Social Inequality and Media Representation

The examination of media content traditionally has been the most common type of media analysis, perhaps because of the easy accessibility of media products. The production process takes place in the relative remoteness of movie lots, recording studios, and editors' offices. In contrast, media products surround us and are within easy reach of the researcher.

Whatever the reason, there is an enormous volume of research and commentary on the nature of media content. Rather than try to review this vast literature, we have organized this chapter on media content around the single theme of representation. We explore the question, "How do media representations of the social world compare to the external 'real' world?" As we discuss below, this is not the only possible line of investigation related to media content. However, given our sociological interest in the relationship between the media and the social world, it is a central one.

Furthermore, our discussion focuses on the issue of social inequality. We argue that the creators of media content have often reproduced the inequalities that exist in society based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This is not to say that the media have acted as a mirror, passively reflecting the inequalities of society. Rather, white, middle- and upper-class men have historically controlled the media industry, and media content has largely reflected their perspectives on the world. Therefore, the inequalities in the social world have affected the organization of the media industry that produces media products.

In turn, activists have challenged the media to broaden their narrow perspectives. Some have developed alternative media and told their own
stories through words and pictures. More recently, progressive social change movements have succeeded in altering some facets of social inequality in society at large. This human agency has created changes in the social world, which, in turn, have affected the organization of the media industry. Contemporary media content reflects these changes to varying degrees.

**Comparing Media Content and the “Real” World**

Does media content reflect the realities of the social world? Based on the accumulated volume of media research, the answer is an emphatic no. Content analyses of media products have repeatedly shown them to be quite different from key measurable characteristics of the social world. This gap between the “real world” and media representations of the social world is the subject of this chapter.

“How do media representations of the social world compare to the external ‘real’ world?” is an important question since we conventionally organize media according to how closely they represent reality. We talk, for example, about fiction versus nonfiction, news or public affairs versus entertainment, documentaries versus feature films, “reality” programs, and so on. The impact of media, as we will see in Part Four, can actually become more significant if media products diverge dramatically from the real world. We tend to become more concerned, for example, when media content lacks diversity or overemphasizes violence, sex, or other limited aspects of the real world.

The question of how media representations of the social world compare to the external “real” world also raises several issues. First, the literature in media and cultural studies reminds us that representations are not reality, even if media readers or audiences may sometimes be tempted to judge them as such. Representations—even those that attempt to reproduce reality such as the documentary film—are the result of processes of selection that invariably mean that certain aspects of reality are highlighted and others neglected. Even though we often use the “realness” of the images as a basis for evaluating whether we like or dislike particular representations, all representations “represent” the social world in ways that are both incomplete and narrow.

Second, the media usually do not try to reflect the “real” world. Most of us would like news programs, history books, and documentary films to represent happenings in the social world as fairly and accurately as possible. (After examining the production process, we now know how difficult it is to achieve this, if only because of limited time and
resources.) But by its very nature, a science fiction film, for example, is likely to diverge significantly from contemporary social life. Without that gap between reality and media image, the genre would cease to exist.

We cannot push this point too far, however, because even "fantasy" products such as science fiction films hold the potential for teaching us something about our society. Often, this is the attraction of the genre. When Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhuru of Star Trek kissed on prime-time television in the 1960s, it was the first interracial kiss on a U.S. television series. This media content, though clearly embedded in a fantasy science fiction about the future, just as surely was making a statement about race relations in contemporary America. Social commentary continued in later Star Trek spin-offs when producers cast an African American as the commander of Deep Space Nine and a woman as captain of Voyager. Both of these programs were science fiction, yet clearly both were commenting on social conditions at the time of their creation.

The point is that there is potential social significance in all media products—even those that are clearly make-believe fantasies. Creators of media products are often aware of this fact and use entertainment media to comment on the real social world. In turn, readers and audiences develop at least some sense of the social world through their exposure to both entertainment media and news media. It behooves us, therefore, to attend to what these media messages might be. That includes looking at media forms—including science fiction, soap operas, music videos, and romance novels—that clearly do not claim to accurately reflect society.

A third issue raised by the question of how media representations of the social world compare to the "real" world concerns the troublesome term real. In an age in which sociologists teach about the social construction of reality and postmodernists challenge the very existence of a knowable reality, the concept of a "real world" may seem like a quaint artifact from the past. We generally agree with the social constructionist perspective, which suggests that no representation of reality can ever be totally "true" or "real" since it must inevitably frame an issue and choose to include and exclude certain components of a multifaceted reality. However, some social facts seem solid enough to be used as a measure of reality. To give a simple example, we have a pretty good idea of the age distribution in the United States. In 2000, for example, the Census Bureau estimated that about 21 percent of the U.S. population were younger than age 15. Imagine that, for some unknown reason, television situation comedies became inundated with children, who made up, say, two-thirds of all characters. We could then reliably state that, compared to the real world, such programs featured three times as many children.
Such a claim is possible only because we have a reasonably accurate way of measuring age distribution in the population as a whole.

The legitimacy of the question becomes much more dubious, however, with other examples. Is media content more liberal than society at large, as some contend? That depends on how you go about defining liberal and how you attempt to measure it in both the media and the "real" world. Such a concept is much more ambiguous than age, and therefore we have to be careful about claims of "bias" leveled at the media. In the end, we can make some useful comparisons between the content of media and society, but our limited ability to measure the social world necessarily limits such claims.

Finally, the question of how media representations of the social world compare to the "real" world seems to imply that the media should reflect society. This premise is not agreed on. For many people, media are an escape from the realities of daily life. Therefore, how "real" media products are is irrelevant to many people. However, it is not necessary to believe that the media should accurately reflect society in order to compare media representations with the social world. Gaps between media content and social reality raise interesting questions that warrant our attention.

**The Significance of Content**

While this chapter focuses on the content of media, it is important to realize that many researchers study media content to make inferences about other social processes. In other words, they study media content to assess the significance of that content. There are at least five ways in which researchers can assess the significance of media content. They involve linking content (a) to producers, (b) to audience interests, (c) to society in general, or (d) to audience effects or (e) examining content independent of context.

To illustrate, let's return to our hypothetical example about children and situation comedies. If researchers found that child characters appeared on situation comedies three times as often as children do in the real world, then several lines of interpretation would be possible. Each of these different approaches tries to explain the source and significance of media content.

*Content as Reflection of Producers.* First, it would be possible to infer that this child-centered content reflected the intent of the program writers and producers. This line of interpretation—linking content to producers—encourages us to investigate the social characteristics of situation-comedy writers and producers. We might find that such creative personnel are disproportionately "thirty-somethings," with children of their own, who draw on
their own family lives for story inspiration. As a result, a disproportionate percentage of programs feature children. Or perhaps corporate advertisers have expressed strong interest in sponsoring child-related programs, influencing producers to create more such programs. Determining this connection would require research that moved beyond media content and studied media personnel and the production process more generally (exactly the kind of research we examined in Part Two). Content analysis would alert us to this issue but by itself could not provide an adequate explanation for the heavy population of children on such programs.

Content as Reflection of Audience Preference. Second, we might infer that perhaps the high number of child characters reflects the audience for situation comedies. This does not necessarily suggest that children constitute a large percentage of the audience. It may simply mean, for example, that many viewers are parents who enjoy watching the antics of young children on situation comedies. Here the implication is that media personnel are merely responding to the interests of their likely audience, not to their own interests or to the influence of the production process. This approach suggests that content is a reflection of audience preference. The idea that media producers are only “giving the people what they want” also implies that people want what they get. To test such claims, researchers must explore more than media content. They must move into the area of audience research.

Content as Reflection of Society in General. Third, some researchers investigate media content as a gauge of social norms, values, and the interests of society in general—not just the audience. Some analysts might suggest that child-dominated situation comedies reflect a high level of social concern for children. They might reflect the fact that we live in a child-centered society where people value children highly. The difficulty in firmly making such sweeping assessments should be clear. To support such claims, research would need to extend well beyond the boundaries of media content.

