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CHAPTER

1 Why do media matter?

Just how powerful are the media? We instinctively know that the way that things like gender are represented on television or in cinema matter – but why, exactly? In the past we have usually taken one of two perspectives on this question. The first one involves looking at how different media are used by certain people or organizations to achieve certain goals. A director might use particular cinematic devices to try to get a certain kind of response from the audience, a journalist might use metaphors or humour to persuade readers to agree about an issue, or a politician might try to **spin** an event such as a natural disaster so that the media coverage casts him in a positive light. The second approach, instead of looking at individual media messages, asks: what is the overall function of the media in our society? So, for example, we might enquire whether the media as a whole represent gender, or ethnicity, or any number of things, in a way that reinforces people's attitudes towards them.

SPIN
Spinning is about controlling the media narrative around an event or issue, so that your preferred version becomes the broadly accepted truth

There is much to be said for both of these ways of thinking about media. But neither really gets to the bottom of how media work in people's everyday lives. The first approach, for instance, presumes that

audiences are paying full attention to the medium in question, and ready and waiting to be influenced by whatever techniques the director or writer has in store for them. But what if someone is watching a movie on their phone on a bus somewhere, instead of in the cinema? Researchers (see, for instance, Virilio, 1997; Poster, 2001) often talk about **media saturation** in trying to define the way many of us live our lives these days, swimming – or maybe drowning – in a sea of media of all kinds. And the sheer amount of media we encounter is undoubtedly important, but the truth is that most of it is like water off a duck's back (Neuman, 1991). You might be exposed to hundreds of advertisements in a single day, but it is unlikely that you will be directly influenced by more than a handful of them.

Even if we don't go and rush out to buy every product pitched to us in a commercial, you might think, mustn't there be a cumulative effect if we face a constant barrage of advertisements for fashion, cosmetics or technology? This is what a second perspective or **political economy** view on things would ask, and the simple answer is that there definitely is. But we also know that different people are affected by the same media in different ways (Hall, 1973). There are people who pay no attention whatsoever to fashion, for instance, and that makes it difficult to talk about how 'the media' shape the way that we as a society think about it, or indeed about ideas that might be associated with fashion, such as gender or **consumerism**.

MEDIA SATURATION
Also known as the mediation of everything, **media saturation** refers to the fact that so many everyday practices – standing at a bus stop, going to a bank – have mediated dimensions

POLITICAL ECONOMY
The political economy perspective on media is all about power, especially the power that different institutions have to influence the way media cover things to their own advantage

CONSUMERISM
Consumerism refers to the fact that a lot of what we do for fun, relaxation, in our relationships and in expressing who we are involves buying things

In more conceptual terms, while we used to imagine 'the media' as a coherent entity at the centre of society that we all face towards and pay attention to in more or less the same way, we now think of lots of different media dispersed unevenly and often unpredictably across society generally and our own lives too (Couldry, 2003). Many people still watch blockbuster Hollywood movies, but we no longer assume that 'cinema' is synonymous with Hollywood – and neither do we believe that everyone has the same reaction to representations of sex and violence in mainstream films. Likewise, the charts tell us that at any given moment there are singers and bands that are more popular than anyone else, but there are also countless alternatives available. And more to the point, a teenager will likely respond differently to sexually charged lyrics than would a small child or an adult, and your experience of music in general will be different if you listen to it while doing your homework, or with friends or at the gym.

Now, you might think that this way of talking about media, emphasizing the proliferation of content and the fragmentation of audiences, makes it difficult to answer that question about how powerful media are. But in fact, and this comes from recent developments in philosophy as much as anywhere else, power is at its most effective precisely when it is diffuse, experienced in a million ways in the ebb and flow of our daily lives and often hardly noticed at all. A good way to start, then, is by putting to one side a couple of claims that are appealing in their explanatory force, but ultimately unhelpful: that society makes us act in certain ways, and that the media tell people what to think. The truth is rather more complicated than that. So instead of asking what media do to people, here we will be turning this question on its head and asking instead: what do people do with media?

