertisers exercise a significant role in determining content, frequently refusing to sponsor a program to which they have some objection. Pressure groups petition and even picket networks, stations, and producers. Television critic Jay Nelson Tuck once wrote, not altogether facetiously, that three dirty postcards from a vacant lot can influence a sponsor to do almost anything.

Owners want their media properties to reflect their personal and social views whenever possible, or at least not present views that disagree with theirs. Inasmuch as most media are owned by conservatives, the media reflect conservative agendas. (Strangely, many people erroneously refer to "the liberal media.") Stations managers, producers, and program directors sometimes get their views included—presuming they do not clash with those of their bosses and thus threaten their jobs. Even the government has gotten into the act, although not as much as many of the public believe.

Censorable Material

Although prevented by the Communications Act of 1934 from censoring program material, the FCC is authorized to levy fines or suspend a station's license for "communications containing profane or obscene words, language, or meaning." "Indecency" clause implementation depends on the FCC commissioners' orientation at any given time. The conservative public attitudes and presidential administrations of recent decades have prompted the FCC to take action against programming the FCC deems offensive. In 1996, despite objections

from civil liberties groups and Action for Children's Television, the Supreme Court ruled that the FCC has the right to establish a "safe harbor" for adult programming, ostensibly to protect child viewers. The hours of 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. compose the "safe harbor," based on the assumption that children will not be watching television during that period. Conversely, programming that is deemed "adult" may not be broadcast between 6 A.M. and 10 P.M.

The FCC has cracked down especially on talk show hosts who present materials the Commission deemed offensive. Though not ever specifically defining what it meant by indecency, the FCC relied on what was called the "Miller test"—the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Miller v. California* which applied three criteria in judging whether a work was indecent or obscene: (1) that, applying contemporary community standards, the work appeals to the average person's prurient interests; (2) that the work describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, as defined by state law, and (3) that the work as a whole lacks literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. Although many critics cannot understand how the FCC can enunciate what contemporary community standards for the average person can possibly be, the Commission nevertheless has levied fines against companies, stations, and performers for indecent programming, most notably talk-show host Howard Stern.

At this writing, the Supreme Court has ruled on only one indecency case pertaining specifically to the electronic media (not including the Internet): The so-called Seven Dirty Words case in which Pacifica radio station WBAI in New York carried the George Carlin routine as a segment of a program on communication and language. The FCC fine was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1978, but the court did not further define indecency. Thus, the broadcast writer continues to play Russian roulette when writing, knowing for certain only that the Seven Dirty Words routine cannot be aired on a broadcast station. Subsequent complaints brought before the FCC have been judged individually by what the Commissioners at the given time consider to be average community standards.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 included a provision that requires new television sets to contain a "V-chip" that permits the screening of programs that fall into different rating categories for "violence, sex, and other indecent material." A companion Communications Decency Act also banned the transmission of "indecent" material via computer, ostensibly to protect children. Although the former was implemented, the courts have found the latter and subsequent similar legislation banning certain content from the Internet to be unconstitutional violations of the First Amendment rights of freedom of speech and press.

Broadcasting realized that at least some facts of life cannot be made to disappear by banning them from public discussion or observation or by pretending that they do not exist. Many talk shows, discussion programs, and dramas deal with explicit sexual references and frequently with sexual acts, the latter sometimes simulated even if not fully seen. Language approximates that used in real life, from sitcoms to serious drama, although some of the most common four-letter words have not yet made it to broadcast television. More freedom of language usage is found on cable, particularly on pay channels.

Until 2004, except for large fines for what it deemed to be material that clearly and principally appealed to the prurient interest, the FCC took a selective view of what constituted indecency. For example, a discussion of masturbation on the Howard Stern show, in the context of its presentation, might well be considered indecent. However, a discussion of the same subject on the Oprah Winfrey show, presented in a medical and educational context, would not be considered indecent. (Those were actual findings.) Fleeting or unintentional profanity was not considered a violation. However, in 2004 an incident occurred that most media experts considered relatively mild, but which, in light of and perhaps as a consequence of the growing political, social, and religious conservatism of the time, became a cause celebre. That incident, of course, was the "wardrobe malfunction" that resulted in the baring of part of one of Janet Jackson's breasts during the nationally televised half-time presentation at the Super Bowl. While quite mild in comparison to partial nudity on programs such as *NYPD Blue* and sitcoms about twenty-somethings with raging hormones, and quite innocuous when compared to the material on virtually all "shock-jock" programs, it resulted in a national uproar. Citizen groups, religious organizations, and even Congress demanded increased FCC crackdowns on any material that might even remotely be considered indecent. The FCC obliged, and at this writing has fined and continues to fine networks, stations, and even personalities amounts totaling millions of dollars. In part because of this crackdown, Howard Stern abandoned his long-time terrestrial radio home and moved to satellite radio, over which the FCC has not yet exercised direct content regulation. The FCC similarly has no rules regarding cable content, but the threat of such regulation and recent Congressional legislation raising indecency fines multi-fold has resulted in self-censorship by most media.