Content as an Influence on Audiences. Fourth, researchers sometimes examine media content for potential effects on audiences. Perhaps the preponderance of children on television will encourage couples to have children or to have more children. Here, too, the researcher would have to link content analysis with research on audience interpretations—a topic examined in Part Four. The influence of media is so diffuse, however, that a direct link is usually very difficult to establish. The emphasis in this case—in contrast to the first three—is not on content as a reflection of the production process, audiences, or society. Instead, it is on content as a social influence on audiences.
Content as Self-Enclosed Text. Finally, a substantial body of work addresses media content on its own terms. That is, it usually makes no attempt to link content to producers, audiences, or society but instead examines media as a self-enclosed text whose meaning is to be "decoded." For example, an analysis of the film *Rambo* might show how this film follows the conventions of the Hollywood genre of the "war film," which dramatizes conflict between the United States and its "enemies," and provides a happy ending that portrays the victory of good over evil. It would study the strictly cinematic and formal elements of the film, dissecting the ways that camera angles present Rambo as a god or how slow-motion images of him gliding through the jungle "code" him as a force of nature. One would also notice that images of Rambo being tortured adopt familiar crucifixion iconography, valorizing him as a Christlike martyr, and images of his headband and clothing code him as an individualist, thus appropriating 1960s countercultural iconography for the political right. (Kellner, 1995, pp. 10-11)

This tradition has many variations associated more with the structuralism and semiology found in literary studies and linguistics than with the content analysis found in the social sciences. However, researchers sometimes combine this approach with studies of production and audience reception under the rubric of cultural studies. It is often difficult or impossible to assess the validity of the claims of such analyses because no standard methods exist in this field. Still, such work can be useful for those whose concerns lie with issues such as the relationship between elements of a text or the language, grammar, and vocabulary of image production.

Having sketched out the different ways in which researchers assess the significance of media content, we now turn to the content itself. As you will note, it is impossible to examine content without touching on the role of producers, audiences, or larger social norms. However, we will focus primarily on media content per se. We will also limit our discussion to a few basic characteristics—race, class, gender, and sexual orientation—that are illustrative of a sociological approach to content analysis and that relate to our theme of inequality.

Race and Media Content: Inclusion, Roles, and Control

Nearly all sociologists and anthropologists now recognize that race is a socially constructed concept whose meaning has evolved over time. There
is no biologically valid difference in the genetic makeup of different "races." In fact, different blood types might be more biologically significant than different racial classifications. However, racial distinctions have powerful social meaning with profound real-world consequences. Social scientists chart the development and implications of these socially constructed distinctions, especially as they influence discriminatory structures and practices.

Since race is a cultural or ideological construct, it is not surprising that there has been much interest in content analysis that examines how media messages treat the issue of race. In the United States, the issue of race has been most evident—and most studied—in black-white race relations. This situation is rapidly changing, however, as the population of other racial minorities increases and as scholars examine the history and legacy of other people of color.

Historically, the U.S. media have taken "whites" to be the norm against which all other racial groups are measured. The taken-for-granted nature of "whiteness" means that it need not be explicitly identified. For example, we generally do not talk about "white culture," "the white community," "the white vote," and so forth. We do, however, often hear reference to "black culture," "the Latino community," and so on. The absence of a racial signifier in this country usually signifies whiteness. The pervasiveness of white perspectives in media is perhaps its most powerful characteristic.

To understand how racial difference is portrayed in the mass media, we must recall the earlier roots of racial stereotyping in American culture. Throughout much of U.S. mass media history, blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, and other racial minorities have been, at best, of little consideration to the media industry. Because such minorities comprised a relatively small part of the population, mainstream media did not see them as an important segment of the mass audience. When it came to media content, racial minorities were either ignored or stereotyped in such roles as the Black Mammy, the Indian Maiden, the Latin Lover, or the sinister Asian Warlord. Such stereotypical images were the product of white media producers and bore little resemblance to the realities of the different racial groups (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995).

When we consider how racial differences have been portrayed in the media, three crucial issues emerge. First is the simple issue of inclusion. Do media producers include the images, views, and cultures of different racial groups in media content? The second issue of concern is the nature of media roles. When producers do include members of racial minorities in media content, how do they portray them? Here the history of racial stereotypes takes center stage. Finally, the control of production is crucial. Do people from different racial groups have control over the
creation and production of media images that feature different racial groups? This last issue is more about the production process and the nature of the media industry than about media content in itself. However, the history of media suggests that content very often reflects the views of those in control.

Racial Diversity in Media Content

A sample of some research findings on racial images in the modern media will help provide historical context and alert us to the changes that have occurred over time. The inclusion of different racial groups in the media has changed dramatically. In early Hollywood films of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, blacks were largely absent or were relegated to two roles: entertainer or servant (Cripps, 1993). Not until after World War II did more African Americans begin appearing on the screen. Even then, there were a limited number of available roles, and progress since then has been halting. The trend, though, seems to be toward more racial diversity in films.

On television through the 1940s and 1950s, the presence of blacks was limited largely to their traditional, stereotypical roles as entertainers and comedians. There were virtually no serious dramatic roles for blacks in this period. Instead, comedies and variety shows were the only regular forum for black talent (Dates, 1993). In the 1960s and 1970s, this began to change as television programs featured more blacks and, to a lesser extent, other racial groups. By the 1969-1970 season, half of all dramatic television programs had a black character. Surveys conducted from this period through the early 1980s show that whereas roughly 11 percent of the population was black at that time, 6 to 9 percent of all television characters were black (Seggar, Hafen, and Hannonen-Cladden, 1981). By the 1991-1992 season, blacks made up 12 percent of the population and 11 percent of prime-time characters and 9 percent of daytime characters (Greenberg and Brand, 1994).

Few other racial groups, though, were regularly portrayed on prime-time TV. In the 1970s, only two situation comedies, Chico and the Man and the short-lived Viva Valdez, centered on Latino characters. The 1980s saw a few major roles for Latino characters on programs such as Miami Vice and L.A. Law. However, by 1997, only 179 of 8,662 characters on prime-time television, or 2.6 percent, were Latino (Reuter, 1998). Asian characters, too, have been few and far between. It was only in 1994 that an Asian family was used as the premise for a situation comedy, All-American Girl (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995).

Minorities have also historically been underrepresented in other areas. In 1984, only 4 percent of lead performers on MTV music videos were
black (Brown and Campbell, 1986). On news and public affairs programming, racial minorities continued to lack visibility. In a study of *Life, Time, and Newsweek*, Lester and Smith (1990) found that in the 1980s only 7.5 percent of the photos were of blacks—and this was up from 3.1 percent in the 1960s and 1.3 percent in the 1950s. A study of guests on the two preeminent public affairs television programs, *Nightline* and the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, found that nearly 9 out of 10 guests were white (Croteau and Hoynes, 1994). Studies of advertising have repeatedly found underrepresentation of minorities. A study of *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Vogue* in the late 1980s found that only 2.4 percent of ads featured black women (Jackson and Ervin, 1991). One review of research findings on broadcast advertising concludes that compared to earlier years, “there are more Black faces, but they get less time, are less visible, may be buried in a sea of faces, and rarely interact with Whites” (Greenberg and Brand, 1994, p. 292).

Some media have begun to include more minorities. For example, a Screen Actors Guild (2001) study of TV and theatrical roles in 2000 found that African Americans received 14.8 percent of all roles cast—a higher percentage than their representation in the U.S. population. But Latinos (4.9 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (2.2 percent) were still badly underrepresented. There are simple economic reasons for this development. Growing racial diversity in the population as a whole means that people of color make up larger segments of the market than in the past. Many advertisers have become interested in reaching this growing minority market.

This trend has been facilitated by the growth in media outlets—especially cable television and the newer broadcast television networks. In the late 1980s, for example, the new Fox network created a significant number of programs aimed at black audiences because the other networks were largely ignoring this market niche. As the Fox network gained prominence in the 1990s, though, it began competing with the “big three” networks for more lucrative white audiences, and its programs, too, became more white. The process then repeated itself in the late 1990s as the WB and UPN networks tried to establish themselves, in part, by appealing to minority audiences.

