
Chapter 1

Class Action in the Media

San Francisco, California:

They live—and die—on a traffic island in the middle of a busy downtown street, surviving by panhandling drivers or turning tricks. Everyone in their colony is hooked on drugs or alcohol. They are the harsh face of the homeless in San Francisco.

The traffic island where these homeless people live is a 40-by-75 foot triangle chunk of concrete just west of San Francisco’s downtown. . . . The little concrete divider wouldn’t get a second glance, or have a name—if not for the colony that lives there in a jumble of shopping carts loaded with everything they own. It’s called Homeless Island by the shopkeepers who work near it and the street sweepers who clean it; to the homeless, it is just the Island. The inhabitants live hand-to-mouth, sleep on the cement and abuse booze and drugs, mostly heroin. There are at least 3,000 others like them in San Francisco, social workers say. They are known as the “hard core,” the people most visible on the streets, the most difficult to help. . . .

Every effort to help the Islanders—from family, probation officers, drug counselors, homeless aid workers—has failed. They have been in and out of hospitals or methadone programs and jails . . . so many times even they have lost count. “We want to get off the street, but I got to tell you true,” [Tommy, a homeless man, said], “Unless they take people like us and put us somewhere we can’t keep f——ing up, we’re going to keep f——ing up.”

How does this excerpt from a newspaper article make you feel about homeless people? Based on this news account, most newspaper readers would have a hard time feeling sympathy for the inhabitants of Homeless Island. To the contrary, they typically react to the situation depicted above, as reported in a San Francisco Chronicle series “Shame of the City,” with disgust, thinking,
“Yeah, that’s the sort of homeless people who are the problem”—bums who sleep on the cement, abuse drugs and alcohol, and panhandle for the money it takes to support their habit.

Compare that media-generated account of San Francisco’s homeless population with this one, also from a newspaper article:

“He’s OK,” Michelle, 48, said of San Francisco Police Officer Matt Maciel one afternoon after he gently told them to move their carts and then asked if they had enough to eat. “He’s just doing his job.”

Michelle remembers when she might have been the one calling the cops on people leaving needles outside her house. She was born . . . in Colorado . . . and was sexually abused as a child. Her dad was shotgunned to death young, and her mother was a drug addict gone to cancer. But before Michelle crash-landed at the Island five years ago, she worked as a home health aide and wore smart, pressed dresses.

She dreams of getting back to that life. “That cop might be the guy who helps me, or maybe the jail people—it could be anybody,” she said, giving Maciel a smile as he drove off. “I just need another chance.”

Based on this article, readers might feel some degree of sympathy for the homeless—especially for homeless people like Michelle. Surprisingly, both of these depictions of the homeless were written by the same reporter and ran in the same newspaper. Together, they show how media framing of a particular news story or television program often influences how we feel about the people described, especially when the subject relates to wealth, poverty, or the future of the middle class. The manner in which the media frame class has a major impact on how people feel about class and inequality. For example, most people in the United States are not really middle class (since that would be statistically impossible); yet, most of us think that we belong in this category—at least partly because the media define the middle class in such a way that most of us can easily self-identify with it.

Why “Framing Class”?

In writing Framing Class I aim to demonstrate how newspaper articles and television entertainment programs contribute to the social construction of reality about class in the United States, including the manner in which myths and negative stereotypes about the working class and the poor create a reality that seemingly justifies the superior positions of the upper-middle and upper classes and establishes them as entitled to their privileged position in the stratification system. Although I started this chapter with an example of
how the media frame stories about homeless people—those at the bottom of
the class hierarchy—the interest in class-based media research that led me to
write this book initially related to the upper and upper-middle classes. When
conducting research for The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and
the Social Reproduction of the Upper Class, I became aware of how little
has been written about media representations of class, particularly the U.S.
upper or privileged class. Though some scholars have examined media con-
tent in relation to race and gender, class remains largely overlooked or deeply
enmeshed in the larger race/class/gender sociological paradigm in these stud-
ies. **Framing Class** specifically focuses on class to fill in the gap pertaining
to media representations of class; however, I am not suggesting that class
is more important than race or gender in studying inequality. Rather, this
volume reflects my belief that we must consider class as the media frame it,
especially in television entertainment programs and national newspapers, in
its own right as a form of reality construction and maintenance.

Even a cursory look at the media reveals that class clearly permeates media
content. Regardless of whether journalists and scriptwriters or entertainment
writers consciously acknowledge the importance of framing class in their
analysis of everyday life, it continually imbues the millions of articles and
television shows written and produced each year.

Prior to writing this book, I had studied the media for a number of years,
and I must admit to being an avid reader and a frequent viewer of televi-
sion and films. Previously, I have focused on the ways in which the media
discuss social problems and how the political economy of media industries
contributes to media content. On a more personal level, my interest in the
upper classes and media emerged as I worked with the “high-society” media
in various cities, performing volunteer public relations work for several presti-
gious nonprofit organizations. In that role, I provided “fact sheets” and other
information to columnists and television reporters about major charity fund-
raisers such as debutante presentations, society balls, designer show houses,
and other gala events. While observing a variety of society columnists who
wrote about social elites, I became aware of the complex relationship between
privileged people and the paid journalists who work on the political, business,
and philanthropy beats covering their activities. I noticed that for journalists
to maintain their “inner-circle” access, they must typically take care with
what and how they write about the wealthy and powerful members of their
communities.

Based on these observations, I began to compare information provided by
the media about the upper classes with media representations of the work-
ing class and the poor. It was evident that journalists and television writers
hold elites and their material possessions in greater awe—and encourage
their audiences to do likewise—than they do the poor or homeless, who are portrayed, at best, as in need of our pity and, at worst, as doomed by their own shortcomings. I became convinced, in the words of sociologist Herbert Gans, that “the news especially values the order of the upper-class and upper-middle class sectors of society.” Consequently, although my investigation into media representations of class began with a desire to learn more about how journalists and television entertainment writers portray the rich and famous, over time my area of interest expanded. As I began systematically to gather data about the upper and upper-middle classes in the media, I saw how other socioeconomic dimensions (such as a person’s school affiliation or the cost and location of his or her residence) often become proxies for class. I realized that I should compare the framing of media stories across class lines to demonstrate fully the prevailing themes used to write about social class in this country. My primary focus remains on how the media glorify the upper classes, even when they are accused of wrongdoing, but I also demonstrate how the framing of stories about the middle, working, and poor classes may maintain and justify larger class-based inequalities in the United States.

“All Media, All the Time” and Our Ideas About Class

How the media portray class in the United States is a crucial issue because the typical individual spends so many of his or her waking hours with some form of media. In the past the average American spent an estimated three hours a day watching television, or the equivalent of forty-five days per year. When overall electronic media—including television and radio programs, televised sports events, movies, video and audio tapes, CDs and DVDs, video games, and website materials—were added to the mix, the typical person spent over three thousand hours per year consuming media products. However, these figures do not take into account the rapid expansion of all forms of media usage, including social media networking by people of all ages. American children and teens spend almost eight hours a day watching TV, playing video games, and surfing the Internet. This adds up to more than fifty-three hours a week—more time than many adults spend at work. Nielson Company reports, for example, show that individuals of all ages spend more than 5.5 hours a day on social-networking sites. People continue to increase the number of hours they spend in front of television sets and on computers, especially using such sites. A Pew study found that 72 percent of young adults and teens between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine use social-networking
Class Action in the Media

sites, and the number of adults over age thirty using these sites continues to
grow at a rate that will soon reach 50 percent of all respondents. As media
use continues to grow, so does the necessity and importance of systematically
studying media representations of wealth and poverty.

Understanding how the media portray the different social classes in our
society is important because studies have shown that how the media frame
certain issues may affect audiences’ attitudes and judgments. Although
some may argue that how media depict class does not matter because we can
each use our own experiences to balance any inaccurate portrayals that we
see on television or read in newspapers or magazines, this contention assumes
unrealistically that we can distinguish between the realities of the U.S. class
structure as it actually exists and the fictionalized version of a perceived class
reality as depicted by the mass media.

Framing is an important way in which the media emphasize some ideologi-
cal perspectives and manipulate salience by directing people’s attention to
certain ideas while ignoring others. As such, a frame constitutes a story line
or an unfolding narrative about an issue. These narratives organize experi-
ence and bring order to events. As such, they wield power because they influ-
ence how we make sense of the world. By the time readers and viewers such
as ourselves gain access to media products, they customarily have undergone
an extensive process of review and filtration. In the news industry, for ex-
ample, the joint efforts of reporters, writers, producers, camera operators,
photographers, and many others have framed the available information and
produced a construction of social reality that does not necessarily accurately
reflect the real conditions of social life. Words like “spin” describe the fram-
ing of stories based on organizational constraints, professional judgments,
and the targeted audience for the media product. Surveying print, television,
and Internet news, we find that lead stories and their coverage of particular
events are quite similar. The details are often interchangeable, and headlines
and leads use ready-made clichés. According to media scholar Gaye Tuch-
man, “The news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part
and parcel of everyday reality. . . . [It] is an essential feature of news.” Both
conscious and unconscious motives on the part of media framers play into
how the news is framed.

As in the news industry, the story lines, or frames, in television entertain-
ment shows are standardized and frequently repetitive. Similar plots are
found across a variety of situation comedies, the primary differences being
the location and the characters who act out the various events. Each year
during the holiday season, for example, numerous sitcoms portray a lead
character who attempts to help poorer individuals by giving them a handout
or who performs some other act of kindness toward someone less fortunate.
With regard to the portrayal of class in the media, all of this means that we are not receiving “raw” information or “mere” entertainment that accurately reflects the realities of life in different classes; in fact, audiences are receiving formulaic products that have been previously sanitized and schematized so that readers and viewers do not have to think for themselves or deal with the underlying problems of our society. Today, we must consider media framing as a process in which frame building and frame setting form important components of what we think of as reality. By this I mean that the framing of news articles and television story lines does not necessarily realistically portray class and how it affects our daily lives. We should not assume that what we see in the media accurately reflects class and class-based inequalities. In fact, contemporary media messages about class have a limited basis in reality. At the extreme, French social theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that media images have replaced reality to an extent that we are unable to distinguish between a media image of reality and reality itself. Other scholars join him, arguing that for many people the media constitute “reality” as much as anything that actually happens in the real world.

Consider, for example, how people have, for days after episodes of such popular television shows as The Office, Gossip Girl, The Bachelor and The Bachelorette, and the Real Housewives franchise, discussed what happened to the characters or participants, often referring to them by their first names as if they were friends or neighbors. “Did you see who Ali sent home last night at the rose ceremony on The Bachelorette?” is a typical question. Media scholar Todd Gitlin explains this sociologically:

Of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness—by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity. They name the world’s parts, they certify reality as reality—and when their certifications are doubted and opposed, as they surely are, it is those same certifications that limit the terms of effective opposition. To put it simply: the mass media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology.

As Gitlin points out, media products not only are pervasive and widely accessible in our society but have the symbolic capacity to define the world for people and to limit the terms of debate if someone challenges ideologies implicitly or explicitly set forth in the media product.

By analyzing how the media socially construct meanings about class, we can more clearly see how ideology and everything that passes for knowledge in our society can affect our thinking about inequality and our personal identity in regard to the class structure. Based on a theoretical approach referred to as the social construction of reality, I argue that we use the information
we gain from the media to construct a picture of class and inequality that we come to accept as reality. In the words of sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, “Human reality [is] socially constructed reality.” Accordingly, we learn about our world through primary and secondary socialization, which collectively serves as our induction into participation in the larger societal dialectic. According to Berger and Luckmann, we learn a class-oriented view of society by looking through the lens of the class-related perspectives of significant others—those people whose care, affection, and approval we especially desire and who are most important in the development of the self:

The significant others who mediate this world to [us] modify it in the course of mediating it. They select aspects of it in accordance with their own location in the social structure, and also by virtue of their individual, biographically rooted idiosyncrasies. The social world is “filtered” to the individual through this double selectivity. Thus the lower-class child not only absorbs a lower-class perspective on the social world, he [or she] absorbs it in the idiosyncratic coloration given it by his [or her] parents (or whatever other individuals are in charge of his [or her] primary socialization). The same lower-class perspective may induce a mood of contentment, resignation, bitter resentment, or seething rebelliousness. Consequently, the lower-class child will not only come to inhabit a world greatly different from that of an upper-class child, but may do so in a manner quite different from the lower-class child next door. In addition to the coloration given to class through the socialization process in the family, people also experience class-related coloration in the secondary socialization process when social institutions such as schools, churches, and the media present a highly selective (and sometimes distorted) view of how class works. Along with primary agents of socialization in the family and close friendship units that help to maintain the individual’s subjective reality of class, a number of “less significant others” reaffirm a person’s class location and serve as a “chorus in reality-maintenance.” The media are crucial agents in this chorus.

MEDIA FRAMING AND SOCIAL REALITIES

Framing is the process by which sense is made of events. When we read a newspaper or watch television or a movie, we live vicariously: we do not actually experience firsthand the event that we are reading about or seeing. Instead, we experience a mediated form of communication in which images and words supply us with information that shapes our perceptions of the
world around us. The media selectively frame the world, and these frames manipulate salience, meaning media direct audiences to consider certain features or key points and to ignore or minimize others. The term media framing describes the process by which the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television networks and stations, and the Internet) package information and entertainment before presenting it to an audience. This process includes factors such as the amount of exposure given to a story, where it is placed, the positive or negative tone it conveys, and the nature of any accompanying headlines, photographs, or other visual and auditory effects.

Although various analysts have defined and applied the concept of framing differently, early sociological views of framing by the media were often based on Erving Goffman’s Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, in which he states,

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. My phrase “frame analysis” is a slogan to refer to the examination in these terms of the organization of experience.

According to Goffman, frames serve as cognitive structures that guide perception and the representation of reality. Frames denote schemata of interpretation that make it possible for people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large. However, Goffman did not believe that individuals consciously manufacture frames; he thought that we unconsciously adopt them in the course of communication so that we can deal with reality and attempt to choose appropriate repertories of cognition and action. Thus, a key argument of Goffman’s frame analysis is that individuals make sense of their everyday lives by devising frames that shape and compartmentalize their experiences and help them explain the realm of objects and events around them.

Goffman’s frame analysis has been applied to a wide range of studies examining issues including social movements, gender politics, and news coverage of terrorism. For the most part, these studies shift his use of frame analysis from a focus on an individual’s personal approach to reality to a larger view of how other people or entities, especially the media, devise frames that influence our interpretation of reality. For example, in their examination of the framing process and social movements, sociologists Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow describe how social movement actors serve as agents who actively engage in the production and maintenance of meaning for other people through processes such as frame amplification, which involves “accenting and highlighting some issues, events, or beliefs as being
According to Benford and Snow, by punctuating or accenting certain elements, the frame-amplification process creates a conceptual handle or peg that links together various events and issues, and “these punctuated issues, beliefs, and events may function much like synecdoches that come to symbolize the larger frame or movement of which it is a part.”

The movement slogan “Homeless, Not Helpless” illustrates this function. Other synecdoches—such as “angry white males” and “soccer moms”—have taken on a political reality after journalists created pervasive gendered frames to describe social phenomenon, such as using the term *gender gap* to refer to differences between women and men in political preferences and voting behavior.

