“20th Century Media and the American Psyche is an ideal textbook for educators who want to help their students engage with the impact of more than a century of changing media on the ways we think, remember the past, interact with others, and construct our identities. The perspectives here are both productive and generative, pushing aside old assumptions and pushing us to ask new questions. And the writing is engaging, personal, and witty, all of the things most textbooks are not. The interdisciplinary fusion of media psychology and media history is especially welcomed as a way to get students thinking critically about what has changed and what has remained as a consequence of earlier media ‘revolutions.’”

—Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts, and Education at the University of Southern California and Author of Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide

“A refreshingly warm, intimate exploration of what in less loving hands could be a chilly subject. L’Pree’s core commitment to our essential human ability to embrace media as a partner in our reach for identity and community is a psychology full of heart. Virtuosic in its research, and as gleeful as a selfie, this book is indispensable cheat code for anyone endeavoring to understand how we use technology to both celebrate and share our personhood.”

—Donny Jackson, Clinical Psychologist and Emmy Award Winning Executive Producer of CNN’s United Shades of America with W. Kamau Bell

“Dr. L’Pree’s incisive observations about media and culture never fail to make me rethink concepts I thought I understood. 20th Century Media and the American Psyche shows us how deeply our experience of narrative is influenced and informed by the forms of media in which that content is delivered. The ideal marriage of theory and experience, this book connects and makes explicit the sometimes invisible impact of media—from physical experience to psychological impact—on our understanding of ourselves through the stories we consume. Her rare intellect, combined with her ability to cut to the heart of any topic with compassion and deep analysis, makes her an author whose books will always have a reserved space on my shelf.”

—Lani Diane Rich, narrative expert and New York Times bestselling author

“Move over McLuhan, there’s a new media maven in our midst. In a book rich in sophisticated scholarship, exhilarating analyses, and some enlightened autobiographical fun, Dr. L’Pree invents and then develops a new interdisciplinary approach to ‘media psychography.’ This is a media studies book that’s truly about the media—medium by medium. It retrieves the idea that ‘the media’ are not just content and companies, but storage and transmission, examining the liberating properties of magnetic tape, for example, and the demographically diverse buffet that came courtesy of the coaxial cable. L’Pree proposes a new
history of our complex psychological relationship to the ever-evolving technologies by which we communicate, play, and think about ourselves and each other.”

—Robert Thompson, Director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture and Trustee Professor at Syracuse University

“I spend a lot my time finding signals inside the noise, as a thinker and a builder. With the pace of change inside of media accelerating, 20th Century Media and the American Psyche: A Strange Love provides a sharp perspective about our not so distant past and building the future, and Professor L’Pree’s painstaking look at 20th century media and its lasting impacts on how we think, see, share, and do couldn’t be more relevant. This is a useful resource for anyone leading an organization who wants to gain a deeper understanding of the forces that continue to impact how we think, feel, and see the world around us, and what that might mean for the new realities we are trying to build. If you’re leading teams, building products, or looking to engage with audiences thoughtfully and consistently, pick this up, and don’t put it down.”

—Jonathan Jackson, Co-Founder of BLAVITY and Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University

“In her timely but also visionary 20th Century Media and the American Psyche: A Strange Love, Charisse L’Pree Corsbie-Massay looks at media across three features, ‘intimacy, regularity, and reciprocity.’ Each figure illuminates a historical dimension of media while anticipating a future media that is to come and that has already begun to arrive. L’Pree weaves close readings of individual works, platforms, and technologies, infusing these analyses with doses of autobiography and first-person reflection. She forges in the process a brilliant analysis of the media and the ‘strange loves’ they engender, broadcast, and transmit.”

—Akira Mizuta Lippit, Professor and Vice Dean of Faculty at the USC School of Cinematic Arts and Author of Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video

“L’Pree connects the dots between media usage and self-understanding in a way that allows me to appreciate why, as a kid, I stayed so close to the radio speaker with boombox in hand in order to record my next favorite song to share with others in my life; why mix tapes served as a form self-expression through music; and why I have spent a 30+ year career in radio. 20th Century Media and the American Psyche helps me understand that my past and present relationship with media is intertwined with my personal relationships and far more complex than I imagined. It’s a reminder of why legacy media like radio continues to defy disruption and there is nothing at all passive about its consumption.”

—Joe Lee, Director & General Manager of WAER FM, Syracuse, New York
This innovative text bridges media theory, psychology, and interpersonal communication by describing how our relationships with media emulate the relationships we develop with friends and romantic partners through their ability to replicate intimacy, regularity, and reciprocity.

