The average American spends a lot of time each week on arts, entertainment, and leisure. As reported in the popular press, Americans daily watch about 90 minutes of Netflix and five hours of television, and listen to more than four hours of music. Additionally, they annually watch an average of five movies and read or listen to an average of 12 books. When Americans de-screen, they shop, buying new clothes at a clip of $75 per month. These statistics are not meant to be scientific, but they are illustrative of a simple construct: Culture—whether arts and entertainment such as movies, television, music, and books; fashion; or sports—is integrated throughout our daily lives. Raymond Williams (2000) argued that culture is ordinary because it is part of one’s everyday life and experience. Culture, while active and changing, is a common and accessible experience available to everyone.

Here, culture is comprised of two distinct parts. The first part is “the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to” (Williams, 2000, p. 6). This component of culture encompasses the everyday experiences, societal characteristics, norms, languages, and shared history that collectively create the imagined community of a culture or nation. Culture in this sense is anthropological; it is the collective practices and values that create broad cultures such as the Mayans or the Vikings or more narrow contexts such as Hippies or Patriots Nation. The second part is “the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested” (Williams, 2000, p. 6). Culture in this sense includes human artistic achievement, cultural phenomenon, and the consumption of goods and leisure activities. It is, as Williams describes, the special processes of discovery and creative effort that help create or expand the experiences, characteristics, norms, languages, and history that collectively create the first instance of culture. However, the second, artistic component also changes, and hopefully enhances, the first because small differences of behavior or variations of speech habit can help create new patterns of culture, or subculture or counterculture, that also might positively or negatively influence the broader culture.

Because culture is ordinary, or part of everyday life, it also could serve a normative role. In other words, culture is normative. Traditionally, politics has been the lynchpin of normative theory. However, politics and political coverage are not the only types of information that contribute to democracy and democratic discourse. Culture also is an important component of a community and democracy. Culture helps build those communities that are a necessary component of democratic action. Indeed, culture might help build communities in a way that politics could not or
does not. While politics are an important component of normative theory, they are not the only component. Culture also is an important and possibly even necessary component of democratic and political action. Scholars should begin to rethink normative theory to include a cultural component. While a radical rethinking of normative theory is not necessary, the inclusion of culture is a needed and necessary addition. What follows are three components of culture that scholars could use as they begin incorporating culture into normative theory.

Culture helps create a worldview because it is part of a person’s everyday life and experience. Culture, therefore, can contribute to a sense of togetherness and a vision of community. For example, sports are culturally important because more than 100,000 people in Ohio Stadium could be rooting for the Ohio State Buckeyes to beat the Michigan Wolverines. Those 100,000 have a sense of community, of shared purpose, at least for the length of a ballgame. Similarly, the Hippies in the 1960s were not just advocating for the end of the Vietnam War, and rights for blacks, women, and gay men. They also were building a community on a shared love of rock and roll and other forms on then-controversial arts. That bond, or common experience, could help foster a sense of community, and that community could then, together with similar communities in other parts of the country, begin to form a larger social movement.

Culture also is often directly political. For example, Public Enemy’s “911 Is a Joke” and N.W.A.’s “Fuck Da Police” critique police actions in traditionally black neighborhoods in a much more effective way than a news story could ever hope to do. Coverage of culture and cultural issues, therefore, can be political, or at least aid political discourse. Cultural spaces also might foster political discussion. For example, the closing of the New York punk rock mecca CBGB on the surface might seem like a routine nightlife story. However, bars such as CBGB largely have replaced the coffeehouses envisioned by Jürgen Habermas as the meeting space for the engagement of rational-critical debate. Any conceptualization of normative theory ought to make this necessary connection clear.

Finally, culture can invert the power structure both in a political sense and also in the meanings created by artists, the subjects they consider, and the way they express those subjects artistically. Artists from Woody Guthrie to Jason Isbell have expressed themselves via politically themed art. Historical and contemporary mass gatherings simultaneously are artistic and political. People came to the 1972 Wattstax concert not only to hear Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers but also to continue to rebuild the Watts community in Los Angeles following riots seven years earlier. The True/False Film Festival in Columbia, Missouri, every year features a wealth of documentary films. However, the messages in those films are furthered by question-and-answer sessions between the audience and the filmmakers or subjects, as well as continued discussions between festival attendees throughout the weekend.