Framing helps us make sense of social life because facts have no intrinsic meaning. Facts “take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others.” Out of the many facts or bits of information that the news media might report on class-related issues, for example, frames are used to highlight or privilege certain items over others, thereby elevating them in salience—making them more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audiences receiving those bits of information. Factors that make bits of information more salient are their placement within a text, how often the same information is repeated, and the extent to which bits of information are associated with other symbols familiar to readers or viewers.

Although most often discussed with regard to the news media, the concept of framing also applies to the processes television entertainment writers use to create story lines for dramas and situation comedies. According to Gitlin, “Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.” As we watch a television entertainment show, we are influenced by the tacit theories that guided the writers of that program, whether we are aware of them or not. Like news reports, television entertainment programming provides “symbolic representations of society rather than literal portrayals thereof.”

Although aware that they are living vicariously as they watch fictionalized versions of life, media audiences may identify with the characters and the events depicted, coming to experience the emotions of individuals whom they have never met and will never actually know. For example, media blur the line between fact and fiction when viewers come to identify strongly with fictional characters or cast members on reality shows. Consider, for example, the now-classic television show *Marcus Welby, M.D.*, in which actor Robert Young played the title role. So convincing was Young’s portrayal that many viewers came to view the actor as an actual doctor and sent letters asking him for medical advice. These viewers could not distinguish the real actor Young
from the unreal Dr. Welby. Further blurring the line between the real and unreal, the actor Robert Young later played a doctor in television ads, recommending medical products to potential patients. Since 2004, real-life physicians have reported that TV series such as *House M.D.* have become so real to media audiences that these programs have impacted health care: Viewers/real-life patients have accepted as reality the medical cases diagnosed by the actor (Hugh Laurie) who plays Dr. House, and the real-life patients self-diagnose (usually incorrectly) their own condition as being a rare, life-threatening illness they saw on the show. Consequently, some patients expect their real-life doctors to order costly medical tests to determine if they have the rare condition shown on the TV series. Reality miniseries such as *Hopkins* and *Boston Med* contribute to media reality creation because they are quasidocumentary programs presented in an entertainment format for television. In these programs, doctors, nurses, and patients at major hospitals go about their daily routines, as if not being followed by a television camera crew, while they perform unusual surgical procedures such as face transplants. The line between what is real and what is fake becomes further blurred in the media as a wide variety of sources become more adept at gaining access to all aspects of people’s personal and social lives.

The framing of news and entertainment shows is not accidental. A basic premise of framing analysis holds that the process of framing is an active endeavor involving patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion on the part of journalists and writers who determine what material might be entertaining or newsworthy for readers and viewers. In the process of selecting some topics as important, they discard others. Once a topic has been chosen, determining the aspects to be emphasized, minimized, or excluded is largely left up to the journalist or scriptwriter. In news stories about the middle class, for example, journalists may frame articles to show how the middle class is victimized by the rich (for instance, if wealthy individuals receive a special tax break) or by the working class (for instance, if workers demand higher wages that will increase prices). In framing articles to suggest that middle-class people are victims, journalists may ignore how members of the middle class themselves victimize people in other classes, such as the low-paid house cleaners and yard workers who help them maintain their middle-class lifestyles.

Viewers and listeners often take for granted class-based media representations when they see or hear the same ideas repeated frequently. Take, for example, the annual media coverage that accompanies holiday charity toward those who are down on their luck. This coverage typically receives a homogeneous media interpretation as journalists and television entertainment writers give their annual nod to the poor and homeless by writing news stories or television scripts calling for leading characters to serve a Thanksgiving or
Christmas meal to the homeless at the local soup kitchen. These media representations suggest that Americans are benevolent people who do not forget the less fortunate. Ironically, the rest of the story line for the holiday episode of major television situation comedies typically shows the characters fretting over their own extensive Christmas lists and overindulging at holiday parties, conveying a message widely divergent from the one about unselfishly helping the poor and homeless.

Images of wealth and poverty repeatedly depicted by the media may either reinforce or challenge readers’ and viewers’ beliefs about inequality. This can be true even with regard to a situation comedy or other television program that viewers know is fiction. As communications scholar Linda Holtzman states, “We may say of television, music, or film, ‘I know it’s not real,’ and yet with heavy consumption of the media the repetition of the images will influence us in spite of that understanding.” Positive images of the wealthy may make us believe that they are deserving of their wealth; negative images of the poor and homeless may make us believe that they deserve their wretched condition.

Beliefs and attitudes can influence behaviors. In regard to wealthy celebrities who are constantly featured in media culture, philosopher and media critic Douglas Kellner writes, “The celebrities of media culture are the icons of the present age, the deities of an entertainment society, in which money, looks, fame, and success are the ideals and goals of the dreaming billions who inhabit Planet Earth.” If we accept this dream of fame and fortune, we may engage in voyeurism, vicarious living, and unduly high levels of consumerism, all the while concluding that there is nothing wrong with our society and that our primary concern should be to get rich and avoid being poor—or at least to be solidly middle class but able to show that we can live as the wealthy and famous do. Media analysts suggest that audiences are strongly influenced by constant media bombardment about the lives of high-profile, rich celebrities and that many everyday people seek to model their appearance and behavior on cultural icons they have never met. According to Kellner, for example,

The stars of the entertainment industry become fashion icons and models for imitation and emulation. In a postmodern image culture, style and look become increasingly important modes of identity and presentation of the self in everyday life, and the spectacles of media culture show and tell people how to appear and behave.

In sum, the melding of information and entertainment in the media has created an “infotainment society,” in which many people cannot get enough media spectacle and are willing to participate in everything from appearing
on reality TV shows as contestants to engaging in excessive consumerism that may bankrupt them.

For all these reasons, I became fascinated with the study of how the media have represented class in the United States. As you read this book, I hope that you will share my interest in this important topic.

**CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH**

Because little prior research had examined media and class, I began my study with newspaper databases, searching for key words and phrases like “working class,” “elites,” and “middle class” to identify a range of articles containing some specific acknowledgment of class location or socioeconomic status. I watched thousands of hours of television entertainment shows, looking specifically for such class-related identifiers as the occupational status of characters and the types and locations of their residences. I also examined media publicity about shows that emphasized economic characteristics, such as *Life of Luxury* and *Rich Kids*. Since the first edition of this book, I have continued my research and found many more programs with overt class overtones, such as *90210*, the *Real Housewives* franchise, *Modern Family*, *My Name Is Earl*, and numerous criminal-investigation/forensic-science television dramas.

Although my research includes articles from many newspapers, I found that the *New York Times* best reflected what was being printed in newspapers throughout the country; many other papers are affiliated with the *Times* syndicate and publish the same articles within a day or two. Reliance on the *New York Times* as a major source for my research is in keeping with the work of journalism scholar Jack Lule, who has stated,

> But more than any other U.S. news medium, the *New York Times* has become crucial reading for those interested in the news, national politics and international affairs. Understanding the *Times* has become a necessary part of understanding the times. Though not the biggest, it may well be the most significant newspaper in the world.

As Lule points out, stories are not necessarily truer if they are in the *Times*, but those that do appear in the *Times* carry great weight and are often widely cited by television reporters and others because they were initially published there.

I narrowed my research to newspaper articles and television entertainment shows because both are taken for granted as a form of either information or entertainment. Although reality series have become increasingly popular since the late 1980s and early 1990s, I have limited my observation of such shows to those that overtly employ the idea of class, such as Bravo’s multi-
city *Real Housewives* franchise, which follows the lives of affluent women and their families in places like New York City; Franklin Lakes, New Jersey; Orange County, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and Washington, DC. Regardless of the setting, *Real Housewives* programs focus on material possessions, expensive cosmetic surgery, and class-based distinctions such as whether a person may have money but still have no “class.” This series appears less staged than some others, but it cannot accurately be described as a show about how affluent women actually live.

Many “reality” shows are indeed staged and do not indicate the true class position of cast members. For instance, in the finale of the first season of ABC’s *The Bachelorette*, middle-class participants Trista Rehn (a physical therapist) and Ryan Sutter (a firefighter) enjoy a fully televised, multi-million-dollar wedding extravaganza paid for by the television network and the show’s sponsors. Beginning in 2009, a reality show on the WEtv Network has provided free, lavish weddings for middle- and working-class women. One competition on the network offered viewers the opportunity to win a $100,000 dream wedding by participating in a watch-and-play giveaway.

Regarding newspapers and class representations, I have attempted to gain a historical perspective on how newspapers have covered class-related issues over time. I found the archives of the *New York Times* particularly useful, as its articles dating back to the 1850s have been systematically organized by headline or key words and can be easily retrieved (for a fee) for full-text analysis. I carried out research on more recent newspaper and television news reports, as well as television entertainment shows, through Internet database searches. I recorded many of the television shows mentioned in this book and watched the episodes numerous times, looking each time for subtle nuances of class that I previously might have missed.

I divided all of the materials that I had gathered into categories reflecting the different components of the U.S. class structure and the divisions set forth by well-known sociologists in the field of social stratification. Despite the variety of views of the American class system, I find a fairly traditional model most useful for explaining the objective view of class because it reflects more closely than some other models what most media typically purport to show about class divisions in this country. According to sociologists, a class system is a type of social stratification based on the ownership and control of resources and on the type of work people do. One resource is income—the economic gain derived from wages, salaries, income transfers (governmental aid), and ownership of property. Income is most important to those in the middle and lower tiers of the class structure because, without it, they would not have the means for economic survival. By contrast, wealth is the value of all a person’s or family’s economic assets, including income, personal
property, and income-producing property. Some wealthy people do not need to work because they possess sufficient economic resources—derived from ownership of property, including buildings, land, farms, factories, stocks, bonds, and large bank accounts—to live very well for the duration of their lives and to pass on vast estates to their children and grandchildren.

Because the media frequently use terms like *working class* and *upper-middle class*, I employed the model developed by Dennis Gilbert and Joseph A. Kahl, which divides the United States into six classes—the upper class (or capitalist class), the upper-middle class, the middle class, the working class, the working poor, and the poor and homeless (or underclass)—as a basis for analyzing my data. The Gilbert-Kahl model identifies economic variables (such as occupation, income, and wealth), status variables (prestige, association, and socialization), and political variables (power and class consciousness), which I used to divide my data into categories for analysis. In regard to status variables, for example, the media often use prestige as a concept to differentiate between people on the basis of how much deference or, alternatively, condescension they receive from others. Similarly, the concept of association helps to peg a person’s class location with respect to the individuals or groups with whom he or she associates. Socialization is the process through which we learn the skills, attitudes, and customs of a particular class. In regard to the political variables of power and class consciousness, power is the ability of individuals or groups to achieve their goals despite opposition from others, whereas class consciousness is the degree to which people at a similar location in the class system think of themselves as a distinctive group sharing political, economic, and social interests. All of these variables either contribute to or limit opportunity for social mobility—the extent to which people can move up or down in the class system.

At the top of the social-class hierarchy is the upper (capitalist) class, which constitutes about 1 percent of the U.S. population and comprises the wealthiest and most powerful people, who control the majority of the nation’s (and, in some cases, the world’s) wealth. The investment decisions of people in this class shape national and international economies. Typical household income is about $1 million annually. The upper class includes “owners of substantial enterprises, investors with diversified wealth, heirs to family fortunes, and top executives of major corporations.”

Distinctions are sometimes made between “old-money” (upper-upper) and “new-money” (lower-upper) classes in the sociological literature. Members of the old-money category come from prominent families that have possessed great wealth for several generations. On a national level, names like Astor, Rockefeller, Mellon, Du Pont, and Kennedy come to mind. However, many regional elites also have immense wealth and pass its benefits on to children...
and grandchildren through gifts and legacies. By contrast, families with new money have accumulated vast economic resources during the lifetime of people in the current generation. Since the 1980s and 1990s, this money has come from high-tech industries, investment and banking, top-earning professions, and high-profile careers in sports and entertainment. Often new-money individuals’ net wealth exceeds that of people with old money. An example of new-money wealth is that held by Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, a surgeon, who added to his $4 billion fortune when he sold his company, Abraxis BioScience, to Celgene for $2.9 billion in cash and stock. Previously, Dr. Soon-Shiong gained $3.7 billion when he sold a generic-drug company he founded. The two sales together made him the wealthiest man in Los Angeles.\(^{53}\)

Like the upper class, the upper-middle class (about 14 percent of the U.S. population) is identified as privileged in comparison to the middle and working classes, working poor, and underclass in that the upper-middle class primarily consists of professionals with college and postgraduate degrees. This group includes many top managers of large corporations, business owners, lawyers, doctors, dentists, accountants, architects, and others who earn incomes far above the national average. People in the upper-middle class are often portrayed as having achieved the American Dream. Unlike many in the upper class, however, members of the upper-middle class work to earn a living, and their children must acquire the requisite education if they are to enter well-paid employment; they cannot simply assume that they will inherit family-owned businesses or diversified stock and bond portfolios. Typical annual household income for people in the upper-middle class is about $150,000.

By comparison, people in the middle of the middle class (about 30 percent of the U.S. population) typically hold two-year or four-year college degrees, have more supervision at work, and experience less job stability than those in the upper-middle class. Occupational categories include lower-level managers, semiprofessionals, and nonretail sales workers. About $70,000 is a typical annual household income for people in this segment of the middle class. In the past, middle-class occupations were considered relatively secure and thought to provide opportunities for advancement if people worked hard, increased their level of education, and gained more experience on the job. Today, however, a number of factors—including the recession of the 2000s, the housing crisis and high mortgage-foreclosure rates, occupational insecurity and long-term job loss, and the continual cost-of-living squeeze—are subjects of major concern and increasing analysis in various media sources.

The working class (about 30 percent of the U.S. population) comprises semiskilled workers such as machine operators in factories (blue-collar jobs) and some service-sector workers, including clerks and salespeople whose jobs involve routine, mechanized tasks that require little skill beyond basic
literacy and brief on-the-job training. Typical household pay is $40,000 a year or less among the working class. Few people in this group have more than a high school diploma, and many have less, making job opportunities for them scarcer in the second decade of the 2000s. Jobs in fast-food restaurants and “big-box” chains such as Walmart have been the largest employment growth area for the working class; the segment made up of semiskilled blue-collar workers in construction and manufacturing has shrunk since the 1950s. The working class has been hard hit by everything from natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and other major weather events to human disasters such as the vast BP oil spill off the southern U.S. coastline. For example, current estimates suggest that as a direct result of the 2010 oil-spill crisis, thousands of working-class jobs may be lost in the fishing industry, tourism, and the oil-drilling and oil-service businesses.

Below the working class in the social hierarchy is the working-poor category (about 13 percent of the U.S. population). Members of the working poor live just above or below the poverty line. Typical annual household income is about $25,000. Individuals identified as the working poor often hold unskilled jobs, seasonal migrant jobs in agriculture, lower-paid factory jobs, and minimum-wage service-sector jobs (such as counter clerk in restaurants). As some people once in the unionized, blue-collar sector of the workforce have lost their jobs, they have faced increasing impoverishment. A large number of the working poor hold full-time jobs, and some hold down more than one job, but they simply cannot make ends meet. At the bottom end of the working class, there is often a pattern of oscillating mobility in which people move back and forth between the working-class and the working-poor categories.