Erik Barnouw, discussing movie censorship in his book *Mass Communication,* wrote: "Banning evil example . . . does not ban it from life. It may not strengthen our power to cope with it. It may have the opposite effect. Code rules multiply, but they do not produce morality. They do not stop vulgarity. Trying to banish forbidden impulses, censors may only change the disguises in which they appear. They ban passionate love-making, and excessive violence takes its place."

Controversial Material

Freedom of expression and democratic exchange of ideas in television and radio are endangered because many media executives fear controversy. On the grounds of service to the sponsor and on the basis of good ratings for non-controversial, generally mediocre entertainment, controversial material and performers frequently have been banned. Many companies refuse to sponsor a program with controversial material if they feel it might in any way alienate any potential customers. Erik Barnouw observed that "when a story editor says 'we can't use anything controversial,' and says it with a tone of conscious virtue, then there is danger."

Most broadcasters fought for years to abolish the **Fairness doctrine,** which authorized the FCC to require stations, in some circumstances, to present more than one side of significant issues in the community, therefore bringing controversy to the fore. Following

President Reagan's veto of a congressional bill making the Fairness Doctrine into law, the FCC abolished it in 1987.

The history of censorship of controversial material in broadcasting is a long one, and, unfortunately, one in which both broadcasters and the public never seem to learn the lessons of integrity and democracy. One of the United States' darkest and most shameful periods was the blacklist of the 1950s, during the heyday of McCarthyism, when Senator Joseph McCarthy cowed most of America into supporting his demagoguery of guilt-by-accusation—even false accusation. Broadcasters cooperated with charlatans to deny freedom of speech and the freedom to work to countless performers, directors, producers, and writers who were accused by self-proclaimed groups of super-patriots of being un-American. Broadcasters panicked and threw courage to the winds and ethics out the windows. Many careers and a number of lives were destroyed. Although broadcasters have since apologized for their undemocratic and cowardly behavior, political considerations are still a priority on the censorship list. Throughout most of the 2000's first decade, political conformity resulted in the mainstream media by and large reporting inaccurately or not at all on nationwide protests against the abrogation of America's cherished civil liberties by the federal government under the Patriot Act, on massive countrywide anti-war protests, and on Constitutional violations by America's highest officials. As noted earlier, the media are by and large controlled by conservative individuals and companies. With few exceptions, only alternative media sites on the Internet reported objectively what was happening.

Several classic situations have resulted from censoring material that might put the sponsor's product or service in a poor light or that might suggest a competing product. Among them is a program that dealt with the German concentration camp atrocities of the1940s from which the sponsoring gas company eliminated all references to gas chambers. Another program deleted references to President Lincoln's name in a civil war drama because it was also the name of a car produced by a competitor of the automobile sponsor. In retrospect such situations are funny, but they were not funny then and would not be now to the writer forced to compromise the integrity of his or her script.

Censorship is sometimes the result of an owner's attitudes toward or conflict with the content of a program. For example, the American Broadcasting Company's highly regarded news program, *20/20,* had a segment prepared on hiring and safety problems at the Walt Disney World entertainment complex. Written assurances were given that there would be no problem with ABC's corporate ownership—the Walt Disney Company. The story was killed. It should be noted, however, that *20/20* had previously aired a story critical of another Disney project. Some censorship takes place not because of feared public reaction or even because of a sponsor's vested interest, but because of direct prejudice. One program, the true story of a large department store owner who was Jewish and who gave his entire fortune to fight cancer, was cancelled by the sponsor because the play allegedly would give "Jewish department store owners" an unfair advantage over other department store owners.

Media executives and sponsors alone are not to blame. Writers and other personnel often give up their integrity out of fear for their jobs or to curry favor with their employers. In Boston, for example, after a local station cancelled a program under pressure from a local religious group, a governing board member of the New England Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS) introduced the following resolution:

> Freedom of the press, including television, is a cornerstone of American democracy. The United States is one of the few countries in the world where the media legally have freedom from the control of outside forces. To abandon that freedom under pressure from any group, public or private, no matter how laudatory its aims, is to subvert a basic principle of democracy, and to undermine one of our cherished freedoms. As communicators in New England, we urge our broadcasting colleagues here and throughout the nation to stand firm, with courage and conviction, not to succumb, but to maintain the open marketplace of ideas that has marked freedom of speech, thought, and press in our country. We pledge our support to our colleagues in this endeavor.

The other members of the NATAS Board of Directors refused even to consider that resolution. One NATAS officer suggested that the resolution "was perceived by many as a criticism of the actions taken by a member station." Of course it was. Not only, therefore, do outside pressures determine programming decisions and content, but the pressures of management also tend to force individual broadcasters and writers to give up the principle and courage to support freedom of ideas and speech.