The argument that threads throughout this chapter is that culture, specifically arts and entertainment, needs to be taken seriously by scholars theorizing about a socially responsible normative role for media organizations. The next section is focused on the concepts of political humor, especially in the context of mock news programming such as The Daily Show and its various offshoots. Then, there will be an exploration of the portrayal of journalists in movies and television. In a section on social responsibility theory, the author will begin a discussion on why normative theory should apply to entertainment programming and why media ethicists need to seriously begin to contemplate a normative code for entertainers similar to the Hutchins Commission guidelines for news journalists. Finally, there will be a discussion and rebuttal of Neil Postman’s central argument in Amusing Ourselves to Death. One caveat: The thoughts in this chapter are not meant to be definitive; instead, they are designed to begin a dialogue and establish a possible frame for a discussion about normative theory regarding arts and entertainment programming.
THE ROLE OF HUMOR IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Humor typically has a larger purpose in social and political life than simply attempting to get laughs or knowing nods (Feinberg, 1967). Modern political comedy follows a rich tradition of satire with deep roots stretching to the work of playwrights such as Aristophanes, Diogenes, Erasmus, and Shakespeare, as well as farcical newsvendors of seventeenth century European country fairs. In England, political comedy stretches at least as far as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* and continues into the twentieth century with the various Monty Python projects and the Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove*. David Frost made his name hosting *That Was the Week That Was* before cementing a journalistic legacy with his series of interviews with former President Richard Nixon. John Oliver, who served as a correspondent on *The Daily Show* before hosting his own HBO program *This Week Tonight*, arguably is the most popular British political humorist today.

Purely American political comedy and satire traces its roots to writings by Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain, as well as monologues by Will Rogers. Today, that mantle is carried first by Jon Stewart and then by Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* and then *The Late Show*, Samantha Bee on *Full Frontal, Saturday Night Live’s Weekend Update*, Andy Borowitz in *The New Yorker*, and the writers at *The Onion*. Political humor also has been an integral part of the work of political cartoonists from Thomas Nast to Garry Trudeau, as well as television shows with undercurrents of politics such as *South Park*. Indeed, the jurists on the U.S. Supreme Court thought so highly of the importance of political discussion via cartoons that they upheld protections in the 1988 case *Hustler v. Falwell*, stating that *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt should not be punished because of the informational importance of political cartoons, which often base their depictions on unfortunate physical traits or events. Political humor, though, is not confined to two countries. Indeed, there are several international examples, from the cartoonists at *Charlie Hebdo* in France, to television programs such as *The Haute Show* in Germany, the *Witty Seven* in Hungary, *Al Bernameg* in Egypt, and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* and the *Rick Mercer Report* in Canada.

Political humor also has found its way past arts and entertainment and toward more traditional types of political discourse. Cable news hosts such as Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow, and documentary filmmakers such as Michael Moore use satire as one tool in the repertoire (Tally, 2011). Much like traditional humorists, they use satire to highlight absurdities in political discourse and coverage, and to appeal to larger audiences. Here, satire is defined as a type of humor—typically involving sarcasm, ridicule, irony, and exaggeration—used to expose, magnify, or criticize incompetence, stupidity, corruption, or wrongdoing (Hight, 1962; Knight, 2004). Political satire “encourages critical debate, sheds light upon perceived wrongs within society and government, points out hypocrisy, and makes political criticism accessible to the average citizen” (Caufield, 2008, p. 4).

Some scholars argue that younger audiences increasingly are turning away from more traditional news sources such as network or cable news and toward unconventional alternatives such as *The Daily Show* (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011), while others argue that late-night comedy viewers are more likely to be or become interested in traditional forms of news (Feldman & Young, 2008). The balance between these two poles is to conclude that few Americans rely exclusively on one media source; the most knowledgeable and politically active citizens have a varied news diet that might include both the *NBC Nightly News* and *The Daily Show*. The influence of political comedy, therefore, might be diminished by factors such as internal efficacy, discussion frequency, online interaction, and network size (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Lee, 2012). Still, comedy programs with healthy doses of political satire also might serve as a gateway...
to increased audience attention to news and public affairs by providing basic knowledge and familiarity with traditional news topics (Baum, 2003; Cao, 2010). Satirical programming often piggybacks content from traditional news programming, so, once people gain a basic or cursory knowledge about a political topic from satirical programming, they are more likely to continue to engage if that topic is later encountered in more traditional news programs because of the lower cognitive cost (Caufield, 2008; Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2011).

