Introduction

Understanding Social Institutions and Ourselves in a New Media Society

**KEY CONCEPTS**

*New media* are the mass communications that rely on digital technologies such as social media, online games and applications, multimedia, productivity applications, cloud computing, interoperable systems, and mobile devices. New media are part of mass media.

*Social institutions* are the systems of established social rules that create stable expectations for behavior. Social institutions include family and religion, which provide support and a sense of purpose, and education, government, and law, which help create social order. Mass media are also a social institution.

*Structure* refers to the rules and practices provided by society and social institutions.

*Agency* refers to individuals’ decisions to conform to or challenge the rules or practices of a social institution.

The *social exchange model* highlights the importance of relational dynamics, or how the behavior of one actor is shaped by the behaviors of other actors and by changes in the institutional context.

The fish will be the last to discover water.
—Anonymous

Can you imagine trying to explain water to fish? Fish know a lot about their watery world. They know where to find food, where they are likely to become food, and where the water is too warm or too cold for them to survive. Fish, however, are unlikely to discover water itself because it is impossible to see. Water is their reality. Water provides the backdrop
to everything fish know about living and dying. The only way for fish to understand the importance of water to their lives is to remove them from it.

The same can be said about us and *new media*, or the mass communications that rely on the digital technologies that we use daily. We use devices—cell phones, computers, tablets—to access the internet, read the news, watch television, chat with our friends, make our appointments, and register for school. If you look at figure I.1, which is based on data provided by the Nielsen Research Center, you begin to get a sense of just how important new media are in our lives. As you can see in the figure, 122 million Americans stream video on their smartphones, and 146 million Americans stream video on their computers. We engage one another a lot via new media as well. According to the Nielsen Research Center, 142 million users access social media through apps on their smartphones, and 133 million users access social media through their computers.

Table I.1, which was created using data from Statista, shows our average daily media use in minutes. You can see that Americans increasingly spend time using mobile devices. Over a five-year period, Americans’ average daily use of mobile media grew from 88 minutes per day in 2012 to 195 minutes per day in 2017—a difference of 107 minutes. At the same

![Figure I.1. Number of Users by Device in Millions. Source: Nielsen Research Center.](image-url)
time, this doesn't necessarily mean that we are watching less TV. Notice that TV use is only down 38 minutes per day, and desktop/laptop use is only down 14 minutes per day during the same six-year time period.

New media, in short, are our water; they provide the backdrop for most of our encounters. We swim in a technological world, yet like fish, we rarely think about how new media potentially change the ways in which we interact with one another or shape how we live our lives. The social changes resulting from the emergence of new media are consequential. For example, new media alter how we understand our intimate relationships. We may find it easier to text our family good and bad news or find email a convenient way to end a relationship—intimate interactions that had to be done over the phone or face-to-face only twenty years ago. Similarly, we may find it more enjoyable to take a required class online because we can do it from the comfort of our homes, in our pajamas and at our convenience—an option that has only been available in the last decade. New media have fundamentally changed how we interact with one another and how we navigate daily life. This book provides a sociological approach to understanding how new media shape our interactions and our experiences. Specifically, this book explores two related questions:

1. How do new media shape our interactions and experiences with one another?
2. How do new media change the social institutions, or the systems of established social rules that create stable expectations for behavior, governing our lives?
If you are new to sociology, you should know that sociologists study the development and structure of human society. While sociologists are interested in individuals, they analyze how people live together as well as how their lives are organized by social institutions such as family, work, and education. Sociologists, in other words, make clear distinctions between individual experience and the institutional context in which those experiences occur. If this seems confusing, don't worry. In this chapter, I will discuss social institutions in more detail and outline how a sociologist might analyze the effects of new media on social institutions.

**SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS EXPLAINED**

A *social institution* is an organization that is critical to teaching us the norms and behaviors of a culture. Social institutions provide us with a common identity and give us a sense of order because they establish a sense of purpose and direction as well as dictate clear rules for behavior. For example, we learn a lot more than just our *ABCs* in school. The American education system brings diverse groups of people together and gives them common membership in a group, such as kindergartners or high schoolers, as well as provides them a common sense of direction (to do well in school, graduate, and get a job). Social institutions, in short, give us a sense of purpose and offer us support so that we know what to expect from different social settings and know how to interact with one another.