However, another result of media outlet growth and the fragmenting market is that most Americans are not seeing the growing diversity in mass media. Instead, television programming became extremely segregated in the mid-1990s, leaving white audiences watching white programs while black households tuned in to black programs. For example, in the 1994-1995 season, only 1 of the 20 most popular television programs in black households was among the top 20 programs in white households. But by the end of the decade, perhaps due to the growth of
multietnic casts, the trend was reversing. By the 2000-2001 season, the number of common top 20 programs had increased to 9 (Bauder, 2001).

Still, the segmentation of media audiences has stirred concern that if media are losing their role as a common socializing agent. Media companies compete for advertising dollars by developing products that are targeted at the narrow, demographically specific audiences they want to reach. As targeting becomes more sophisticated, audiences increasingly pay attention to media products that are designed specifically for their demographic or "lifestyle" group and ignore media designed for others. Turow (1997) warns that this process "may accelerate an erosion of the tolerance and mutual dependence between diverse groups that enable a society to work" (p. 7).

Race and Media Roles

For much of U.S. history, most white-produced images of other racial groups have been unambiguously racist. As early as the late 1700s, the "comic Negro" stereotype of "Sambo" appeared in novels and plays. On stage, Dunes and Barlow (1993) note, this racist character "was cast in a familiar mold: always singing nonsense songs and dancing around the stage. His dress was gaudy, his manners pretentious, his speech riddled with malapropisms, and he was played by white actors in blackface." (p. 6). Such images in popular culture are the precursor of racist stereotypes in the mass media.

Early Images of Race

Racist stereotypes were peppered throughout popular culture in the nineteenth century. In the novel The Spy, James Fenimore Cooper introduced the stereotypical image of the loyal, devoted, and content house slave who doubled as comic relief because of his superstitious beliefs and fear of ghosts. This image reappeared in many later books and films. Whites in blackface performed racist stage acts, portraying blacks as clownish buffoons. In the 1830s, a white actor named Thomas Dartmouth Rice copied a song-and-dance routine he saw performed on a street corner by a young slave boy. Rice used burnt cork to blacken his face, dressed in tattered clothes, and popularized the "Jump Jim Crow" routine. Early minstrel shows consisted of whites in blackface copying black music and dance traditions. Native Americans, too, were ridiculed in stage performances. One popular play was titled The Original, Aboriginal, Erratic, Operatic, Semi-Civilized and Semi-Savage Extravaganza of Pocahontas (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995). Popular songs, sung on the stage and printed in sheet music, also featured many racist stereotypes.
Even well-intentioned works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perpetuated a "positive" image of blacks as gentle, suffering victims with childlike innocence.

The end of slavery brought different but equally racist images. The "contented slave" was taken over by the faithful servant: the female side of this stereotype became the domestic mammy caricature, while the male side matured into elderly Uncle Toms" (Dates and Barlow, 1993, p. 11). Thefolksy character of "Uncle Remus," speaking in stereotypical black dialect, became the prototypical apologist for postbellum plantation life. Free black men began appearing as angry, brutal, and beastlike characters in novels, when D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*, featured similar characters, it was an indication that producers would fill the new film medium, as well, with racist images.

By 1920, the United States had fought in World War I "to make the world safe for democracy," according to President Wilson. However, early U.S. films were routinely presenting racist images of white supremacy. Blacks were viciously attacked in films such as *The Wapping and Wedding of a Coon* (1905) and *The Nigger* (1915). The Mexican government banned films such as 1914's *The Greaser's Revenge*, which portrayed Mexicans as bandits, rapists, and murderers. Movies portrayed Asians as a threat to American values, as in the film *The Yellow Menace*. Early films openly advocated white supremacy over American Indians, as in the 1916 film *The Aravan* [Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995].

As the film industry matured and grew in the pre-World War II years, it continued to use stereotypically racist images, albeit in less crude forms. Cliched portrayals of Native Americans filled the popular "western" film genre. Movie directors transferred the faithful black servant image to the silver screen, leading to the first Oscar for a black actor when Hattie McDaniel won the award for her portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara's servant in *Gone With the Wind*. Hollywood responded to complaints—and to declining distribution sales in Mexico and Latin America—by largely replacing the earlier "greaser" image with the exotic "Latin lover" stereotype. Asians were either violent villains, in the mold of Dr. Fu Manchu, or funny and clever, as in the enormously popular Charlie Chan film series.

*Slow Change and "Modern" Racism*

It is out of this long legacy of racist imagery that the modern media's portrayals of racial minorities emerge. Media images have changed over the years. Since World War II, and especially since the 1960s, the trend has been toward more inclusiveness and growing sensitivity in media of all types. The civil rights struggle for racial equality influenced Hollywood,
and discrimination against blacks became the theme of a number of prominent movies in the late 1950s and 1960s. The more militant black power struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s were accompanied by the rise of "black exploitation" films with nearly all-black casts. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the huge success of some black performers, such as Whoopi Goldberg and Denzel Washington. Directors cast these black stars in a wide variety of roles, from comic to dramatic.

Meanwhile, white guilt over the domination of Native American Indians surfaced in a series of movies. The 1970 film Little Big Man suggested that, since General Custer had engaged in years of atrocities against American Indians, he got what he deserved at the Little Big Horn massacre. Films in the 1990s began to create a different stereotype: the idealized Indian. Dances With Wolves (1990) and Geronimo (1993), for example, extended the theme of white guilt and Indian dignity. Film portrayals of other racial groups followed this general trend toward a new set of roles for people of color (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995).

But although mainstream media have generally grown more sensitive to stereotypes, controversial racial and ethnic images continue to emerge. For example, The Siege, a 1998 film depicting an epidemic of Arab terrorism in New York City, and Rules of Engagement, a 2000 film about the killing of demonstrators outside the U.S. embassy in Yemen, sparked protests from Arab American groups, such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), who believed both films perpetuated stereotypes of violent fanatic Arabs. (Ironically, both films starred African American actors: Denzel Washington in the first, Samuel L. Jackson in the second.)

Increasingly, stereotypical imagery is being challenged by organizations that monitor and respond to such content (see Exhibit 6.1). Asian American organizations, for example, have decried the relative absence of Asian American characters on television. This was especially visible on programs such as Party of Five or Suddenly Susan, which were set in San Francisco—a city where more than one-third of the population is Asian American—but which rarely or never featured Asian American characters. They have also objected to films such as Lethal Weapon 4, in which popular Hong Kong film hero Jet Li is cast as a stereotypically evil Asian villain who is brutally killed by the Mel Gibson character.

Blatantly racist images of minority groups are now rare in the mainstream U.S. media. Certainly, it is still possible, without much effort, to identify stereotypical racial images in film, television, novels, and other media, but the clear trend has been away from such unabashed stereotyping. Some researchers, however, believe that in recent years the legacy of racism has manifested itself in more subtle but perhaps equally powerful ways.

In a study of local Chicago news coverage of blacks and whites, Robert Emmann (1992) illustrates the complicated dynamics present in
EXHIBIT 6.1 Fighting Media Stereotypes

There are numerous organizations that fight stereotyping by the media. The Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) is one such group. It is a media monitoring and advocacy organization whose mission is "to create an environment free of racism through accurate, balanced, and sensitive Asian American images." MANAA produced an open memo to Hollywood entitled "Asian Stereotypes: Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media and How to Balance Them." The following is excerpted and adapted from that memo.

"Despite the good intentions of individual producers and filmmakers, limited and unbalanced portrayals of Asians have traditionally been the norm in the entertainment industry... Below is a list of restrictive Asian portrayals that are constantly repeated in the mainstream media... Each description is followed by a 'Stereotype-Buster' that can combat the inaccuracies of such portrayals.