The Daily Show or This Week Tonight should not be seen as “real” news, but these shows highlight that all, or at least most, news is now entertainment, no longer bearing much, if any, relation to the “real” (Tally, 2011). Indeed, Stewart and his ilk provide a needed counterbalance “in a public culture where one has to wonder if real news is fake, and where one often wished that were so” (Hariman, 2007, p. 275).

Cable television comedians have influenced how viewers perceive “real” news in four important ways. First, they have altered the recognizable boundaries of the journalistic community (Tetenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). The comedians, who almost uniformly declare that they are not journalists even though they routinely perform journalistic acts, blend healthy doses of explanatory journalism, news analysis, and editorials with laugh-out-loud humor. Each conduct interviews with newsmakers such as elected representatives and political candidates, journalists, and celebrities. Second, they alter mainstream coverage by breaking through false shells such as objectivity, often blending comic, political, and partisan discourse; reframing policy debate; and helping to set the political agenda (Jones & Baym, 2010; McBeth & Clemons, 2011). Third, Stewart and his colleagues routinely hold traditional broadcast news outlets accountable to the public by pointing out falsehoods, pointing out inconsistencies, pointing out when inconsequential news is blown out of proportion, and critiquing the very nature of broadcast news (Painter & Hodges, 2010). The “mock” news hosts point toward the misinformation, biases, and inadequacies of their “real” news counterparts (Wiszewski, 2011), interrogating content that is “arguably failing its democratic function” (Baym, 2005, p. 268). Finally, these comedians counterbalance traditional news reporters through the use of jokes and exaggerated faces and vocal inflections.

People often laugh at surprising or odd occurrences, so fully understanding satire is not required for a satirical joke to be perceived as being funny. However, audience members must have gained the requisite knowledge of politics, civics, and current events through other media texts or personal experiences to fully appreciate satirical humor (Fox, 2011; Young, 2008). For example, viewers of Monty Python and the Holy Grail could appreciate the film’s humor on many levels. Some viewers could laugh at slapstick such as the Black Knight’s assertion that having his arm chopped off is “Just a flesh wound” or the attack by the Killer Rabbit of Caerbannog. In order for more sophisticated viewers to nod along with their laughs, they need at least some knowledge of European or American witch trials during the scene when Bedevere is holding court while the masses repeatedly scream “Burn her,” or some understanding of the devastations of the plague in Europe during the “I’m not dead yet” sequence. Specific understanding of British-French relations, as well as historical knowledge that there actually were Medieval troops whose job was to taunt opposing enemies before battle, is necessary for the two scenes of Frenchmen taunting King Arthur and his knights. Similarly, viewers need to understand the British monarchical and political system in order to fully appreciate a peasant telling Arthur that he “can’t expect to wield supreme executive power just because some watery tart threw a sword at you.” Finally, most likely only British viewers would get the joke that the image of the animated God was based on a picture of W.G. Grace, one of England’s most famous cricket players.
Some researchers argue that there is a stronger effect of political entertainment among sophisticated viewers (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005; Young, 2008) while others argue that greater effects are seen within political novices (Cao, 2010; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Viewers of political satire often are “political news junkies” who do not live in a news vacuum but also consume traditional print and broadcast news sources (Fox, 2011; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Political satire, then, is well suited to the format of mock news because audiences already know the politics, politicians, and political issues that serve as the underlying substance of the jokes through “real” news programming. The humor, and the education, then comes from incongruity between what is expected and what is presented (Meyer, 2000). Through incongruity, political satirists encourage new ways of looking at politicians and political discourse by playfully yet critically distorting the familiar or self-explanatory (Colletta, 2009; Feinberg, 1967).

Humor can be a tool used to enhance the salience of messages, increase learning and enjoyment of a subject matter, and heighten judgments of credibility, attitude change, and compliance (Nitz, Koehn, & McCarron, 2017). However, humor at another's expense can have negative effects and, therefore, can be ethically problematic (Painter & Hodges, 2010). Satirists use humor “to diminish or derogate a subject and evoke toward it attitudes of amusement, disdain, ridicule, or indignation” (Hill, 2013, p. 329). Humor during the 2016 U.S. presidential primaries was heavily negative and subversive, commonly incorporating obscenity, and distortions of a candidate’s personal life and character (Nitz et al., 2017).