The poor and homeless, or the underclass (about 12 percent of the U.S. population), typically include unemployed individuals or part-time workers caught in a pattern of long-term deprivation that results from low education and income levels and high unemployment rates. In this category are unskilled workers, many single parents, members of subordinate racial and ethnic groups, people with mental or physical disabilities, recent immigrants with low levels of educational attainment, and individuals who depend on public assistance and other government transfers. Household income in the underclass typically is $15,000 or less each year. By using these objective criteria for class established by Gilbert and Kahl, I began to look for recurring frames used over time to describe the lifestyles of people in the upper, middle, and lower classes. It was interesting to see the extent to which these recurring themes could be found not only over decades but also over centuries in media portrayals. For example, although the harsh representations of the poor and homeless have been mitigated by the more respectful terms of political correctness since the 1990s, many of the same
Class Action in the Media

17

themes and framing devices are still used to describe the plight of those at the bottom of our society’s social, economic, and political ladder. Over the years, there has also been an almost fawning acceptance of the rich and famous, even when they are accused of wrongdoing, that is not found in representations of the working class. And though most people choose to identify themselves as members of the good, solid middle class, for the past 150 years the media have portrayed this group as fragile and caught perilously between the rich and the poor. Media representations of the upper class seldom suggest that its members’ favored location in the class structure might be short-lived, but depictions of the middle class often portray its members as holding on by a thin thread.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CHAPTERS

Because most of us think of ourselves as being in the middle class, that might seem the logical place to start; however, I have organized the chapters in a different manner, one that places the framing of stories about the rich and famous next to those of the poor and homeless so that readers can more closely compare the sharply contrasting images of wealth and poverty that continually influence our attitudes and perceptions about class. In this way, I hope to demonstrate the sharp contrast between the often flattering descriptions of the rich and the pitying or derogatory descriptions of those at the bottom of the class heap.

Chapter 2, “Twenty-Four-Karat Gold Frames: Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” describes the history of media framing of the upper class, showing how discussions of the rich and famous have captured the interest of journalists from the days of the earliest newspapers up to today, with our Internet websites. Changes in the “society page” over time reflect larger societal transformations and new information technologies, but they do not indicate a diminished interest in the doings of the wealthy and famous. If anything, just the contrary is true: audiences can increasingly feed around the clock on gossip about those at the top of the economic pyramid. For this reason, chapter 2 analyzes four positive media frames and their messages: (1) the consensus frame: the wealthy are like everyone else; (2) the admiration frame: the wealthy are generous and caring people; (3) the emulation frame: the wealthy personify the American Dream; and (4) the price-tag frame: the wealthy believe in the gospel of materialism.

Not all media representations of the top class are positive, however, and chapter 3, “Gilded Cages: Media Stories of How the Mighty Have Fallen,” sets forth negative framing devices sometimes used to portray the upper class: (1) the sour-grapes frame: the wealthy are unhappy and dysfunctional; and
(2) the bad-‐apple frame: some wealthy people are scoundrels and downright criminals. Chapter 3 specifically looks at media coverage of the downfall of some top corporate executives and people in the financial industry, showing how media audiences find these individuals’ excessive consumption of great interest even as they decry the greedy actions of these captains of industry. The extent to which some wealthy people believe they can buy anything, including their way out of trouble, is a recurring media frame discussed in this chapter. Media framing of articles about the wealthy showing them to be more interesting and more deserving of what they have stands in sharp contrast to portrayals of the poor as living tedious and less worthy lives.

In chapter 4, “Fragile Frames: The Poor and Homeless,” I show that although some framing of impoverished and homeless people is sympathetic, much media coverage offers negative images of individuals in such circumstances, showing them as dependent on others (welfare issues) or as deviant in their behaviors and lifestyles. A favorite media device employs exceptionalism framing: if this person escaped poverty, why can’t anyone else? This approach tells inspirational stories about people who have risen from poverty or homelessness to find greater economic solvency and happiness in the working or middle classes. The media use another device, charitable framing, to show how we can help the poor at holidays and after disasters. Articles and television entertainment story lines using charitable framing focus on the need to lend a helping hand on special occasions, but they do not suggest that we should make a more focused effort on a daily basis to help alleviate the larger societal problems that contribute to individual problems of poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

Chapter 5, “Tarnished Metal Frames: The Working Class and the Working Poor,” discusses five framing devices used by the media to portray the working class: (1) shady framing: greedy workers, unions, and organized crime; (2) heroic framing: working-class heroes and victims; (3) caricature framing #1: white-‐trashing the working class; (4) caricature framing #2: television’s buffoons, bigots, and slobs; and (5) fading blue-collar framing: out of work or unhappy at work. As these frames show, media representations of the working class typically do not provide a positive image.

In chapter 6, “Splintered Wooden Frames: The Middle Class,” I identify three key frames that I found frequently employed in media representations of the middle class: middle-class-values framing, squeeze framing, and victimization framing. The first of these—middle-class-values framing—emphasizes that the core values held by people in the middle class should be the norm for this country and that these values remain largely intact over time despite economic, political, and cultural changes. Within that frame, the middle class becomes not only the nation’s frame of reference but the ideal
model to which people in the United States should aspire, particularly those in the working and poor classes. However, the media also employ the other two (seemingly contradictory) frames that I identified to represent the middle class. Squeeze framing sends the message to media audiences that the middle class is perilously caught between the cost of a middle-class lifestyle and the ability to pay for it, whereas victimization framing suggests that many middle-class problems stem from actions of the upper and lower classes, actions that potentially endanger the middle-class way of life.

Chapter 7, “Framing Class, Vicarious Living, and Conspicuous Consumption,” looks at how the media may affect our behavior, particularly in regard to how we think of other people and what we purchase. It also suggests that changing economic times influence how the media frame articles and entertainment shows involving the wealthy, the middle and working classes, and the poor. The chapter suggests that we, as readers and viewers, must be more aware of class realities in our everyday lives and have a responsibility to ourselves and our children to develop a greater awareness of how news and entertainment programming and social networking color our views about our own class location and about wealth, poverty, and inequality in the larger society. Since print media, television, the Internet, and social media have become the twenty-first century’s primary storytellers, we should be concerned about the kinds of stories being told as well as how these socially constructed representations of reality contribute to the way we think of ourselves, fostering an unhealthy ideology that supports the ever-widening chasm between the haves and have-nots in the United States and around the world. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how old-media representations (in newspapers, magazines, and television) of wealth and poverty are replicated in new-media sources, despite the fact that some people believe that technology is completely changing the news and entertainment that we receive via new media, such as the Internet and social networking sites.
Chapter 2

Twenty-Four-Karat Gold Frames
Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous

Like Prada handbags and Hermes scarves, a spot on one of New York City’s most prestigious cultural boards never goes on sale, even in a recession.

Looking to join the power set at the Metropolitan Museum of Art? Be ready with a check for as much as $10 million. The price of admission can reach that high at the Museum of Modern Art, and remains roughly $5 million at the New York Public Library, according to people involved in the process.

“For those who can, we have an expectation and we try to be very clear about that expectation,” said Reynold Levy, the president of Lincoln Center, whose board members are generally asked to contribute $250,000 upfront and on an annual basis.

The pressure to raise money from volunteer boards has intensified as the economy slumped and broader charitable giving declined. Yet even with weakened portfolios, many people of means remain willing to answer the call because a spot on a cultural board is among the most coveted prizes in a city of strivers and mega-achievers. And spots are limited: the New York City Ballet, for example, has 40 voting members; the Museum of Natural History has 56.

“People want to be part of winners,” said Sanford I. Weill, Carnegie Hall’s chairman and a former chairman at Citigroup. “Give, get or get off,” is a motto many in the cultural world know well.

Although they have played down the glittering lifestyles of the superrich since 2007 because of the worldwide economic downturn, recent media representations of the wealthy continue to show that the rich and superrich spend vast sums of money on $22 million residences, $1 million yachts, $250,000 automobiles, and even cultural and charitable pursuits such as “purchasing” a seat (only if invited to do so) on a prestigious cultural board. In the words of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me.”
To emphasize the differences between the rich and everyone else, media framers often provide elaborate descriptions of the ways the wealthy spend their money and the social events they attend to “do good deeds,” or to have a good time and impress one another. This framing device conveys the message that the wealthy are not only different from other people but perhaps better than other people—or at least some of them may be better.

How media frame news stories about the wealthy and television writers develop story lines for entertainment shows that include affluent characters helps to shape our perceptions about the rich and famous. Communications scholars Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki state that people have two paths to social information: personal experience from formal education, socialization, and conversation with others and mediated communication from sources such as television and newspapers. Although some individuals in the top economic and social tiers may choose to be highly visible to others, their wealth and privileged lifestyle make it possible—if they so desire—to live completely away from the gaze of the masses except for the media coverage they receive. Accordingly, most of us do not really know how the “other half” lives. The manner in which news and entertainment sources frame information about the upper classes therefore helps shape how others view the wealthy and well connected, as well as how middle- and lower-income individuals perceive the U.S. class structure and larger issues of social inequality in general.

Media framing either reinforces or contradicts most people’s previously held ideas about the wealthy because we use mental shortcuts such as schemas—sets of related concepts that allow us to make inferences about new information based on already organized prior knowledge—across many different situations. Entman and Rojecki give this example:

For instance, mainstream U.S. culture includes a schema stored in many Americans’ minds that associates the concept of success with other ideas such as wealth, hard work, educational attainment, intelligence, status, snobbery, fancy cars, and good looks. Images representing those related concepts readily come to mind when people hear the word or see a symbol that evokes the concept of success—a picture of a BMW, a mansion, a big executive office suite.

By contrast, a television news story on welfare reform might summon schema about individuals on welfare as lazy or likely to be members of racial or ethnic minorities.

The most popular media frames for news accounts and entertainment TV program story lines about the rich play on the preexisting schema within many people’s minds that it is okay simultaneously to love and hate the rich. This is nothing new; fascination with the lifestyles and material possessions
of the rich and well connected in the United States goes back several centuries, perhaps finding its apex during the Gilded Age, between the 1880s and 1920s, and it has always contained a mixture of both love and hate.

FROM THE SOCIETY PAGE TO THE INTERNET: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDIA FRAMING OF THE UPPER CLASSES

Today, news stories about the top classes appear throughout the newspaper in sections ranging from “Top News Stories” and “Business” to “Entertainment and Leisure,” “Fashion and Travel,” “Food,” and “Book Reviews.” However, some of the earliest visible media framing of stories about the rich and famous found its way into specifically designated portions of major newspapers typically referred to as the society or women’s page.

The first society pages performed a useful function for journalists and editors who wanted to sell newspapers, but they also played a latent role for some of the rich and those who hoped to reach the top tiers of society. Writing during the Great Depression, social historian Dixon Wecter described the society page as a useful tool for the wealthy with social aspirations:

> It is seldom realized how greatly the Society Page has helped create social consciousness in the United States. . . . The Society Page, which is flowered with peculiar luxuriance in American journalism, has often been sufficient to confer leadership on individuals or groups simply by printing their names, day in and day out, or ascribing to them a dictatorship which is accepted first by the gum-chewing typist and finally by the enthroned dowager.6

Among the first journalists in the United States to print personal notes about individuals in high society were James Gordon Bennett Sr. and his staff at the New York Herald in the 1830s. No news item was too inconsequential if the participants included “people we know,” a designation used by many of the wealthy and well connected to refer to others whom they considered part of their in-group. According to social historians, plenty of individuals in the “people we don’t know” category read excitedly about such trivial matters as the comings and goings of the privileged class on luxury ocean liners or their parties at big New York City hotels, even when the economic fates of the masses were dismal by comparison.7

Experienced journalists frequently advised junior members of the profession on the importance of covering the wealthy. Social historian Wecter reported that one well-known journalist told a class of college students, “Only the rich man is interesting.”8 Before the advent of television and other electronic media, newspapers and magazines provided people in the lower
classes opportunities to see “magic phantoms,” such as the very wealthy Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, and to gain entry to her residence by way of tabloid reporters who routinely covered her activities and described her lifestyle in intricate detail. For those within the top class, sneaking a peak at the society page afforded an opportunity to keep score of one’s position in relation to other elites. For the newly rich, being included in the society page was a reason for celebration. For people outside the top class, the society page afforded a chance to live vicariously: “The society editor rejoices in barriers, cliques, snobberies, and invidious implications, knowing that these things make news and give the humble reader a sense of being ‘in the know’ even though he may never dream of impinging upon that holy sphere.”

Although the society page reached the apex of its power and readership during the Gilded Age and early to mid-twentieth century, its history reaches back several centuries. It is believed that the idea was borrowed from the European custom of reporting on the comings and goings of royalty, who at the time received dignified, low-key treatment, unlike in the tabloid formats that later emerged and brought great embarrassment to many royal families. In the United States, however, the New York Herald’s Bennett adopted a tell-all tabloid format in his reporting on high society in America:

No one ever attempted till now to bring out the graces, the polish, the elegancies, the bright and airy attributes of social life. . . . Our purpose has been, and is, to give to the highest society of New York a life, a variety, a piquancy, a brilliancy, an originality that will entirely outstrip the worn out races of Europe.

By 1840, Bennett had successfully infiltrated high society by smuggling a society reporter into a famous Fifth Avenue fancy dress ball in New York City, with the host’s reluctant approval. Following that event, the barriers between “society” columnists and upper-crust hostesses began to crumble. As Wecter notes, journalism began to “break down the old exclusiveness of a clique which once regarded its balls and dinners as no more the public’s business than its bankruptcies and adulteries.” Eventually, the privileged class went from “anger to tolerance and thence to secret pleasure in seeing itself written up.”

After Bennett successfully launched the society page in the New York Herald, a number of other newspapers in New York and other major cities copied the idea of Society (with a capital S) as news and began to “dish up social soufflé” to the public. The job of the society reporter often went to a widow or an unmarried woman with the right connections and easy entrée into elite social circles. Perhaps the media received greater acceptance because many reporters shifted the framing of their stories from derision and mockery to admiration for the pomp and grandeur of the rich and famous.
Despite journalists’ greater praise for the upper class and its lavish lifestyle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the typical story framing suggested deep-seated contradictions in attitudes toward the way the privileged class lived. For example, in recording his impressions of a famous ball given in 1897 by the Bradley-Martins, one journalist stated, “The power of wealth with its refinement and vulgarity was everywhere.”

This ball—costing almost $370,000 for the party itself and the work to transform the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria into a replica of a hall in the palace at Versailles (outside Paris)—was considered quite excessive for its time. Ironically, the Bradley-Martins allegedly threw this lavish costume ball to stimulate the U.S. economy during a time of severe economic depression, stating that they believed the event would “give an impetus to trade.” The extensive media coverage of the ball’s excesses resulted not in praise for the Bradley-Martins’ charitable endeavors but in their decision to relocate permanently to England, outside the glare of negative publicity.