In research-rich, conversational chapters, the author applies psychological principles to understand how nine influential media technologies—theatrical film, recorded music, consumer market cameras, radio, network and cable television, tape cassettes, video gaming, and dial-up internet service providers—irreversibly changed the communication environment, culture, and psychological expectations that we then apply to future media technologies. With special attention to mediums absent from the traditional literature, including recorded music, cable television, and magnetic tape, this book encourages readers to critically reflect on their own past relationships with media and consider the present environment and the future of media given their own personal habits.

*20th Century Media and the American Psyche* is ideal for media studies, communication, and psychology students, scholars, and industry professionals, as well as anyone interested in a greater understanding of the psychological significance of media technology, usage, and adoption across the past 150 years.

**Charisse L’Pree Corsbie-Massay** is Associate Professor of Communications at Syracuse University’s S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. Charisse has dedicated nearly two decades to helping students think differently about media. In 2017, Charisse received the Award for Teaching Excellence from the Newhouse Graduating Senior Class. The current volume is inspired by a class entitled “Psychology of Interactive Media,” taught at the University of Southern California and Syracuse University.
20TH CENTURY MEDIA AND THE AMERICAN PSYCHE

A Strange Love

Charisse L’Pree Corsbie-Massay
To Dianne and Constantine, who help me see the past and the future.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: Why Media? 1

SECTION 1: Intimate Media—Sharing Experiences 15
1 Theatrical Film 21
2 Recorded Music 35
3 Consumer Market Cameras 50

SECTION 2: Regular Media—Synchronizing Experiences 63
4 Radio 69
5 Network Television 86
6 Cable Television 104
Contents

SECTION 3: Reciprocal Media—Affecting Experiences 123

7  Magnetic Tape 129

8  Video Gaming 145

9  Dial-up ISPs 162

Conclusion: Why Not? 179

Glossary 184
Index 192
I would first like to thank my husband, Jeremiah, who did not know he was also marrying this book. Thanks to his ongoing and unwavering support, I did not have to choose between writing, feeding myself, and caring for our child.

I thank my parents, Dianne and Felix, who, through their innovation, allowed me to immerse myself in media content without interruption, while also ensuring that I could engage clearly and critically about and with the world around me. I would also like to thank my family, my grandfather Percy, my grandmother Elaine, my brothers Marc and Mike, and my cousins Damien, Pat, and Tai, who forever demanded more while loving me where I stood.

Thank you to each of my advisors and mentors, whose scholarly direction and encouragement resonate on every page of this book, including Henry and Cynthia Jenkins, Jeffery Ravel, Whitman Richards, Pawan Sinha, Tara McPherson, Tiffany Grunwald, Stephen Read, Lynn Miller, Richard Andalon, Cheryl Grills, and Bob Thompson, as well as Brad Gorham, Hub Brown, Amy Falkner, and Lorraine Branham.

Thank you to everyone who read drafts of this manuscript, typos and all, including Andrew Schrock, Lynne Vincent-Schmohe, Michaela Greer, Emilie Croisier, Lani Diane Rich, Dustin Sweet, and Mike Davis. Your continued critiques fueled my writing.

Finally, thank you to all of my students, including those at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston, University of Southern California, Loyola Marymount University, and Syracuse University, as well as the handful of middle school students who enrolled in my very first class on MTV in 2001 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. My conversations with you help me understand more of myself.
INTRODUCTION

Why Media?

In 2000, I had an epiphany while watching late-night infomercials: *With enough money, anyone can reach into your home at any hour and convince you to buy or believe something that you had never considered before.* In that moment, through this revelation, my life was forever changed.

Our new relationships with media are often told through generational stories because generational markers capture the experiences of cohorts who live through shared social, political, economic, and technological eras. I was born in 1981, right in the heart of a micro-generation referred to “X-ennials.” X-ennials are situated between Generation X (born 1965–1980) and Millennials (born 1981–1996). Growing up as the digital media environment of the 21st century emerged, we are defined by an analog childhood and a digital adulthood (Wertz, 2018). Although the uniformity of generations can be overstated, growing up with one foot in the 20th century and the other in the 21st gave me a vantage point to understand the relationship between media and psychology, especially in a rapidly evolving environment. I draw on these experiences to understand the intense relationships we form with media in this book.