Satire, however, is not used just for humor; it has a larger purpose regarding social and political life (Feinberg, 1967; Hill, 2013). Political humor tends to take one of two forms: Horatian and Juvenalian (Hight, 1962; Knight, 2004). Modern political humor typically follows the Horatian style of satire. Horatian satirists, who hold up human absurdities and follies to gentle and witty ridicule, comment on the ruling elite and macrolevel norms of social behavior (Hight, 1962). Horatians typically are optimists regarding humanity’s willingness to overcome deficiencies once those faults are pointed out to them (Hight, 1962; Holbert, Tchernev, Walther, Esralew, & Benski, 2013). Juvenalians, by contrast, savagely and mercilessly attack vice and error with pessimism, contempt, and indignation (Sander, 1971). Horatian humor found in comedy programming such as The Daily Show, therefore, is “used much like the proverbial spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down; it keeps pointed criticisms from being perceived as being mean spirited by the audience” (Painter & Hodges, 2010, p. 259). Further, satirists do not simply highlight the failings of politicians and political institutions, but highlight the gap “between vice and virtue, between good and bad, between what man is, and what he ought to be” (Griffin, 1994, p. 36). Satirists, therefore, often promote a disappointed idealism (Jones, 2005) or positive negativity (Schutz, 1977) by balancing a pessimistic or critical outlook of the political process with an endorsement of an idealistic impression that citizens can redress these ills or follies.

THE DEPICTION OF JOURNALISTS IN FILM AND TELEVISION

Most audience members will never be a part of, or even see, a working newsroom, so these viewers could base their opinions of real-world journalists on film and television depictions of their fictional counterparts. Research into pop-culture portrayals is important; regardless of how popular culture fictionally depicts journalists, these opinions influence public opinion about real-world journalists (Ehrlich, 1997) and could influence public trust in the media (Stone & Lee, 1990). Indeed, some scholars argue that the public’s perception of the journalism industry is shaped more by popular depictions of the field than the work done by actual journalists (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).
The sight of a journalist on the big or little screen, and increasingly on the computer screen, is commonplace—such an ordinary part of people’s everyday experience that we seldom stop to think about the bigger ramifications of what we are witnessing. One possible reason for the multitude of journalists is that the day-to-day activities of the job are interesting, or at least seem interesting to non-journalists. Journalists ask important questions, hobnob with celebrities and politicians, and typically are near the center of the action. Onscreen, journalists sometimes literally are superheroes: Both Superman and Spider-Man spend their non-villain-fighting time trying to hit a deadline.

Journalists of all stripes routinely appear in most genres of film and television. Newspaper reporters are featured in dramas such as Absence of Malice and Kill the Messenger, comedies such as Fletch and The Paper, and classics such as Roman Holiday and It Happened One Night. The inner workings of television newsrooms are played for drama in Network and The Insider, for laughs in Anchorman and WKRP in Cincinnati, and for some combination of both in Broadcast News. Magazine journalists take center stage in films such as The Devil Wears Prada and television shows such as Just Shoot Me, while advertisers and public relations practitioners get their star turn in Mad Men and Thank You for Smoking. There even is a film dedicated to citizen journalists: Nightcrawler follows a crime-scene videographer who often scoops his professional counterparts.

Since the earliest years of the film industry, journalists and journalism have played a leading role in Hollywood (Ehrlich, 1997). The Front Page first hit theaters in 1931, and it later appeared as His Girl Friday in 1940, as well a 1974 remake starring Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau. Each version of the comedy features two journalists who will do anything while chasing a story, including hiding an accused and escaped murderer from the police in order to get an exclusive scoop in order to beat the competition. Orson Welles’s 1941 classic, Citizen Kane, often considered the greatest movie of all time, centers on a titular character deeply entrenched in the newspaper business; indeed, the character Charles Foster Kane is at least partially based on the lives of real-life publishers William Randolph Hearst, Harold McCormick, and Samuel Insull (Schudson, 1992).

All The President’s Men (1976), arguably the most famous and iconic film about journalists ever produced, follows the investigative reporting of Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein as they attempt to untangle the web of intrigue, corruption, power, and money surrounding the break-in at Washington’s Watergate Hotel. Based on Woodward and Bernstein’s book of the same name, the film reputedly upholds the ideals that serve as the foundation of journalism and “offers journalism a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys” (Schudson, 1992, p. 124). The film, as well as the real-life reporting, significantly and favorably influenced public opinion regarding journalism and its role in our democracy (Schudson, 1992), although myths surrounding the duo and their influence often overshadow reality (Campbell, 2016). This favorable influence underscores why public and academic understanding of popular depictions are important.