This list... is designed to encourage Hollywood's creative minds to think in new directions—to help our storytellers create more interesting roles for actors by avoiding old, stale images."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotype</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. &quot;Asian Americans restricted to cliched occupations (e.g., grocers, martial artists, prostitutes)&quot;</td>
<td>2. &quot;Asian Americans in diverse, mainstream occupations.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. &quot;Asian racial features, names, accents, or mannerisms as inherently comic or sinister.&quot;</td>
<td>3. &quot;Asian names or racial features as no more 'unusual' than those of whites.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. &quot;Asian male sexuality as negative or nonexistent.&quot;</td>
<td>5. &quot;More Asian men as positive romantic leads.&quot;</td>
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<td>6. &quot;Asian women as 'China dolls' (i.e., exotic subservient, compliant, industrious, eager to please).&quot;</td>
<td>6. &quot;Asian women as self-confident and self-respecting, pleasing themselves as well as their loved ones.&quot;</td>
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<td>7. &quot;Asian women as 'dragon ladies' (i.e., inherently scheming, untrustworthy, and back-stabbing).&quot;</td>
<td>7. &quot;Whenever villains are Asian, it's important their villainy not be attributed to their ethnicity.&quot;</td>
</tr>
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<td>8. &quot;Asians who prove how good they are by sacrificing their lives.&quot;</td>
<td>8. &quot;Positive Asian characters who are still alive at the end of the story.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. &quot;Asian Americans as the 'model minority' (i.e., overachievers with little emotional life).&quot;</td>
<td>9. &quot;The audience empathizing with an Asian character's flaws and foibles.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. &quot;Asianness as an 'explanation' for the magical or supernatural.&quot;</td>
<td>10. &quot;Asian cultures are no more or less magical than other cultures.&quot;</td>
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Source: Adapted from janet.org/-manaab_stereotypes.html.
contemporary images of race. In his work, Entman distinguishes between two forms of racism. "Traditional racism" involves open bigotry usually based on beliefs about the biological inferiority of blacks. "Modern racism" is a "compound of hostility, rejection and denial on the part of whites toward the activities and aspirations of black people" (p. 341).

Modern racism, therefore, is much more complex. It eschews old-fashioned racist images, and as a result, according to Entman, "stereotypes are now more subtle, and stereotyped thinking is reinforced at levels likely to remain below conscious awareness" (p. 345). Is this "modern racism" found in the news media? Entman argues that it is, but at first some of his claims can seem counterintuitive.

One of his findings was that the local news prominently covered the activities of politically active blacks. We could easily see the exclusion of such activities as racially motivated, but here Entman (1992) says that the form of their inclusion suggests a racist image. Entman found that "black activists often appeared pleading the interests of the black community, while white leaders were much more frequently depicted as representing the entire community" (p. 355). Thus, Entman argues, it is possible for viewers to get the impression that blacks are pursuing a politics of "special interests" rather than one of public interest. The cycle of racial stereotypes becomes difficult to break. Political marginalization as a result of years of racism may spur black leaders to agitate on behalf of the "black community." The news media duly cover this activism. Such coverage unintentionally conveys a message that blacks are seeking special treatment, thus fostering white resentment and perpetuating the political marginalization of blacks.

Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) note a similar problem in the media coverage of minority issues in general. They argue that in recent years, "the coverage of minority issues often focused inordinate attention on the more bizarre or unusual elements of minority communities, such as youth gangs, illegal immigration, or interracial violence" (p. 26). While these are legitimate issues, the near-exclusive emphasis on such negative stories resulted in a new stereotype of racial minorities as 'problem people' groups either beset by problems or causing them for the larger society" (p. 26).

In his study, Entman (1992) criticizes the portrayal of politically active blacks as being inadvertently racist. However, he also criticizes the regular use of blacks who "did not talk in angry or demanding tones" (p. 357). He is referring to black newscasters, who are generally "unemotional, friendly but businesslike" (p. 357). Station managers often use a black newscaster as a coanchor, with a white newscaster, for the local news. While this practice may be seen as a very positive step, Entman suggests that
the innocuous black anchors may also reinforce whites' impatience with the poor or demanding blacks who appear so frequently as news subjects. The anchors' very presence suggests that if blacks just keep quiet and work hard, the system will indeed allow them to make progress and even earn more money than most whites. Showing attractive, articulate blacks in such a prestigious public role implies that blacks are not inherently inferior or socially undesirable—and that racism is no longer a serious impediment to black progress. (p. 358)

Entman's (1992) arguments are provocative, though speculative. His work was based on content analysis of news programs, not on a study of news audiences. There is no way to tell from his work how audiences interpret what they are seeing. However, his suggestions raise difficult questions about African American media images in the future. For example, if the exclusion of blacks from news anchor positions reflects underlying racism and the inclusion of blacks in such positions inaccurately implies that racism no longer exists, then what should the media industry do? Entman's analysis suggests that we have to understand race and the media in a holistic fashion. Racially diverse news anchors really do not indicate much progress if, at the same time, the content of news remains racially skewed. Real change will come when all aspects of the media—including media content—more accurately reflect the racial diversity of society.

Entman (1992) suggests that we must pay closer attention to how the process of media production influences the content of the media. Entman believes that the production norms of news are linked with the perpetuation of stereotypical images. To create dramatic stories, for example, reporters will often choose "sound bites" from black leaders that are emotional and suggestive of conflict. Such dramatic quotes, though sometimes misleading, follow media conventions for "good television." The unintended result is that such norms and practices contribute to stereotypical images of African Americans.

These stereotypical images are often subtle, as Entman and Rojecki (2000) found in their survey of various forms of media. On local television news, for example, they found that crime stories tend to overrepresent both black perpetrators and white victims. Compared to whites, blacks were more likely to be shown in mug shots and were twice as likely to be shown under the physical custody of police. Thus, the authors contend, blacks tend to be portrayed in ways that make them more threatening and less sympathetic than whites.
Race and Class

Entman's (1992) study hints at—but does not explore—the intervening issue of class in the portrayal of African Americans. He is, in effect, contrasting black anchors who exude upper-middle-class manners and confidence with the poor and working-class blacks featured in many news accounts. To understand contemporary media images of different racial groups, therefore, it is important to consider their class (and, as we will see, their gender). There is no longer any single image of African Americans in the mainstream media.

The intervention of class in the portrayal of blacks on television has resulted in a bifurcated set of images (Gray, 1989). On one hand, even though audiences are more fragmented now, middle-class blacks have become mainstream in prime-time entertainment programs. Epitomized by The Cosby Show of the 1980s, these programs portray African American families who have succeeded in attaining a piece of the traditional "American Dream." On the other hand, news coverage and documentaries about blacks tend to focus on poor African Americans in the so-called "underclass," mired in drugs, crime, and violence. One implicit message in these contrasting images may be that, since some blacks have clearly succeeded, the failure of other blacks is their own fault.

In their conclusion to a sweeping review of black images in television, radio, music, films, advertising, and public relations, Dates and Barlow (1993) suggest that the tension between white-produced images of blacks and black cultural resistance "has become increasingly entangled in more complex social conflicts and concerns. In effect, the primacy of the 'color line' is being challenged by generational, gender, and class differences" (p. 527). We have moved beyond the point where we can say that a single set of media images represents African Americans—or any other racial group.

Controlling Media Images of Race

The absence of stereotyping of different racial groups in the media highlights a fact often taken for granted: Affluent, white men have historically controlled the mainstream mass media. But although whites have often propagated racist images, it is important to note that, historically, African Americans and other minorities have responded by producing a culture of resistance. From the slave chronicles of Frederick Douglass to the poetry of Langston Hughes, from the blues of Bessie Smith to the rap of Public Enemy, from the diverse work of Paul Robeson to the films of Spike Lee—to name just a few of the better-known personalities—black activists and artists have created a counterculture that opposes the racist
stereotypes being propagated in white-owned media and culture. *Freedom's Journal* was the first African American newspaper in the United States. Its editors wrote in the first 1827 edition, "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations" (in Rhodes, 1993, p. 186). The importance of presenting a distinct "black perspective" continues to this day, as Jacobs (2000) chronicles in his study of the black press' coverage of major events such as the Watts and Rodney King uprisings.

