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SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND MEDIA

Thinking Comparatively

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◆ *Introduction: Why a Comparative Frame?*

Culture, Raymond Williams once wrote (1985, p. 87), is one of the most complex words in the English language. In addition, *society* and *media* are hardly simple terms. In the 21st century, it is clear not only that these are complex words but also, and more important, that the analysis of the relations between the three terms encounters some of the most contentious and complicated dynamics in the contemporary world.

I propose to take a comparative frame to explore these issues, using Britain, the United States, and Iran as the three national contexts of analysis. First of all, comparison allows us to see most readily that relationships between phenomena in one context are differently structured in another. Comparative method rapidly denaturalizes social relations and helps us understand that they are historically constructed, culturally inflected, and mutable. The choice of comparison here, as of 2002, of two of the most highly developed economies and media systems in the world with a non-Western, Middle Eastern system helps problematize some of our expectations. Beyond this commonly acknowledged duality,

Author's Note: I'd like to thank JD for his patience, support, and very helpful editing and Gholam Khiabany for help with Iranian materials.

though, there are multiple complexities. The United States and Britain are not just peas in a pod. There remain significant differences of ethos and orientation between them. Moreover, Iran has been producing a wide array of media products as well as a range of imported ones, giving Tehran a cosmopolitanism surprising to the uninformed outsider. Iran's population is very young and highly politicized, whereas the two democracies have aging populations and suffer from widespread political apathy.

Second, such a comparative approach is also based explicitly on the understanding that society, with its characteristic social divisions of class, gender, and ethnicity, is strongly intertwined with the nation-state. Indeed, it is very difficult to unravel the mutual development of modern societies, nations, and states (Mann, 1993, p. 737). Each society that is a sovereign social entity is also a nation-state that organizes the rights and duties of each societal member or citizen (Urry, 2000, p. 9). The social structure is not only material but also cultural, with members believing they share some common identity that is caught up with the territorial boundary of the state, much of this built up through an everyday "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995) of repetitions: flag waving, anthem singing, a shared historical narrative, common literary and artistic fields, the rhythms of the annual calendar, and, increasingly, media usage.

A global system of national societies has developed, with each enjoying relatively clear boundaries and supported by its own pattern of "banal nationalism" in which one of the functions of the media is to articulate the different parts of society together in the creation and maintenance of a form of shared national culture. Here *culture* becomes identified with "national culture" and seems to demarcate the national territorial space, as per the well-known argument from Anderson (1991), which locates much of this development at the moment of the growth of print capitalism and the fixing of written languages in a national press and literature.

Yet, there are also preexisting, more local cultural groupings, such as regional cultural practices and urban cultural environments, that are not erased with the growth of a national mediascape and that media developments may help to revive, in the way that a good local newspaper can support urban affiliation and regeneration. Yet other "sub-national" cultures that do not map straightforwardly onto national space may include class, gender, and ethnicity, whereas religious attachments clearly do not obey the territorial divisions of nations. Increasingly evident and widely shared are the flows of globalized cultural products, including television programs, pop music, feature films, and news imagery that serve to create global audiences, linking people in transnational taste cultures of various kinds. Although it is important to acknowledge the continuing differential access of poor and rural people to media, it is also important to recognize the real differences that mobile telephony, wireless/windup radio, satellite delivery, and affordable internet access have made in bringing ever more people into a mediated world.

Third, the complexity of, and constant changes within, the relationships between society, culture, and the media can be vividly demonstrated across these three very different social formations. In the West, the increasing ubiquity of several versions of mediated communication in our everyday lives has meant that the distinctions between our personal life, social networks, and "mediated" culture have long broken down. As Tolson (1996, p. x) puts it, "the 'situated' and the 'mediated' worlds gradually, but inexorably, interpenetrate. We live in highly mediatised societies. These processes are at work in Iran but are still somewhat less developed than in the United States and Britain, where the three elements are increasingly homologous, mapped onto each other in a process of mutual definition and redefinition. In Iran, there remains greater distance between the three levels of activity, meaning that there remain more areas of social life that are not mediated. To

give two simple examples of this, in Iran, there are few sports bars, where media use begins to reshape social space previously focused on conversation. Iran also does not yet have reality TV, where media track ordinary people and their micro-interactions. The temporal caveats above in terms such as *remains* and *yet* are deliberate because the core process that international communication has shown is a world-historical tendency toward greater mediatization of society.

By reading the media environments of different societies against each other, we can see more clearly how the mediated environment is an essential part of wider yet still heavily nationally defined sociocultural and political milieux. Using these three national media systems as our cases, we will be able to explore the different ways in which the relationships between society, culture, and media have been defined within each system and the ways in which they have changed over time, as they deal with various pressures

- ◆ toward ever more commercially driven systems and oligopolistic tendencies;
- ◆ of convergence and digitization through new technologies to reconfigure older parts of the media system;
- ◆ from a range of internal underrepresented sectors, differently constellated in the three societies, for access and voice;
- ◆ from competing constituencies, some who wish to define and regulate the “national” cultural space and others who wish to protect or expand the space for free expression and communication;
- ◆ from external sources and global flows of media production that provide audiences with greater choice but alter the context in which internal production and meaning making occurs.

Let us begin with a rapid bird’s-eye view of certain major distinguishing features of these three nations.

◆ *Comparative Societal Structures*

Both the United States and Iran are postrevolutionary societies, with their sociopolitical upheavals separated by some 200 years (1776/1978). Each is a republic with a written constitution; the United States makes a formal separation between church and state, whereas the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocracy. Britain remains a constitutional monarchy without a written constitution, although the debates about the future of the royal family grow more frequent and intense, and entry into the European Union has meant that Britain has become signatory to European human rights law, amongst other constitutionally derived codes.

The United States and Britain are stable Western democracies with multiple political parties, although their first-past-the-post voting procedures have produced strong two-party formations that mean the political center generally dominates and constrains the growth of alternative political voices at all ends of the political spectrum. In both, corporate power constitutes the primary influence in public policymaking, even though it is often contested, especially at the present time regarding environmental issues, and even though frequently it is internally riven by clashing financial agendas. Neither country, however, has been invaded or experienced a revolution—or anything approaching it—over the past century. Both nations have experienced a steadily growing affluence at a level shared by rather few other nations worldwide.

Iran, in comparison, is an evolving political system that has experienced considerable changes throughout the 20th century. These have included a constitutional revolution in 1905–1907; the 1920s appointment by the British of a hereditary monarch, the

shah; a democratic-nationalistic movement in the 1950s that nationalized its oil industry and removed a later shah, a process thwarted with his forcible reinstatement through U.S. and British support; another popular movement in the late 1970s that led to the final overthrow of the monarchical system, with its perceived dependency on the West, and the installation of an Islamic Republic; a bitter war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, in which both governments were covertly supported by the United States and some other Western nations and in which a million died and many others were injured; floods of refugee immigrants from Afghanistan resulting from the wars there during the 1980s and 1990s; and, since the 1970s, the growth of a very substantial Iranian diaspora across the planet.