Media and everyday life

There is a video on YouTube of a toddler pawing at a magazine, frustrated because the gestures she has learned to navigate from one section to another on a touchscreen do not seem to work on actual paper. What this illustrates is that the way we interact with media often comes to us as second nature, requiring no effort or conscious thought, but what we experience as something that just comes naturally is actually quite context specific. A toddler 20 years ago would not have acquired those same hand movements that allow her to sail effortlessly through the particular experience of digital media that an iPad affords – though they doubtless will have had other skills and instincts lost to today's generation. Similarly, it is likely that in 20 years' time a whole new set of practices will have to be learned in order to access the same kind of media content. And yet learning them will not seem like hard work – for most, at least, it will quickly feel like the most natural thing in the world.

This does not only apply to hand gestures, either. Much of what we think about everything from what constitutes 'good' music to how to live a good life and how society should be organized are as taken for granted as the way we use our fingers to work a smartphone. This is power in action, and to understand it properly we need to look at our everyday routines and ask: how did this become normal? Social media is a good case in point. When Facebook was first launched there was considerable concern about how much private information people were sharing, often with others they did not know in 'real life'. There was outrage (Morozov, 2011) when the platform changed its privacy settings so that not only friends but friends of friends could access certain parts of your profile, even more so (Andrejevic, 2011) when Facebook started to sell what you had shared about yourself to companies who would then mine your data in order to sell you products and services. But for most of us the outrage did not last long: accepting the privacy terms and conditions, usually without reading them, seemed like a reasonable trade-off for access to a platform that at the everyday level is enjoyable (Figure 1.1).

How did this become normal? To understand this we need to look not only at what people do routinely, but why. And this means trying to understand what motivates people's **media practices** and where those practices come from. Researchers disagree about whether social media satisfy a desire that was always latent in us to connect in more dispersed ways than is possible among communities reliant on face-to-face communication – or whether they effectively created that desire. Either way, for billions of people using social media quickly became established as something that was desirable to do, and then as something you just did without giving it much thought. Advertisers might not be able to magic new desires out of thin air, but being asked to consider trying out something you have not tried before can be flattering rather than annoying, and the imagination you draw on to picture new experiences you might have make it easy to think of the desire for that experience as something coming from inside you.

> **MEDIA PRACTICES**
> Media practice theory is important. It starts from the premise that what really matters about media cannot be read from media texts, but instead from what people do with media: making it, consuming it, ignoring it, talking about it

The same goes for fear. A news outlet cannot just make you mistrust people of different religions, for instance. But it is natural enough to feel uncertain or even anxious about change taking place around you, and the object of that uncertainty – the specific
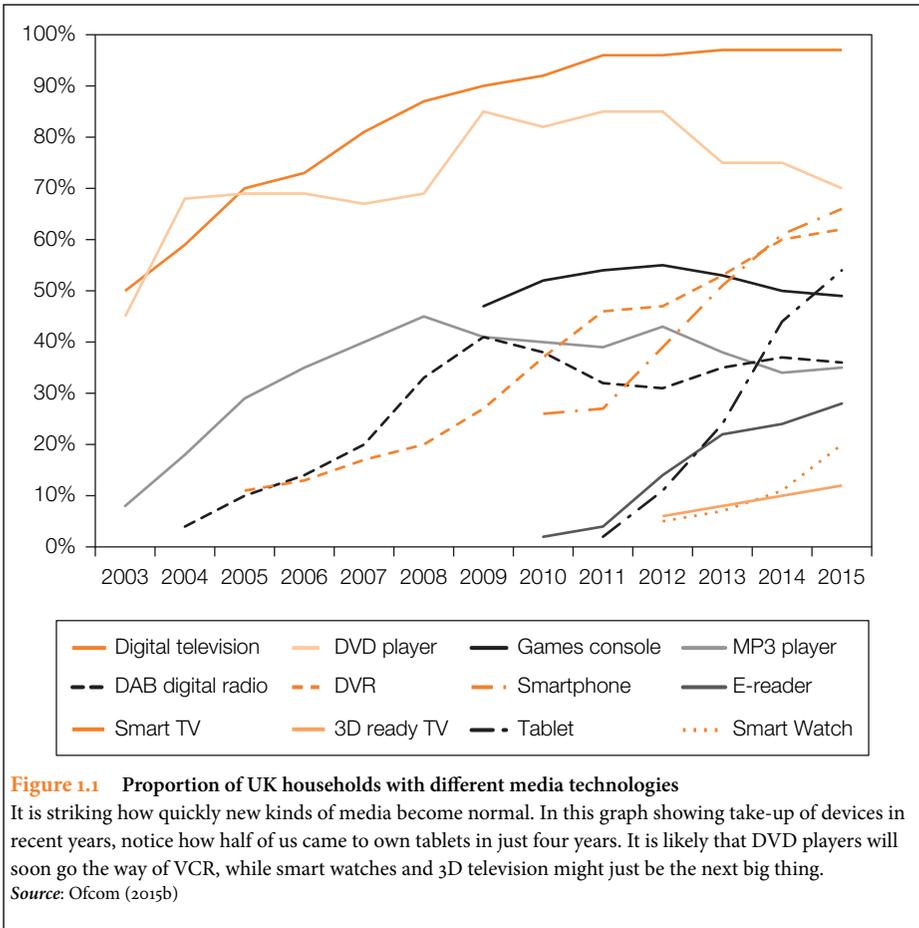
Figure 1.1   Proportion of UK households with different media technologies
It is striking how quickly new kinds of media become normal. In this graph showing take-up of devices in recent years, notice how half of us came to own tablets in just four years. It is likely that DVD players will soon go the way of VCR, while smart watches and 3D television might just be the next big thing.
Source: Ofcom (2015b)