These sentiments also underlie efforts by other racial groups to create alternatives to mainstream media. In journalism, for example, the first Latino paper, *El Misisipi*, was published in 1808 (by a white publisher) in New Orleans. The first Native American newspaper, *Cherokee Phoenix*, was published in 1828. What was probably the first Asian American newspaper, *The Golden Hills' News*, first appeared in San Francisco around 1851. All three publications were bilingual, and ever since, bilingual publications have served Latino, Asian, and Native American communities in many areas (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1995).

People of color, as well as women and people promoting the interests of the working class and poor, have had to confront a basic dilemma: They have had to choose between developing alternative media and struggling to change mainstream media from within. The first strategy—developing alternative media—has the advantages of being feasible with more limited financial resources and of promising control for the producers. However, it usually means sacrificing the chance of reaching a mass and broad audience in favor of a smaller, narrower one, in part because media operations working on a shoestring budget cannot hope to match the slick, seductive production quality of the mainstream media.

The second strategy—changing the mainstream media from within—offers an opposite set of advantages and challenges. Mainstream success can result in access to major financial resources that allow a product to reach millions of people. However, ownership and control of mainstream media are still predominantly in the hands of wealthy, white men. While some people of color and some women have worked their way into positions of authority and influence, they are still vastly underrepresented. The example of journalism illustrates this. In the more than 20 years between 1978 and 2001, the percentage of minorities in U.S. newsrooms almost tripled from 4 percent to 11.6 percent. Although this was progress, it was far slower progress than news editors had anticipated, and it still woefully underrepresented minorities, who actually made up 30 percent of the population in 2001. Minorities were also concentrated at lower levels of the newsroom hierarchy, making up 12.7 percent of reporters but only 9.1 percent of supervisors (American Association of Newspaper
Editors, 2001). One way minority journalists have worked for change in their field is by organizing a variety of associations that often collaborate on efforts to promote more diversity in the newsroom. These include the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, and the Native American Journalists Association.

**Gender and Media Content**

In some ways, the media's history of portraying women parallels its history of portraying people of color. Women were often marginalized in all types of media. Simple, blatantly stereotypical images dominated the earlier years of mass media. As media audiences and the media industry felt the influence of movements struggling for women's rights, these stereotypical images gave way to a wider diversity of images and roles for women. Here too, then, we see a history of injustice, inequality, and change.

**Women: Presence and Control in the Media**

Reviews of the extensive literature on gender and the media reveal a fundamental inequality in the frequency of appearance of women and men. Television, for example, features more portrayals of men than women, and men appear more often in lead roles (Fejes, 1992). However, family and heterosexual relationships are central to the plots of many films, music videos, and television programs, ensuring that women (unlike racial minorities) are regularly included in these media, though in secondary roles.

Control of the creation and production of media images is also in male hands—though women are making substantial gains. Consider the news media, for example. In broadcast news, women made up 40 percent of the workforce in 2001 but only 20 percent of news directors. Similarly, in news radio, women made up 37 percent of the workforce but only 22 percent of news directors (Radio-Television News Directors Association, 2001). At newspapers, women made up 40 percent of the reporters and 34 percent of the supervisors in 2001 (American Association of Newspaper Editors, 2001).

Women are even less represented in other forms of media. For example, an analysis of "behind-the-scenes" employment in the top-grossing 250 domestic films of 2000 found that women were dramatically underrepresented in all job categories. Women were only 16 percent of executive producers, 24 percent of producers, 11 percent of directors, 14 percent of writers, 2 percent of cinematographers, and 19 percent of editors (Lauzen, 2001).
The dynamics relating to gender are similar to those found in the discussion of race. Women are generally not in positions of control and, perhaps as a result, are less likely than men to be prominently featured in media products. However, like racial images, the situation of women in media is undergoing what one observer calls “a long, slow journey” (Laffy, 1993, p. 87).

Changing Media Roles for Women . . . and Men

The media images of women and men reflect and reproduce a whole set of stereotypical but changing gender roles. On television, we are more likely to find men in action and drama roles and less likely to find them in situation comedies and soap operas (Fejes, 1992). Men are also more likely than women to be portrayed as having high-status jobs—in traditionally “male occupations”—and are less likely to be shown in the home. Producers are likely to portray men as more dominant than women and as more prone to engage in violence. In situation comedies, men are more likely to disparage women than vice versa, but overall men are more often the object of humor or disparagement. Even simple camera techniques used on women and men seem to differ: Television camera shots are more likely to feature women’s entire bodies while more often showing men in close-ups of only their faces.

Fejes (1992) concludes that “men, as portrayed on adult television, do not deviate much from the traditional patriarchal notion of men and masculinity” (p. 12). They are portrayed in the media as generally powerful and successful. They “occupy high-status positions, initiate action and act from the basis of rational mind as opposed to emotions, are found more in the world of things as opposed to family and relationships, and organize their lives around problem solving” (p. 12). Alerting us to the intersection of different identities, Fejes points out that “the masculinity portrayed on television is a white, middle-class heterosexual masculinity” (p. 12). While important distinctions exist, we can make similar observations about advertising, film, music, and other media.

Women’s roles have often reflected similar stereotypes about femininity. Over the years, the dominant roles for women have been as mother/homemaker or sexual object. The media industry, though, responded to feminists organizing for social change. As with racial stereotypes, the industry has muted the blatant simplicity of stereotypical gender images in more recent years. There is certainly a wider palette of roles and media images of women in the 1990s than there was 25 years ago, despite what some have called a “backlash” (Faludi, 1991) in the 1980s against feminist gains. However, the inequality that women still face in society as a
whole is clearly reflected in the unequal treatment women receive in the media. Some of this unequal treatment, such as that in sexist advertising and degrading pornography, is straightforward and easy to spot, as are some of the stereotypical roles writers still create for women on television situation comedies and dramas. However, like racist stereotypes, sexist stereotypes have often taken subtler forms.

Media coverage of women’s sports, for example, has changed as more women have entered organized sports at all levels. Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) note that

sport is still dominated by men at nearly all levels, and still serves to construct culturally dominant ideas of “exemplary masculinity.”

... But the dramatic increase in female athleticism in the past two decades directly challenges the assumed naturalness of the equation of men, muscles, and power. In short, the institution of sport has become a “contested terrain” of gender relations and ideologies. (p. 122)

Messner and his associates examined the role of the media in this “contested terrain.” Despite the growing popularity of women’s sports, research has showed that media coverage of women’s sports is miniscule compared to men’s sports, accounting for less than 10 percent of all sports coverage in newspapers and on television. Tuggle (1997), for example, found that ESPN’s SportsCenter and CNN’s Sports Tonight devote less than 5 percent of their coverage to women’s sports, concluding that “in nearly every measurable way, the two programs portrayed women’s sports as less important than men’s athletic competition.”

However, the relative absence of media coverage of women’s sports tells us nothing about the quality of the coverage that does exist. Studies conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s found that on the rare occasions when women athletes were covered on television, they “were likely to be overtly trivialized, infantilized, and sexualized” (Messner et al., 1993, p. 123). Such media images of women’s sports are the area that Messner examines. The examples Messner and his associates studied were the television coverage of the 1989 men’s and women’s NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) basketball tournaments and coverage of various matches in the 1989 U.S. Open tennis tournament. What they found is symptomatic of the subtle ways in which media both reflect and re-create gender inequality.

First, they note that their study “revealed very little of the overtly sexist commentary that has been observed in past research” (p. 125). They did find that camera angles, especially in tennis, tended to differ
a bit between women and men and perhaps subtly framed women athletes as sexual objects. However, the main focus of their study—verbal commentary—did not do so. We can consider this finding qualified good news since it contrasts with the overtly sexist coverage researchers found in earlier studies.

Second, though, they found that commentary did frame women’s and men’s sports differently. One finding was that gender was constantly “marked” in women’s basketball coverage. For example, the coverage mentioned—77 times during three games—both verbally and graphically that it was the “NCAA Women's National Championship Game” or “women’s basketball.” (This does not even count gender-marked team names, such as the “Lady Tigers,” which were mentioned 102 times.) Not a single instance of gender marking occurred in coverage of men’s basketball. Television coverage referred to men’s competition in a universal way: “The Final Four,” “The NCAA National Championship Game,” and so on. It did not mention gender.