This political volatility has been matched by rapid social change that produced enormous disjuncture between a traditional, religious rural world and a modernizing middle-class urban life experience. The 1978 revolution was partly driven by a desire for greater political openness, the desire for which remains strong; from the late 1990s, this openness has fluctuated, taking a step forward and then retreating into new repression when the pace of change goes too fast for conservative forces in the establishment. Yet, with the franchise extended to women since 1963, Iran actually enjoys a greater degree of political freedom and mechanism of formal participation than many states in the Middle East. However, this is tempered by severe state interference in determining which political groups are authorized, in controlling the media, in closely monitoring university life, and through continuing to fill the jails with political prisoners.

Both the United States and Britain are exemplars of late capitalist economic development, with the service and financial sectors and global economic vectors playing an ever more significant role within their national economies. Iran's economy remains one of uneven development, a mix of traditional and mercantilist economic practices

mixed with some highly industrialized sectors and a slowly growing information sector. But its core natural resource, upon which the national economy remains heavily reliant, is oil, and Iran remains a rentier state, as of 2000, earning 80%¹ of its foreign exchange from various forms of oil-based revenues (although it is only the world's 10th biggest exporter).

Demographically, Iran is heavily tilted toward youth, having approximately 59% of the population age 24 or younger,² with no memory of life under the shah or of the revolution but very attracted by new technologies and global popular youth culture (whose content, however, is severely frowned upon by the religious establishment). In contrast, the 2000 U.S. census and Britain's 2001 census revealed that, respectively, 42% and 36% of their populations are in the (slightly more extended) 1 to 29 age category, and their proportion of upper middle age and elderly is substantially higher than Iran's. Both Britain and the United States have highly differentiated family structures, including a high percentage of single people living alone. Iranian extended family ties, however, typically continue to be very strong. All these demographic patterns tend to influence lifestyle choices, social and cultural habits, media tastes, and even political priorities among the public.

The United States has a strong self-narrative of being an immigrant society, with different waves of European and other migrations and enjoying a highly mixed ethnic population base in its major cities; 13% of its population have a Spanish-speaking background. Minority-ethnic populations make up less than 7% of the British population. A more significant process of differentiation has occurred along the lines of "internal nations" with the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, which may carry long-term political, economic, linguistic, and cultural implications for weakening the unitary character of the British state. Iran's population is just over half Farsi

(Persian) speaking, but there are 26% whose mother tongue is a Turkic language, 9% who speak Kurdish, and other smaller minority-language groups,³ as well as the 2 million or so Afghan refugees already mentioned.

In comparison with Britain, where only a tiny percentage regularly attends weekly worship, the United States remains a remarkably religious society, despite the formal separation of church and state. In certain of its states, a conservative religious morality rules even the privacy of the bedroom and affects school textbook content as well. Iran, a predominantly Shi'ite⁴ Moslem culture with strong national cultural traditions, has historically been open to the absorption of other cultures. (This included a superficial Westernization under the second shah, but it lacked the formal guarantees of the rule of law that officially underpin most Western democracies.)

◆ Comparative Media Structures

These historical, political, and economic macro-structures help to define the nature of the media and communications environments in each country. Although some basic structural features will now be introduced, emphasis needs to be placed just as much on the ongoing movement within those structures and the constant negotiation of their limits.

Britain has one of the oldest press systems in the world, with *The Times* having been established in 1784. The press has historically been dominated by press barons, including Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere at the turn of the 20th century, Lord Beaverbrook from the 1930s through the 1970s, and the Lords Thomson (father and son) from the 1950s to the 1970s. The press is privately owned but nationally extensive, divided most clearly by the broadsheet-tabloid distinction. The physically larger and intellectually weightier broadsheets range from the conservative

The Daily Telegraph and *The Times* to the more liberal *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. The tabloids, physically smaller and more popular, include the *Sun* with its enduring daily bare-breasted “pin-up” on Page Three, an image as unlikely to appear in an American daily newspaper as an Iranian one. Through the 1990s, these stylistic and content divisions have begun to blur as “serious” newspapers such as *The Guardian* spawned multiple special sections in tabloid-sized format, underscoring the physical correlation with “soft” human interest and nonpolitical stories. Some press barons have turned into media moguls, most notably Rupert Murdoch, who already controlled the sensationalist *News of the World* and the *Sun* when he purchased *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1980–1981 and who also owns Sky, providing multichannel TV packages through satellite and digi-box.

British broadcasting remains fundamentally divided into BBC channels supported solely by the government-approved annual license fee (although some parts of the BBC, such as BBC World, are now commercially driven) and three commercially financed channels, although all remain governed by the ethos of “public service”—a midway point between state-organized and commercially driven broadcasting. The British broadcasting model, based on its founder, Lord Reith's, principle of “bringing culture to the masses” (as though they had none of their own already), has acted as the paternalistic guardian of British culture and historically brought “high culture” to the general public. It even took on a strong role as public educator, not least in the relationship forged between the broadcast-based Open University and the BBC, with course programs broadcast early in the morning and late at night for all, not only its students, to watch. This system was, however, slow to grasp regional diversity, including Welsh and Scottish programming, and multicultural programming remains a contested arena of resource and programming output. The public service

ethos of the system also works to strengthen civic society against the state, yet it is a contested democratic space continually squeezed “between the economics of the market place and the politics of propaganda and public relations” (Eldridge, Kissinger, & Williams, 1997, p. 59). The regulatory frameworks have also maintained reasonable editorial independence for the broadcasting networks.

The process of digitization and the pressures of convergence between media and telephony mean that powerful changes have been rippling through contemporary communication systems. In both the United States (from 1984) and Britain (from 2002), the ownership rules that have prevented oligopoly are being progressively relaxed (see Chapters 14 and 15, this volume). In Britain, a single agency for media and communications, OFCOM, has been setup, except that the BBC, originally founded in 1922 as a public corporation “at arm’s length” from the government, will remain an aloof and self-regulating structure.

The United States exemplifies a privately owned, commercially driven media system. Its press has historically been city based and city bound, and even papers of repute such as *The New York Times* have never achieved a mass national readership. *USA Today*, which aimed to be the first to do so, never got beyond the tag of “McPaper.” The U.S. broadcasting system of networks and affiliates better approximates a national system, although local differences of taste and interest help structure the content environment. For a long time, broadcasting was dominated by three major networks, but that system was blown open by the aggressive newcomer, Murdoch’s Fox Television, in the 1980s. Public broadcasting—both television and radio—remain weak in reach and influence, supported by corporate donations and extended fund-raising telethons from individual audience members.