Most recently, Spotlight (2015) depicted The Boston Globe’s investigative team as it investigated widespread and systematic cases of sexual abuses by Catholic priests in Boston and the subsequent cover-up by the Catholic Church. The Globe earned the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for the series, and the filmmakers won the 2016 Best Picture Oscar. Unlike All the President’s Men, the film Spotlight did not have a wide-ranging positive impact for the journalism industry; Americans attitudes about the news media generally are fairly negative, although there is some division along deeply partisan lines (Barthel & Mitchell, 2017).

Television writers and producers also have used journalism extensively as a backdrop; in turn, viewers gained more data points upon which to base their notions of the field (Ryan & Revah, 1996). In a content analysis exploring depictions of journalists during the 1987 primetime
television schedule, researchers found that journalists were portrayed often, but typically as something akin to a Greek chorus on cops and crime shows in order to propel the narrative forward (Stone & Lee, 1990). Fictional television journalists, both men and women, usually were depicted favorably; newspaper journalists, however, predominantly were white men depicted negatively (Stone & Lee, 1990). Reporters also play a large role on the children’s television show *Sesame Street*. Major characters such as Kermit the Frog sometimes are depicted favorably as reporters, but many minor characters consistently portray negative journalistic stereotypes such as the curmudgeon or pushy reporter (Ragovin, 2010).

On *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), Mary Richards worked as an associate producer and later producer for WJM-TV, a Minneapolis television station. Richards portrayal was positive; she was seen as being “bright, attractive, well liked” and “generally happy” with a “good job that she perform[ed] well” (Dow, 1990, p. 268). While Moore was “informed by and commented on the changing role of women in American society” (Dow, 1990, p. 263), she also perpetuated many female stereotypes including being a passive, deferent, and motherly journalist who typically was on the outside of the newsroom’s boy’s club.

The titular *Murphy Brown* (1988–1998) is a more advanced, or at least more successful, version of Moore’s Richards. Richards struggles but ultimately succeeds in furthering her career in local television. Candice Bergen’s Murphy Brown begins the show’s run as an unqualified success; she is the award-winning network co-anchor of a primetime news magazine. While the portrayal generally is positive, Brown is sometimes portrayed in the form of a domineering, patriarchal figure (Dow, 1992). Such a portrayal is interesting because journalistic values tend to coincide with masculine values, and newsroom managers tend to socialize women to accept these values, so women might begin acting in masculine terms to comply with the existing social culture (Beam & DeCicco, 2010; Steiner, 2008). Brown’s portrayal, therefore, might be a nod to the reality that women must adapt to and adopt masculine traits in order to succeed in a perceived man’s world. Both Richards and Brown were groundbreaking in terms of television, especially sitcoms, for portraying successful, single, working women (Dow, 1990, 1992).

More recent television series have been a mixed bag at best. David Simon’s *The Wire* (2002–2008) has been called the most realistic depiction of a newsroom and news industry ever (Hanson, 2008; Sabin, 2011), although Simon’s depictions of individual journalists have been criticized as being distorted for entertainment purposes or wholly inaccurate (Steiner, 2013). The final season, which focuses on a semi-fictionalized version of *The Baltimore Sun*, highlights a morally decaying industry. *Sun* reporters have a strained relationship with citizens and other city institutions such as the police department and the city schools, editors and reporters have to do more with less—or as City Editor Gus Haynes says, less with less—due to budget cutbacks forcing buyouts and layoffs, and newsroom tensions erupt as reporters and even some editors cut journalistic and ethical corners in an attempt to win the awards they deem necessary to move to more secure and lucrative newsrooms (Painter, 2017).