Media have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. My earliest memory is of playing plastic records on a toy record player for my mother’s friends in our apartment in Queens. I wrote, printed, and bound my own autobiography using Printshop in fourth grade (see Figure 0.1). In sixth grade, I was frustrated that boys always won in the television commercials for board games and I convinced my teachers to write an angry letter to Milton Bradley. In high school, I obsessively made and traded mixtapes with my friends. As a freshman at MIT at the end of the millennium, I coded my own website using Netscape, which was full of spelling errors because spell check was not yet the default (Figure 0.2). I didn’t just grow up around media. During my early
FIGURE 0.1 My Autobiography (1990): The Print Shop (1984) was a desktop publishing program that featured user templates including newsletters, signs, cards, and banners, as well as a library of clip art. In fourth grade, we each wrote our own autobiographies, formatted them using an Apple II, and printed them on the classroom’s dot matrix printer. However, in order to use the manual comb binding machine, the printouts had to be glued to construction paper. This was my first self-published book.
FIGURE 0.2 My First Website (1999): Although consumer market internet access was dominated by dial-up internet service providers (ISPs) in the late 1990s, MIT offered all students their own web locker, which allowed us to build and host our own websites. I coded this website in HTML using Netscape Navigator’s (1994) editor feature.

life, I came to understand myself, my relationships, and my perspective on life through media.

While watching infomercials on this night, I was already aware of the power of media technologies, but its sheer invasiveness surprised me. I was in my home in my pajamas, completely relaxed and vulnerable, and I had effectively invited a stranger into my house to promote messages for unwanted products. This wasn’t an isolated incident. As an adult, I regularly curled up in bed with television, showered with my stereo, and showed my camera things I would never show another person. These personal habits are not uncommon. Today, 29% of teenagers sleep with their cell phone (Johnson, 2019). My relationship with media technologies had become so normalized that I couldn’t tell where they ended and I began.

Since my epiphany in 2000, my life’s work has been to uncover how my media impacted psychology. I wanted to understand how media affected my thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs. This interest took me on a long journey that helped me formulate this book’s argument about the cyclical relationship
between psychology, media, and culture. At MIT, I earned S.B. degrees in brain and cognitive science and comparative media studies, taught a class on MTV history to middle school students, and led a summer program at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston teaching members to edit video using donated Hi-8 cameras. I continued my education with an M.A. from the USC School of Cinematic Arts and a Ph.D. in Social Psychology, also at USC. I am currently Professor of Communications at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. After 20 years of academic investigation, it has become clear that media technologies gratify my emotional and physiological needs much like a friend or an intimate partner. In turn, these technologies have mediated and shaped my relationships with future technologies.

To describe the relationships that people develop with media, this book builds on an established research tradition in communication. Tens of thousands of studies have investigated media effects—the idea that media impacts the way its users think and act. Although popular, there are two key issues in this research that limit generalizability and application. By focusing on specific industries (such as journalism, advertising, and entertainment), content genres, and audiences, media effects research tends to neglect distinctions between media formats and collapses meaningful categories of media technologies such as theatrical film, television, or magnetic tape (Corsbie-Massay, 2016). For example, whereas the effects of violent content on violent attitudes or behaviors are well researched, there is a dearth of work comparing differences in psychological impact of violent content between movies, music, television, and video games. In addition, media effects research is attracted to new and popular media technologies—and even future technologies—at the expense of older technologies. Together, these shortcomings inhibit our ability to recognize usage patterns across technologies and time. Media effects alone would be unable to explain my own feelings of excitement, ambivalence, and hesitancy about media as I grew up.

Instead, I merge the media studies and psychological traditions in communication to understand the relatively stable psychological relationships humans have formed with different media technologies. Although each media technology is “new”—in that novel engineering enables new opportunities compared to previous technologies—past media trends and communication strategies establish behavioral patterns that impact our relationships with emerging media technology. Reeves and Nass describe in The Media Equation that new media engage “old brains” (Reeves & Nass, 1996). That is, we treat new media technologies similar to how we treat (and expect to be treated by) other people because it is cognitively efficient to map established strategies for interpersonal communication onto media technologies, meaning “new media” is never completely “new.”

Several other areas of scholarship reinforce the argument that new media is not new. Media archaeology investigates the interplay between media artifacts
across time, and scholars that embrace this methodological approach investigate new media cultures using insights from earlier media that itself was once “new” (Parikka, 2013; Gitelman, 2006). In doing so, they consider how media extends the physical self and affects how users view the world, each other, and themselves. Similarly, other scholars have explored how the grammar or language of new media—that is, the stylistic patterns present in the early usage of a given medium—are rooted in earlier mediums (Manovich, 1999). Bolter and Grusin label this phenomenon “remediation” and argue that technology becomes a medium once it is contextualized within earlier media practices; “a medium is that which remediates” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 98). In these formulations, mediums are defined by the opportunities that they offer to the user as well as the political, economic, and social structures in which they exist and are used, and in some cases, the cultural shifts that they trigger. For example, the term technoculture has emerged to describe how the opportunities of digital technologies result in a society that is more interconnected and actively shares content in real time (Penley & Ross, 1991; Brock, 2012).