Yet competition and concern about the bottom line of profitability can mean that new programming simply reworks highly

formatted and successful genres (the sitcom, the talk show) with little creativity or innovation and with considerable amounts of time given over to advertising content. And despite the foundational significance of the First Amendment protecting free speech, there have always been some forms of regulation, most usually from within the media industries themselves to prevent government action (e.g., the Hays Code, the McCarthy-era shunning of supposed or actual Communists, the cinema and TV content ratings systems). The First Amendment has also come to be used by media corporations defining themselves in legal terms as speakers with free speech rights, thereby justifying their attempts to block low-power radio stations and cable public-access channels on the grounds that they are interfering with their corporate speech rights.

In terms of a putative “public sphere,” the presence of different media voices in the U.S. system is only enabled by major capital investment in the development of a new broadcasting company or publishing title that vies with a multitude of others in a rather oligopolistic market. This model has fostered a demotic popular culture, with a generally superficial and skewed recognition of multiethnic diversity that entered the televisual mainstream already in the 1980s with *The Cosby Show* but also included some of the best examples of programming (*ER*, *Ally McBeal*) that put the idea of color-blind casting into practice. The ethnic mix of the U.S. population, coupled with the development of cable and satellite-based technologies, has helped to foster a broadcasting environment in which different communities, mainly differentiated on ethno-linguistic and religious grounds, enjoy their “own” small-scale broadcasting opportunities, whether a cable television network in Spanish (Univisión), an occasional metropolitan-city television program in Farsi, or a daily radio show in Mandarin or Hindi.

Iran’s media system has always been dominated, either directly or at a short arm’s

length, by an elaborate state apparatus. Since the mid-19th century, the country has had a privately owned press that has operated under often harsh political control by the state. This has been particularly vigorous in recent years, such that in 2001 alone, more than 20 newspaper titles were closed down and a number of journalists and editors jailed, some even executed (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2001). Some of its best-known titles, such as *Keyhan*, have continued despite regime changes, whereas *Etela'at International*, a daily, has become a vehicle for Iranians dispersed globally since the revolution.

Iran has a state-run nationwide broadcasting system, which immediately changed its name after the revolution from National Iranian Radio and Television to Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic, which was later renamed the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). In 2002, there was talk of private television being allowed in the next few years, though possession of a satellite dish remained of dubious legality.

The Iranian media model, echoed in other parts of the Middle East and in the global South, has focused on national development and cultural protection in a global context where Western televisual products are readily available. There are two Farsi television channels, two in Arabic, and regular broadcasting in English. Domestic TV production has been building in recent years, including new soap operas.

Concerned about excessive Western influence, the Islamic Republic since 1979 has bought media programs from Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Japan. The IRIB Office of Communication and International Affairs coordinates an active program of television exchange with a number of countries, including Germany, Japan, China, Kuwait, Lebanon, Bosnia, Cuba, Brazil, Pakistan, India, Switzerland, Australia, and North and South Korea. Like the BBC World Service and VOA, IRIB broadcasts radio programs internationally in 21 languages, including Arabic, English, German, Hindi, French, Spanish, Turkish,

Urdu, Hebrew, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Italian. A gradual recognition of the needs of the Iranian diaspora has precipitated greater international broadcasting in Farsi by the IRIB.

However, the political and cultural constraints are powerful. For example, women can only appear veiled—hence women's acting parts on television or in film are relatively few. Though a series of outstanding Iranian films were busily winning international awards, many of them are denied access to domestic screens. In 2002, a further chapter in the fight against Western cultural incursion was waged against the Barbie doll, with the Islamic Republic producing its own range of acceptable dolls wearing Islamic dress.

Because the state runs broadcasting and polices the press, any independent public sphere is severely curtailed, and “civil society” has little space within which to function (despite the phrase saturating political debate at the time of writing). The state even tried to close down internet cafés and thus control access to the Web, yet that remained a very hard task to achieve. At the beginning of the 2000s, a newspaper might be closed down one day, only to have its content publicized on the internet the next, potentially facilitating an even larger readership.

Such brief sketches cannot do justice to the complexity within each media system. But they already serve to signal the very different environments in which the media operate, as well as the different relations between media, the wider culture, and the political system in which each functions. Each exemplifies, up to a certain point, an ideal-typical form of media organization and power: The United States reveals the power of commercial forces, Iran shows the power of the state, and Britain still struggles to retain an ethos of “public service.” Of the three, the United States also has the media system that most recognizes a full range of social and cultural difference, with Iran the most concerned about political coherence and ideological control. The

United States, despite its powerful and secure media industries, is paradoxically the most closed to mediated cultural products from abroad, but Iran, where the political rhetoric remains somewhat paranoid about external cultural influence, imports a considerable amount. Britain, the only monarchy, remains concerned about the continuity of tradition; Iran remains concerned about sustaining religious values; and the United States is the global leader in the production of popular culture, with its many shifts and fashion changes.

Thus, various forces external to the media—political, legal, economic, and cultural—are at work within each system, diluting the “purity” of the typicality of its structure, and it is vital to situate any analysis of cultural phenomena within these macro-structures. As Martín-Barbero (1993) has insisted is typically the case, in Iran, political and social issues are constantly played out on media channels and across social divisions. All three nations are, at the turn of the 21st century, highly mediated societies (at least in Iran’s cities, which account for almost two thirds of its population⁵).

We will maintain this comparative analysis as we explore struggles over the definition and content of the media within these three nations in the context of three broad issues—namely, media communication and the power structure, media and the shifting boundaries of taste and decency, and social divisions, conflict, and their media representation.

◆ *Media Communication and the Power Structure*

In all societies, a complex web of law and regulation governs the ownership, operation, and content of the media. The comparison between these three systems is stimulating because it allows for a clearer exposition of the differences between

processes of repression and processes of hegemony, which are probably best thought of as occupying a continuum of control from harsh and externally imposed to less harsh and more self-regulating, although in practice, repressive options are always in place if hegemony erodes.

In Britain, a variety of structures have framed and controlled permissible speech. The arcane office of the Lord Chamberlain, abolished only in 1968, was able to ban many of the staple plays of the contemporary and even classical theatrical repertoire—including Aristophanes, Shaw, Pirandello, Wedekind, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Beckett—at one time or another, removing “the adult, the accurate and the outspoken from the British stage, as well as the lewd, the raucous and the plain dirty” (Hall, 2002, p. 14). Hints of homosexuality, suggestions of sex outside marriage, and questions about the existence of God were all enough to have plays banned from the stage for years.