form you give to your general unease about the fact that the world you know will not remain the same – can harden as you scan the news on a daily basis, going from it being imaginable that certain groups are untrustworthy, to it being plausible and finally plain common sense that they present a real threat to you and your way of life.

These are just two examples, but they both point towards a complex relationship between media and identity which can often leave us feeling that we are being asked to answer which came first, the chicken or the egg. Is someone naturally predisposed to suffer body image anxiety, or is it a product of the unrealistic **representation** of bodies in the media? The advantage of the everyday life approach is that we can stop thinking of the media as something 'out there' doing things to us, but instead part of the environment in which we became ourselves in the first place and which we now inhabit as we work, study and socialize. This does not mean, though, that we let media off the hook, write it off as a benign backdrop to the lives we lead. There are, after all, relationships between the

REPRESENTATION
Representation is about norms: the way that certain images of different people and phenomena become so entrenched that it is taken for granted that they are realistic

media that people use and the kind of people they are. Many theorists have tried to come up with an appropriate way of fathoming these relationships, without ever falling into the trap of concluding that media force us to think and behave in certain ways, or to be so naive as to think that we are all unique individuals who can do whatever pleases us. The truth is that we are more predictable than we like to think, especially in our media tastes and habits, but this does not quite make us sheep.

The big picture: media and power

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION
How do all society's inequalities and hierarchies continue from one day to the next, year after year? Functionalists start from the premise that institutions like 'the media' exist primarily in order to make sure the current social order continues as is, along with all the inequalities associated with it.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984), like other theorists starting from a functionalist view of things, is interested in the process of social reproduction: how society is geared towards the preservation of the status quo despite all of the changes that we see in the form of new ideas and technologies. This is inevitably about power (In Focus 1.1), and usually inequality too – uneven power distribution between people from different backgrounds, or between genders, or between developed and developing countries across the world. Taking our cue from this approach, we would then probe what role media play in helping social reproduction along. Giddens, though, also thinks that our practices are just as important as these wider structural forces. In short, social reproduction could not happen without the things that we do in our everyday lives. This sounds promising, because it suggests that we can decide not to reproduce society in its current form by changing our individual habits, especially those involving media. The catch is that those habits never are truly individual: the things we do with media are actually shared by others, and it is not as though any of us individually came up with the way that we navigate a website or graze our Twitter feed while half-watching television.

IN FOCUS 1.1: STEVEN LUKES' THREE DIMENSIONS OF POWER

Stephen Lukes (1974) devised a three-dimensional model of power that was not ostensibly about media, setting out the different kinds of power that might exist between two individuals he imaginatively named A and B. But his framework transposes seamlessly to thinking about the distinct forms that media power can take.

The first dimension of power is straightforward: the overall media you consume, or even particular media texts, exert power over you if they represent things in a way that is contrary to your interests. This is about clear cases of disagreement where media come down on the opposite side from you: say if you think of yourself as liberal but the media are conservative; or even if the media vilify a sporting team you adore.

The second dimension of power is about agenda setting. Here the media wield power when they keep things out of the spotlight that are really important to you. You might be

passionately opposed to global warming or fracking; the media disempower you not just by reporting on these issues in a biased manner, but by not reporting them at all. The thing about this form of power is that it tends to favour elites over the rest of us.