However, these historical approaches to media have been isolated from the area of psychology. New media dramatically alter the communication environment, thus impacting social and psychological expectations. Considering media history through a psychological lens situates users as constants in a communication environment that evolves at an ever-increasing pace. Therefore, we must be equally attentive to how past technologies and technocultures established psychosocial norms that continue to affect us today. We must be informed by history while still attending to the psychological conditions in which history occurs. For lack of a better term, I will refer to this as a media psychography, or an examination of how the collective psyche impacts and has been impacted by media technologies. By looking to our own histories with media, rather than succumbing to the allure of newness, we can further unpack the complex relationships that users develop with media and provide insight into how people might build future mediated relationships, beyond anticipating future stylistic patterns.

What Are Media?

Before beginning this exploration, it is essential to define terms that many feel that they understand, specifically the difference between communication and media. Communication refers to any conveyance of verbal and non-verbal messages within an individual (i.e., intrapersonal communication), between individuals (i.e., interpersonal communication), and to many individuals (i.e., mass communication). By contrast, media are the channels and tools used to store and transmit information or data. They include media technologies—the objects and devices that are used to store and transmit information; media content—the messages that are stored and transmitted;
and the **media industry**—individuals and organizations responsible for producing and distributing content. In short, media are the tools that aid in or mediate communication, including but not limited to technologies, content, and industry. All media communicates, but not all communication is mediated.

This multifaceted definition of media is rarely embraced outside academia. When people complain that “television is ruining culture” or “video games make children violent,” they are blaming the invention for the conventions. Are they referencing *Masterpiece Theater* or *Dating Naked*? Does *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego* or *Halo*—both video games—make youth violent? This adherence to an overly simplistic definition of media as one homogenous entity eliminates nuance and inhibits a robust conversation about the role of media in society and user psychology. In turn, this silencing impedes **media literacy**—the skills that help users analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a wide variety of media modes, genres, and formats. For us to understand the context within which a message was produced (e.g., time period, technological capabilities, and gender relations) and its deeper meaning, we must be able to read patterns in media technology that constitute the current media environment.

Grammatically, medium is the singular form of media. Combined with the scientific definition of medium as an intervening substance, “medium” refers to any singular object or device that conveys stimuli to the senses, including stone tablets, paper, radio transmission, and even song. Compared to the multifaceted definitions embraced in media archaeology, this definition isolates the objective changes to the communication environment that are enabled by new mediums, a classic psychological method, and allows us to assess the impact of new communication opportunities.

Cave paintings, which are generally agreed to be one of the earliest mediums, dating back more than 40,000 years in Europe and Asia, enabled users to document their observations and experiences for posterity. These artifacts feature animals, humans, and narratives such as hunts—many simply include outlines of hands, a prehistoric way of saying “I was here” (see Figure 0.3). Other storage mediums, or devices that retain messages, include pots, jewelry, headdresses, and engravings on tools, each of which provides users the opportunity to convey messages across time and space. Alternatively, transmission mediums convey messages without storage and allow users to cast messages across great distances and to a broad audience—drum and smoke signals, which emerged around 500 BCE and 150 BCE respectively, may be considered some of the earliest broadcasts. Finally, memorable mediums assist in conveying consistent messages by presenting information in structured formats to improve memory and recollection. Often cited examples include oral epic poetry and the songs of medieval troubadours, which relayed stories, history, and culture in preliterate societies and were easily recalled and repeated to ensure message consistency across users and across time. Each of these categories represents a
FIGURE 0.3 Cave Paintings: Mediums contain messages created by a source and encoded with meaning that can be decoded by a receiver who encounters the medium and its messages at a later time or place. Cave paintings continue to resonate with us today because we recognize that someone is trying to communicate and we are eager to decipher their meaning.

revolution in the social and psychological environment by enabling new ways of communicating. Like language—possibly the earliest memorable medium—our means of communication impact how we think about the world, each other, and ourselves.