Generally speaking, there are six social institutions that sociologists study in order to better understand the structure of a society:

1. Family, which teaches us about the world and our place in it
2. Education, which teaches us how to get along with one another and trains us to be good workers
3. Religion, which provides us a unified system of beliefs and a moral code by which we are supposed to live
4. Work, which provides for the production and distribution of goods/services
5. Law, which maintains social order through law enforcement
6. Politics, which maintains social order through policy
These institutions are critical because they encompass every area of social life and because they fulfill essential functions—such as preserving order and perpetuating society—that other groups cannot do. As a result, we know how to behave in a classroom, in the grocery store, and at our workplace—and we expect others to behave in a similar manner or to experience consequences for their failure to do so.

Society, of course, is not static. Social forces such as industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and technological development have made it more difficult for these social institutions to do their jobs. For example, if fewer people attend church or temple services, it becomes more difficult for religious leaders to give individuals a sense of purpose and offer them support. This does not mean that society will fall apart. It’s quite the opposite. As our society becomes more complicated, new institutions emerge and help maintain social stability. In fact, mass media are one of the social institutions that have helped maintain social stability in our complex society.

You might be thinking, “Wait a minute. Aren’t mass media part of the economy?” After all, like other industries, mass media companies are oriented toward making a profit. This is true. Traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, books, magazines, radio, and television, as well as new media platforms, such as blogs and services like Amazon Prime, Hulu, and Netflix, are all oriented toward profit-making. However, mass media also are a social institution because they teach us the norms and behaviors of our society. Mass media help give meaning to the world around us and provide guidance on how we should behave in it. We don’t simply have to rely on our families or our pastors to tell us how to behave; we can watch a movie or go online to learn more about the kinds of rewards and punishments that go along with different kinds of behavior. Similarly, we don’t completely rely on educational and religious institutions to integrate us into groups and give us a sense of membership. If we have a particular interest, we can simply go online and find a website, discussion board, or chat room where individuals gather and talk about the interests they have in common.

To be sure, the economic and social functions of mass media do not perfectly complement one another. Since media companies primarily are interested in growing their bottom line, they use content to sell us
products and lifestyles. Let’s use MTV’s hit series Teen Mom as an example of how the economic and social functions of mass media can come into conflict. Teen Mom, which follows the lives of several teenagers who have had children, is used in more than three thousand middle and high school classrooms across the United States to warn teenagers about the pitfalls of teen parenting. In the reality show, the teen moms are shown struggling to find housing, obtain child care, and stay in school. This, however, is not the only reality the show’s audience sees. Since the show also needs to make money, MTV features products in its shows. Teen Mom becomes a showcase for products, and the teen moms get extensive makeovers, posh baby accessories, and expensive clothing—none of which most teen moms could afford. The teen moms also are shown engaged in dramatic, and sometimes destructive or violent, behavior. From an economic point of view, emphasizing conflict on the show makes a lot of sense. After all, if the teen moms were only shown changing diapers, MTV probably would not have advertisers or an audience for the program. However, the focus on products and drama arguably undercuts the social message of the program. A viewer of Teen Mom, for instance, may not get the message that being a parent during your teenage years is very challenging. Instead, she might think that being a teen mom is glamorous and wonder whether she might be able to get on the show herself. In fact, in 2011, a staff writer for the New York Post pointed out that three of Teen Mom 2’s Janelle Evans’s friends got pregnant within a year of her appearance on the show and that another teen mom roommate, Megan Nelson, became pregnant in an effort to become a regular on the show.

Of course, media companies do not simply drive the desires of Americans. Not all teens want to be moms or get the latest baby swag. New products and platforms emerge in response to what we like and want. Let’s use social media as an example. Facebook burst onto the Harvard University scene in 2004. By 2006, Facebook had spread beyond college campuses and had twelve million users worldwide. Given the popularity of Facebook, it is not surprising that other companies tried to create additional social media platforms and that many of these efforts failed. The founder of Monster.com, for instance, created a social media site called Eons for the more-than-fifty crowd in 2007. Given the relative
nnewness of social media and the site’s focus on a demographic that was not very familiar with digital technology, Eons did not attract enough users, and it failed. Twitter, in contrast, is an example of a successful social media platform. Founded in 2006, Twitter capitalized on a popular feature of Facebook—the status updates. Twitter allows users to “microblog,” or communicate their thoughts, opinions, and activities in 280 characters or less, well beyond their standard friendship networks. Using hashtags, individuals can follow topics and connect with people around the world who share their interests.