Major laws that the courts could invoke included one pertaining to an “obscene publication” in which the test was whether the publication “tended . . . to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences.” This law was invoked against works of recognized merit as well as against pornographic publications. Successful prosecutions were common, as were seizures of books by post office, customs, and police officials. Historical test cases included James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, books that could today be included on high school reading lists.

Probably the law that most limited and continues to limit journalistic activity has been the Official Secrets Act, first promulgated in 1911 at a period of growing spy scares in the countdown to World War I. By the 1980s, the enforcement of this act was looking frayed, with increasing and notorious breaches. One civil servant was jailed for leaking to the press details of the arrival in England of cruise missiles, and another was arrested but ultimately

acquitted for leaking information that the government had misled parliament about the deliberate sinking, outside the official combat zone during the Malvinas/ Falklands War, of an Argentinian ship, the *General Belgrano*, with the loss of some 900 lives (Keeble, 1997). The new Official Secrets Act of 1989 concentrated on protecting official information, defining five areas where the publication of leaks was banned and journalists were denied a public interest defense. Yet it failed to address fears that it would help to suppress evidence of serious wrongdoing and ignored the natural other half of the argument, the need for more openness, so that as of 2002, a lobby still presses for a detailed Freedom of Information Act.

Another structure of control has been military governance of press access and information in times of conflict. The British Navy rigidly controlled coverage of the 1982 Falklands War (Morrison & Tumber, 1988), a policy that served as the model for the Pentagon's news "pools" during the Grenada invasion (1983), the Panama invasion (1989), the Gulf War of 1990–1991, and the Afghanistan invasion of 2001.

Unlike Britain or Iran, the legal framework of the U.S. media has as a major component the First Amendment, which forbids Congress from enacting laws that would regulate speech or press before publication or punish it after publication. Its simple existence is not magically or absolutely effective, however. Individual states have passed contradictory laws, for example, when abolitionist literature against slavery was outlawed in the South before and during the American Civil War. Only in the 1920s did the U.S. Supreme Court make the First Amendment applicable also to the states. Although prior restraint on publication is unconstitutional, exceptional circumstances such as war are held to justify it, for example, prohibiting the publication of the number or whereabouts of troops. Public officials and all official acts, including the government itself, may be openly criticized and denounced by speech or publication,

provided only that the words used are not of such a nature and are not used in such circumstances "as to create a clear and present danger." This is a hard argument even for the government to make, as in the 1971 *Pentagon Papers* case, when *The New York Times* and other papers began publishing classified material relating to U.S. policy in Vietnam. The government asked for an injunction to stop publication but the Supreme Court, by a majority vote, refused to bar the newspapers from reprinting the report. For the television and radio industries, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has promulgated rather vague rules about program content, containing an implied threat that a license can be revoked for repeated poor judgment involving program content.

In the United States, many different private groups attempt to influence government agencies, businesses, libraries, radio and television broadcasters, newspapers, and other communications media to censor material that they consider objectionable. Religious, ethnic, and racial groups have tried to prevent plays, movies, and television programs from being presented because of elements they deem offensive. In some states or local communities, textbook commissions or school boards have exerted pressure on authors and publishers to omit from or include in school texts certain materials relating to various sensitive areas such as evolution, the biblical account of creation, or discussions of religious or racial groups. Some groups have attempted to pressure public and school libraries to prevent circulation of books and periodicals they consider morally or otherwise offensive. On the other hand, the American Civil Liberties Union promotes the open flow of all types of information in the belief that individuals should have free access and opportunities for the exercise of their personal discretion and that no group should limit the availability of the resources from which such choices are made.

Another form of media control in the United States, as elsewhere, is self-censorship,

often developed to prevent the state or the courts from breathing down an industry's neck. The Hays Production Code—promulgated by Will Hays's Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America in 1922 and partly a response to the Catholic hierarchy's demands for strong controls—gave a movie a seal of approval if it complied with its rather conservative standards. Movies got the MPAA film classification system in 1967, which remains the basic guide to content and age-related suitability still today, and tussles about classification can make or break a film's circulation.

The broad moral code of Hays also governed television's depiction of family life and male-female relationships well into the 1960s. This meant that Lucy and Ricky on *I Love Lucy* had to sleep in separate twin beds and kept one foot on the floor at all times when kissing, despite being married in real life as well as on the show. The National Association of Broadcasters, the lobby organization for the biggest broadcasters, also promulgates a code that is voluntarily adhered to by station operators (www.nab.org). In addition, the major networks also have their own self-regulating system, especially the Standards and Practices departments that review scripts and watch everything that is aired, including commercials, and every contract with a producer provides that the project is subject to their approval.

Beyond the use of news pools in times of crisis and war, as a response to the terrible events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent "war on terrorism," the passing of the 2001 Patriot Act widened the scope of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and weakened 15 privacy laws, whereas the Homeland Security legislation entailed serious repercussions on privacy as well as plowing a \$1.5 billion technology budget into surveillance.⁶

Among the main technology-related provisions, the law created a huge database of information from government and the private sector to look for terrorist threats. It established longer sentences for hackers

who cause bodily harm, invade personal privacy, hack government computers, or disrupt infrastructure. It widened the circumstances under which internet service providers, libraries, and other agencies can voluntarily turn over information about internet users without a warrant. It encouraged critical infrastructure providers such as power companies to share security information with the government and exempts this information from the Freedom of Information Act. It established an Office of Science and Technology within the Justice Department to provide law enforcement with recommendations and standards for high-tech tools. It created a technology clearinghouse to encourage technological innovation for fighting terrorism. It required federal agencies to self-assess and improve their information security measures for protecting all federal information and information systems, and it created "Net Guard," a high-tech National Guard to defend local internet infrastructure from attacks.

The legislation closed off large amounts of information previously open to the public. It had the effect of shielding from the public and from lawsuits any industry mistakes that threaten public health and would "data-mine hundreds of millions of records of Americans to figure out who may or may not be a terrorist threat" (Jerry Berman, executive director of the Center for Democracy and Technology, Washington, D.C., quoted in Kirby, 2002). An even more telling criticism might be that huge amounts of data were already available to U.S. agencies *before* September 11, so that the issue would center on the mechanisms of sifting and interpretation, rather than just the amassing of ever more raw information.

Beyond these and other explicit structures of law and regulation, the political economy of big business oligopolies in media ownership in the United States tends to produce an ideological conformity. An oligopoly of large players makes it hard to penetrate the market, which makes it very difficult for nonmainstream voices to be heard. It was

only Murdoch's deep financial pockets that allowed him to launch Fox TV and gradually break into the former three-network oligopoly. For the press, all the evidence points toward competition for readers, which actually reduced the numbers of newspaper titles available to readers even in major cities. But it is not only vertical but also horizontal integration of media conglomerates that potentially make so worrying their disinterest in quality information and critical debate.

