One way to understand the impact of the media on our lives is to explore the cultural context in which the media operate. Often, culture is narrowly associated with art, the unique forms of creative expression that give pleasure and set standards about what is true, good, and beautiful. Culture, however, can be viewed more broadly as the ways in which people live and represent themselves at particular historical times. This idea of culture encompasses fashion, sports, architecture, education, religion, and science, as well as mass media. Although we can study discrete cultural products, such as novels or songs from various historical periods, culture itself is always changing. It includes a society’s art, beliefs, customs, games, technologies, traditions, and institutions. It also encompasses a society’s modes of communication: the creation and use of symbol systems that convey information and meaning (e.g., languages, Morse code, motion pictures, and one-zero binary computer codes).

Culture is made up of both the products that a society fashions and, perhaps more important, the processes that forge those products and reflect a culture’s diverse values. Thus culture may be defined as the symbols of expression that individuals, groups, and societies use to make sense of daily life and to articulate their values. According to this definition, when we listen to music, read a book, watch television, or scan the Internet, we usually are not asking “Is this art?” but are instead trying to identify or connect with something or someone. In other words, we are assigning meaning to the song, book, TV program, or Web site. Culture, therefore, is a process that delivers the values of a society through products or other meaning-making forms. The American ideal of “rugged individualism,” for instance, has been depicted for decades through a tradition of westerns and detective stories on television, in movies and books, and even in political ads.

Culture links individuals to their society by providing both shared and contested values, and the mass media help circulate those values. The mass media are the cultural industries—the channels of communication—that produce and distribute songs, novels, TV shows, newspapers, movies, video games, Internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people. The historical development of media and communication can be traced through several overlapping phases or eras in which newer forms of technology disrupted and modified older forms—a process that many academics, critics, and media professionals call convergence.

These eras, which all still operate to some degree, are oral, written, print, electronic, and digital. The first two eras refer to the communication of tribal or feudal communities and agricultural economies. The last three phases feature the development of mass communication: the process of designing cultural messages and stories and delivering them to large and diverse audiences through media channels as old and distinctive as the printed book and as new and converged as the Internet. Hastened by the growth of industry and modern technology, mass communication accompanied the shift of rural populations to urban settings and the rise of a consumer culture.
Oral and Written Eras in Communication

In most early societies, information and knowledge first circulated slowly through oral traditions passed on by poets, teachers, and tribal storytellers. As alphabets and the written word emerged, however, a manuscript, or written, culture began to develop and eventually overshadowed oral communication. Documented and transcribed by philosophers, monks, and stenographers, the manuscript culture served the ruling classes. Working people were generally illiterate, and the economic and educational gap between rulers and the ruled was vast. These eras of oral and written communication developed slowly over many centuries. Although exact time frames are disputed, historians generally consider these eras as part of Western civilization’s premodern period, spanning the epoch from roughly 1000 B.C.E. to the mid-fifteenth century.

Early tensions between oral and written communication played out among ancient Greek philosophers and writers. Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.), for instance, made his arguments through public conversations and debates. Known as the Socratic method, this dialogue style of communication and inquiry is still used in college classrooms and university law schools. Many philosophers who believed in the superiority of the oral tradition feared that the written word would threaten public discussion by offering fewer opportunities for the give-and-take of conversation. In fact, Socrates’ most famous student, Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), sought to banish poets, whom he saw as purveyors of ideas less rigorous than those generated in oral, face-to-face, question-and-answer discussions. These debates foreshadowed similar discussions in our time regarding the dangers of television and the Internet. Do aspects of contemporary culture, such as reality TV shows, Twitter, and social networking sites, cheapen public discussion and discourage face-to-face communication?

The Print Revolution

While paper and block printing developed in China around 100 C.E. and 1045, respectively, what we recognize as modern printing did not emerge until the middle of the fifteenth century. At that time in Germany, Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of movable metallic type and the printing press ushered in the modern print era. Printing presses and publications then spread rapidly across Europe in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Early on, many books were large, elaborate, and expensive. It took months to illustrate and publish these volumes, and they were usually purchased by wealthy aristocrats, royal families, church leaders, prominent merchants, and powerful politicians. Gradually, however, printers reduced the size and cost of books, making them available and affordable to more people. Books eventually became the first mass-marketed products in history.

The printing press combined three elements necessary for mass-market innovation. First, machine duplication replaced the tedious system in which scribes hand-copied texts. Second, duplication could occur rapidly, so large quantities of the same book could be reproduced easily. Third, the faster production of multiple copies brought down the cost of each unit, which made books more affordable to less affluent people.

Since mass-produced printed materials could spread information and ideas faster and farther than ever before, writers could use print to disseminate views counter to traditional civic doctrine and religious authority—views that paved the way for major social and cultural changes, such as the Protestant Reformation and the rise of modern nationalism. People started to resist traditional clerical authority and also to think of themselves not merely as members of families, isolated communities, or tribes, but as part of a country whose interests were...
broader than local or regional concerns. While oral and written societies had favored decentralized local governments, the print era supported the ascent of more centralized nation-states.