The preferences of users have shaped the development of social media in other ways. Both Facebook and Twitter are commercial ventures designed to generate a profit. Both platforms prominently include advertising on their sites and sell user information to corporations. In fact, we’ve recently seen in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the company accessed the private information of more than fifty million Facebook users and then used this information to influence voter behavior in the 2016 presidential election, just how much of our personal information can be accessed by third parties. While some individuals do not mind the commercial aspects of Facebook and Twitter, others do. New platforms have emerged to address users’ concerns regarding the collection and sale of user information. Paul Budnitz, for example, created Ello, an advertiser-free social networking site. As you can see from the Ello Manifesto below, Budnitz rejects the idea that a social networking site needs to be commercially driven to succeed. In an interview with BetaBeat, which is the innovation section of the New York Observer, Budnitz argued that “Facebook, Google+, Tumblr, etc. aren’t really social networks—they’re advertising platforms. They exist to sell ads. That’s it.” Ello allows users to post content, send messages, and share links; it just prohibits advertising, since it distracts from the users’ experiences. Yik Yak, another social media platform, was also created in response to users’ concerns over what Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and other commercial platforms were doing with their personal information. Yik Yak, which was designed for college students, allowed individuals who were within ten miles of a college or university campus to post content anonymously on a wall. In both of these cases, we can see that social media platforms developed in response to the people who used them.
Ello Manifesto

Your social network is owned by advertisers.

Every post you share, every friend you make, and every link you follow is tracked, recorded, and converted into data. Advertisers buy your data so they can show you more ads. You are the product that’s bought and sold.

We believe there is a better way. We believe in audacity. We believe in beauty, simplicity, and transparency. We believe that the people who make things and the people who use them should be in partnership.

We believe a social network can be a tool for empowerment. Not a tool to deceive, coerce, and manipulate—but a place to connect, create, and celebrate life.

You are not a product.

In sum, social institutions such as family, education, government, religion, and work are critical for reproducing American society. Social institutions fulfill our need for learning, provide social order, give us a sense of purpose, and offer us support. As our society has gotten more complicated, however, new social institutions have arisen to help maintain social order. Mass media, including new media, are an example of a social institution that emerged in response to increased social complexity. However, mass media are not just a social institution. Media often are oriented to profit-making, which affects how companies craft the stories they tell us, the products they offer, and, consequently, the messages we receive about the world and how it works.

A Sociological Approach to Studying New Media

It can be difficult to assess the effects of new media on our behaviors and lives. Some of our behavioral changes in response to technological innovation are fairly straightforward. The rise in internet-based video streaming services such as Amazon Prime, Hulu, and Netflix, for example, drove video stores out of business and caused some households to drop their cable and satellite services and stream video over televisions and mobile devices instead. Likewise, technological advances in mobile phones have altered who has a phone as well as how mobile phones are used. Motorola brought the first generation of mobile phones (also
known as 1G) to the public in 1984. These early mobile phones, which cost more than two thousand dollars each, were largely installed in cars because they were too bulky to carry around. The inconvenience and cost of this mobile technology meant that not many people owned them. Mobile phone usage increased dramatically in the 1990s as second-generation (or 2G) technology made phones smaller, more reliable, and more affordable than in the past. As phones and phone plans became more affordable, more people bought them and integrated this technology into their daily routines.