The convergence of broadcasting and communications technologies provided the backdrop for Reagan's media deregulation of the 1980s, when limits were eliminated for both radio and television on the amount of time that could be devoted to advertising, and guidelines were cancelled governing minimum hours for news, public affairs, local programming, and children's programming. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 ended the legal requirements for coverage of more than one side of controversial issues. And the way was paved for oligopoly through liberalizing rules governing the sale of broadcast channels (Demac, 1995). There remains little government policy for nationwide communications, and market forces are increasingly expected to self-regulate and construct policy by themselves (Demac, 1995, p. 281).

The FCC⁷ deals with a business sector that accounts for about 15% of the American economy and important aspects of general daily life—telephone, television, radio, newspapers, and the internet. Yet many of the 2001–2002 “corporate scandals” concerned the economic crises or collapse of companies, many of which were regulated by the FCC (Qwest, WorldCom, Adelphi, Global Crossing, AOL Time-Warner); these companies lost trillions of dollars in stock market valuation and collectively pulled down the entire stock market. Part of the role of the FCC is one of industrial supervision—managing the competition among communications companies and supposedly looking out for the public's interest—though as Napoli (2002,

pp. 253–274) points out, it is one of the very weakest of the U.S. regulatory agencies, the most subject to corporate and/or congressional pressure. With deregulation and the increasing multimedia mix of communication platforms, the lines have blurred between telecommunications providers, broadcasters, and even publishers, and thus issues of “fairness” and market dominance are once again at the forefront of citizen debate about media ownership and concentration.

In Iran, at the time of this writing, the head of the IRIB was directly appointed by the “supreme religious leader” (Ayatollah Khamenei⁸), to whom he is ultimately accountable, despite the existence of a governing broadcasting council of six representatives of the three branches of the state. During the sixth *Majlis* (parliament), an attempt was made to bring the IRIB under the control of a new council, but this was rejected by the Council of Guardians, an institutional bastion of conservative policies, on the grounds that this was against the Constitution. By contrast, the minister of Islamic culture and guidance is directly appointed by the elected president. These appointments have often been the site of contention between competing forces. For example, in 1997, the reformist president Khatami appointed Ayatollah Mohajerani as minister, who promptly restored the licenses of many publications, angering the conservatives, who called for his impeachment.

The situation of the press is even more complex because it fell under often arbitrary rulings from various bodies. A publication needs to get a license from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance. If there are problems of content, the 1985 Press Law and the press courts should deal with them, but the revolutionary courts, set up as a temporary measure immediately after the 1979 revolution, have become a permanent part of the legal system of the Islamic Republic and are also empowered to deal with press offences. In addition, the Special Court for the Clergy, set up to deal

with offences by the clergy, has also been used. For journalists, the biggest problems are the lack of separation between the executive and legislative branches and the general lack of clarity about what is permissible and what is not. We have already noted the paradox that internationally acclaimed Iranian films are often banned from domestic cinemas; in addition, there have been continual attempts to ban the possession of satellite TV dishes.

These brief examples from the three countries underscore the variety of external pressures under which media almost always operate. Although the particular mix of political, economic, legal, social, and cultural forces differs, no media system functions completely aloof from these, and different systems will absorb and handle them differently. In the field of media studies, these issues are often dealt with in singular fashion or not at all, with a fully developed theory of mediation still a long way off.

This chapter leans toward clarifying the significance of forces external to the media, but clearly, changes internal to the media can also alter the media environment in any country. These might include shifts in personnel—the appointment of a new chief editor or a top broadcasting executive, takeovers and mergers, the repositioning of channels, and the development of internal guidelines—but there is insufficient space to explore those important dimensions here.

◆ *Media and the Shifting Boundaries of Taste and Decency*

In this section, I try to highlight three arguments:

- ◆ that what is culturally “acceptable” changes over time within every social system;
- ◆ that media have been and remain a preferred target among political conservatives to account for socially distasteful behaviors, which often means conveniently avoiding the harder questions as to their real causation;
- ◆ that modern Western societies are as perplexed and divided about the limits of “free expression” as a more traditional and religious culture such as contemporary Iran’s: The biggest difference is that the United States and Britain largely deal with materials produced within their culture, whereas Iran is mainly (although not solely) reacting to materials coming from outside and thus can use “cultural imperialism” as its rationale for controlling them.

The issue of media control also raises the thorny question of whether the media are agents of change or agents of stasis, as well as how media push or reflect changing sensibilities and tastes. In these debates, the old favorites of sex and violence reign supreme (see also Chapter 26, this volume), with much of the debate focused on the always arbitrary and socially imposed distinction between childhood (to be protected) and adulthood. Britain still offers one of the clearest demarcations, with its “watershed” of 9 p.m., after which “adult” programming content is allowed.⁹

Here, comparisons between Britain and the United States are particularly interesting because although the two systems share a great deal in common and, between them, have determined the nature of many media forms and genres over the past century, the nuances in the way the media systems and the cultures at large have dealt with issues of sexuality and violence have been rather different.

If the pure logic of the market were to rule, then, for example, we might expect the U.S. media environment to be more replete with explicit sexual material than Britain. But this is not the case. The very popular

series *Sex and the City* was shown at 10 p.m. on a national British television channel, but the program was only shown in the United States on HBO, a subscription cable channel. The late-night talk show *So Graham Norton*, hosted by a very out gay man, or the explicit gay-theme drama *Queer as Folk* would also not have found their way onto broadcast network U.S. television. Thus, in the United States, the tension between free speech, commercial pressures, and puritanical sensibilities produces television that shows less sex but far more violence than in Britain. In turn, Britain, although it “enjoys” more nudity and swearing than the United States, has far less of both, as well as less hardcore pornography, than many continental European countries.

Yet any history of television reveals that what was disallowed at one point becomes quite banal at another, and each system will have its milestones of pivotal programming relaxations. Such a history would also show the important parallels between what was shown on the big screen of the cinema and the small screen of private television sets, as well as between what could be performed live on a theater stage and what was acceptable for presentation on the small screen. In Britain, the 1960s were the key decade for the representational challenge to accepted proprieties, with both film and television taking up hitherto unmentionable topics such as illegitimacy, adultery, homosexuality, and abortion. New movies such as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), and *A Taste of Honey* (1961)—all based on novels—challenged the conventions of British society, and television pushed the same sensitive buttons. *Up the Junction* (1965) was the first program to deal frankly with abortion. Dennis Potter’s *Brimstone and Treacle* (1977) dealt with family sexual abuse, and *Bouquet of Barbed Wire* (1976) was the first program to tackle incest. For the United States and Britain, it would be possible to document the milestones of increased explicitness on television: the dates of the

first bare breast, the first gay man, the first lesbian kiss, the first four-letter word, and a range of topics that now have come to be regularly discussed by ordinary people in talk show formats.¹⁰

Although some sections of the British-viewing public welcomed a greater explicitness and adult frankness, others did not. In the 1960s, Mary Whitehouse established a pro-censorship lobby, the National Viewers and Listeners Association (which changed its name to MediaWatch in 2002 after her death), and engendered many a moral panic about the declining moral environment in Britain, as with her 1984 campaign to outlaw “video nasties.”¹¹ Her campaigners have long maintained a very media-obsessed conservative agenda about sex and violence, paying little attention to issues such as media coverage of unemployment, school dropout rates, or discrimination.