Aaron Sorkin long has been fascinated by the inner workings of television newsrooms. On *Sports Night* (1998–2000), he depicted a *SportsCenter*-like news and highlights show. Female producers ostensibly are in charge; Dana Whitaker and Natalie Hurley run *Sports Night*, while Sally Sasser produces the sister-show *West Coast Update*. However, the three newsroom leaders, as well as other female journalists, are depicted throughout the series as acting unprofessionally, displaying motherly qualities, choosing their personal lives over work, being deferential to men for ethical decisions, and showing a lack of sports knowledge compared to the male characters (Painter & Ferrucci, 2012). In the comedy, the women are portrayed as mediocre-to-bad journalists who are “incapable of existing without the protection, adoration, and support of the men” despite their obvious intelligence and capability (Ringelberg, 2005, p. 91).
Similar to *Sports Night*, the female journalists on Sorkin’s *The Newsroom* (2012–2014) overwhelmingly are depicted more negatively than the men (Painter & Ferrucci, 2015). The women again ostensibly are in charge; Leona Lansing owns the news channel’s parent company, and MacKenzie McHale is the producer of *News Night*, the show within the show. However, the female characters are shown as unprofessional in the newsroom, inadequate at their jobs, motherly and weak (Painter & Ferrucci, 2015). The journalists in *The Newsroom* also practice market-driven journalism (Ferrucci & Painter, 2016), competing for audience, sources, advertisers, and stock prices. The show depicts a news organization in crisis, where an internal fight occurs throughout the series between journalists struggling to separate economics from journalism and business executives (including, at times, some senior journalists such as anchor Will McAvoy) who want to continue the status quo where editorial decisions are driven by business interests.

Carrie Bradshaw, the central character in *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), was a different type of journalist. As a sex-and-relationships columnist for *The New York Star*, she focused on soft news as opposed to the hard news journalists in shows such as *The Wire* or *The Newsroom*. Bradshaw and her friends are successful professionals, embracing “the intellectual and sexual freedom, and independence that their success has given them” (Richards, 2003, p. 147). They are the embodiment of Helen Gurley Brown’s “single girl” (Richards, 2003), seeking “sexual freedom or freer expression of [their] female sexuality” (Gerhard, 2005, p. 38). However, while Bradshaw is depicted as a successful columnist, her personal and professional life is consumed by an obsession for consumerism, a constant worry about appearance, and an unceasing preoccupation with men.

*House of Cards* released its sixth season on Netflix in November 2018, but only the first two seasons focused extensively on journalists. The two major female journalists are portrayed as diametric opposites (Painter & Ferrucci, 2017). Zoe Barnes, who begins the show as a reporter for the fictitious *Washington Herald* before moving to the online publication *Slugline*, is shown as being childlike, unprofessional, and unethical. She has an affair with a source, and then unquestionably publishes material that she thinks or knows is false. By contrast, *Wall Street Telegraph* reporter Ayla Sayyad is a dedicated watchdog journalist who eschews easy fluff pieces to dig into difficult but important stories. During the series, viewers also see a definite distinction between print and digital journalism and journalists. The latter are depicted as being less ethical and more driven by self-gain, while the adoption of technology itself is shown to be a detriment to good journalism (Ferrucci & Painter, 2017).

As stated in the beginning of this section, these depictions matter. Journalists, much like cops, doctors, and lawyers, are popular subjects in both television and film. Popular culture depictions, both positive and negative, could have a socializing effect both on audiences and on young people thinking about entering the mass communication field. Audience members could think that real journalists think and act like their fictional counterparts who often are inaccurately depicted or whose actions are distorted in order to be more entertaining. For example, female journalists do not routinely have sex with their sources, although that is the impression viewers of *House of Cards*, *Thank You for Smoking*, *Crazy Heart*, and *Adaptation* (among many, many other films and television shows) would be led to believe.

**SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY AND ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS**

In the facilitative role, media seek to promote dialogue between constituent groups in a society. The media serve as a community-building forum, encouraging dialogue in neighborhoods, churches, and other institutions divorced from state and market forces. The goal of the facilitative
role is to promote pluralism, which is a fundamental need and ideal for a functioning democracy (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009). The facilitative role is related to social responsibility theory, which is based on a communitarian model that seeks justice, covenant, and empowerment with an ultimate goal of social transformation (Christians, Ferré, & Fackler, 1993). The basis of social responsibility theory is that “freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society” (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963, p. 74).