The third dimension is more insidious still. This is where media shape your interests and desires. You might think the things you want and believe come from inside you, but actually they have been inculcated over time through the media you pay attention to. This dimension covers everything from people's hunger for the latest smartphone to their buying into the latest moral panic.

Others, like Erving Goffman (1972), see these practices as more akin to roles that an actor might play or a costume that you might wear: they were there before you came along, and others may well adopt them and adapt them to suit themselves, but while you are playing the part or wearing the outfit you convince others as well as yourself that this is you. And whether you think about roles or costumes, notice that they come as a package: the same is true with media, since what you consume, how you consume it and how you feel about it tend to come in clusters.

We call these cultures of practice (Bourdieu, 1977), and all it means in effect is that, while nobody is exactly the same, there are identifiable types of media user, and they tend, roughly, to share other characteristics than their media use – their generation, or education, or their parents' line of work. This is where the debate gets heated, with researchers on one side (Peterson & Kern, 1996) pointing to the fact that we have never been so **omnivorous** in our media habits as we are today, and researchers on the other (especially Bourdieu, 1984) insisting that the choices we make are not really ours. If we stick with Giddens we get to have our cake and eat it, too: sure, your habits and tastes do not come from some pure, unique you, but neither are you just the docile product of some process of structural reproduction. There is a moment, in the midst of everyday life, when anything could happen.

> **OMNIVORES**
> Just like what actual **omnivores** eat, media omnivores consume a bit of everything – news and entertainment, high brow and low

Most of the time, of course, anything does not happen. While it is technically possible that despite all of our habituated ways of doing things with media we could all suddenly decide to change how we think about gender or government or drugs, we rarely do. But this does not mean that the media are brainwashing us. Perhaps the best way to understand this is through a concept known as **hegemony**, used by many writers but most influentially by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971). For Gramsci, hegemony is about spontaneous consent: the way that a thousand times a day you are implicitly invited to give your consent to things carrying on as they usually do. You could say no, but it would not normally occur to you to even consider it while you are getting on with your busy life.

> **HEGEMONY**
> Hegemony is about the dominance of one group over others, but it is more subtle than them bossing people about. Instead, it refers to how their power is secured through all of the structures that make up a society: economics, politics, culture … and media

Hegemony, then, is not about the government or media saying that you must accept certain ideas as true, or that you are not allowed to do this or that. It is instead a matter of being nudged to go along with the current

state of affairs just because that is the way things are done. This is potentially the most potent form of power that the media wield: the ability to present a very particular set of circumstances, with particular kinds of media content and practices dominating at a particular juncture in history, as utterly normal. Why this matters is that it is usually the case that this set of circumstances will be associated with a particular political and economic reality. At any given point in time, then, all the injustice and exploitation and unfairness we know is out there also come to seem nothing other than ordinary, or at least something we can reasonably tolerate – just like the privacy we are okay with relinquishing when we use social media.

You will encounter writers (see, for instance, Barron, 2012) who respond to this account of hegemony by reading all manner of media as tools of indoctrination. Running through a television talent show, for instance, is a neoliberal agenda – meaning that the spontaneous consent sought by the programme is to dog-eat-dog individualistic competition for status and wealth, won not through talent alone but the stale repetition of middle-of-the-road commercial taste and selling your authentic self as a debased commodity. Or we might not take it so seriously. It is worth noting, at the very least, that different audiences will take different things out of an episode of a reality show, and that there are different ways of watching them: sceptically, critically or in search of easily digestible light entertainment at the end of a long day. Those

> **NEOLIBERALISM**
> A much-abused term, **neoliberalism** boils down to the proposition that whatever is best for business is best for society, too. It is often criticised by media scholars.

same writers will retort that because our media culture is saturated with this kind of content, in the end it does not matter what kind of resistance you put up (see Garnham, 1990). Ultimately it is worse than being invited repeatedly to consent to the **neoliberal** agenda – you are being asked to become its cheerleader, someone who embodies its capitalist dogma as your own personal values.

And again, we might respond with a suggestion to lighten up a little. First, a lot of people are highly media literate and know full well how artificially these programmes are put together. Further, to suggest that people cannot enjoy a show just for a laugh without there being an insidious undercurrent of subordination is a little patronizing. The 19th-century philosopher Karl Marx can help us here. Marx was not writing about the media but economics, though the logic is the same: the question is not how media influence you, but how that very notion of 'you' arises in large part through mediated practices. This means that we can set aside the question of whether you are being corrupted by the media you consume, and instead focus on what kinds of 'you' are formed through your engagements with media. And if that all sounds a bit metaphysical, think of it this way: of all things your sense of who you are is the one that in everyday life you tend to experience as completely taken for granted. But how did this become normal?