These concerns about sex and violence have an enduring resonance, now stretched across a wider range of communications technologies and modes of delivery. In 2002, Britain’s Broadcasting Standards Commission, which investigates all complaints about television programming even if registered by only one person, still spends the bulk of its time focused on issues of profane or sexual language and “decency,” the issues of most concern to the “active public” who complain. The internet has been blamed for the rise in child pornography and pedophilia, resulting in tougher legal measures, again blanketing the deeper and more disturbing question of why so much of contemporary male sexuality leads in that direction.

In a shift in relation to cinema, however, in 2001, the British Board of Film Classification’s (BBFC’s) annual report spoke of screen violence as an issue of particular concern to the British public, registering the BBFC as particularly concerned about the prominence of weapons and the portrayal of dangerous activities that could be copied by young and impressionable viewers. The report also paid particular attention to material in which the glamorization or

“normalization” of drugs might be implicit and noted that the BBFC would continue to cut any material portraying sexual violence that might be harmful to individuals or to society, in line with the requirements of the Video Recordings Act. At the same time, portrayal of sexual activity within a loving relationship is increasingly accepted, and less attention is being given to explicitness of language (www.bbfc.co.uk). Indeed, as the first lesbian-theme drama hit British television screens (*Tipping the Velvet*, October 2002), critics were pointing out that with a changed media environment, including access to pornographic video and internet imagery, certain cinematic conventions (no erect penis, except in pornography) and television codes appeared outmoded and clichéd.

In the United States, the beginning of a more open legal approach was adopted by federal courts already in the 1930s, when they held that the Irish author James Joyce’s *Ulysses* was not obscene and could be freely passed through customs. The courts ruled that the use of “dirty words” in “a sincere and honest book” did not make the book “dirty.” Since the 1950s, many obscenity cases—involving books, magazines, and films—have been brought before the Supreme Court. In cases during the 1970s, the Court ruled that laws against obscenity must be limited “to works which, taken as a whole, appeal to the prurient interest in sex; which portray sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; and which, taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” There is a hierarchy of media in this regard, with the least permissiveness for broadcast television, radio, and basic cable subscriber packages; more permissiveness for supplementary cable and satellite subscriptions (especially some, such as the *Playboy* channel) and in the cinema; and effectively no constraints on novels, magazines, and comic books.

The Communications Decency Act, which was a discrete section of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, designed to control obscenity on the internet, was struck

down in 1997 by the Supreme Court as being drafted in a way that contravened the First Amendment. The Court has further held that obscenity should be determined by applying “contemporary community standards” rather than national standards. This means that material acceptable in a cosmopolitan, urban environment may not be acceptable in a different community, but it also implies the silencing power of small groups. Thus, despite the powerful sway of the First Amendment, local outrage at art museum displays of Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs or Andrés Serrano’s “Piss Christ” photograph¹² aroused intense controversy in 1989 and the years following, all the way through to a Supreme Court decision in 1998 about the proper expenditure of public funding for the arts by the government-supported National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The Court enjoined the NEA to fund only work that observed “general standards of decency.”

It is interesting to observe how the denunciations of media permissiveness and their corruption of public moral standards by U.S. Christian fundamentalists echo, in many of their specifics, those launched by Moslem fundamentalists in Iran and elsewhere against the depravity of the Great Satan.

Nonetheless, in Iran, taste and decency operate within a very specific, but contradictory, political and cultural framing. Although there were women pop stars and actresses under the shah’s regime, and women appeared unveiled in film and television, since 1978, the representation of women on big and small screens has been highly curtailed. All women have had to wear Islamic covering, and visual representations can include no sex, although political and revolutionary violence is allowed. As a consequence, fewer women appear in contemporary film, constraining narrative development.

Yet in Iran, there is a sense in which state repression both before and after the revolution actually promoted an underground and illegal circulation of cultural materials that often make Tehran seem far

more cosmopolitan and trendy than many a European city. For example, even in the mid-1990s, it was possible to find many people who listened to both Iranian and Western classical music, contemporary Iranian pop illegally imported from Los Angeles, and current Western pop that had gone through many generations of copying. The recording formats included cassette tape, CD, and mini-CD (at a time when mini-CDs were hardly known in Britain). A new wave of women's magazines was being produced, with increasingly explicit articles about personal and sexual matters as well as political analysis. There were various pressures for different kinds of representation, especially of women, and key debates about Iranian politics were played out in the pages of the press.

Are the breasts and the gay sex yet to come (out in public) in Iran? That implies a West-centric model of communications development, permitting an increasing openness toward sexuality, and such changes do not appear imminent. However, even a kiss was not just a kiss in Iran in 2002: Ayatollah Khamenei ordered police to crack down on immoral behavior after a well-known actress, Gohar Kheirandish, kissed the film director Ali Zamani on the forehead when he collected a prize at a ceremony in the city of Yazd ("Not Just a Kiss," 2002). Yet one of the growth industries in Tehran is plastic surgery, and many a woman can be seen sporting nasal bandages under her enveloping scarf. Another, slightly more discreet, medical trend, popular in Iran as in other Muslim countries such as Egypt, is virginity restoration for brides-to-be, a powerful indication of the growing split between private practices and socio-cultural norms. Many commentators on Iran focus on the considerable gap between public life and what happens behind closed doors, in private space. "Iranians delight in telling you that there is an indoor and an outdoor life, a mask for the street and a face for home, a uniform for the frump and a designer dress for the chador-less nymph, a public and a private morality" (Smith, 2002, p. 32). Thus, Iranian society operates

with a powerful front stage and back stage, to use Goffman's (1959) terms, and public representations seem to lag behind social practices.

Often, regime response lags behind public opinion, both in time and in values. In spring 2004, a film called *Marmoulak* (*The Lizard*) was released in cinemas across Iran. It told a humorous story of a thief who escapes from prison, takes on the garb of a mullah, and is welcomed by a village that has been looking for a new preacher. It was the fastest grossing film in Iranian cinema history, topping \$1 million in a very short space of time, and played to packed houses until the head of the Guardian Council declared it un-Islamic (without having seen it), and it was pulled from all screens.