A press based on social responsibility is premised on the idea that freedom of expression is a positive freedom, or a freedom to do an action (Berlin, 2002; Nerone, 1995). Expression is not an inalienable right, but a right granted to do the moral good of serving the public (Nerone, 1995). The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) stated that news organizations have five missions: to provide a complete, intelligent, and comprehensive report on the day’s events in a context that gives them meaning; to provide a forum for comment and criticism; to provide a representative sample of the various constituent groups in a society; to report a society’s goals, values, and ideals; and to provide a full account of the day’s intelligence. Taken together, these five missions should promote dialogue and pluralism while simultaneously compelling the press to seek justice, covenant, and empowerment for constituent groups in a society.

There is an ethical difference between news and entertainment media; however, public discourse about politics, news, religion, education, and commerce increasingly is mediated through entertainment programming (McBeth & Clemons, 2011; Postman, 1985). All forms of political communication, including political satire, ought to be subject to normative theory (Hill, 2013) because the “boundaries between news and entertainment programming are falling fast” (Christians, Rotzell, Fackler, McKee, & Woods, 2005, p. 240). While some might argue that the Hutchins Commission findings could just as easily be applied to entertainment media, that simply has yet to be the case. With few exceptions, media ethicists generally have ignored most entertainment programming even though it constitutes the vast majority of all programming and often directly influences both the culture at large and news media more specifically.

People create political understanding through the use of diverse political content, but this content gathering is obscured by unnecessary and untenable distinctions between news and entertainment (Valdivia, 2008; Young & Tisinger, 2006). Indeed, the genres of art and entertainment serve educational purposes for society and often are all but impossible to separate from the genres of news and information (Berkowitz & Gutsche, 2012; Japp, Meister, & Japp, 2005). Further, the simplistic distinction of classifying programming as either news or entertainment obscures vast differences among shows within those classifications (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2008). For example, there is a wide gap between The Today Show and the NBC Nightly News even though both are “news” programs on the same network. Similarly, The Daily Show and Drunk History really are not comparable programs even though both are part of the Comedy Central lineup.

Media ethicists need to further explore the ethical implications of entertainment and amusement, the dominant role of almost all media content (Wilkins, 2012). In the 1934 Communications Act (and updated in the 1996 Telecommunications Act), Congress asserted that networks could freely use taxpayer-owned airwaves in exchange for one hour of information programming daily; that programming became the evening news. Prior to the 1968 debut of 60 Minutes, network news divisions were loss-leaders; they lost money but added prestige while fulfilling the public interest standard. Most of the other 23 hours were filled with money-making entertainment programming. Yet, media ethicists studying broadcast focused on the one hour of news instead of the other 23 of entertainment. Cable news networks such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC blend news, punditry, and entertainment into a 24-hour news cycle. As The Newsroom’s
fictional cable news anchor Will McAvoy said, he’s “in the exact same business as the producers of Jersey Shore.” Most cable networks are in the entertainment business, not the news business, and some—E! News, A&E, and ESPN—explicitly state their entertainment mission.

Entertainers still have virtually no broad legal standards to hold them accountable (with the notable exceptions of offensive language, indecency, and obscenity); however, there are ethical standards that society expects them to follow (Peifer, 2012). For example, there is an academic tradition of criticizing dramatists for their unfavorable portrayals of groups such as journalists, physicians, public officials, and ethnicities because such portrayals might negatively influence viewers’ perceptions of those groups. Entertainment programming needs a positive code of ethical conduct because it helps inform citizens by raising questions, offering incisive observations, and voicing marginalized perspectives. Indeed, entertainers “can benefit by an articulation of aspirations, duties, and responsibilities” (Peifer, 2012, p. 270).

Some media scholars have begun sketching out what such a code might look like. First, communication, whether labeled news or entertainment, ought to

shape opportunities for understanding, deliberating about, and acting on the relationships among:
(1) the conditions of one’s day-to-day life; (2) the day-to-day life of fellow members of the community; and (3) the norms and structures of power that shape these relationships.

(Williams & Delli Carpini, 2008, p. 183)

Second, entertainment portrayals ought to serve an overriding public interest if there are foreseeable and substantial negative consequences to those portrayals (Cenite, 2009). Of course, adherence to these principles is voluntary. There are First Amendment protections that prohibit government bodies from dictating or censoring most entertainment content. However, news programming also has First Amendment protections yet media ethicists often argue that journalists should hold themselves to standards of social responsibility, that, to quote Uncle Ben Parker from the Spider-Man comic books, “With great power comes great responsibility.” The same is true for entertainment programmers; they must hold themselves to a higher standard to fulfill their discursive role within the broader republic.