> **IDENTITY**
> Identity sounds easy, but how do you define it: who you are, what you do, who you think you are or what others think of you?

The best way to get a handle on the vexed relationship between media and **identity** is to look at situations where identity seems to be in flux, with new ways of thinking about ourselves emerging. These are never shared by everybody, but there are certainly times when identifiable patterns can be seen, apparently given shape and amplified through different kinds of media. Two recent examples in many Western societies at first look very different, but can be thought of as two sides of the same coin: raunch culture and

retro domesticity. Both represent new ways of understanding gendered identity, and rather than simply inventing a new form of womanhood, both are examples of remixing identity: taking on a kind of female identity associated with the subjugation of woman and reimagining it as empowering. Raunch culture (Levy, 2005) came to be epitomized by the growing popularity of pole-dancing classes, whether conceived as a novel way to express sexual identity or packaged as a new kind of fitness regime. As it happens this phenomenon was exaggerated by the media, often overly hasty to spot a trend. But it is emblematic of a time in which positive expression of female identity was often associated with **aesthetics** and practices historically linked to the **objectification** of the female body in a patriarchal, heteronormative (that is, assuming that heterosexuality is the norm) world – put bluntly, an image straight out of pornography aimed at straight men.

> **AESTHETICS**
> Aesthetics is about what is beautiful. But who decides, and why do standards of beauty in art and music change so much over time?
>
> **OBJECTIFICATION**
> Objectification means, quite literally, reducing someone to nothing more than the object of another's desire, hatred or entertainment

Retro domesticity, on the other hand, took the form of a rediscovered love of baking, and an aesthetic that drew, often ironically, on an ideal of the 1950s American suburban housewife half-remembered from popular television shows and advertising back in the day. This is another kind of re-appropriation of identity: taking a version of womanhood experienced by many at the time as a kind of prison of boredom and unrealizable expectations, and retooling it as a response to a contemporary life in which work is the norm for adult women who often juggle childcare and looking after elderly parents into the bargain. Cupcakes made the old-fashioned way and fashion inspired by 1950s TV shows might just be thought of as a kind of harmless escapism on the individual level. But if many women are adopting such an identity at the same time it is tempting to pronounce a cultural moment, a collective, even a political rethinking of what gender means in the 21st century. And as with raunch, it is curious that this takes on a familiar form of female servility, this time one with ties to saintly, nostalgic ideals of motherhood.

What you think of media's role in all this depends on whether you think media are there to bring people together or to make them conform. Like the example of talent shows above, you could side with the functionalists and assert that media representations of the new raunch and the new retro alike are nothing more than weapons of indoctrination, duping women into believing that taking your inspiration from strippers and domestic goddesses, if done with a nod and a wink, will make you happy. On the other hand, though, you could give media credit for showing otherwise disconnected individuals what new things others are trying out, encouraging solidarity and sorority between women across the world. There is no shortage of examples where the media have acted as such an irresistible force for bad or good: think of the moral panics (In Focus 1.2; Cohen, 1972) that rear their ugly heads from time to time around the corruption of childhood innocence by popular culture, or alternatively the waves of pro-democracy protests that erupt in authoritarian societies and then fan out across social media (Castells, 2012). But before we get ahead of ourselves it is important to stop thinking for the time being about what overall power media have and instead look at how power operates in everyday contexts.

(🔍) IN FOCUS 1.2: STAN COHEN ON MORAL PANICS

Moral panics are episodes of media-fuelled fear and anxiety about perceived threats to our way of life. The word moral is key here: this is not so much about traffic accidents or cancer rates as things that things that threaten shared social values – common decency, family life, the innocence of children. If you look at a list of moral panics over time they can look pretty ridiculous, including everything from violent confrontations between mods and rockers in the 1950s through alien abduction and subliminal Satanism in heavy metal music in the 1980s to chemsex and social media radicalization this decade.