The huge emigration brought about by the revolution was unprecedented in Iranian history and has scattered Iranians all over the world. It is having a continuing impact on culture and everyday life inside Iran itself. Many families have contacts in more than one country and are thus receiving bits and pieces of other cultures—foodstuffs, mores, habits, news, language—through family networks. Diasporic cultural products also circulate back inside Iran. In many ways, Iranians have had cosmopolitanism thrust upon them. The dozen new Iranian television stations based in California have garnered significant audiences inside Iran, and two of them, ITN and Tapesh, attract advertising from Iran. It seemed likely that some of the style of these Irano-American cultural products would rub off on internal Iranian programming (not least in news, where the Los Angeles bulletins adopted a more detached form of coverage).

◆ *Social Divisions, Conflict, and Their Media Representation*

In the United States, as in Britain, many of the most important changes have been driven from within as various groups—minority-ethnic groups, women, gay men,

and lesbians—have struggled and fought for both political representation and media recognition. All societies have internal divisions, and the media landscape is one site where these divisions may become visible. In the Iranian scenario, the principal focus of division remains the social standing of women, but the stereotype of an unchanging Islamic culture is blown apart by the increasing cultural and political ferment there. We will concentrate on issues of ethnicity and gender in this discussion, though obviously questions of social class also need to be put at center stage.

It is interesting to note that although the debates about propriety and decency noted in the previous section focused more on what was *included* in the media (and should not be), much of the debate about social division concentrated on what is *excluded*—namely, on groups who are not represented or poorly represented. As such, this latter debate has been spearheaded by social groups making demands about their own representation, rather than by a conservative concern about collective moral well-being.

A major problem in multicultural representation of difference would be created if it were solely to take the form of the growth of separate media channels, potentially leading to social fragmentation and socialization solely into one's "own" grouping. An alternate model is to develop an increasingly multicultural and diverse representation of people and themes within mainstream channels. Having said that, however, the contemporary plethora of broadcast, print, internet-based, and global channels itself challenges the idea of a cultural mainstream. We still think we know what it is, but it is no longer so clear whether any one group would actually fall into that category. As Richard Eyre (2001), the British theater director, said recently, "If there's one thing that is clear about our society, is that we are all members of minority groups of one sort or another" (p. 12). How to successfully address this reality through devising media policies with

pluralism, justice, and citizenship in mind remains a goal rather than an achievement.

In Britain, debate about cultural diversity in the media rages. The number of "minority" media channels in Britain has grown significantly, with around 200 Black and Asian print journals, including *Eastern Eye*, *Asian Times*, *The Voice*, and *Ebony*. Similarly for broadcasting, the number of radio and television channels for minority-ethnic populations and diasporic groups has grown, helped by the diffusion of satellite and cable.

Minority themes also have become more mainstream, and ethnic writers and creative artists have been producing novel forms that have crossed over into the mainstream. On television, this included the tremendously popular *Goodness Gracious Me*, the first program in which South Asian actors both laughed at quirks of South Asian daily culture in Britain and mocked common British prejudices, and *The Kumars at No. 42*. This second show deconstructed the talk show format by locating it within an Indian family's private house and upstaging the Indian host with his own parents and grandmother. Stronger Afro-Caribbean programming also emerged, including *Babyfather* and *Caribbean Summer*. British-made programming is explicitly addressing minority audiences, as with *Network East*, and there is also an increasing amount of imported programming, particularly from the Indian subcontinent, including *Bombay Blush*. Such crossover cultural productions can be seen in other forms, including Andrew Lloyd-Webber's musical *Bombay Dreams*, performed on the London stage with music written by one of India's best-known film score composers and staged by the top Bollywood choreographer. It also has been evident in film, with the popularity of *East Is East*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, and *Anita and Me*, written and played by British Asians. Radio is offering an Indian soap, *NAME*, that moves through English, Urdu, and Panjabi and is set to be the Asian equivalent of the long-running *Archers*.

Mainstream media slowly have been becoming more aware of the need to change their employment patterns. Although ethnic minorities comprise about 7% of the British population, that figure rises in some Midlands and Northern cities, as well as in London, where the minority-ethnic population is about 30%. The BBC has instigated a minimum 10% rule for guest actor appearances on long-running popular programs such as *East Enders* and *Casualty*. There are schemes to attract minority talent into both newspapers and broadcasting, but there are still very few executive positions within the media held by minority-ethnic individuals.

Also, minority-ethnic actors have increasingly become tired of “acting their skin,” with the story line and characterization having them somehow represent an entire community. Many simply want to be cast in interesting roles (Sreberny, 1999). Slowly, program makers, especially on Channel Four, have shifted from making programs that are “monocultural,” targeting specific ethnic groups, toward “multicultural” programming. The BBC has tried to maintain a twin-track approach, so that programs such as *Black Britain*, *Mega Mela*, and *Network East* have specific minority groups in mind, whereas *Heart of Harlesden* and *Babyfather* were designed to have broader appeal. An example of multiple cultural characteristics of contemporary Britain finding their way onto the TV screen was the 2002 television adaptation on Channel Four of Zadie Smith’s award-winning novel *White Teeth*, a novel written by a young woman of Afro-Caribbean descent that included a mixed-race family, a Bangladeshi family, Moslems and Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the power of science versus the loss of faith, all turned into a vivid and amusing televisual depiction.

After September 11, 2001, many media paid particular attention to increasing the representation and range of voices from within Islamic communities. *The Guardian* prepared a special insert on “Race in the Media” (2002) to discuss the political and

mediated representation of Muslims and to counter growing Islamophobia, and Channel Four’s *Islam in Britain* season tried to depict the range of lifestyles and choices encompassed within British Islam (Poole, 2002).

In the United States, the dynamics of a commercial system in a very large country, the demographics of minorities (particularly African Americans and Hispanics), and perhaps also the popular rhetoric of an immigrant nation have all combined to produce a media environment that today includes specific channels, programs, and print media for minorities and localities. There is some visible integration of minorities into the heart of mainstream TV, at least at the level of household names such as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo Rivera, and Connie Chung. Yet although African Americans are represented on the small screen in rough proportion to their percentage in the population, they are mostly to be found in sitcoms. Zook (1999) has shown how, in the mid-1990s, the brief explosion on the Fox TV network of Black-themed shows was only a phase in a strategy to contrast Fox’s profile with the established networks. Smith-Shomade (2002) demonstrates how poorly Black women’s roles have been scripted on TV and in music videos. Latinos are just visible, even though they are nearly 13% of the population, and Asian Americans and Native Americans hardly ever appear. People of color are rare indeed in the executive ranks of U.S. media industries, not least in the advertising industry, engine of the media system.