The late Sydney W. Head, a leading teacher and writer in the communications field, stated, "television, as a medium, appears to be highly responsive to the conventional conservative values," and that a danger to society from television is that television will not likely lend its support to the unorthodox, but "it will add to cultural inertia." The media's great impact and television's and radio's ability to affect people's minds and emotions so strongly are clearly recognized by the media controllers or, as they are often called, the gatekeepers, who by and large represent the status quo of established business, industry, social, and political thought and power. In her book, *Screened Out: How The Media Control Us And What We Can Do About It,* Carla Brooks Johnston notes the increasing global control of the media by fewer and fewer companies that decide what the public is permitted to see and hear. It is not surprising that the conglomerate-controlled mainstream media have only superficially covered or distorted the growing worldwide protests against corporate globalization. In this instance, as in others, the full stories may be found principally on the Internet.

Commercials *do* sell products and services, and Madison Avenue advertising agencies wield considerable impact. News and public affairs programs and even entertainment shows have had remarkable impact in changing many of our political and social beliefs, policies, and practices. Broadcasting's cooperation with manipulative politicians, spin-doctors, "sound-bites," and other non-substantive and non-issue reportage

in covering politics and elections indicates how effectively the media can influence and even control the political process.

At the same time, the media have been responsible, through similar control, for great progress in human endeavors. Television's coverage of the civil rights movement in the 1960s often is credited with motivating many people to insist on congressional action guaranteeing all Americans civil rights. Television's bringing of the Vietnam War into the nation's living rooms is credited with motivating millions of citizens to pressure our government to end the war, resulting in one president ending his political career and another eventually ending the nation's overt military activities in Southeast Asia.

Conversely, the media have from time to time voluntarily cooperated with the government and military in denying information to the American public. Following the media's revelations of the military's lies and deceptions in the Vietnam War, thus strengthening the public's resolution to bring that war to an end, the Pentagon took pains to see that it would not happen again and imposed strict censorship of all news in subsequent conflicts, including the invasion of Grenada, the action in Panama, the Gulf War, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although many media organizations later apologized to the American public for deliberately keeping it in the dark about what was really happening in the Persian Gulf in 1991, the media once again showed its lack of integrity and courage by allowing itself to report false and incomplete information during the U.S. involvement in the NATO action in Yugoslavia in 1999. News guru Walter Cronkite publicly criticized the government and the military for its censorship and the media for its complicity with that censorship in its reporting of the Kosovo crisis. As noted earlier, the media's abandonment of its traditional freedoms and its obligation to serve the public was exacerbated in its coverage—or, rather lack of coverage—of the government's covert actions against its own citizens, including political dissenters, in the "war against terrorism."

Frank Stanton, former president of CBS, said this:

> The effect of broadcasting upon the democratic experience has gone far beyond elections. The monumental events of this century—depression, wars, uneasy peace, the birth of more new nations in two decades than had occurred before in two centuries, undreamed of scientific breakthroughs, profound social revolution—all these were made immediate, intimate realities to Americans through, first, the ears of radio and, later, the eyes of television. No longer were the decisions of the American people made in an information vacuum, as they witnessed the towering events of their time that were bound to have incisive political repercussions.

Sadly, the media, by and large, too often have appeared to have forgotten their heritage and have become virtual mouthpieces for special government and private interests.

The media writer who prepares material dealing with issues and events has the satisfaction of knowing that he or she can contribute to human progress and thought and is participating directly in changing society and solving problems of humanity. Not many

professions allow you to accomplish this on such a broad and grand scale! Theoretically, the writer can help fulfill the mass media's responsibility to serve the public's best interests, to raise and energize the country's cultural and educational standards, and to strengthen the country as a whole. Realistically, the best-intentioned writer is still under the control of the network or station or advertiser, whose first loyalties usually are directed toward its own bottom-line and not necessarily to the needs of the public. Occasionally, these interests coincide. The writer who wants to keep a job is pressured to serve the employer's interests. Hopefully, conscience will prompt the writer to serve the public interest as well.

THOMSON
WADSWORTH

Writing for Television, Radio, and New Media
Ninth Edition
Robert L. Hilliard

Publisher: Michael Rosenberg
Managing Editor, Development: Karen Judd
Assistant Editor: Christine Halsey
Editorial Assistant: Megan Garvey
Technology Project Manager: Lucinda Bingham
Marketing Manager: Karin Sandberg
Marketing Assistant: Mary Anne Payumo
Marketing Communications Manager: Heather Baxley
Content Project Manager: Georgia Young
Print/Media Buyer: Susan Carroll
Permissions Editor: Robert Kauser
Production Service/Compositor: PrePressPMG
Text Designer: Marsha Cohen, Parallelogram Graphics
Cover Designer: Laurie Anderson
Printer: West Group

Printed in the United States of America

4 5 6 7 8 11 10 09 08 07

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007922064

Student Edition: ISBN 0-495-05065-2
International Student Edition: ISBN 0-495-09751-9

Thomson Higher Education
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Marlowe

who will soon carry the torch