However, third-generation (3G) and fourth-generation (4G) technology, which is what most of us have today, fundamentally changed how we use our mobile phones. Each new generation transfers data faster and allows us to do more on our mobile phones. As a result, more and more Americans buy mobile “smartphones” and use them for various purposes. You can see in figure I.2 that 45.9 percent of the American population owns a smartphone and that 75 percent own a web-enabled device that is also a mobile phone. The widespread availability of 3G and 4G technology has changed how we use our phones. 3G and 4G technology, for example, allows us to transfer emails, information, and instant messages to one another, which, as you can see in figure I.3, makes it easy for us to use our phones for banking (42.7 percent of mobile phone owners), to check the weather (80.5 percent of mobile phone owners), to keep up with the news (65 percent of mobile phone owners), to listen to internet

![Figure I.2. Percentage of Americans with Different Media Devices. Source: Pew Research Center.](image-url)
radio (51.2 percent of mobile phone users), to play games (65.2 percent of mobile phone users), and to communicate with our friends via social networks (70.2 percent of mobile phone users). In other words, we do not need to watch the local news to check the weather or wait for our favorite song to play over the radio. We can do all this, and more, on our mobile devices.

Think of it! Less than one hundred years ago, the television was introduced to the public at the New York World’s Fair. President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the fair and became the first American president to be televised. Now American presidents can speak with us directly through social media at any time of day. Given these dramatic changes, how do we understand the role of new media in our lives? Different disciplines in the social sciences have different approaches for studying the world. Since sociologists study the development and structure of human
society, they do not assume that new media are “good” or “bad” for American society. Instead, they examine how new media shape human interaction and institutional life from the perspective of different actors and assess how new media are intentionally (or unintentionally) used to challenge existing institutional arrangements.

Let’s extend our discussion of social institutions to better understand how sociologists study the effects of new media on American society. As we discussed above, in America’s early history, social institutions such as education, family, religion, and government provided individuals information, tradition, and a moral compass. Technological developments, however, have diminished the roles of traditional social institutions in this regard and, increasingly, mass media have stepped in and picked up the slack. Mass media are a social institution. The relationship between traditional social institutions and new media is complicated by another factor as well. New media are so pervasive that traditional social institutions such as family, education, religion, government, and work are both shaped by and dependent on communication technology to fulfill their functions.

Politics are a good example. Politicians use media to influence the public. Politicians spend millions of dollars on advertising designed to make their opponents look bad and make themselves look good to voters. That said, politicians’ actions are also affected by what happens in mass media. For instance, when Barack Obama ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, he focused on new media, such as social media, rather than traditional media outlets, such as broadcast television, to beat his opponent, Hillary Clinton. Obama had a two-pronged approach when it came to using new media. First, he used social media to connect with his supporters directly. In 2007, Obama’s staff took to Twitter to connect with and organize voters. In fact, his account was one of the most followed in the world at the time. Second, Obama rewarded bloggers for writing posts that were supportive of his presidential bid by giving them exclusive interviews and campaign information. Lots of bloggers wrote supportive posts because they knew that having insider information and exclusive interviews would draw people to their sites. Hillary Clinton, who made limited use of new media, quickly found herself out of presidential contention as the buzz around Obama and his
call for “change” and “hope” grew louder online and offline. Clinton’s presidential bid, in short, was shaped by mass media—and new media in particular—even though she made little use of it in her own campaign.

Hillary Clinton upped her social media game during the 2016 presidential campaign cycle and was quite effective. According to the conservative news outlet National Review, Clinton’s tweets were liked, shared, and commented on more often than her opponent Donald Trump’s tweets. Clinton’s “Delete your account” tweet, which was a response to Trump criticizing President Obama for endorsing her, was retweeted more than five hundred thousand times. A sarcastic “I never said that.’—Donald Trump, who said that” with a link to Trump’s 2012 tweet claiming global warming was a Chinese hoax posted by a Clinton staffer during a presidential debate also was retweeted more than one hundred thousand times. Additionally, Clinton’s Facebook account was more active than Trump’s account, although he had more followers. National Review reported that Clinton’s accounts had almost 190 million likes, comments, and shares. However, this did not translate into presidential victory for Clinton. This, in part, was because Donald Trump’s in-your-face, often-offensive tweets were not just retweeted and discussed in online forums such as Reddit but also made it into mainstream and cable news. Anchors and pundits spent countless hours analyzing and, in some instances, deriding Trump’s use of Twitter. While Trump’s use of Twitter alone doesn’t account for his presidential victory, it is clear that new media play a critical role in Americans’ understandings of politics.