Eventually, the machine production of mass quantities that had resulted in a lowered cost per unit for books became an essential factor in the mass production of other goods, which led to the Industrial Revolution, modern capitalism, and the consumer culture in the twentieth century. With the revolution in industry came the rise of the middle class and an elite business class of owners and managers who acquired the kind of influence formerly held only by the nobility or the clergy. Print media became key tools that commercial and political leaders used to distribute information and maintain social order.

As with the Internet today, however, it was difficult for a single business or political leader, certainly in a democratic society, to gain exclusive control over printing technology (although the king or queen did control printing press licenses in England until the early nineteenth century, and even today governments in many countries control presses, access to paper, advertising, and distribution channels). Instead, the mass publication of pamphlets, magazines, and books helped democratize knowledge, and literacy rates rose among the working and middle classes. Industrialization required a more educated workforce, but printed literature and textbooks also encouraged compulsory education, thus promoting literacy and extending learning beyond the world of wealthy upper-class citizens.

Just as the printing press fostered nationalism, it also nourished the ideal of individualism. People came to rely less on their local community and their commercial, religious, and political leaders for guidance. By challenging tribal life, the printing press “fostered the modern idea of individuality,” disrupting “the medieval sense of community and integration.”5 In urban and industrial environments, many individuals became cut off from the traditions of rural and small-town life, which had encouraged community cooperation in premodern times. By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideal of individualism affirmed the rise of commerce and increased resistance to government interference in the affairs of self-reliant entrepreneurs. The democratic impulse of individualism became a fundamental value in American society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Electronic and Digital Eras

In Europe and America, the impact of industry’s rise was enormous: Factories replaced farms as the main centers of work and production. During the 1880s, roughly 80 percent of Americans lived on farms and in small towns; by the 1920s and 1930s, most had moved to urban areas, where new industries and economic opportunities beckoned. The city had overtaken the country as the focus of national life.

The Electronic Era

In America, the gradual transformation from an industrial, print-based society to one grounded in the Information Age began with the development of the telegraph in the 1840s. Featuring dot-dash electronic signals, the telegraph made four key contributions to communication. First, it separated communication from transportation, making media messages instantaneous—unencumbered by stagecoaches, ships, or the pony express.6 Second, the telegraph, in combination with the rise of mass-marketed newspapers, transformed “information into a commodity, a ‘thing’ that could be bought or sold irrespective of its uses or meaning.”7 By the time of the Civil War, news had become a valuable product. Third, the telegraph made it easier for military, business, and political leaders to coordinate commercial and military operations, especially after the installation of the transatlantic cable in the late 1860s. Fourth, the telegraph led to future technological developments, such as wireless telegraphy (later named “radio”), the fax machine, and the cell phone, which ironically resulted in the telegraph’s demise: In 2006, Western Union telegraph offices sent their final messages.

“We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. . . . We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.”

HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN, 1854
The rise of film at the turn of the twentieth century and the development of radio in the 1920s were early signals, but the electronic phase of the Information Age really boomed in the 1950s and 1960s with the arrival of television and its dramatic impact on daily life. Then, with the coming of ever more communication gadgetry—personal computers, cable TV, DVDs, DVRs, direct broadcast satellites, cell phones, smartphones, PDAs, and e-mail—the Information Age passed into its digital phase.

**The Digital Era**

In *digital communication*, images, texts, and sounds are converted (encoded) into electronic signals (represented as varied combinations of binary numbers—ones and zeros) that are then reassembled (decoded) as a precise reproduction of, say, a TV picture, a magazine article, a song, or a telephone voice. On the Internet, various images, texts, and sounds are all digitally reproduced and transmitted globally.

New technologies, particularly cable television and the Internet, have developed so quickly that traditional leaders in communication have lost some of their control over information. For example, starting with the 1992 presidential campaign, the network news shows (ABC, CBS, and NBC) began to lose their audiences to MTV, CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Comedy Central, and radio talk shows. By the 2004 national elections, Internet *bloggers*—people who post commentary on personal and political-opinion-based Web sites—had become a key element in news.

Moreover, e-mail—a digital reinvention of oral culture—has assumed some of the functions of the postal service and is outpacing attempts to control communications beyond national borders. A professor sitting at her desk in Cedar Falls, Iowa, sends e-mail messages routinely to research scientists in Budapest. Yet as recently as 1990, letters—or “snail mail”—between the United States and former communist states might have been censored or taken months to reach their destinations. Moreover, many repressive and totalitarian regimes have had trouble controlling messages sent out in the borderless Internet.