While some early newspaper accounts of the rich came from correspondents who entered the homes of the wealthy by getting jobs as butlers, chambermaids, or musicians, hangers-on who were never quite accepted into the magic circle of society were the main informants, dishing dirt on people who had snubbed them. Although little has been written about how people in other classes viewed earlier media reporting of the upper class, social historian Mary Cable states,

Annoying though this publicity may have been to its subjects, it was certainly adulation. For Society people, the nightmare was when the papers got hold of some scandalous event in their lives—a separation or divorce, a murder, an assault, a swindle, a paternity suit, a breach of promise, grand larceny, or some display of total absence of taste or common sense. The public wanted its idols to at least appear to behave well, and when they were found wanting, they were savaged by the process. “You can do anything you like,” was the famous dictum of the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, “as long as you don’t do it in the streets and frighten the horses.” Rumors might fly, but as long as no one admitted to anything, they simply flew, like Fourth of July rockets, and fell to earth harmlessly.

However, Cable notes, when the horses did stampede and an uproar ensued, newspaper sales were guaranteed to soar.

Although society scandals may have sparked a temporary upswing in sales, regular readers thrived on stories of society brides and debutantes, especially the coming-out parties that accompanied their debuts. Even among debutantes, there were inner and outer circles, and the public became enamored with young women who received such titles as “Debutante of the Year.” In addition to stories about debutantes from families with “old money” (families
that had possessed great wealth for several generations), many people with “new money” became the favorite topic of a new breed of society reporter who covered “café society” by hanging around nightclubs. The use of women to sign endorsements and advertise such products as cosmetics, cigarettes, pianos, and whiskey further blurred the lines between the truly wealthy and the celebrity set.21

Newspaper articles about the wealthy proliferated whether or not members of the media had official entrée into the lives and social functions of the privileged class, and these articles began to show up in other parts of the newspaper, such as the fashion, travel, and business sections and the women’s page. In The Private World of High Society, Lucy Kavaler describes how press agents in the 1950s became liaisons between the upper classes and the media because they had both society and newspaper contacts and did not hesitate to use the former on behalf of their clients.22 Press agents not only influenced what the media reported about the privileged class but helped to frame the settings in which media events took place. Some press agents held parties for their clients, which members of the media attended; others made sure that journalists and society columnists were invited to prestigious openings and charity events where their clients were sure to be present. Public relations people also facilitated publicity tie-ins between individuals and products, as Kavaler explains:

I was in Mr. Davis’ office one day when he got a telephone call from a man who is a favorite with both the international set and society columnists. He had been approached by a lipstick manufacturer eager for a publicity tie-in. The firm was introducing a new shade, to be called “Continental,” and it wanted the gentleman to be named “our favorite Continental” by a group of debutantes. They could then all be photographed together at a society hotel. Although this sounds pretty obvious, pictures of this type do appear regularly in the afternoon newspapers. Mr. Davis, of course, was expected to produce the debutantes—getting publicity in turn for his clients or their daughters.23

Although the daughters of old-line families might have had no interest in this type of publicity, many of the newly wealthy families jumped at the chance. Eventually, the combined efforts of public relations agents, debutante-ball organizers, party planners, and others who wanted to capture the attention of the media further blurred the lines between old guard society, the nouveau riche, and the media. According to Kavaler, in her discussion of high society in the 1950s,

The society pages are taken seriously in small towns and big cities alike. People will go to great lengths to be mentioned... Even in society’s inner circle very few pay more than lip service to the still much-quoted cliché: “A lady’s name
should appear in the newspapers three times—when she is born, when she is married, and when she dies.”

In the decades following Kavaler’s writing, sociologists like G. William Domhoff turned to the society or women’s page as “a window on the ruling class.” Although no longer strictly considered a society page, the women’s page of daily newspapers became one of the central places where readers could learn about the ruling class. Some papers referred to this section as the people’s page, but it still contained society news, gossip, and other trivia about the wealthy and famous. Based on research in the women’s pages of various newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s, Domhoff asserted that there indeed existed a cohesive culture of the richest people and the top U.S. managers in high society. Domhoff deemed the women’s page not only useful in studying connections among people in the ruling class but informative about their lifestyle and shared ideology:

It is on the women’s page we learn that our business, cultural, and government leaders, for all their public differences on specific issues, share in a deeper social community that keeps them as one on essential questions concerning the distribution of wealth and the system of property, questions that seldom become issues, questions that rarely receive attention on the straight news pages. Only on the women’s page does the newspaper tell us each and every day that there is a ruling class in America.

Since Domhoff’s study, daily newspapers have largely replaced the women’s page with sections on lifestyle, food, fashion, and travel, thereby slightly reframing the stories they contain. For example, a 2003 article (“Tacos, Stir-Fries and Cake: The Junior League at 102”) in the New York Times food section not only gave a sales pitch for the Junior League cookbook and included several of its recipes but featured an interview with Deborah C. Brittain, an African American woman and former president of the Association of Junior Leagues International. In addition to being the official spokeswoman for the cookbook, Brittain was in charge of dispelling myths about the Junior League, historically known as an organization that “doubled for decades as an exclusive social club where the blood was blue and the gloves were as white as the members.” According to journalist Alex Witchel,

As for its stringent social qualifications, Ms. Brittain said, the Junior League relaxed them years ago. Not only had African Americans been discouraged from joining, but Jews, Italians, middle-class women and older women were as well. She dispatched this unappetizing bit of history briskly. “The Junior League is good at changing, which is why we still survive,” [Ms. Brittain] said. “Particularly in the 70’s, they realized their history had a little baggage. But for
the majority of our chapters, we’ve been there, done that, and it’s over. Now our membership is open to all women who want to contribute to their community.”

Even with the changes so described in the Junior League, most middle- and working-class and minority-group women remain unlikely candidates for membership in this prestigious organization. However, placing the story in the “Dining In/Dining Out” section of the New York Times gave it a more egalitarian frame than it would have received on the society page. As we examine contemporary media framing of the wealthy and social elites, we see that the top classes are now the subjects of news reports and other accounts throughout virtually all sections of major daily newspapers.

In the twenty-first century, television and the Internet are increasingly becoming avenues by which elites keep informed of the activities of other elites. These media outlets also provide a window through which middle- and upper-middle-class individuals can vicariously participate in the comings and goings of the wealthy and famous. One example is New York Social Diary (www.newyorksocialdiary.com), a website maintained by David Patrick Columbia, a society writer with access to many in the subcultures of international wealth and celebrity. This website provides party pictures of social and charity benefits attended by the rich, a calendar of “society” events, and a social diary describing Columbia’s interactions with members of the top tiers at parties and other exclusive events. Such websites have also become popular in cities like San Francisco (see www.nobhillgazette.com), and they are perhaps one of the closest equivalents to the old society page in newspapers.

Along with society websites, local magazines and neighborhood newspapers in affluent sections of major cities have become popular ways in which well-to-do people keep up with each other. In New York City, AVENUE magazine provides party pictures and stories about well-known socialites and elite volunteers, who typically live on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Such magazines can be found in affluent enclaves throughout the country. Weekly newspapers for the privileged also serve the function of the old society page. In Dallas, Texas, for example, newspapers and magazines sold specifically in Highland Park and University Park (among the most affluent zip codes in the central Dallas area) and available on the Internet (see www.parkcitiespeople.com) carry stories about society events in that area. Some stories highlight children’s school accomplishments or neighborhood issues, but most resemble the old society page, publishing party photos and articles about society events, debutante presentations, and elite weddings in the community. Although available to anyone who wants to purchase them, they serve as the virtual “in-house” publications of affluent groups, making it possible for elites to read about each other and keep up with social events regardless of whether major newspapers or television stations carry information about their activi-
ties. In this sense, the old society page is not dead; it has been reincarnated in newer technologies and more specialized publications read primarily by the affluent and well connected as well as those who aspire to join their ranks.

Most people, however, do not get their information about the upper classes from publications like these. Rather, their information comes primarily from the daily newspaper, any magazines they read, and the television programs they watch. It is therefore important to examine the framing mechanisms that these media sources use in depicting the various social classes in order to understand their effect on our perceptions of social class in the United States.

**POSITIVE DEPICTIONS OF THE WEALTHY IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY**

An examination of routine journalistic practices is important to determine what stories are covered and how, as well as what dominant cultural meanings they convey. According to media scholars, although each day’s news is unique in some ways, the framing of similar events in the past greatly influences how journalists observe and report a specific occurrence. As a result, information about the very wealthy is often framed similarly whether it appears in newspaper, broadcast, or Internet news sources or in the story lines of television entertainment shows. I have identified six dominant media frames and their messages used in articles and story lines about the rich and famous that I believe influence how people in other classes view the wealthy:

- The consensus frame: the wealthy are like everyone else.
- The admiration frame: the wealthy are generous and caring people.
- The emulation frame: the wealthy personify the American Dream.
- The price-tag frame: the wealthy believe in the gospel of materialism.
- The sour-grapes frame: the wealthy are unhappy and dysfunctional.
- The bad-apple frame: some wealthy people are scoundrels.

This chapter discusses the first four of these frames, while chapter 3 addresses the fifth and sixth.

**Consensus Framing: The Wealthy Are Like Everyone Else**

The consensus frame tends to obscure inequalities between the classes by highlighting ways in which very wealthy people are similar to people in other classes and by downplaying key differences between the wealthy and everyone else. An article or story that utilizes this frame makes it easy to
believe that the very rich are just ordinary people who happen to have more money than the rest of us and, further, that if we just earned or saved a little bit more, we could be just like them—if we wanted to be. If we are all alike, perhaps the concept of social class is outdated: the differences between us are simply gradations of accumulated wealth.

Consensus framing largely ignores, however, vast differences in lifestyles and life chances—the extent to which individuals have access to such important societal resources as food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care—between the rich and the poor. According to sociologist Dennis Gilbert, if income were a national pie sliced into portions, the wealthiest 20 percent of U.S. households would receive almost 50 percent of the total pie, whereas the poorest 20 percent would receive only 3 percent.\(^3\) In fact, the income share received by the wealthiest fifth of households is seventeen times that received by the poorest 20 percent.\(^2\) The average pretax income of people in the top 1 percent of households was $1,743,700 in 2006 as compared with an average pretax income of $17,200 in the bottom 20 percent of households.\(^3\) These figures look only at income inequality; they do not take into account wealth inequality, which has also increased dramatically in the twenty-first century. It is estimated, for example, that the top 1 percent of wealth holders in this country owned about 34 percent of net worth in 2007. As Gilbert explains, “The concentration of wealth at the top is so great that the top 1 percent now holds more net worth than the bottom 90%.”\(^3\) Consensus framing ignores the fact that few people in the top tiers of the upper class derive their income from a paycheck for hours worked, that the wealthy are not likely to experience the economic and psychological hardships of the unemployed or homeless, and that wealth may afford some people more leisure time, better security, better health care, and better connections and opportunities for their children than are available to people with less wealth.

Despite the vast differences in income and wealth across the United States, consensus framing of media stories serves the purpose of portraying the very rich as similar to everyone else or showing how the affluent and nonaffluent should agree on certain pressing issues or social problems. Articles about the Great Recession beginning in 2008 and disasters such as hurricanes and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico often use this framing device to show that rich and poor alike suffer from devastating events. An example is the Reuters .com article “Recession, Bear Markets Hit the Rich, Too,” which states, “Turns out the rich may not be so different from you and me: They, too, are falling behind on their mortgages.” However, the article primarily discusses the delinquency rate on multimillion-dollar mortgages, such as one month when there were two hundred foreclosures nationwide on mortgages of $5 million or more.\(^3\)
Consensus ("we are all alike") framing is compatible with the ideological perspective of scholars who believe that class is no longer a meaningful analytical concept for studying social life in the United States. For example, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters argue that advanced or postmodernist consumer culture has shifted the focus from class-based relations to relations based on "taste," "fashion," and "lifestyle," which have become key sources of social differentiation and affiliation, thereby displacing old identity packages like class. Pakulski and Waters contend that key groupings in contemporary society are organized not around class per se but rather around noneconomic, nonclass bases, including "ethnicity, gender, value-commitment, life-style, and consumption." Some analysts refer to this idea as the class-convergence thesis based on the assumption that differences in lifestyle between the wealthy, capitalist class and the working class have largely diminished or disappeared.

Previous assessments of how the media report on the wealthy have not examined the consensus approach to news reporting as much as they have analyzed existing media content to determine the topics most frequently presented and to assess whether they are class specific or not. Many media scholars believe that news media content focuses almost exclusively on issues of concern to middle- and upper-class readers and viewers. News items of concern to the wealthy, such as stock market and other business reports, are routinely presented with a pressing urgency, suggesting that most American families own stock and cannot wait for the latest reports from Wall Street and about other financial markets. However, the popularity of such reports primarily rests with the more affluent members of society because, as previous studies have shown, "most American families do not own any type of stock and four out of five families do not own stock directly. In fact, 86 percent of the nation’s stock is owned by just 10 percent of the nation’s families." Thus, as media scholars David Croteau and William Hoynes state, "the vast majority of the public is unlikely to be interested in stock reports. Most Americans do not even understand stock listings and reports. Yet stock market reports are a prominent feature of news programs and newspapers." According to Croteau and Hoynes, stock market reports vastly outnumber news stories on topics such as how to apply for welfare benefits or workers’ rights to form a union.

Although he does not refer to it as media framing, sociologist Gregory Mantsios argues that the media often send the message that "the wealthy are us." He notes that everything from business reports to fashion and sporting news, wedding announcements, and obituaries often has a built-in class bias not detected by ordinary readers and viewers. According to Mantsios, although the news as reported may have practical value to the wealthy, it has
a strong ideological value in that it sends the message that “the concerns of the wealthy are the concerns of us all.”

Political reporting is a key area of news coverage that sometimes portrays the rich as being like everyone else. Obviously, this framing technique has the approval of wealthy politicians and their spokespersons, who hope, at least for the duration of an election, to show that even though wealthy, the candidate shares important concerns and lifestyle elements with people in other classes. *New York Times* articles offer numerous examples of the consensus framing of political reporting. For example, the media often feature wealthy candidates and elected officials, such as New York City’s mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, when they are doing something that might endear them to the masses. In a 2002 article titled “Bloomberg’s Salon, Where the Powerful Mix over Meatloaf,” for instance, journalist Jennifer Steinhauer emphasized that multibillionaire Mayor Bloomberg, who owns not only a $17 million, five-story, 7,500-square-foot limestone beaux arts mansion in Manhattan but sprawling homes in North Salem (New York), Vail (Colorado), Bermuda, and London, likes to serve “common folk” food, including meatloaf and mashed potatoes, potpie, scrambled eggs, and grilled hotdogs to people he invites to his Manhattan mansion. The article begins, “A few times a month, 20 or so New Yorkers open their closets and contemplate what to wear to eat meatloaf at the Beaux-Arts town house of the 108th mayor of New York.”

Of course, as the article states, most people invited to come eat meatloaf with the mayor are celebrities, executives, and socialites who arrive for “an evening of comfort food, highbrow chitchat and networking.”

Articles like this typically appeal to middle- and upper-middle-class readers, the primary purchasers of the *New York Times*. The framing of the article appears democratic because the very wealthy mayor is acting like an ordinary person, and the meatloaf and potpie have middle- to working-class connotations. However, the menu served by the mayor’s staff also includes cocktail hors d’oeuvres, a first course of asparagus with lemon butter, a main course of meatloaf and potatoes, a dessert of berry cobbler with ice cream, an assortment of wines served throughout dinner, and after-dinner cookies decorated to reflect the interests of individual diners, including “a Labrador retriever for the dog lover, the insignia from Yale’s rowing team for an alumnus, or the seal of a hospital for a generous donor.” Although this front-page article is framed using the consensus approach (“we’re all the same; even rich people eat meatloaf”), it brings into sharp contrast both the commonalities and differences between people in divergent class locations. Media portrayals of the wealthy as just like everyone else (“good ole boys”) obscure vast differences in economic conditions in the United States. If the very wealthy are viewed as down-home people who just have more money than everyone else, the invidious distinctions inherent in the capitalist economy are obscured and
class-based oppression is downplayed, or appears to be nonexistent, in news accounts and entertainment programming.