Progress appears patchy and inconsistent in other media. In 2002, Halle Berry was only the fifth Black woman to appear on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* since the magazine began using cover photographs in 1964 and the first since Naomi Campbell in 1990, and in many broad-circulation magazines, non-White cover subjects are still avoided for fear they will depress newsstand sales. A *New York Times* survey of magazine covers in November 2002 found

that about one in five (or 20%) depicted minority faces, whereas 5 years previously, the figure had been only 12.7% (Carr, 2002). But with a non-White population of toward 30%, the incremental progress has not been impressive. The absence of cover model diversity has mirrored the industry's racial homogeneity, with only 6.1% of the magazine industry's professional staff non-White.

In Iran, debates about internal difference are differently constructed. The media do recognize the country's regional and language differences. All *ostan* (provinces) have their own regional television programs, which may include drama, comedy, and talk shows in their own regional languages and accents. Print media include publications in Arabic, Azeri, Kurdish, Armenian, English, German, and French (*Rasaneh* 9.1, Spring 1998, p. 63).

The most problematic issue still centers, as we have seen, on the visual representation of women. As noted already, there are now a number of publications designed for women, the best known of which is *Zan-e-Ruz*, that offer often quite frank discussions about health matters, sexuality, and the social situation of women (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2004).

◆ Conclusions

Julius (2002) argues that the modern period has seen three kinds of transgressive art: an art that breaks art's own rules, an art of taboo breaking, and a politically resistant art. The logic of this chapter has often focused on moments of media transgression and resistance. The challenge for all cultures is how to be adult, structurally speaking: how to facilitate freedom of expression but not hate speech, how to protect children from growing up too fast and too violently, and how to encourage individual and group access to all forms of expression without some voices becoming overly

powerful and consistently drowning out others.

The public debates in these three nations about the power of the media focused on a similar set of issues—control over media, sexual explicitness and language, and social divisions—but they were addressed in very different ways. In the United States and Britain, commercial pressures and new national security laws construct the chief restrictions on a civil society that is pretty multivocal. The United States is one of the most multicultural nations yet also one of the countries that imports the least broadcast content, perhaps because—amongst a complex of reasons—it has an insular and introverted take on the world that became particularly salient in U.S. foreign policy after September 11. Some of the greatest homogeneity in national media form and feel comes from the single most powerful media producer. In Iran, Islamic theocracy attempts to stifle a vibrant opposition, whereas a pervasive traditional Islamic culture has produced profound splits between public conservatism and private permissiveness. Complexity rules.

Conflicts over media are ongoing. In 2002, Britain was in the throes of developing a totally new regulatory framework for media and communications that responded to technological convergence but left out the BBC and was thus the subject of considerable controversy. Increasingly beleaguered circles within the United States were debating the repercussions of post-9/11 security measures and the degree of political openness within the major media as a move toward war on Iraq gathered momentum. Iran was still locked in struggle about its form of political organization, and the divisions between conservatives and reformers remained far from resolved; hence, the contours of its media and communications landscape remained blurred, too.

Finally, our analysis needs to transcend a comparative frame, insofar as it tends to suggest that these three social and communicative systems exist in isolation from

each other and other global forces (see Chapter 3, this volume). This is clearly not the case. Britain imports much of the best of U.S. television, as does the United States some of the best of British television (viewers in either country have little sense of how bad the other's bad stuff can be!). British television writers are challenged to make programs as novel as *24*, with its concept of a real-time narrative and its quartered screens, as taut as *The Shield* or as quirky as *Six Feet Under*. The Iranian revolution was partly mobilized through a fear of engulfment by Western cultural values and products, a sense that the society had become so "Westoxicated" that it had lost its own identity. Yet when it turned militantly Islamic, many people said that was not their identity either, and the private face of Iran is percolated with the most up-to-date videos, CDs, and other products of the abominated West. Some of the most popular programming originates outside Iran, from the diasporic communities of Los Angeles, organized by Iranian exiles, and from RTE Prague. Although this programming is popular because it offers entertainment and music, these channels also carry political interpretations unavailable inside Iran and thus become part of the propaganda struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the Iranian people.

Yet the comparative framework is also crucial. A major objective of this chapter has been to underscore how crucial it is to avoid media centrism in the analysis of media and to focus on social change. The media obsessiveness of some conservative groups mentioned is only an extreme version of a larger analytical error too common within media research itself. The very differences between these three nations' media systems, both structurally and in relation to the changes they are undergoing, demonstrate with one voice the necessity of centering media analysis in societal and cultural processes. Simultaneously, these differences make ludicrous any simple

statement that attempts to encapsulate for all times and places what "the media" are.

◆ Notes

1. Accessed January 17, 2003, from www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/04/F.RU.000406124546.html.

2. Accessed January 17, 2003, from unescap.org/pop/data_sheet/2000_tab3.htm.

3. Accessed January 17, 2003, from www.umsl.edu/services/govdocs/wofact2000/geos/ir.html#People.

4. Shi'ite Islam embraces some 10% to 15% of Moslems worldwide, including the great majority of southern Iraqis and many Lebanese. It traces its origins to the Prophet's younger cousin and son-in-law, Ali, and his son Husain, both of whom were martyred. This branch of Islam is distinguished (a) by the conviction that only these and certain other direct successors of the Prophet, in the earliest phase of the religion's development, possessed the authority to define its tenets; (b) by belief in the redemptive power of suffering; and (c) by the belief that eventually, the 12th of the original Imams will return and free the world from oppression and tyranny.

5. Accessed January 17, 2003, from unescap.org/pop/data_sheet/2000_tab3.htm.

6. See analyses by the Center for Democracy and Technology (www.cdt.org/security/usapatriot/analysis.shtml) and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (www.eff.org/Privacy/Surveillance/Terrorism_militias/20011031_eff_usa_patriot_analysis.html), both accessed January 17, 2003.

7. The following analysis borrows heavily from Lemann (2002).

8. Widely perceived as a firm supporter of existing controls, Khamenei's power appeared at least to balance the elected president's.

9. Once during the revolutionary period in Iran, when programs were running very behind schedule, a television commentator told the entire population to go to bed and that the long-awaited film would be shown on another night.

10. Ironically, it was Mrs. Thatcher's Conservative government that funded the biggest program of sex education in Britain and revolutionized representations of sexuality and sex talk on British television, all as part of AIDS education.

11. The term was coined to refer to a supposed wave of underground ultraviolet "reality" videos being made available to teens. A moral panic was whipped up, and new censorship legislation was passed to protect the innocent and impressionable (see Barker, 1984).

12. A photograph of a white plastic crucifix immersed in urine. Serrano's work consistently made use of bodily fluids, and he insisted that he did not intend to produce blasphemous art. For the controversies surrounding Serrano and Mapplethorpe, see Dubin (1992, pp. 96–101, 170–192).

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