There are three things to bear in mind before rushing to judge people for falling for such panics. The first is that certain parts of the media love them. They have it all: lurid details, endless personalization (this could happen to your kids!), cultural decline narratives and ample opportunities for moralizing. The second is that while most people do not believe everything they hear in the media, they have a tendency to get caught up in and then propagate groupthink. Individually you might be sceptical, but collectively we tend to reinforce vague impressions until they become firm beliefs, even when they are very misdirected. Finally, moral panics matter because they are inherently conservative: the solution to a panic is always a return to traditional values, to the way things used to be.

We have come a long way since the early days of radio and cinema, when many feared that individual media platforms acted more or less like a hypodermic syringe, squirting content along with its unspoken agendas and assumptions directly into our brains. According to this view, getting into raunch culture ironically might be what Marx would have diagnosed as false consciousness – thinking that an objectively negative situation is in fact positive, and one you have chosen rather than having had imposed on you. But the very possibility of **irony** points to the fact that however impressionable we might be, the thing which makes us human is that we are self-conscious: not in the sense of being shy and awkward, but literally conscious that we are conscious, and thus able some of the time at least to think about how we think. It is self-evidently not the case that we weigh up every piece of media we encounter and think long and hard about what to make of it, but we do routinely make decisions about how seriously to take something on the basis of what its intentions seem to be, how well it appears to gel with what we already know, or what mood we are in. And this suggests that the media screens you look at are not the only things that stand between the people and objects you see represented on them and your brain.

> **IRONY**
> A difficult one to define, **irony** means deliberately using language or reading media in ways other than they are usually meant

Sometimes these mediating things, the things that sit between what you see and what you think of it, are social. Peer pressure is one term that is used to capture the sense of obligation we sometimes feel to keep up with what others are following, but it is fairly loaded – so is 'groupthink', referring to the way people tend to form a consensus about

Sometimes you barely notice media but it seeps into your awareness anyway – a billboard you pass every day, a song that is always on in the background, a political issue that people seem to be talking about. This is **ambient attention**

what is important (if not what opinion to have about it) without actually having a discussion about it. Learning through ambient attention is more eloquent, putting a finger on the way that without anyone having to explain it to you, you can often get a sense of what people are paying attention to and what the prevailing attitude is. Or you might rely on a trusted other, someone you know or recognize as authoritative, to give you the heads-up on what is worth paying attention to and what, roughly, to make of it. There may be a blogger or tweeter you follow who has a reliable sense of when some supposed new thing is really nothing more than media hype, or you may have learned through experience that just because BuzzFeed promises that some new trend or other will blow your mind does not necessarily presage a radical new cultural development.

A question of habit

The media's power to indoctrinate you into a novel form of subjugation or to recruit you into a new cultural phenomenon is also qualified by what you are doing and why at different points in the day. There are times when you are genuinely looking for a steer on what is going on, whether politically or culturally, and others when you are just killing time or taking a break from work or study and looking for light relief. You might have little choice about what to pay attention to on the television if you are not the one holding the remote (Couldry, 2004), and even a concerted effort to watch what looks like an important documentary might be waylaid by hyperactive children or a boss's out-of-hours emails. If your interests are primarily football and international diplomacy it may be that you live in a filter bubble (In Focus 1.3; Pariser, 2011) of personalized news alerts and carefully sourced Twitter feeds that leave you blissfully unaware of the rise of raunch or retro. Or your attention might be constrained by nothing more than hard-wired habit – the truth is that while any of us could spend our leisure time perusing an endless variety of material online, we tend to go back to the same places repeatedly and instinctively.

Habits matter, in part because they are so hard to break. British newspaper *The Guardian* underwent a visual revamp in 2004, its hard copy edition moving from the traditional broadsheet size to a smaller, more chic Berliner format. This meant axing some regular features and adding new ones, as well as a lot of reshuffling of existing content, and unsurprisingly the changes generated a lot of feedback, much of it negative. Many readers were upset by what they saw as a move downmarket, with popular culture and celebrity given a new prominence and political coverage seemingly hidden away. Others just did not like the look, with a profligacy of colourful images unbecoming an avowedly serious publication. An unexpectedly high number of complaints were received about the decision to move the cryptic and quick crosswords, previously printed in separate sections of the paper, to the same page. It turned out that many cohabiting readers had developed the habit of taking a crossword each, and this change had seriously disrupted their breakfast routines.

What appears to be a trivial unintended consequence in fact reveals a lot about the way we pay attention to media. First, it shows that while a lot of us are always on the