As the Bloomberg example shows, one technique of consensus framing presents extremely wealthy people as basically like people in other classes but then sets them apart from others by emphasizing their wealth or “ruling-class” social position. Using this hook to catch the interest of media audiences, the newspaper or television journalist initially leads readers or viewers to perceive the wealthy individual as just an average person, perhaps no different from someone in the middle class, on the basis of the individual’s lifestyle or appearance. However, this down-home image is juxtaposed with an elaborate description of the person’s material possessions or net worth, clearly setting the wealthy subject apart from ordinary people. Consider, for example, this paragraph about S. I. Newhouse Jr., the octogenarian family ruler of the Condé Nast media empire:

The lights of Midtown Manhattan still twinkle in the early-morning darkness as a man walks toward 4 Times Square, a huge office tower. He is short and moves with a shuffle, a gait that suggests he may be a bit old for punching a clock at 5 A.M. With his khakis, loafers, and a green sweatshirt that seems too big on him, he could be one of the kitchen staff showing up to prep food at the vaunted Condé Nast cafeteria, four floors up.

But look closer at the sweatshirt and the outline of the New Yorker logo emerges. Peer closer at the man and S. I. Newhouse, Jr., is revealed, one of the world’s richest men and the owner, along with the rest of his family, of a far-flung and immensely profitable media empire. As chairman of Condé Nast Publications, he presides over magazines like Vogue, Vanity Fair and yes, The New Yorker—shiny totems built to assemble wealthy readers and the advertisers who covet them.49

This is a typical introduction for an article about a business empire and the wealthy people who control it. When a very wealthy individual does not appear to embrace overtly the trappings of great wealth, reporters often see in this a newsworthy beginning for a story even if the majority of the article concerns the holdings of the person’s business empire and personal wealth. By starting the article in this manner, members of the media build a tension or internal contradiction into the story line—juxtaposing appearance and reality—thereby showing media audiences that things are not always as they seem. This framing device allows journalists to reveal significant discrepancies between appearance and reality without questioning economic inequality, particularly the source of wealth and how it is otherwise spent. Journalists who use this approach are more likely to get interviews and personality profiles from wealthy individuals, many of whom are leery of publications that do not always show them in a favorable light. For this reason, images of
the wealthy as generous and caring people who engage in acts of philanthropy are among the most common forms of media coverage for individuals and families in the top economic tiers of society.

Admiration Framing: The Wealthy Are Generous and Caring People

The media also tend to serve the interests of the wealthy when they engage in admiration framing, showing the rich as generous and caring people who share their vast resources with other people and organizations. Although philanthropy, which involves a spirit of goodwill toward others as demonstrated in efforts to promote their welfare, takes place at all levels of the class structure, major contributions of money to worthy causes are uniquely identified with the upper classes, whose members can make larger financial contributions (even extremely large ones) than those in the lower tiers of the class structure. In this case, the media may serve as a public relations outlet for the wealthy, helping to smooth the rough edges of their business dealings and (sometimes) unscrupulous acts by letting others know about their good deeds. Of course, some wealthy donors prefer to remain anonymous; however, taken as a whole, these individuals number far fewer than those who desire to see their names on the buildings of well-known hospitals and universities or on the major donor lists of high-prestige nonprofit organizations.

Admiration framing is often used to publicize a high-society social event that raises money for a good cause. This type of coverage includes lavish descriptions of charity galas and other black-tie events, such as balls sponsored by hospital foundations or arts organizations. Events that collect money for the symphony or opera not only serve as fund-raisers but provide opportunities for the wealthy and well connected to socialize; media reports typically describe the duality between raising money for the cause and spending vast amounts of money to stage the event or attend it. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu used opera performances as an example, stating that such performances “are the occasion or pretext for social ceremonies enabling a select audience to demonstrate and experience its membership in high society in obedience to the integrating and distinguishing rhythms of a ‘society’ calendar.” Similarly, charity events provide elites and wannabe elites with such venues.

Extensive media coverage of high-priced charity parties may gain the admiration (or the disdain) of the general public. When the media record these prestigious, by-invitation-only events, they provide people in other classes glimpses of how key players at high-society social events conduct their lives. The typical tone of such reports can be seen in a 2009 article, “After the Polo Match, in the Tented Pavilion,” describing a New York event to raise money
for Sentebale, the charity started by Prince Harry of Wales in memory of his late mother Princess Diana, to help vulnerable village children and nomadic shepherd boys in Lesotho, South Africa:

His Royal Highness Prince Harry of Wales had finished his Champagne and found a seat. His small joke about falling off his polo horse had actually gone over rather well: warm applause from the jowly dons and willowy social beauties at his feet.

His guests at Table 1, at the Veuve Clicquot Manhattan Polo Classic, were in fact still smiling brightly, though it might have been less the prince’s sense of humor than the ravishing midspring day. . . . In the Royal Enclosure, the prince’s area, things were as they should be: The waiters brought the porterhouse with fingerling potatoes; there were sodden models, daffy heiresses. Michelle Paige Paterson [wife of New York governor David Paterson] sat to the royal left; Mark Cornell, president of Moet Hennessy USA, was opposite her on the right.

“I dare say,” said Mr. Cornell, an Englishman in a dashing khaki suit, “one thinks of Champagne, polo and princes, and it gives one a sense of exclusivity. But today . . . is about inclusivity. Fun yes. Exclusivity, no.” Such are the prerogatives of privilege, the license given the rich to construe their own good fortune as part of the Great Democracy.52

Using admiration framing in its introduction, the article follows with a description emphasizing the elaborateness of the event itself rather than the worthiness of the cause being benefited. Based on admiration framing, the fact that the event raises a large sum of money for a worthy cause justifies the behavior of those who spend tens of thousands of dollars on tickets (in this case, the fee was $50,000 per table) and clothing to wear to the event.

As some journalists point out, however, not all charity fund-raising is so glamorous. Some big-ticket fund-raisers benefit causes such as AIDS research, homes for abused and neglected children, or schools for the disadvantaged. In this case, high-profile organizers and donors are important for the success of the event because they will capture more media coverage than less well-known individuals. For example, media sources—ranging from websites to news magazines and daily papers—carry lead stories about very wealthy and well-known people like Bill and Melinda Gates when they give away billions of dollars for such nonelite causes as bringing better health care to the world’s poorest children53 or providing better schools for the disadvantaged in the United States.54 Rather than emphasizing opulent events, these media reports focus on the down-home nature of foundations like the one started by Gates.

According to one media report, the Gates Foundation, unlike the posh old-line charities, operates in the bare-bones environment of a refurbished check-processing plant that abuts a working dock on Lake Union (in Seattle) and
has no imposing nameplate on the building, just a street number. Similarly, Paul Allen, who founded the Microsoft Corporation with Bill Gates, announced in 2010 that he will donate half of his estimated $13.5 billion fortune to philanthropy, particularly to benefit the Allen Institute for Brain Science, which is linked to the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Experience Music Project/Science Fiction Museum in Seattle, Washington. Although Gates supports projects around the world, Allen’s charitable contributions go primarily to programs in the Pacific Northwest and tend to produce less international media coverage.

The seemingly low-profile, no-publicity-please approach of some contemporary philanthropists may diffuse public frustration over current economic crises and the excesses of contemporary capitalism. Philanthropy, when set in an admiration frame by the media, may help soften the rough edges of the capitalist economy in much the same way that Domhoff suggests the charitable work of privileged women volunteers helps to offset the negative public image of their elite husbands’ sometimes unsavory business practices.

Although some media reports may focus on the down-home nature of certain philanthropists, many other articles and television shows highlight the activities of the rich and famous in expensive surroundings, enjoying lavish food and entertainment in the name of charity fund-raising. From Manhattan to Houston and San Francisco to Atlanta, media descriptions of these parties typically resemble this one about the charity events organized by Houston’s social organizer Becca Cason Thrash:

Some of Becca’s parties looked like they cost a small fortune. At one Venetian-themed fete for [the] Houston Grand Opera, she had an authentic gondola shipped from St. Louis, lowered by a crane through a skylight, and placed in her swimming pool. At another party for Best Buddies, which she called “Shanghai in the Spring,” she transformed her home into . . . a Far East still life filled with Asian statuary, golden parasols, and dangling lanterns.

According to journalists, organizers of lavish charity events like these argue that such expenditures and visible signs of conspicuous consumption are necessary for successful major fund-raising endeavors because they inspire rich donors to contribute to a good cause. Often a few high-society socialites, such as Becca Cason Thrash, plan major top-dollar fund-raisers. Since the above description of Thrash’s parties was written, she has also planned major events to raise big bucks for UNICEF and the American Friends of the Louvre, as described here:

When Houston’s Becca Cason Thrash sends out an invitation with a dress code of “High Black Tie,” you better follow directions, and the guests attending her
Twenty-Four-Karat Gold Frames

The privileged women who frequently plan these social or charitable events for the wealthy and well connected also believe that this sort of media coverage is crucial for the success of the event. Evidence of this is found in columns like “Boldface Names” in the New York Times, in the lifestyle sections of local newspapers, and in neighborhood newspapers (such as Park Cities People in Dallas) and on numerous websites (such as Style.com).

The media also use admiration framing to describe situations in which naming rights have been purchased. The term naming rights describes a practice whereby universities, hospitals, and other charitable organizations offer, for a large fee, to name a building or a portion of a structure (such as the surgical wing of a hospital, a theater within an arts complex, or even a stone paver) after an individual, family, or corporation. Some colleges, universities, hospitals, museums, and arts venues bear the names of corporations—such as Comcast Center (at the University of Maryland), Save Mart Center (at Fresno State University), or Value City Arena (at Ohio State University). Other buildings are named for individuals or families who have made significant financial contributions. The McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin, for example, is named for Red McCombs, a major university donor who owns car dealerships and the former owner of the Minnesota Vikings National Football League franchise. Media framing of stories about very wealthy philanthropists like McCombs frequently employs humor. For example, media accounts of the McCombs naming event often mention a comment by also-very-wealthy Southwest Airlines founder Herb Kelleher: “For $50 million, I’ll change my name to Red McCombs.”

Not all media reports of naming events describe acknowledgments on such a grand scale as placing major donors’ names on the sides of coliseums or academic buildings. Some stories relate how people who give $50,000 or $100,000 in charitable donations receive little recognition other than having their names placed on a small stone paver or donors’ wall. Media reports of philanthropy at Disney Hall in Los Angeles are an example. According to one journalist, Disney Hall came in at nearly double the original projected construction budget; consequently, the project “became a rare naming opportunity, a kind of permanent billboard for wealthy people to have their names
Newspaper and television accounts of this naming event showed that donors giving $50,000 were honored with stone pavers (their names were two inches tall) in the concert hall’s terrace garden, while those contributing $100,000 were honored with inch-and-a-half-letter names inscribed on the donors’ wall (located in a more visible interior position). According to media reports, many people seized upon this naming opportunity and gave much more: “Every atrium, every staircase, every reception room, even every escalator in and around Disney Hall carries the name of a benefactor.”

Even when a major naming-rights donor is later involved in a scandal or crime, media representations continue to speak about him or her with a degree of admiration. What happens when the name of a major donor who has bought naming rights becomes tarnished? A typical example arises in the New York Times article “If a Name Is Tarnished, but Carved in Stone,” which describes the problem experienced by administrators and regents at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, when A. Alfred Taubman, an extremely generous donor, was convicted of price fixing:

Valets were parking cars and assisting patients at the A. Alfred Taubman Health Care Center here last Wednesday when a federal jury in Manhattan convicted Mr. Taubman, principal owner of Sotheby’s, in a price-fixing scheme. Just down the hill, University of Michigan students were entering the A. Alfred Taubman Medical Library to study for exams. Nearby, aspiring designers were completing end-of-term projects at the A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. . . . Mr. Taubman, who attended Michigan but left before graduating, has given more than $35 million to the university. His generosity does not stop there. His name is on institutes at Harvard and Brown, he leads a list of the most generous donors at Michigan State University, and he has given millions to Detroit area charities.

In articles about the Taubman scandal and how it might affect naming-rights issues at universities and medical centers, media writers chronicled Taubman’s good works and frequently concluded with statements such as this: “Mr. Taubman’s philanthropy, rather than his conviction, could still prove to be his legacy.” And, indeed, it appears that this prediction has come true: a number of university business schools celebrate Taubman as “one of America’s most successful entrepreneurs,” and his involvement in business and philanthropic initiatives was widely praised as he continued to reside in Michigan in 2010.

Admiration framing by the media typically includes informing ordinary people about how much it costs to be considered a real philanthropist. Journalists place price tags on donations and discuss what contributors receive in return. Admiration framing sends a mixed message to audiences about
philanthropy. On one hand, by informing readers and viewers about the large sums of money contributed by wealthy individuals, the media suggest that the average person cannot make a difference; on the other hand, editorials may urge each of us to learn from the good deeds of others and follow their example. At this point admiration framing becomes blurred with emulation framing, which suggests that ordinary people should be like rich people.

Emulation Framing: The Wealthy Personify the American Dream

The most obvious examples of emulation framing of the rich and famous crop up on the editorial pages of major newspapers or in television commentaries about their charitable contributions. Although news articles about philanthropists extol the generosity of those who give money for a good cause and typically include photographs of those individuals, editorial comments further edify readers and viewers with the significance of major charitable contributions and tend to suggest that ordinary people should also be philanthropists.

Two editorials are instructive on this point. The first concerns the Long Center for the Performing Arts in Austin, Texas. Banker and lawyer Joe R. Long and his wife, Teresa, had given an initial gift of $20 million to start the fund-raising campaign for transforming an old city auditorium (previously named for Lester E. Palmer, a former mayor) into a state-of-the-art performing arts venue. Long is quoted as saying, “It gives us a great deal of satisfaction in seeing something done with our money while we’re still alive. . . . [This project] could have an impact on lives in this community for the next 50 years.” The editorialist comments, “In the coming years, that kind of thinking and generosity will be important not only for maintaining, but advancing, the quality of life Austinites revere.” Although other wealthy donors, including Michael and Susan Dell, have reached into their pockets to give $10 million to help complete the project, average citizens do not see themselves as playing in the same financial league as these individuals, and funds have been slow to come in long after the construction project should have commenced.

The second editorial, from the Dallas Morning News and also reported on its affiliated television station, WFAA, concerns philanthropist Margaret McDermott’s $8 million contribution for the design of two Trinity River bridges to enhance the appearance of roadways entering the city of Dallas. The editorial, quotes McDermott: “If I’m a small catalyst in bringing this goal—this dream to reality, I’m thrilled. Also, I feel it might be the most meaningful thing I have been able to do for my city.” The editorial comments, “This is the kind of philanthropy that turns a good city into a great one. . . . Ms. McDermott shows us how it is done. Let’s all follow her
Neither editorial makes clear what the average individual might do to equal such largesse, and editorialists typically do not suggest that small contributions are as valuable to the public good as multimillion-dollar gifts from the wealthy.