AMUSED BUT NOT DEAD

Neil Postman, in his 1985 book Amusing Ourselves to Death, argued that Americans are the best-entertained but least well-informed people in the Western world. His thesis centered on the idea that public discourse has been subsumed by and transformed into entertainment; that important matters such as politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce no longer are distinct entities but merely adjuncts of show business. His argument is not that television is entertaining (although he clearly does not see much, if any, entertainment value in the medium), but that television has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. Further, he argued that this subsumption and transformation largely occurred without notice, let alone protest.

Postman also argued that every program is a discrete event that is separated in content, context, and emotional texture from what precedes it and follows it. For example, the May 20, 2019, lineup for the Dayton CBS market aired as follows: The Ellen DeGeneres Show, 4–5 p.m.; local news, 5–6:30 p.m.; CBS Evening News, 6:30–7 p.m.; Wheel of Fortune, 7–7:30 p.m.; Entertainment Tonight, 7:30–8 p.m.; Big Bang Theory, 8–9 p.m. Clearly, there is very little overlap between The Ellen DeGeneres Show and The Big Bang Theory. Each television program is a
package in itself; viewers did not need to apply any knowledge gained from one program to any other program, nor do they necessarily have to know what happened on the previous day’s show to understand what is happening today. Further, surrounding the two-hour news programming slot with a talk show, a game show, an entertainment show, and a sitcom signals to viewers that all of the above simply is entertainment, that nothing, including potentially important news, should be taken that seriously. That is Postman’s argument.

The argument here is that Postman, at least to an extent, is wrong. He overstated the negative aspects of entertainment while neglecting the positive cultural and political contributions society receives from such programming.

First, Postman misstates why entertainment has transformed society: Culture, and entertainment is one component of culture, is a part of each person’s life and experience (Williams, 2000). Politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce are cultural, and each at least partially serves an entertaining mission. Reducing politics, for example, to mere entertainment would be disastrous. However, mixing some entertainment—William Howard Taft throwing out the first pitch at a Washington Senators game in 1920; then-candidate Bill Clinton playing saxophone on The Arsenio Hall show in 1992—with politics both humanizes political figures and signals to citizens that no one always has to be serious. Through culture and entertainment, people also can gain a sense of togetherness and create a vision of a shared community. These are good things.

Second, entertainment programming could serve as a gateway to more serious political discussion and engagement. Politically entertaining programming such as The Daily Show or Saturday Night Live could serve as a learning tool by providing basic knowledge and familiarity with news topics (Baum, 2003; Cao, 2010; Feldman et al., 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008). Basically, these programs could help expand the number of people who are politically engaged, bringing more people into the political discussion. Any attempt to engage citizens should be seen in a positive light. Further, scholars argue that few people rely exclusively on one media source; indeed, most have a varied news diet (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011; Feldman & Young, 2008) that might include entertainment programming as well as more traditional broadcast and print news sources.

Less news-y popular culture fare also could serve as a learning or political tool. The examples given in this chapter focused on journalists, and these depictions are important. At their worst, these portrayals are distorted for entertainment or entirely inaccurate. However, the best of these programs at least give viewers a glimpse into a working newsroom, a place that most people otherwise would never see. Viewers could gain a better appreciation for the hard work, dedication, and importance of journalists in movies such as Spotlight. These insights could help offset perceptions of bias or calls that the media routinely engage in “fake news.” Purely entertainment programs also, at times, indirectly drive important political conversations. Such was the case following Blood Diamond, which helped bring the concept of “conflict” diamonds into the political arena.

Postman argued that “the junk” is the best thing on television; that Americans would benefit if programming got worse instead of better. Here, Postman simply is wrong. Better programming, or more socially responsible programming, would aid in the political discussion and education of Americans. In social responsibility theory, an organization is obligated to act in a way that benefits society, either directly by advancing social goals or indirectly by avoiding socially harmful acts (Cenite, 2009). The creators of any television series ought to have an ethical obligation to their audience to be socially responsible. Viewers would be hard pressed to find anything socially responsible or morally uplifting in shows such as The Beverly Hillbillies, Married with Children, and Two and a Half Men. While other shows certainly fulfill this necessary obligation, there needs to be a framework for ethicists to distinguish between morally upright and morally deficient programming. Media ethicists have begun to have such a conversation; however, that vital dialogue needs to continue because it is far from complete.
REFERENCES