Our Relationships With Media

Over the last few decades, scholars have proposed metaphors to describe the phenomenon of mass media. These phrases and metaphors provide a lens through which to consider social interactions with technology. Marshall McLuhan famously said the “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994), implying that media technologies themselves convey relevant messages apart from their content. Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass (Reeves & Nass, 1996) found that users engage with media technology as they would other individuals. They claimed that “media = real life,” helpfully bringing media together with everyday life. Ken Burke argued that media functions as a window, frame, and mirror: revealing the distant world to the user, delineating what is important and valuable, and demonstrating what the user should expect of oneself (Burke, 1997). Extending to the processes of media and culture, Nick Couldry and
Andreas Hepp explore mediatization, or how changes in media and communication are related to changes in society and culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Each of these concepts and metaphors has advanced the discussion of media in the 20th century. However, each alone neglects the combined cultural and psychological changes brought on by new opportunities for communication. To understand individuals’ responses to changing media environments, we must turn to psychology, specifically our cognitive and emotional reactions to the world in which we live.

The 20th century was particularly tumultuous, given the rapid emergence of media technologies and the field of psychology. Mass media was largely stagnant for centuries after the invention of the printing press in the mid-11th and mid-15th centuries in East Asia and Western Europe (respectively). In the mid-19th century, electricity sparked a massive evolution in communication technologies, allowing for the consistent replication of visual movement and audio through film and recorded music, as well as rapid dissemination of messages via wireless and broadcast technologies.

At the same time, researchers began to systematically investigate cognitive processes in humans. In the public discourse, psychology is often associated with individual therapy (i.e., clinical psychology) or unusual patterns of behavior, emotion, and thought (i.e., “abnormal psychology”), but other subfields explore trends in the overall life experience, including cognitive psychology, which investigates mental processes like perception and memory; developmental psychology, an area concerned with how and why humans change over time; and social psychology, which studies social interactions and constructions of identity. In recent decades, media psychology has brought together media studies with psychology, a subfield that focuses on the relationship between cognitive processes and media. Together, these more quotidian perspectives on human behavior are the foundation of my arguments about the evolving relationship between media and individual users.

I argue that media technologies should be considered through a relational lens. We develop relationships with media technologies that mirror those we develop with friends and romantic partners because they satisfy a wide variety of needs, thus encouraging users to depend on and engage with them. Many scholars have investigated how we foster relationships through media technology, but neglect the relationships that we foster with technology. Media has become a central vehicle for intimacy, regularity, and reciprocity—expectations we typically ascribe to interpersonal relationships. Although the definition of media is broad, each new media technology changes our communication environment because it offers novel means of interacting with information and each other. Over time, these communication strategies become integrated and normalized, in turn affecting psychological expectations, culture, and strategies with future technologies. As with human partners, past relationships with media technologies influence future relationships by affecting our desires and expectations (see Figure 0.4)—we become accustomed to the tendencies of our partners (e.g.,
FIGURE 0.4 Psychology and the Communication Environment: How we communicate affects our psychology, and our psychology affects how we communicate. Communication technologies, including everything from language and music to smoke signals and radio, enable novel strategies for communication. As these technologies become normal, so do their associated strategies, thus impacting culture, society, and individual expectations for communicating. These expectations then impact the development and adoption of new technologies.

cooking, love notes) such that we expect and select for them in future partners whether or not we are aware of it.

Therefore, understanding our relationships with media technologies requires a long-term perspective. It took centuries for the printed word to be widely adopted as a normal part of culture after the invention of the printing press. By comparison, we have experienced an unprecedented advancement in the media environment the past 150 years—a blink in the longer history of human evolution. Consider electricity. First introduced to the consumer marketplace in the early 1900s, American homes have been electrified for just over 100 years. In 1915, only 20% of American households were wired with electricity, jumping to just over two-thirds by 1930 and 99% by 1955 (Desjardins, 2018). Since then, users have become habituated to electricity and electronic technologies. Users can produce power by simply flipping a switch, and this expectation of control and convenience was normalized within a few decades. Now, any disruption of this relatively recent opportunity can be frustrating. Dead batteries in one’s favorite device or a blackout reveal our dependence on electricity. Similar to our dependence on loved ones—we cannot imagine life without them.

Describing past media behaviors and their societal impact through an interpersonal psychological lens disrupts a key flaw in popular media effects rhetoric: that audiences are passive, or that we allow ourselves to be rapidly influenced. Responding to propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s, communication scholars proposed the theory that media have immediate, consistent, and direct effects on audiences. Although communication and psychology researchers no longer consider the individual as a passive consumer, this sentiment still pervades the