Individuals on the lower rungs of the class system may be able to ignore the philanthropy of the rich and famous, but it is more difficult to ignore media stories about people who move from “rags to riches” through hard work and determination. This kind of emulation framing raises the question, If they can do it, why can’t you? It portrays the United States as the land of opportunity, where anyone who works hard and plays by the rules can achieve the American Dream. Basic tenets of this dream include the notions that each generation should have a higher standard of living than the previous and that all people, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, gender, or religion, stand on a level playing field with an equal opportunity to get ahead. According to the political scientist Jennifer Hochschild, four key beliefs are associated with the American Dream: everyone can participate equally and can always start over if he or she needs to; it is reasonable to anticipate success; success results from individual actions and traits that are under the individual’s control; and success stems from virtue and merit, whereas failure corresponds to lack of talent or will. The emulation framing of stories about the rich, particularly those who came from working-class or impoverished origins, incorporate these beliefs.

The old Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories of the late nineteenth century inspire contemporary media framing of stories about individuals from humble origins who make fortunes during their lifetimes. Horatio Alger–type stories perpetuate the American Dream by relating sagas about people who rise from poverty to wealth through hard work, individual initiative, and merit. Although belief in the American Dream may give working- and lower-class people some degree of hope for a better future, this ideology hides structural barriers to upward mobility. Ironically, some American Dream stories in the media contradict the notion that hard work and traditional values are important by telling of individuals who get rich through nothing more than good luck in games of chance. According to television, Internet, and newspaper accounts, the contemporary American Dream may be achieved through winning the lottery (see the TLC network’s Lottery Changed My Life) or winning TV reality shows like American Idol, America’s Got Talent, America’s Next Top Model, or The Next Food Network Star.

Stories about people who win multimillion-dollar lotteries like Powerball typically include at least these three points: the humble origins of the winners; their extreme luck, which might also come to others who purchase lottery tickets; and their hardworking nature, even after their windfall. The
story “School Cooks Win over $95 million in Powerball” contains all three ingredients:

They waited until the students got their lunch, then 15 school cooks and one janitor who each put a quarter into a lottery pool came forward Monday night as the holders of a Powerball ticket worth more than $95 million.

The women started their first Monday as millionaires back on the school lunch line where they fed the students in the tiny Holdingford School District before hopping a bus to the state lottery headquarters to claim their prize.

This media report tells of the persistence of the school workers, in that they put a quarter from each paycheck toward the purchase of four Powerball tickets for more than a decade before acquiring one of the two winning tickets for the $190.9 million Powerball jackpot. The journalist emphasized the women’s continuing dedication to their school lunch jobs, pointing out that they did not plan to quit immediately because, as one of the winners stated, “The kids come first.”

Although some rags-to-riches media stories concern onetime windfalls like winning the lottery, others employing emulation framing describe how an individual rose from poverty to wealth through entrepreneurship. Media sources around the world have told the inspiring story of Oprah Winfrey, one of the world’s wealthiest women, because she is seen as personifying the American Dream. Since the often-repeated theme of her television program, books, and lectures is the importance of self-empowerment, she serves as a media role model for success among the downtrodden. Here is a typical example of media framing about her humble origins and her rise to wealth: “Somewhere en route from dirt-poor Mississippi schoolgirl to TV news anchor to talk-show empress to award-winning actress to therapist for an anxious nation, Oprah Winfrey became a businesswoman.”

Journalism accounts of Winfrey’s success carefully regale audiences with the fortune she has amassed from The Oprah Winfrey Show, which airs in 145 countries and brings in about $300 million each year. Her net worth is estimated to be in the range of $2.3 billion, a figure calculated before she launched her own television network. Winfrey’s message—you are responsible for your own life—is in keeping with the ideal of the American Dream, making it all the easier for journalists to frame stories about her using the emulation model.

Winfrey herself has never suggested that anyone can be Oprah, but media accounts of her success suggest that others could do as well. According to one journalist, “By making herself and her struggles central to her message, [Winfrey] taps deeply into the American psyche and its desire for self-reliance.” According to “The Church of O” (an article in Christianity Today), Winfrey has become one of the most influential spiritual leaders
in America by seeking to empower others.\textsuperscript{77} Her gospel includes the belief that people can change and that they are responsible for their own destinies. Members of media audiences who see Winfrey as a role model may gain the unrealistic expectation that they too can become successful if they only work harder or change some negative aspect of their lives. This is a central message of emulation framing: You too can get ahead (like that person) if you try hard enough. If you are not successful, you have no one to blame but yourself.

Emulation framing involves not only class but race and gender. As an African American woman, Winfrey becomes the model for economic, gender, and racial/ethnic empowerment. She is not alone, however, in receiving praise for her ability to rise above inequalities based on race and class. In 2009 \textit{Forbes} magazine compiled for the first time a list of the wealthiest black Americans (based on net worth, not income), a number of whom came from working-class families. Don Peebles, worth $350 million, is the grandson of a hotel doorman but now runs one of the country’s largest minority-owned real estate development companies. Quintin Primo III had an estimated net worth of $300 million in 2009 but grew up in more modest circumstances as the son of a minister.\textsuperscript{78}

Emulation framing in news stories about wealthy individuals of color suggests that two barriers can be broken down relatively easily in our society: class-based inequality and historical patterns of racism. This type of framing suggests that low-income people, even those who historically have been the objects of discrimination, can rise up and achieve the American Dream of success and wealth. Given the long odds against such an outcome, emulation framing not only creates unrealistic expectations given economic and social realities in the 2000s but provides an excuse for those who are better off financially to deride those who are not. Emulation framing of stories about self-made millionaires and billionaires, particularly those who have demonstrated business acumen or talent as entrepreneurs, entertainers, or athletes, perpetuates the myth of the American Dream. Beyond descriptions of how the rich and famous attain that dream, media stories also suggest that a part of living it entails the continuous consumption of expensive goods and services in accordance with a gospel of materialism.

\textbf{Price-Tag Framing: The Wealthy Believe in the Gospel of Materialism}

Price-tag framing describes the practice of making the cost of luxury items a key feature in media stories about the rich and famous. While straight news accounts typically provide information about the basic who, what,
when, where, why, and how, price-tag framing focuses on how much. Notwithstanding the old saying “If you have to ask how much it costs, you can’t afford it,” price-tag framing informs media audiences of the cost of luxury items and who owns them. Whether on the Internet and television or in newspapers and magazines, price-tag framing is an extremely popular storytelling device because it both entertains and shocks media audiences with the expensive spending habits of the very wealthy. Media descriptions of the power-lunch hamburger (stuffed with foie gras and short ribs) for $29, the $6,000 shower curtain in the maid’s room, or the $20 million mansion inform audiences about how at least some of the wealthy spend their money. As the recession continues in the second decade of the twenty-first century, power lunches and high-priced dinners are still served in the finest, most expensive restaurants. Media reports such as “No Recession Special on the D.C. Power Lunch Menu” and “Expensive New York Restaurants,” which describes high-end restaurants like Masa in New York City’s Time Warner Center where the fixed-price menu starts at $400 per person, still abound.

Publicizing the price of goods and services, however, sets the wealthy apart from other people and in the process raises a barrier between the lifestyles of the rich and those of other classes. According to one journalist’s account of power lunches in New York’s finest restaurants, “[Prices] can act as a kind of velvet rope to keep out tourists and people paying their own way, allowing a big hitter to tuck in a napkin secure in the belief that no one who works for him can afford to walk in the door.” Price-tag framing provides “outsiders” with information about what luxury items cost, but it also establishes the notion that people in other classes are categorically excluded from many elite settings by their inability or unwillingness to pay such prices.

Journalists employing price-tag framing in their stories typically use the concept of conspicuous consumption, formulated by economist Thorstein Veblen (who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century), to describe the excessive and extravagant purchases of the wealthy. According to Veblen, conspicuous consumption is one of many signs of the superfluous lifestyle of the rich. Although some contemporary media reports condemn them, others glorify the excessive spending and “gracious lifestyles” of the wealthy in order to gain media audiences and advertising revenue.

If one tenet of the American Dream is that individuals can rise from humble origins to great wealth, another is that, given great wealth, a person can spend extravagantly and enjoy the “good life.” Returning to the American Dream saga of Oprah Winfrey, for example, media reports about her not only mention stories of her childhood, youth, and rise to fame but also how much it costs to be Oprah. For example, a Chicago magazine article titled “The
Richest Chicagoans” (which was also carried by the Associated Press, CNN, and FOX News International, among others), said,

If the economic downturn is worrying some, it’s not stopping the world’s most famous woman, who in April dropped $50 million for a 10,000-square-foot estate on 40 acres in Montecito, near Santa Barbara, California. She retains her homes in Colorado and downtown Chicago, and a farm in LaPorte, Indiana. Forbes estimates her wealth at around $900 million.83

In two brief sentences, the article makes readers aware of Winfrey’s ownership of multiple residences, the latest of which cost an amount equaling what the United Nations might spend to feed several million Colombian refugees.

Disclosure of the cost of luxury residences and the identities of the rich and famous people who live in them underlies one of the most widely used forms of price-tag framing in the media. Homes that cost more than $10 million often gain media attention when they are for sale, even when a well-known celebrity does not live there. The proliferation of shows about residences, such as those on the popular house and garden network HGTV, Bravo, and other cable networks, has contributed to a public awareness that millions of single-family residences and high-end, luxury condominiums sell for amounts exceeding the lifetime earnings of most families in the United States. Reports about the most expensive gated communities in the United States provide another example of emphasis on the cost and exclusivity of residences. According to Forbes.com, the most expensive are located in Hawaii and California, for instance, in Beverly Park (Los Angeles), where homes ranging in size from eight to forty thousand square feet sell for between $10 and $34 million; in 2010 residents include media star Eddie Murphy and top executive Sumner Redstone, a global media businessperson.84

Price-tag framing of the homes of the wealthy is not limited to how large the residence is or where it is located; some stories emphasize intangible factors. For example, in the New York Times article “How Much Is That View in the Window?” a key issue is the cost of residences with the best views of Central Park:

“Central Park is the most expensive view,” Frederick W. Peters, the president of Ashforth Warburg Associates, said, and the most expensive views of it are from Fifth Avenue. Even in the less fashionable 90’s on Fifth, a full-floor apartment with a view of the park, he said, “will command 10 million bucks.” The same apartment on Fifth Avenue and 73rd street, he added, can run to $14 million.85

In 2010, some apartments on Fifth Avenue with a view of the park run as high as $22 million in a city where the average sale price is over $2 million. The HGTV series Selling New York highlights some of the most expensive prop-
properties as real estate brokers show properties to wealthy and trendy potential buyers. The typical viewer of this TV program and its accompanying website is middle-class and probably lives in a residence that costs about $100,000 at most.

Although we might expect price-tag framing to focus on celebrities who are continually in the media spotlight, they are not the only subjects of this kind of publicity. Articles about residences of the wealthy are not limited to those of the superrich living in large urban centers such as New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago. Local and regional newspapers and television stations often report on sales of top-priced luxury real estate. An article in the *Austin American-Statesman*, “Austin Mansion Sale’s a Stunner,” is an example:

Radio industry millionaire Steve Hicks and his wife, designer Donna Stockton-Hicks, are buying the most expensive existing house in Austin: a 13,362-square-foot estate in the heart of Pemberton Heights, West Austin’s most exclusive neighborhood. The asking price: $8.5 million, down from $10 million. . . . The estate’s property tax bill last year was $138,000, not much less than the current median home price in Austin of $158,900. This article makes a point of comparing the tax bill on this luxury estate with the current median home price in the area to show how utterly unaffordable this property is for most people.

Even more elaborate descriptions of luxury residences, interior design, and other material possessions of the rich and famous are found in specialty magazines like *Millionaire*, *Robb Report*, and *Worth*; in business publications such as *Forbes* and *Fortune*; in regional magazines like *Texas Monthly*; and in city magazines, such as *D Magazine* (Dallas) and *Chicago*—all of which print articles and copious advertisements showcasing the luxury acquisitions of the affluent. Articles in these publications are typically available on companion websites such as Millionaire.com and Billionaire.com, and their subjects receive additional coverage from the Associated Press and other news services, bringing this information via Internet, television, or newspaper into the homes of people who do not subscribe to these high-end publications.

Luxury magazines targeting upper-middle- to upper-class readers frequently have tie-ins (intentional or not) between published articles and advertisements. *Texas Monthly*, which frequently publishes articles such as “Who Wants to Be a Billionaire? Ten of the Richest Texans Tell You How,” carries many residential ads that sell “class” as well as a piece of real estate. An ad for The Woodlands, a relatively expensive residential community (prices range from $400,000 to over $2 million) outside of Houston bears the headline “Move to the Head of Your Class.” A portion of the ad copy reads,
“There is a class distinction that sets The Woodlands apart. An unparalleled class of living that you simply won’t find anywhere else.” After detailing such amenities as the six championship golf courses, the “peaceful, forested home sites,” the lakefront estates, and the “unparalleled luxury and exclusivity of a private, gated community,” the ad declares that the residences and the families who own them are “truly in a class of their own.”

As this advertisement suggests, the media use discussions of how to live like the rich as a continuing subplot in price-tag framing. Television networks such as E!, HGTV, MTV, the Food Network, and VH1 attempt to provide useful insights for middle- and working-class viewers into how the rich spend money. VH1’s *The Fabulous Life* takes viewers on virtual tours in episodes like “Hollywood’s High-End Homes.” The Travel Channel offers programming like “How the Rich Stay Young” and “Ways to Vacation Like a Millionaire,” suggesting that it might be possible for the ordinary viewer to achieve the lifestyle of the rich and famous—or at least to sample it. A central technique in price-tag framing is spreading this idea: you too can live like the wealthy, even on a more modest budget. Consider, for example, HGTV’s programs that feature an expensive designer room re-created affordably for the average viewer. A decorating expert first analyzes the design principles used in the expensive original, then viewers see how they too might apply those principles to produce a satisfying version that is less expensive but “sensibly chic.” Programs like these teach viewers what luxury items cost and that they can have the look without the price, giving them an opportunity to feel superior to people who spend excessively on material possessions.

It is not possible to provide examples of all the ways in which the media use price-tag framing; however, the following are frequent subjects: lavish residences and residential enclaves; rare and highly valuable items such as art collections; luxury cars, yachts, and airplanes; tuition and other expenses incurred at private schools and elite universities; expensive toys for rich children and adults; membership dues for private clubs; and luxury dining, travel, and other leisure pursuits. Of these, money spent on residences, lavish entertainment, and toys for the wealthy are particular favorites for media coverage. The Neiman Marcus department store chain receives millions of dollars in free advertising each year from the media through articles and news stories about the items for sale in its annual *Christmas Book*. In 2009, the book’s most expensive item was a His & Hers Icon A5 Sports Aircraft priced at $250,000, with flight lessons included. The cost of the top item was down considerably from previous years because of the global economic recession: the previous year a Learjet 60 (with lessons included) had been priced at more than $12 million. In the past other “fantasy gifts” have included a one-of-a-kind 44.6-karat yellow diamond for $800,000; recently, a Jaguar XJL Super-
charged Neiman Marcus Edition commanded only $105,000. By informing everyday people of the prices of these luxury goods, the media make them aware of the conspicuous (or at least excessive) consumption of the wealthy and creditworthy. The department store is pleased to receive the free publicity about its merchandise, and media audiences have an inside view of how the rich might spend their money. According to a Neiman Marcus vice president of public relations, “Everybody is so jaded today, there’s so little out there that makes you go, ‘Oh, wow!’ I like to think of the fantasy element as the equivalent of a Barbie dreamhouse for adults. There’s nothing anyone really needs, but there’s definitely things they can fantasize about having.”