There are also plenty of instances in which it is unclear how the interactions between humans and technology will shape institutional practices. Let’s take the example of Yik Yak. Mostly, Yik Yak provided a virtual public forum for college students, who posted everything from complaints about the food in the student union to jokes about bodily functions. Yik Yak, however, was not always used as the creators intended, and this affected institutional operations. For example, several students used Yik Yak to post anonymous threats against high schools, colleges, and universities—threats that closed schools and triggered police investigations on campuses. Similarly, some students used Yik Yak to post racially charged, sexual, or otherwise disparaging comments about their classmates and professors. These Yik Yak controversies spurred calls for bans on anonymous platforms and faculty action, including “Yak Back”
protests in which professors hijacked Yik Yak with their own commentary. Schools across the country banned Yik Yak, and its use plummeted. In 2017, Yik Yak shut down.

So how would a sociologist study Yik Yak and its effects on education? A sociologist would focus on the push and pull between structure and agency. Structure refers to the rules and practices provided by society and social institutions. Agency refers to individuals’ decisions to conform to or challenge the rules or practices of a social institution. Sociologists believe that individuals can make choices and that these choices can have important consequences. Individuals, however, make choices in institutional settings over which they have little control. For example, a student can decide to post on Yik Yak or check her email instead of listening to a course lecture. This is agency. While this choice does not change the fact that she needs to take the required course as part of her major, it may alter whether a professor allows the use of

![Figure I.4. The Social Exchange Model](image-url)
devices in his classroom. This is structure. So to better understand how new media affect education a sociologist might study whether professors’ policies regarding electronic devices and computers have changed with the introduction of social media platforms such as Yik Yak.

UNDERSTANDING NEW MEDIA IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Now that we have a better sense of why social institutions matter and understand how sociologists study them, we can begin to make sense of the complex interactions between individuals, institutions, and new media. Figure I.4 provides a simple graphic summary of these relationships. Mass media, which consist of diverse communications technology, including new media, provide a backdrop for our interactions with institutions. In this way, it is the water in which we swim. New media make it easier for us to connect with one another and provide us new ways to engage one another relative to social institutions. For example, we can email or text our colleagues a work-related question after work hours and get a response. This innovation in how we do our work changes the social institution of work. Specifically, it changes bosses’ expectations of when our workday ends, and it changes our expectations about whether we should be paid for work done via email and text after regular hours. This model is called the social exchange model because it highlights the importance of relational dynamics, or how the behavior of one actor is shaped by the behaviors of other actors and by changes in the institutional context. The consequences associated with these changes may be positive, negative, or both. Again, sociologists are not interested in arguing whether new media are good or bad for a social institution. Instead, sociologists look at the relational dynamics between mass media, social institutions, and individuals/actors and examine how these interactions change our behavior and alter society.

You might still be curious about how individuals fit into the social exchange model. Agency indicates choice, and choice means that we could decide to ignore the guidelines we are given and try to change the social institutions governing us. This is true. Generally speaking, social institutions tell us how to behave and interact in a setting, and we reproduce these rules and expectations every time we engage
in them. Sociologists assume that we typically uphold—rather than challenge—the norms and behaviors set out by social institutions because we are rational actors who want to maximize our opportunities (and minimize our personal costs) in a given setting. What distinguishes this logic from a pure cost-benefit calculation that we associate with economics is that sociologists believe that self-interest signals more than competition and the accumulation of wealth. Instead, sociologists argue that we rely on one another in order to accomplish our goals. This is a critical difference. Since we need one another to achieve our goals, we try to create mutually beneficial and stable relationships within an institution. This requires us to form commitments to one another that have more to them than the exchange of money, goods, and services. These relationships involve trust. Understood this way, you can see how the choices we make, which are based on a combination of self-interest and interdependence, end up reinforcing social institutions. To get what we want, we need to have a sense of how others will act in a given situation—and others expect the same from us. Consequently, we generally act in predictable ways, and these behaviors reinforce social institutions. Again, this isn’t always the case. If we ignore, replace, or directly challenge social institutions, the rules by which they operate can change over time. We just don’t do this daily. We typically behave in ways that reproduce what we already know and do.