Tennis coverage showed roughly equitable treatment—for example, in references to the “men’s doubles finals,” “women’s singles semifinals,” and so on. However, gender differences did occur in discussing the athletes. The researchers note that “in the mixed-doubles match, the commentators stated several times that Rick Leach is ‘one of the best doubles players in the world,’ where Robyn White was referred to as one of ‘the most animated girls on the circuit’” (Messner et al., 1993, p. 126). More gender marking occurred when CBS used pink graphics for the women’s matches and blue graphics for the men’s matches.

The naming of athletes also differed by gender. The announcers called women “girls,” “young ladies,” and “women.” They never called men “boys,” only “men,” “young men,” or “young fellas.” Commentators covering tennis matches referred to female athletes by first name seven times as often as they did male athletes. In basketball, the ratio was about two to one. Messner and his associates (1993) remind readers that research has demonstrated that dominants (either by social class, age, occupational position, race, or gender) are more commonly referred to by their last names (often prefaced by titles such as Mr. [or Professor!]). Dominants generally have license to refer to subordinates (younger people, employees, lower-class people, ethnic minorities, women, etc.) by their first names. (p. 128)

Finally, an array of differences appeared in the language used to describe athletes. Male coaches “yelled,” while female coaches “screamed.” Announcers described female tennis players as having “confidence,” but
they never applied this term to male players. Was it because announcers took for granted that men were confident? While an excellent shot by a female player was "lucky," excellent play from a male player showed that he was "imposing his will all over this court." Announcers described success differently as well:

Men appeared to succeed through a combination of talent, instinct, intelligence, size, strength, quickness, hard work, and risk taking. Women also appeared to succeed through talent, enterprise, hard work, and intelligence. But commonly cited along with these attributes were emotion, luck, togetherness, and family. (Messner et al., 1993, p. 130)

Language is never neutral. Media coverage, in this case of sports, reflects—and helps to construct and affirm—a particular framing of the social world. When media personnel use language in a way that represents stereotypical gender roles, it helps perpetuate such roles. Conversely, when they use language self-consciously to counter stereotypes, it can be influential in changing social realities.

Class and the Media

Interestingly, researchers have not given a great deal of attention to class in media content. There are many fewer studies about class in television, for example, than about either race or gender. Yet class permeates media content, and it is useful to examine both the class distribution of people in the media and the roles given to characters of different class status. It is also important to keep in mind the relationship between class and the media industry.

"Some People Are More Valuable Than Others"

Class underlies the media industry in a distinctive way. Class considerations connect advertisers, producers, content, and audiences. The for-profit, advertiser-driven nature of all commercial media means that advertisers are keenly interested in the economic status of media consumers. They want to reach people with enough disposable income to buy their products. You can guess which class a media product reaches by examining the ads that accompany it. Everybody has to buy toothpaste and breakfast cereal, but when a program or publication features ads for jewelry, expensive cars, and investment services, you know it is aimed at an affluent audience. (Take a look at one of the national weekly newsmagazines, for example. Whom do you think advertisers are trying...
to reach?) Media outlets, in turn, want to attract affluent consumers and often gear their content to a more affluent reader or viewer.

The influence of class can sometimes take on strange dimensions. For example, one of the lesser-known strategies sometimes employed in the newspaper business is to reduce circulation to increase profits. While at first this may seem to be an impossible strategy, here is how publishers make it work. Newspapers receive about two-thirds of their revenue from advertisers, not readers; therefore, they must be sensitive to advertiser needs to stay in business. In turn, as noted above, advertisers want to reach only readers with enough disposable income to buy their products. In the information that major newspapers send to potential advertisers, they usually tout the affluence of the consumers who read their paper because these are the readers advertisers want to reach. To sell advertising space at a premium, newspapers want to improve the demographic profile (in terms of average household income) of their readership. They can do this in two ways: attract more affluent readers and/or get rid of poorer readers.

The first approach is reflected in media content that is clearly aimed at more affluent households. This content includes major business sections with extensive stock market reports and "style" sections with articles that highlight fashion, culture, and other upscale consumer activities. The second strategy is more direct. Some papers have made it difficult for poor people to buy their product. Publishers sometimes limit the paper's distribution in poor neighborhoods and in some cases even raise the price of the paper in these areas while reducing it in wealthier areas! The Los Angeles Times, for example, raised its daily sales price in inner-city neighborhoods from 35 cents to 50 cents. At the same time, it reduced the price to 25 cents in affluent surrounding counties (Cole, 1995).

Newspaper publishers are not the only ones who recognize that affluent people are more important for the media industry than poor or working-class people. In the 1970s, ABC issued a profile of its viewing audience, highlighting its desirable demographics. The network titled the profile "Some People Are More Valuable Than Others" (Wilson and Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 23). It is important, therefore, to keep in mind the underlying profit-oriented nature of the media when we examine class in media content.

Class and Media Content

Overwhelmingly, the American society portrayed in the media is wealthier than it is in the real world. The real world is predominantly
The class status of a television family is communicated to viewers in various ways, most obviously through the occupation of the major characters. Another signal of class is the set used to represent home life, as seen here in two classic sitcoms from the 1960s and 1970s.

Most prime-time programs feature families that are middle to upper-middle class. The Home Improvement photo shows a distinctly middle-class set: beautiful glass doors open onto a backyard with an expensive-looking jungle gym, the dining room furniture appears to be high quality, tasteful artwork decorates the wall, and books fill the shelves. (Here, the father is teaching his son proper table manners.) Notice how many prime-time programs feature such "tasteful" and upscale sets. (Photo © 1996 CAPITAL CITIES/ABC, INC./Fred Salinas. Used with permission.)

Working class, with the vast majority of Americans working in service, clerical, or production jobs. Media, however, portrays the social world as one heavily populated by the middle class—especially middle-class professionals. Images showing comfortable middle-class life fill magazines, films, and television programs. These images are most obvious in advertising. Simply put, advertisements aimed at selling products do not feature poor people and rarely feature working-class people. Instead, comfortable middle-class and affluent upper-class images reign in ads.

*Entertainment Media*

Entertainment is little different from advertising. Butsch (1992) examined 262 family-based situation comedies that aired from 1946 to 1990. Because programs based in a workplace—such as police shows—would dictate the occupation of the main characters, he intentionally excluded
In contrast to the usual middle-class fare, the set of Roseanne illustrates what is probably closer to reality for working-class Americans of more modest means. There is an eat-in kitchen instead of a dining room, and the trappings of the set are much less fancy: the furniture appears to be worn, the walls are decorated with an Elvis Presley plate and discount department store artwork instead of "tasteful" art, and there are no book-lined shelves on the wall. (Photo © 1996 CAPITAL CITIES/ABC, INC./Don Capetac Used with permission.)

What other devices are used to signal the class status of television characters? What social class is most commonly portrayed in today's sitcoms?

The focus of domestic-based situation comedies is home life away from work. Thus, creators of such programs are free to give their characters a wide range of potential occupations. Butsch found that only 11 percent of such programs featured blue-collar, clerical, or service workers as heads of the household. More than 70 percent of home-based situation comedies featured middle-class families. In 1992, professionals made up roughly 15 percent of the U.S. workforce. In Butsch's study, fully 44.5 percent of families—three times as many—were headed by professionals. And these weren't your run-of-the-mill professionals, either. The elite professions were vastly overrepresented. Doctors outnumbered nurses nine to one, professors outnumbered schoolteachers by more than three to one, and lawyers outnumbered less glamorous accountants by more than nine to one. All these high-paying jobs for television characters meant lots of disposable income, and families in these situation comedies overwhelmingly lived in beautiful middle-class homes.
equipped with all the amenities (see Exhibit 6.2). More than one out of every five families even had a servant!