Children’s toys are another topic for media stories, particularly near Christmas. The old adage “The only difference between the men and the boys is the price of their toys” may have less meaning today than in the past because the cost of some children’s toys has skyrocketed. Manufacturers and retailers of expensive lines rely on the media to carry stories about their products so as to fuel consumer desire for the latest playthings and gadgets for children. These “news” items typically have headlines like “Over-the-Top Gifts for Junior?” The Superplexus, a sphere that looks like a large globe, is a $30,000 example of this kind of toy:

This is the three-dimensional spherical labyrinth that challenges the limits of your manual dexterity and spatial understanding as you maneuver a 5/8 inch wooden marble through its entire course. The Superplexus is a complex network of chicanes, multi-planar hairpin turns, spirals, and staircases—even a vortex. Handmade from 3- and 6-ply Finnish birch that form the track, over 400 hours are involved in its construction. The labyrinth is set inside a 36 inch diameter acrylic sphere affixed to a Jatoba base using a stainless steel gimbaled mount that allows you to tilt the sphere in any direction to guide the marble. The entire track laid out on a straight line is 31 feet longer than a football field. . . . Successful completion requires a minimum of 425 turns (plane changes) of the sphere—without letting the marble fall off the track.

Ironically, the boy shown looking at this toy appears bored compared with the typical child who looks excited when playing with a much less expensive, handheld video game. Here are some other examples of expensive toys widely described in media reports: How about a $97,395 luxury vehicle for your six- to eleven-year-old? A red Ferrari Testarossa two-seater might fill the bill. Another option is a $40,000 Junior Off Roader vehicle with an all-weather fiberglass body and three-speed transmission for the seven- to fifteen-year-old. Junior-sized residences are also popular: a ten-by-sixteen-foot minimansion that features ten flower boxes across the front, twenty-two working windows, four columns, a loft with ladder, a child-sized front door,
and an adult-sized wooden porch across the back is available for only $5,875. An eightieth anniversary Winnie the Pooh, measuring thirty-two inches tall, was also available for $775 in 2010.\textsuperscript{91}

Although fantasy toys such as junior-sized mansions and luxury cars do not show up under the Christmas trees in most homes, journalists frequently report on the rich and famous who actually purchase such items for their children. For example, one story told how actor Chris O’Donnell and NBA star Jason Kidd had purchased custom-built playhouses (with heat, insulation, and running water) for their children.\textsuperscript{92} Based on media reports of wealthy parents’ purchases for their children, some parents with average or lower-than-average incomes feel inadequate because they cannot afford even the far-less-expensive items they would like to buy for their own children.

Placing a price tag on exclusive residences, lavish toys, and other trappings of the rich and famous is not a recent media practice. In the 1980s, the television series \textit{Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous} profiled the self-made members of that set, providing detailed reports of what they bought and how much it cost. Created and hosted by Robin Leach, himself a model for the American Dream who had risen from shoe salesman to wealthy television personality, \textit{Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous} ran for thirteen seasons in over thirty countries and continues today in syndication and video games. Leach was the master of price-tag framing, showing viewers some of the lavish residences, luxury vehicles, and exotic travel destinations enjoyed by the world’s wealthiest people.\textsuperscript{93} At the end of each episode, Leach wished his viewers “champagne wishes and caviar dreams.”

As that tag line suggests, the lifestyles of the rich and famous shown on Leach’s program were nothing more than “wishes” or “dreams” for the typical viewer. However, the series supported one of the key tenets of the gospel of materialism—namely, “Greed is good,” as stockbroker Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) declares in the 1980s film \textit{Wall Street}. During the economic crisis of the 2000s, in \textit{Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps}, Michael Douglas reprises his role as Gordon Gekko, who emerges twenty years later from prison and seeks to rebuild his career and repair his relationship with his daughter. She is engaged to a young, ambitious Wall Street trader with goals much like Gekko himself had when he became involved in chicanery resembling much of what has contributed to many of this country’s financial problems in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{94} Like the original \textit{Wall Street} and other films such as the 1980s classic \textit{Bonfire of the Vanities}, \textit{Wall Street 2} highlights price-tag framing: everything (and everybody) has a price, and the higher the price, the greater the zeal with which people will pursue wealth and power at any cost.
Not only does price-tag framing tell media audiences how much the rich pay for their possessions, but it also may suggest that ordinary people can live like millionaires, even if on a reduced scale. For example, a promotional piece for the video game spun off from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* says,

> You deserve to live the high life. The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous® game gives you that rich feeling. . . . Limo, mansion and yacht symbols animate in amazing 3-D fashion when you land in winning combinations, adding adrenalineline to the thrill of receiving a big payout. . . . With the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous® game, you can get a taste of champagne wishes and caviar dreams.95

By looking behind the scenes at how the rich live, Lifestyles shows and games place price tags on the lavish material possessions of the rich and famous, offering viewers a chance either to pretend that they are part of that lifestyle or to ridicule it. Numerous other games, including The Sims, have taken up the theme of gaining the most wealth by correctly guessing the prices of some of the world’s most luxurious items.

The story lines of reality TV shows constantly use price-tag framing. VH1’s *The Fabulous Life* is an excellent example; in it the prices of a celebrity’s lavish possessions pop up on the TV screen as the story of the well-known individual’s life unfolds. Viewers get the “inside scoop” on the cost of birthday celebrations, clothes, residences, and private jet travel. The price of each item is carefully put into perspective for middle- and lower-class viewers.

**THE TWENTY-FOUR-KARAT GOLD FRAME:**
**EFFECTS OF FRAMING THE WEALTHY**

The media’s framing of stories about the wealthy influences the opinions of people in other classes. Lacking personal encounters with extremely wealthy individuals, people in the middle, working, and poor classes look to the media for an insider’s view of how the “other half” lives. Television programs such as *E!, Entertainment Tonight, Inside Edition,* and *Access Hollywood* promise to take viewers behind the scenes to learn what goes on in the lives of the rich and famous. Vicarious living through the media helps ordinary people feel that they know about celebrities and other wealthy individuals. Be it celebrity gossip (“what’s going on with Lady Gaga?”) or news stories about scandals involving the rich (“can you believe that CEO got a $20 million buyout after he put the company into bankruptcy and left employees destitute?”), many people talk about the good deeds and misfortunes of the wealthy as if they had personal knowledge of them. Extensive media coverage of the rich and famous creates this illusion of familiarity over time. It is important for us to
evaluate the framing, however, because, like rose-colored glasses, a frame used to tell a story may distort our perceptions. As an artist once suggested, “The frame you select can completely change the look and feel of my painting. Choose your frame very carefully.”

Similarly, how the media, as powerful purveyors of information and entertainment, frame stories is a significant concern because we use these frames as mental shortcuts (schemas) in forming our thoughts both about the wealthy and about larger issues of social stratification and inequality. Media messages about the rich—for instance, the wealthy are more powerful and somehow better than other people—may influence our views not only about the affluent but about the poor and homeless.

This chapter has discussed four of the most frequently used frames for building news stories or entertainment story lines about the upper class. Consensus framing depicts the wealthy as being like people in other classes and suggests that “we all put on our pants one leg at a time” regardless of our location in the class hierarchy. This framing technique ignores invidious distinctions in material possessions and life chances, distinctions brought about by vast economic differences in society. Showing the wealthy dining on meatloaf ignores larger social realities about the exploitative nature of capitalism or such pressing social problems as poverty and hunger. Cropped out of the picture by this frame are the vast differences between the rich and poor regarding life expectancy, health care, police and other security protection, and many of the other factors that influence one’s life chances. Consensus framing leaves media audiences with the impression that the concerns of the wealthy are the most important issues facing the nation.

Admiration framing, which casts the wealthy as generous and caring people, provides media audiences with copious examples of how the rich help others. Based on the concept of noblesse oblige (those who have much should give to those who are less fortunate), admiration framing highlights the contributions of the rich to prestigious institutions like universities and hospitals. A central message of admiration framing holds that although the rich have so much money, they can afford to give away millions without diminishing their wealth, other people should follow their good example to whatever extent their finances allow. Admiration framing deflects criticism of the wealthy by portraying them as good citizens who put their money to work for others.

Emulation framing also casts the rich in a very positive light; however, this type of framing goes one step beyond admiration framing by suggesting to media audiences that they should be like the wealthy, not just admire them. Based on the ideology of the American Dream, emulation framing plays on the widely held belief that anyone can become rich through hard work and determination. This type of framing offers people in other classes suggestions
about how to emulate the lifestyles of the celebrity wealthy in small ways, such as by purchasing a bar of luxury soap or designing a room to “look like a million.”

Many media stories intertwine emulation framing with price-tag framing. Cost often becomes a central issue in news or entertainment accounts about the rich and famous. For example, the amount an individual spends on spa and beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery may become a major topic in a celebrity profile, overshadowing discussion of the person being interviewed. Although individuals are the purported subjects of news articles or television story lines, in actuality products and services are the stars. Audiences are left to ask, Can you believe how much that costs? Journalists and television writers realize that price-tag framing often produces ambivalent responses, but they also know it draws in viewers and readers from targeted age categories. Media audiences receive conflicting messages, one preaching the gospel of materialism and another disputing its worth. Preaching the gospel of materialism as practiced by the wealthy encourages some viewers to engage in excessive consumerism. Other audiences reject the idea that how much a person owns is a measure of his or her worth. Overall, price-tag framing—whether of middle- and working-class television shows like *The Price Is Right* or upscale lifestyle programs like the *Private Chefs of Beverly Hills*—sends the message that material possessions make some people happy and that a trip to the mall can, at least temporarily, help us forget our worries.

In sum, audiences receive mixed messages about the wealthy based on media portrayals of that group. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) suggested that human passions (emotions) are present in antagonistic pairs: love and fear, shame and shamelessness, pity and resentment, and envy and contempt. Our beliefs about the rich and famous, as framed by media depictions, may come in pairs as well. We may simultaneously pity them (“poor little rich girl”) and resent them (“Life is unfair! Why do the rich have more than I do?”). We may not feel bad because a rich celebrity owns a particular possession (such as $250,000 sports car), but we may resent not being able to afford that item ourselves. Stories about the wealthy particularly evoke contradictory emotions in audiences when the media employ two additional kinds of framing—sour-grapes or bad-apple framing—as discussed in chapter 3.
Chapter 3

Gilded Cages

Media Stories of How the Mighty Have Fallen

Beating up on the wealthy seems to be the order of the day. I suspected that. But a recent Wealth Matters column [in the New York Times] touched a particularly raw nerve. It looked at how even people with sizable fortunes were concerned about money in this recession and the impact that could have on the rest of us.

Readers rejected the attempt to understand the concerns of the rich.

“That’s so stupid that you ought to be slapped for it,” one woman wrote. My favorite began “Bowties and Reaganomics are for losers. You can cry for the rich all you want, the rest of us will be happy to see them get taxed.”

The vehemence in these e-mail messages made me wonder why so many people were furious at those who had more than they did. And why are the rich shouldering the blame for a collective run of bad decision-making? After all, many of the rich got there through hard work. And plenty of not-so-rich people bought homes, cars and electronics they could not afford and then defaulted on the debt, contributing to the crash [in 2008]. But in this recession, anger flows one way.

As this New York Times columnist suggests, editorials such as “Too Rich to Worry? Not in This Downturn” do not go over well with people who think the rich have it made and feel they personally are far from wealthy. Certain types of media framing of stories and commentaries about the well-to-do and their problems produce schadenfreude, a feeling of malicious satisfaction in learning of the misfortune of others. However, the sour-grapes and bad-apple framing discussed in this chapter typically produce contradictory feelings of both schadenfreude and a desire to know more about—and perhaps possess—the premium-price goods and services enjoyed by the very wealthy, even when they are experiencing financial difficulties or legal trouble. Although media audiences may gain some gratification from learning about the problems of the rich, readers and viewers often believe that if they had as
much money and all of the material possessions of the wealthy, they would
do things differently: they would not be unhappy or get into trouble with the
law because of excessive greed.

Media coverage of the downfall of top Wall Street financiers, mortgage
executives, and other captains of industry has amply proven this point by
emphasizing both the nature of their misconduct and the elaborate lifestyle
to which they have become accustomed. Reports of their legal problems
have cataloged their opulent residences, lavish lifestyles, and other forms of
conspicuous consumption. For example, a 2010 New York Times article titled
“Mortgage Executive Accused in Multibillion-Dollar Fraud” described how
federal prosecutors accused Lee B. Farkas, former chairman of Taylor, Bean
& Whitaker, one of the nation’s largest mortgage lending firms, of “master-
minding a fraud scheme that cheated investors and the federal government
out of billions of dollars and led to the failure of Colonial Bank.” According
to the article, Farkas perpetrated the fraud by setting up an elaborate shell
game that involved covering up the lender’s losses by creating fake mort-
gages and passing them along to private investors and government agencies:
“Mr. Farkas pocketed at least $20 million from the fraud, which he used to
finance a private jet and a lavish lifestyle that included five homes and a
collection of vintage cars, prosecutors said.” Similarly, media sources have
described R. Allen Stanford, a Texas financier who defrauded investors in a
massive $8 billion Ponzi scheme, as a “billionaire inmate” with a net worth
of $2.2 billion who possesses $100 million in private jets, a yacht he paid
$100,000 a week to rent, and a fully stocked, professional kitchen in his
company’s Houston headquarters.

Media descriptions of upper-class crime and the excessive patterns of
consumption that typically accompany it may influence ordinary people’s
perceptions of how the rich live and the gratification they receive from ac-
quiring more and more luxury possessions such as private jets, yachts, and
mansions. Many middle- and lower-income people are simply unaware of
the nature and extent of the opulent surroundings that very wealthy families
enjoy on a daily basis. Television and Internet coverage of lavish residences
and luxury cars brings home the point that the rich are very different from
other people, and this may produce a variety of feelings about the most af-
fluent individuals and families in a nation. When the rich have accumulated
some, or all, of their material possessions through dishonest means, everyday
people may initially assume that the wrongdoers will be punished by having
wealth and other assets removed. However, the articles point out that wealthy
individuals accused of crime often do not lose the lifestyles they have cre-
ated, even after being sent to a country-club prison for a brief period. In other
words, people who gain an opulent lifestyle though criminal endeavors or
other means perceived to be unethical or immoral may not lose these rich gains even if it is proven that these persons acquired their possessions through dishonest means.