Further reinventing oral culture has been the emergence of *social media*, particularly the phenomenon of Facebook—which now has more than 500 million users worldwide. Basically, social media are digital applications that allow people from all over the world to have ongoing online conversations, share stories and interests, and generate their own media content. The Internet and social media are changing the ways we consume and engage with media culture. In pre-Internet days (say, back in the late 1980s), most people would watch popular TV shows like *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, *Cheers*, or *Roseanne* at the time they originally aired. Such scheduling provided common media experiences at specific times within our culture. While we still watch TV shows, we are increasingly likely to do so at our own convenience with Web sites like Hulu or DVR/On-Demand options. We are also increasingly making our media choices on the basis of Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter recommendations from friends. Or we upload our own media—from photos of friends at last night’s party to homemade videos of our lives, pets, and hobbies—to share with friends instead of watching “mainstream” programming. While these options allow us to connect with friends and give us more choices, they also break down shared media experiences in favor of individual interests and pursuits.

**Media Convergence in the Digital Era**

Developments in the electronic and digital eras fully ushered in the phenomenon of *media convergence*—a term that media critics and analysts use when describing all the changes currently occurring in media content and within media companies. However, the term actually has two different meanings—one referring to technology and one to business—and has a great impact on how media companies are charting a course for the future.
The Dual Roles of Media Convergence

The first definition of media convergence involves the technological merging of content across different media channels—for example, the magazine articles, radio programs, songs, TV shows, and movies now available on the Internet through laptops, iPads, and smartphones.

Such technical convergence is not entirely new. For example, in the late 1920s, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) purchased the Victor Talking Machine Company and introduced machines that could play both radio and recorded music. In the 1950s, this collaboration helped radio survive the emergence of television. Radio lost much of its content to TV and could not afford to hire live bands, so it became more dependent on deejays to play records produced by the music industry. However, contemporary media convergence is much broader than the simple merging of older and newer forms. In fact, the eras of communication are themselves reinvented in this “age of convergence.” Oral communication, for example, finds itself reconfigured, in part, in e-mail and social media. And print communication is re-formed in the thousands of newspapers now available online. Also, keep in mind the wonderful ironies of media convergence: The first major digital retailer, Amazon.com, made its name by selling the world’s oldest mass medium—the book—on the world’s newest mass medium—the Internet.

A second definition of media convergence—sometimes called cross platform by media marketers—describes a business model that involves consolidating various media holdings, such as cable connections, phone services, television transmissions, and Internet access, under one corporate umbrella. The goal is not necessarily to offer consumers more choice in their media options, but to better manage resources and maximize profits. For example, a company that owns TV stations, radio outlets, and newspapers in multiple markets—as well as in the same cities—can deploy a reporter or producer to create three or four versions of the same story for various media outlets. So rather than having each radio station, TV station, newspaper, and online news site generate diverse and independent stories about an issue, a media corporation employing the convergence model can use fewer employees to generate multiple versions of the same story.

Media Businesses in a Converged World

The ramifications of media convergence are best revealed in the business strategy of Google—the most successful company of the digital era so far. Google is the Internet’s main organizer and aggregator because it finds both “new” and “old” media content—like blogs and newspapers—and delivers that content to vast numbers of online consumers. Google does not produce any of the content, and most consumers who find a news story or magazine article through a Google
search pay nothing to the original media content provider nor to Google. Instead, as the “middle man” or distributor, Google makes most of its money by selling ads that accompany search results. But not all ads are created equal; as writer and journalism critic James Fallows points out, Google does not sell ads on its news site:

*Virtually all of Google’s (enormous) revenue comes from a tiny handful of its activities: mainly the searches people conduct when they’re looking for something to buy. That money subsidizes all the other services the company offers—the classic “let me Google that” informational query (as opposed to the shopping query), Google Earth, driving directions, online storage for Gmail and Google Docs, the still-money-losing YouTube video-hosting service. Structurally this is very much like the old newspaper bargain, in which the ad-crammed classified section, the weekly grocery-store pullout, and other commercial features underwrote state-house coverage and the bureau in Kabul.*

In fact, Fallows writes that Google, which has certainly done its part in contributing to the decline of newspapers, still has a large stake in seeing newspapers succeed online. Over the last few years, Google has undertaken a number of experiments to help older news media make the transition into the converged world. Google executives believe that since they aren’t in the content business, they are dependent on news organizations to produce the quality information and journalism that healthy democracies need—and that Google can deliver.

Today’s converged media world has broken down the old definitions of distinct media forms like newspapers and television—both now available online and across multiple platforms. And it favors players like Google whose business model works in a world where customers expect to get their media in multiple places—and often for free. But the next challenge ahead in the new, converged world is to resolve who will pay for quality content and how that system will emerge. In the upcoming industry chapters, we will take a closer look at how media convergence is affecting each industry in terms of both content production and business strategies.