Try to think of domestic-based situation comedies in which the head of the household had a working-class job. A number of well-known programs may come to mind. Archie in All in the Family was a dockworker. Ralph in The Honeymooners was a bus driver. On the prime-time cartoon The Flintstones, Fred was a "crane" operator in a rock quarry. The short-lived Fox program ROC featured an African American garbage collector and his wife, who was a nurse. The main character in Roseanne held various jobs, including a factory worker, waitress, and shampooer in a beauty salon, while her husband struggled as a construction worker and mechanic. The father in Family Matters was a police officer. Married With Children featured a shoe salesman, and Homer in The Simpsons was a woefully underqualified technician in a nuclear power plant. (Interestingly, several of these working-class programs highlight their characters' aspirations for middle-class life through the launching of small businesses. For example, Archie Bunker became a bar owner in the later program, Archie's Place. Both parents on Roseanne opened up businesses of their own: an unsuccessful motorcycle shop and a diner.) You can probably come up with a few more examples of family-based situation comedies with working-class main characters—but you can't come up with many more because, as Butsch (1992) has shown, they simply don't exist. The exceptions here prove the rule.

Now think of domestic-based situation comedies in which the head of the household had a middle-class job. The list of lawyers, doctors, architects, advertising executives, journalists, and businessmen should be quite long. Butsch (1992) argues that the predominance of middle-class characters in these television situation comedies conveys a subtle but significant message. The few working-class characters who do populate some programs are the deviant exception to the norm, and therefore it must be their own fault that they are less economically successful. (This observation is quite similar to the one Gray [1989] made when examining the portrayal of blacks in the media. As you may remember, Gray argued that middle-class blacks on entertainment programs were the "norm" against which real-life blacks in the news were contrasted.)

The message that people in the working class are responsible for their fate is a quintessential middle-class idea that ignores the structural conditions that shape social class. It is also an idea reinforced by another tendency identified by Butsch (1992). In contrast to most middle-class television families, the father in working-class families is usually ridiculed as an incompetent, though sometimes lovable, buffoon. Ralph Kramden, Fred Flintstone, Al Bundy, and Homer Simpson are perhaps the most obvious
cases. All, to varying degrees, were simpletons who pursued foolish get-rich schemes and wound up in trouble because they simply weren't very smart. Each of these shows portrayed the female main character as more level headed and in control. Often, these programs even portrayed the children of working-class men as smarter and more competent than their fathers. Here, too, the father on Roseanne and the lead character on ROC, for example, were notable exceptions that illustrate the possibility of more sympathetic portrayals of competent working-class fathers.

Butsch (1992) acknowledges that this kind of program sometimes also ridiculed middle-class fathers but not nearly as often as working-class fathers. Instead, the norm in comedies with middle-class families—from Father Knows Best and Leave It to Beaver to Bewitched and the Brady Bunch to the Cosby Show and The Wonder Years—is for middle-class fathers to be competent at their jobs and often to be wise and capable parents. The implication, argues Butsch, is that working-class families struggle because of incompetence and lack of intelligence, while middle-class families succeed because of competence and intelligence. Such images help reinforce the idea that class-based inequality is just and functional.

The comedies that have populated prime-time television since Butsch’s (1992) study was written have continued to focus overwhelmingly on middle-class people. Even work-based programs that at first suggest working-class life turn out to be different. Working featured a college graduate in a multinational corporation. Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place actually starred two graduate students, an ex-college roommate, and a pizza place; working-class jobs were just a temporary stopover on the way to brighter careers. Similarly, The Jamie Foxx Show highlighted the trials of an aspiring actor as he worked in a hotel—owned by his uncle. There were some exceptions. The cartoon King of the Hill featured a propane salesman and substitute elementary school teacher. The Steve Harvey Show starred an ex-R&B singer turned high school music teacher. And King of Queens starred a parcel deliveryman. But although working-class folks make up a substantial portion of the population, they continue to be scarce on network television.

If media rarely show working-class folks, they are even less likely to show working people in labor unions, despite the fact that more than 16 million Americans belong to a union. And as Puette (1992) has shown, the media's portrayal of unions has been anything but sympathetic. Like the stereotypical images of racial groups and women, the media stereotypes of unions have evolved over the years. After examining the image of labor unions in Hollywood movies, television dramas, TV news, and editorial cartoons, Puette argues that there are some basic "lenses" that
color and distort media portrayals of organized labor and its leaders. Among these media images are the stereotypes that unions protect and encourage unproductive, lazy, and insubordinate workers; that unions undermine America's ability to compete internationally; that union leaders, because they do not come from the educated/cultured (privileged) classes, are more likely to be corrupted by power than are business or political leaders; and that unions are no longer necessary. Certainly, unions are far from perfect organizations, and they are fair game for media criticism. However, with very few exceptions, Puette's analysis points to a systematic and relentless disparagement of the most visible effort at collective empowerment by working Americans.

**News Media**

Class enters directly into news media content as well. News tends to highlight issues of concern to middle- and upper-class readers and viewers. Take the example of stock market reports. Most American families do not own any type of stock, and four out of five families do not own stock directly. In fact, 86 percent of the nation's stock is owned by just 10 percent of the nation's families (Mishell, Bernstein, and Schmitt, 1999). Thus, the vast majority of the public is unlikely to be interested in stock reports. Most Americans do not even understand stock listings and reports. Yet stock market reports are a prominent feature of news programs and newspapers. Now think for a moment. When was the last time you saw a news story explaining how to apply for welfare benefits or reviewing the legal rights of workers to form a union or to learn about health and safety hazards in the workplace? Even suggesting such stories might seem odd because it contradicts our taken-for-granted notion of what news is "supposed" to be.

On the whole, the news reflects a middle- and upper-class view of the world. In this world, newspaper business pages flourish, but labor reporters are almost an extinct breed. News may address "regular" people as consumers, but it almost never addresses them as workers. Even consumer-oriented stories are scarce because they have the potential to offend advertisers. For example, the San Jose Mercury News once published an innocuous feature story advising consumers on how to buy a new car. The prospect of well-informed customers apparently concerned a group of 47 local auto dealers. They retaliated by collaborating and canceling 52 pages of advertising in the paper's weekly "Drive" section—a loss of $1 million for the paper. While pressure from local car dealers is infamous in the newspaper industry, this time the paper went to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which ruled that the auto dealers had illegally conspired. The dealers reached an agreement with the FTC and
agreed not to boycott the newspaper in the future (Chiuy, 1995). This episode is a dramatic illustration of how advertisers can influence media content—directly or indirectly. Advertisers do not want media content to interfere with the "buying mood" of the public.

The people who populate news and public affairs programs also represent a skewed sample of American life. "Hard news" usually features people in positions of power: especially politicians, professionals, and corporate executives. We might argue that, for many journalists, the very working definition of news is what those in power say and do. As we saw in Chapter 4, the organizational structure of journalism also favors coverage of the wealthy and powerful. The industry organizes its news beats around powerful political institutions such as the city hall, the state house, and federal offices. People with substantial resources and influence can also command attention from the media by supplying journalists with packaged information such as press releases, press conferences, and pseudo-events. The only regular features on working-class and poor people are likely to come from the reporter on the crime beat.

Unlike straight news broadcasts, public affairs programs offer a great deal of flexibility in the list of guests who are invited by producers to comment on and analyze current issues. Yet the class characteristics of the guests on such programs are also heavily skewed toward professionals. On the prestigious public affairs programs Nightline and the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, politicians and professionals dominated the guest lists (Croteau and Hoynes, 1994). Representatives of organizations speaking on behalf of working people are almost nonexistent on such programs. Public television in general is skewed toward professional sources, usually leaving the public out of the picture (Croteau, Hoynes, and Carragee, 1996).

Finally, there is often a racial dimension to class images. The term working class often conjures up images of whites, even though people of color are disproportionately working class. Barbara Ehrenreich (1975) notes, "The most intractable stereotype is of the working class (which is, in imagination, only white) as a collection of reactionaries and bigots—reflected, for example, in the use of the terms 'hard hat' or 'redneck' as class labels" (p. 41). She also observes, "It is possible for a middle-class person today to read the papers, watch television, even go to college, without suspecting that America has any inhabitants other than white-collar people—and, of course, the annoyingly persistent 'black underclass'" (p. 40).