In the remainder of the book, I explore a different social institution—family, education, religion, work, law, and politics—in each chapter and outline how new media have changed our expectations as they relate to social institutions and the rules by which they operate. As you will see in the chapters, there generally is not a consensus on the effects new media have on these social institutions. For example, there is a lot of debate over the role of new media in the creation and enforcement of our laws. The purpose of this book then is to give you a sociological framework for understanding these debates and to provide you opportunities to apply sociological concepts to recent cases. Sometimes the material will be uncomfortable and controversial. The goal is to move beyond your personal reaction and think sociologically.
CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we defined social institutions and discussed how sociologists study them. We learned that traditional social institutions, such as family, education, religion, work, politics, and law, have diminished in strength as American society has changed in response to social forces (such as industrialization, urbanization, and technological innovation) and become more complicated. New social institutions emerge in response to these social forces and help fill the gap by teaching us the norms and behaviors associated with American society and by giving us new ways to connect with one another. Mass media, which includes new media, are one of these social institutions.

We also learned that mass media are not just a social institution. Most media companies are oriented toward profit-making, which means that media platforms and content often are shaped by economic concerns. Consequently, we sometimes get distorted messages about social institutions, such as the family. Teen Mom, for example, doesn’t give a completely accurate view of parenting during your teen years. Showing sleep-deprived teen moms changing diapers would not attract many viewers or make MTV much money. Instead, MTV attracts viewers by focusing on the dramatic aspects of the moms’ lives and makes additional money by featuring products in the show. In short, mass media are affected by economics, which shapes what lessons about the world are broadcast throughout society.

We concluded the chapter with a discussion of the social exchange model, which focuses our attention on relational dynamics and helps us better understand how new media change our behavior and society. Specifically, the social exchange model draws attention to the following:

- the different actors engaged in a social institution and their priorities
- how different actors reproduce and challenge the practices and/or structural arrangements of an institution
- how social institutions respond to technological innovation and the shifts in interactions that come with it

As fish swimming in technological waters, it is difficult to determine the effect of new media on our lives. The value of the social exchange model
is that it highlights the interaction between structure and agency and allows us to critically examine how new media change our behavior and the social institutions that govern our lives.

In each chapter, we will think about how new media have challenged and changed our expectations as they relate to social institutions and the rules by which they operate. The social exchange model presented here is the underlying framework for the remainder of the book. The social exchange model helps us identify the relevant questions we should ask when analyzing the effects of new media on American social institutions. In this case, the social exchange model focuses on how the introduction of new media into a social institution affects individuals’ expectations of an institution as well as how actors within the institutions respond to these new and changing demands. Understanding these relationships is key to a sociological understanding of the role of new media in American society.

There are a couple of notes worth making about the book. As you go through the chapters, you will notice that I included case studies on important issues related to new media, such as countering religious extremism online and dataveillance (which refers to the collection and surveillance of data regarding where we go and what we do). In the case studies, I pose questions for you to think about and specifically ask you to consider these cases relative to course ideas and concepts. I hope that you will use the case studies to explore the relationship between new media and American social institutions in more detail. I’ve also included a section titled “Reproducing Inequality” in each of the chapters. In this section, I offer you additional information about a topic, such as the costs of online, for-profit education, and note how this reproduces inequality in American society. I hope that these sections will stimulate additional conversation about important sociological topics. At the end of each chapter, you will see a number of links that direct you to articles, talks, and films that will help you learn more about information covered in the chapter. There are also links that will help you learn more about the topics more generally. If you rented or purchased a print version of this book, go to www.deanarohlinger.com to access a document with the “live” links. Finally, I have included a concept index at the end of the book. If you don’t remember a term discussed in a previous chapter, navigate to the back of the book to read a definition and see on what page the concept was discussed.
CHAPTER LINKS


CHAPTER REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are social institutions, and why are they important?
2. Why are mass media, including new media, considered a social institution?
3. How do economics affect the kinds of products and content media companies make?
4. How does the social exchange model explain the effects of new media on American institutions?
5. Does the social exchange model argue that new media has negative consequences for society? Why, or why not?

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