That last phrase is important. In the media, the "poor" tend to be equated with blacks—even though two-thirds of people living below the poverty line in the United States are white. One study of the major news-magazines and the three major networks (Gilens, 1996) examined
images used to accompany stories about poverty. It found that although blacks make up less than 30 percent of the poor in real life, 62 percent of poor people pictured in newsmagazines and 65 percent of those on television were black. Such gross misrepresentation of class and race can easily contribute to misperceptions on the part of the public. Indeed, polls have shown that Americans—of all races—tend to vastly overestimate the percentage of poor people who are black.

**Sexual Orientation: Out of the Closet and Into the Media?**

Finally, let's consider one more group in society that suffers unequal treatment both in and outside the media; lesbians and gays. For decades, lesbians and gays have been either ignored or ridiculed in nearly all media accounts. Like the movements for racial equality, women's rights, and organized labor, the gay and lesbian movement has both developed alternative media and worked for more positive portrayals of gays and lesbians in the mainstream media.

Reviewing the literature on lesbians, gays, and the media, Fejes and Petrich (1993) argue that until the early 1930s, film portrayals of homosexuals were used either as “comic devices,” as “a form of erotic titillation,” or “to depict deviance, perversion and decadence” (p. 397). From the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, more conservative norms reigned in Hollywood, and producers severely restricted and censored images of gays and lesbians. The lesbian and gay images that emerged in the 1960s were usually quite negative in tone. Fejes and Petrich note that during this period, “homosexuality was portrayed at best as unhappiness, sickness, or marginality and at worst perversion and an evil to be destroyed” (p. 398). They cite one review of all the films made between 1961 and 1976 that featured a major homosexual character. Thirty-two such films appeared in this period. Eighteen of these films featured a homosexual character who ends up being killed by another character, 13 featured a homosexual character who commits suicide, and the one remaining film featured a gay man who lives—but only after being castrated. The portrayal of gays and lesbians in films has improved since then—there was no place to go but up. However, realistic and positive portrayals are still a rarity, although independent films by lesbians and gays have served as an important source in providing a broader range of images.

Television has followed much the same route as Hollywood. From comic drag queens to threatening villains, television routinely disparaged homosexuals. Fejes and Petrich (1993) cite a 1967 CBS documentary in which the host, Mike Wallace, concluded, "The average homosexual, if
there be such, is promiscuous. He's not interested in, nor capable of a lasting relationship like that of a heterosexual marriage (p. 400). As the gay and lesbian movement gained strength in the 1970s and 1980s, it more actively sought fairer television portrayals of homosexuals. A 1974 episode of the medical drama *Marcus Welby* featured a homosexual child molester and suggested that homosexuality was a treatable disease. The program angered gay activists, who responded by organizing media watch efforts that challenged the negative media portrayals of gays and lesbians. Because of such efforts, gay and lesbian characters began to appear on prime-time programs, especially in episodes that revolved around homosexuality. Such programs, though, almost always framed these images as a "heterosexual view of homosexuality. Dramatic programming portrayed homosexuality as a problem disrupting heterosexuals' lives and expectations" (Fejes and Petrich, 1993, p. 401). In the 1980s and 1990s, gay and lesbian characters began appearing in more serious and realistic portrayals, especially in roles highlighting the issue of AIDS. This time, it was conservative and religious fundamentalist groups who organized to challenge the media images. They objected to the positive portrayals of lesbians and gays and organized boycotts against advertisers on such programs.

A milestone was reached in 1997 when the lead character of the situation comedy *Ellen*—and the actress that played her, Ellen DeGeneres—"came out" in a highly publicized and anticipated episode. To commemorate television's first openly gay lead character, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) sponsored "Coming Out with Ellen" benefits, and the Human Rights Campaign developed a party kit for the thousands of hosts celebrating the event across the country (Rosenfeld, 1997).

Although a year later, declining ratings spelled the end for *Ellen*, lesbian and gay characters have since become more prominent on television (including a new 2001 series for DeGeneres, *The Ellen Show*). In the fall of 2001, there were more than 25 recurring roles—including more than a dozen leading roles—for lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters on cable and network TV, including a doctor on the popular *ER*, a gay rights activist on *Spin City*, and even a trusty sidekick to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (GLAAD, 2001). In 2001, prime-time's first recurring transgender character also appeared as a college professor in *The Education of Max Bickford*. In some cases, these characters directly confronted stereotypical images. The *Spin City* character, Carter Heywood, was an African American man who in one episode responded to a coworker, "You're surprised I play basketball because I'm a gay man. But you see, Stuart, I'm also a black man. So it's really just a battle of your archaic stereotypes" (*New York Times*, 1997, p. D7).
Stereotypes and limits still exist on television portrayals of gays and lesbians. Television almost always presents homosexual characters in isolation, not as part of a gay community. Also, displays of physical affection between homosexual characters are still largely taboo on American television. One episode of *Thirtysomething* showed two gay men talking in bed. After the episode aired, conservative activists organized protests, several advertisers withdrew from the show, and the network dropped the episode from its summer rerun schedule. As Peter Nardi (1997) notes, “In a show filled with all sorts of sexual escapades,” the lone gay character on the popular *Melrose Place* “has rarely been seen dating and his kiss with another man was edited from the final version” (p. 436). Nardi goes on to observe, “Many of today’s ‘positive’ depictions are simply nonsexualized lesbian or gay characters who do not pose a threat to heterosexuals” (p. 430). One program introduced in 1996, *Will and Grace*, featured the first gay male lead of a situation comedy. However, it followed this “nonsexualized” tradition by having the character be the roommate of a woman. The result, publicity material for the program noted, is “the perfect couple whose relationship is perfect because sex doesn’t get in the way” (NBC, 1998).

News coverage of lesbians and gays has also changed over the years. Rarely mentioned before the 1960s, homosexuality entered the news as a result of gay and lesbian activism. The AIDS epidemic in the 1980s prodded the news media to address issues related to the gay community more directly. In the 1990s, debate about lesbians and gays serving in the military were front-page stories. The move toward more positive coverage of lesbians and gays has taken place primarily in larger metropolitan areas with large, active, and visible gay and lesbian organizations. Smaller, more conservative communities have often lagged behind in their coverage of gay and lesbian issues.

As with the evolution of media coverage of women and racial minorities, the media’s portrayal of lesbians and gays has slowly become less blatantly stereotypical. While coverage is still significantly limited, contemporary media have at least displayed a sense of tolerance toward gays and lesbians. This is a start, but there is a long way to go before media provide truly equitable coverage. “Tolerance” of homosexuality is a far cry from a media position that no longer privileges heterosexuality.

Fejes and Petrich (1993) note that the changes in mass media images of gays and lesbians did not occur spontaneously. Such changes “were not brought about by more enlightened social attitudes. Rather, the activism of gays and lesbians in confronting and challenging negative stereotypes played a decisive role in the change” (p. 412). Nardi (1997) observes that changing images are also partially the result of “an increase in the
production of media by gays and lesbians themselves, such as the lesbian and gay film festivals regularly held in many major cities, gay newspapers and magazines that increasingly attract mainstream advertisers, and gay public access television” (p. 438). These important points apply to all the groups we have examined. Women’s organizations and civil rights groups, as well as lesbian and gay organizations, were significant social factors, in the form of collective human agency, in influencing the media industry to change the nature of media content. Labor unions and other organizations representing working-class and poor people have not had the same impact on media coverage of their constituents.

Conclusion

Entertainment and news media do not reflect the diversity of the real world. However, by its lack of diversity, media content does reflect the inequality that exists in the social world—and in the media industry.

The dynamic relationship between media content and the social world is complicated. Is media content cause or effect? A sociological approach would suggest that it is both. The social world affects media producers and media products. For example, we have seen how the efforts of social-movement organizations have influenced changes in media content. In this case, human agency has altered the operations of a major institutional structure. In turn, media content certainly influences our understanding of the social world. However, to fully assess the potential impact of media content, we must look at the meanings actual audiences attach to the media they read, watch, and listen to. We also need to explore the ways in which media are a part of the political world and our everyday social interaction. Having examined media production and media content, we turn in Part Four to the ways the media influence contemporary social and political life.