Sour-grapes and bad-apple framing focus on the problems of the rich as individual pathologies, not structural concerns rooted in larger economic, political, or social hierarchies, and these forms of framing often include detailed descriptions of the material possessions of the very wealthy. Sour-grapes framing portrays the rich as frequently unhappy and dysfunctional people; bad-apple framing suggests the rich have problems but still enjoy the good life. Since bad-apple framing typically focuses on the individual scoundrel rather than on harm done by many people or established corporate practices, media audiences typically view the problem as one of individual, rather than corporate, abuse. According to media scholar Michael J. Parenti, when we treat the wrongdoings of the rich as mere isolated deviations from the socially beneficial system of “responsible capitalism,” we overlook the larger structural features of the system that produce these problems. When the media portray the abuses of the wealthy as isolated problems rather than as predictable and frequent outcomes of the economic and political system, readers and viewers have little reason to question the status quo. Parenti states that viewing the misconduct of the wealthy as nothing more than an occasional individual aberration serves to legitimate, rather than challenge, existing systems of social inequality.

**SOUR-GRAPES FRAMING: THE WEALTHY ARE UNHAPPY AND DYSFUNCTIONAL**

One of Aesop’s fables, “The Fox and the Grapes,” tells the story of a fox who strolls through an orchard, finds a bunch of grapes ripening on a vine, and decides that they are just the thing to quench his thirst. After several unsuccessful attempts to run, jump, and grab the bunch, however, he walks away with his nose in the air, saying, “I am sure they are sour.” The moral of this story is, “It is easy to despise what you cannot have.” Similarly, sour-grapes framing displays for media audiences the abundance of material possessions and opulent lifestyles of the rich and famous, then suggests that the grapes, which are out of reach for the typical reader or viewer, are not worth having—they are flawed, thus undesirable. A classic example of sour-grapes framing is the poor-little-rich-girl (or -boy) story. Books, television, and films have popularized stories about the problems of people who have inherited large sums of money, then lived lives of despair. Stories about, for example, Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton and tobacco heiress Doris Duke tell of...
unhappy childhoods, personal traumas, and misfortunes among the wealthy. From best-selling biographies to media tabloids to television entertainment shows like E!, Hard Copy, and Entertainment Tonight, audiences learn about the supposed problems and heartaches of the rich and famous.

Many of these stories convey the message that ordinary people are better off because the rich and famous suffer as a result of their wealth and typically do stupid things because they cannot cope with the real world. This frame gives middle- and working-class media audiences a bird’s-eye view of the lives of the wealthy, as well as delivers a cautionary tale about the problems associated with great wealth and notoriety. However, stories with this type of framing draw audiences by providing them with opportunities to feel good about themselves, even though they have not achieved the American Dream of success, wealth, and perhaps fame. Readers and viewers can conclude that being rich is not all it is cracked up to be (“the grapes are sour”); thus, they should feel content with their own lives. A website posting by “Grace” from Seattle, who reviewed C. David Heymann’s Poor Little Rich Girl: The Life and Legend of Barbara Hutton, demonstrates this kind of thinking:

I think I got a pretty good idea of what Ms. Hutton was about, and have a hard time sympathizing with her... poor little rich girl indeed! She popped into a Woolworth’s once in her life, just to sign a few autographs. Her cheesy poetry netted her less than $200, the only money she truly earned of her own effort. Someone else handled all her financial matters (luckily for her, usually quite well), because she couldn’t be bothered. . . . Spending money takes time, you know. She dropped husbands as soon as they no longer entertained her. Yes, she had exquisite taste in clothing and jewelry, and traveled incessantly to places I can only dream of ever seeing, but had no grasp on reality—she once sent one of her employees to the bank to change a bill because she had no change. . . . It was a $10,000 bill (I didn’t even know those existed!). I enjoyed this book because it took me somewhere I could never go myself. It’s hard to feel sorry for her though. . . . She dug her own grave!!!

I like many people who read biographies or see films portraying the lives of wealthy, typically unhappy individuals such as Barbara Hutton, this reviewer enjoyed living vicariously in that she is quick to point out Barbara Hutton’s “exquisite taste in clothing and jewelry” and her ability to travel “incessantly to places I can only dream of ever seeing.” However, the reviewer also emphasizes Hutton’s individual character flaws, such as that she never worked a day in her life and spent her time and money frivolously. Comments like these are typical of media audiences who do not question the larger economic conditions that produced the Woolworth-Hutton family fortune or other macrolevel concerns associated with capitalism and excessive consumerism. The
focus rests strictly on microlevel concerns through an emphasis on the activities and possessions of individuals, not of organizational and societal entities.

Another media message about the wealthy suggests that happiness would be within their reach if certain character flaws—such as greed—did not keep them from finding personal satisfaction with their great wealth. For some wealthy scions, inheriting millions of dollars simply is not adequate, so they attempt to gain even more from the estate of a wealthy relative. For example, following the death of his mother, New York socialite Brooke Astor, at age 105, Anthony D. Marshall waged a battle over her $180 million estate. Marshall and his wife, Charlene, were already wealthy and living in luxury, when he began to steal from his mother while she was still alive. Among other activities, he allegedly brought lawyers and financial advisers to her home to coerce her into changing her will, which previously bequeathed a large portion of her estate to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and New York Public Library. In that will, Marshall would receive payments to live on until his death, at which point the remainder of the estate would go to charity. The subsequent will, orchestrated by Marshall at a time when Mrs. Astor was probably not of sound mind, gave him a larger portion of his mother’s estate, including money and property that he could pass on to other individuals, especially his wife, in his own will. After a five-month trial, Marshall was convicted on several offenses, including manipulating Mrs. Astor’s will and removing and selling art from her Upper East Side apartment without her consent. The typical middle-class reader’s response to frequent the media reports about the Astor trial (as evidenced by comments in interviews, New York Times letters to the editor, and web blogs) was that the already extremely wealthy Marshall should have left well enough alone. Had he not been so greedy, the prevailing thinking went, he could have enjoyed a really great life. Readers and viewers avidly followed the trial and media reports of what journalists referred to as “a 19-week drama of family dysfunction and high society.” Some people concluded that if they had that kind of money, they would know how to spend it and surely could find happiness with all of the possessions the Astor heirs owned, unlike the maladjusted and dysfunctional individuals so often described in news accounts.

Like media representations of actual superwealthy families, entertainment programming about fictitious rich families also uses sour-grapes framing extensively. Multiple generations of daytime and evening soap operas on television have highlighted the foibles of wealthy families, particularly those with members who steal from them, battle with addictions, or engage in frequent sexual liaisons outside of marriage. Shows ranging from The Bold and the Beautiful to Gossip Girl enhance their story lines by showing the
contradictions between having the wealth and privilege of the rich and dealing with their foibles. A short-lived evening soap, *Dirty Sexy Money*, which was cancelled because of a writers’ strike, is a classic example. Actor Peter Krause plays a lawyer who inherits his late father’s task of taking care of the dysfunctional members of New York’s wealthy Darling family. The Darlings include a patriarch (Donald Sutherland) and matriarch (Jill Clayburgh), who are quirky in their own way but much less so than their overindulged, decadent children. Inheritance of the family’s money is a key issue in the series, and its members’ opulent lifestyle is practically a character in its own right. Shows such as this continually come and go on network television, and many live in perpetuity through syndication on cable channels such as SOAPnet and a variety of websites.

Newspaper articles and television entertainment programs about people who have inherited great wealth and those who are newly rich also use sour-grapes framing. Unlike old-money families that have had vast wealth for three or more generations and are considered the old guard in their respective cities, new-money families have accumulated vast economic resources in the current generation and may not be considered social elites in their communities. A popular form of sour-grapes framing about old money tells a cautionary tale about the difficulties faced by heirs to great wealth. Consider the article “Suddenly Popular,” in which inheritor Mark McDonough relays this story:

So first of all . . . there’s this closet called the Green Closet. It’s one of the last taboos. This culture tells you, if you have more money, you’ll be happier. But rich people are in this unique position to say, “You know what? More stuff doesn’t mean more happiness.” But as a rich person, you absolutely cannot tell anybody that there’s anything wrong with your life because, first, everybody knows you should be really happy, and second, they say, “I should have your problems!” Then there’s the shame component. With inherited wealth, there’s this little logic chain: I have a lot of money, I should be really happy, but I’m not happy, so I must be really bad.

Although it is undoubtedly true that possession of great wealth does not equal happiness, sour-grapes framing emphasizes the problems rather than the advantages of such wealth. Problems faced by some wealthy inheritors include low self-esteem and self-discipline, difficulty using power, boredom and alienation, and guilt and suspiciousness. In addition, articles often point out how difficult it is for rich people to establish positive relationships with others because they never know whether someone loves them for themselves or for their money; heirs must fend off “opportunists, speculators, hustlers, and potential lovers” who only want to get their hands on their wealth. Media
audiences may get the message from such articles that having a large amount of money may be a problem and is not something people should desire. Some readers and viewers respond, “I should be so unlucky,” convinced that if they only had the money of the “poor little rich girl (or boy),” they indeed could find happiness.

Aside from suggesting that individuals who earn their own money have higher self-esteem, sour-grapes framing highlights the pitfalls faced by the nouveau riche, particularly in television entertainment programs. The long-running hit series Dallas (shown on CBS from 1978 until 1991 and still in worldwide syndication) popularized the story line of the rich, dysfunctional family. This show follows the exploits of lead character J. R. Ewing (Larry Hagman), a ruthless oil tycoon worth nearly $3 billion who is always plotting evil deeds and having bitter battles with his family and business associates. Ewing prides himself on evading federal regulators, taking down anyone who stands in the way of Ewing Oil, and maintaining off-the-books partnerships to boost profits and hide debt. His image as the prototypical rich misfit endures, preserved in such tributes as his 2002 pseudobiography in Forbes’s “Fictional Fifteen Richest Americans.” Continuing interest in the lifestyle of this fictitious family is evident in the fact that the Ewing family’s estate, Southfork Ranch, has become a tourist attraction. Each year several thousand people from around the world visit the large white mansion, pool, barns, and other settings where Dallas was filmed. Tourists can relive some of the show’s memorable moments and watch video clips from the series. They also can visit the ranch’s retail stores, Lincolns and Longhorns and Ranch RoundUp, to buy souvenirs and other Southfork gift items. However unhappy and dysfunctional the sour-grapes framing of this popular series makes the Ewings seem, media audiences continue to show interest in their material possessions and lifestyle.

In the twenty-first century, the story line of the rich, dysfunctional family remains popular in such television shows as FOX’s The O.C. (now in syndication and available on DVD) and ABC’s Brothers & Sisters. The dysfunctional rich family has also become a favorite subject for a number of reality television series on cable channels. The O.C. aired from 2003 to 2007, when conspicuous consumption and dysfunctional families were popular themes for television series. The show’s characters frequently go to charity fund-raisers, which are represented as nothing more than places where the moneyed residents of Newport Beach come together to make catty remarks about each other and occasionally get into brawls. “The O.C.” refers to Orange County, California, described as “the largest suburban, affluent, Republican county between Los Angeles and San Diego.” Setting up a contrast—and potential conflict—between classes, The O.C. portrays the problems of Ryan Atwood
(Benjamin McKenzie), a “smart, poor kid” from the working-class community of Chino, who comes to live with the affluent Cohens in Newport Beach after getting into trouble with the law. Ryan lives with the family of Sandy Cohen (Peter Gallagher), a public defender from humble origins who resides with his wife, Kirsten (Kelly Rowan), in Newport Beach. Kirsten’s father is a wealthy and sometimes unscrupulous real estate developer. The Cohen family accepts Ryan, and his living arrangements become permanent, but television audiences receive regular reminders that he comes from a lower-class, dysfunctional background. They are also reminded, however, that many Newport Beach residents are dysfunctional snobs who look down their noses at outsiders but have their own dirty laundry to hide. The O.C. portrays the good life of the rich, showing multimillion-dollar mansions, luxury vehicles, and black-tie events, but it also shows the sour-grapes side, emphasizing the shallowness, drug and alcohol abuse, and rampant consumerism of people who live in the fictitious version of this area of Southern California. The O.C. incorporates a rags-to-riches story line, but one critic suggested that the series also illustrates the “slippery slope of wealth” and the empty promise of trying to have it all.21

Part of the constant pattern of one entertainment series about the wealthy and dysfunctional replacing another that gets cancelled, CW’s Gossip Girl aired as a replacement for devotees of The O.C. Developed by Josh Schwartz, creator of The O.C., Gossip Girl’s characters—extremely wealthy students at a prestigious prep school on New York’s Upper East Side—are even more status conscious. Very rich Chuck Bass (Ed Westwick) has a sense of entitlement and believes that everything he wants should be his. Other wealthy characters include Serena van der Woodsen (Blake Lively), who comes back from boarding school to take care of her younger brother, and Blair Waldorf (Leighton Meester), who initially snubs Serena. The wrong side of the tracks is represented by Dan Humphreys (Penn Badgley), whose dad is a rock singer. Although the Humphreys live in a large loft, they are poor folks in comparison to the old-moneyed, ultrarich kids. Even before extensive media criticism and several suicides involving social media, Gossip Girl portrayed young people in constant texting sessions and sending invasive cell phone photos to each other. Characters obsessively follow a blog written by “Gossip Girl,” who snoops into everyone’s lives. The show emphasizes that the characters are “trust-fund babies and legends in their own minds” because Gossip Girl covers their every action. According to one Boston Globe television critic, “They’re Paristocrats [after Paris Hilton]. And, Lord help me, I loved spending an hour hating them, their pedigrees, and their unlimited credit cards. It was like studying the peculiar mating rituals and shopping habits of the species Manhattanus Elitus.”22
Sour-grapes framing, whether in television entertainment series or news accounts, often elicits ambivalent feelings in media audiences. They can experience pleasure looking at expensive merchandise and luxury residences while at the same time becoming aware of problems associated with having wealth and social prominence. Although television shows about families in various economic classes (such as *Parenthood*, *Two and a Half Men*, and *The Middle*) typically make fun of the seemingly dysfunctional American family, the rich and famous are favorite subjects for stories employing sour-grapes framing: it is easier to laugh at their pretentiousness and conspicuous consumption than to face head-on the problems of the working class and poor.

While sour-grapes framing frequently involves the poor-little-rich-girl (or -boy) scenario or a cautionary tale about having great wealth, bad-apple framing focuses on deviant and criminal behavior among the rich. Even bad-apple framing, however, primarily emphasizes the individual nature of these actions rather than the larger patterns of corruption that may constitute a part of the standard business practices of many "wealthy scoundrels."

**BAD-APPLE FRAMING #1: SOME WEALTHY PEOPLE ARE MEDIA HOGS**

The media use a relatively mild form of bad-apple framing to report stories about wealthy individuals who are publicity hogs or have perceived personality flaws; criminal behavior receives stronger forms of bad-apple framing. In both instances, the media provide extensive information not only about individuals’ misdeeds but their net worth and costly possessions. According to sociologist Gregory Mantsios, the media send several messages about the wealthy as bad apples:

On rare occasions, the media will mock selected individuals for their personality flaws. Real estate investor Donald Trump and New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, for example, are admonished by the media for deliberately seeking publicity (a very un–upper class thing to do); hotel owner Leona Helmsley was caricatured for her personal cruelties; and junk bond broker Michael Milken was condemned because he had the audacity to rob the rich.23

As Mantsios suggests, some of the wealthy can be viewed as bad apples because they seek the media spotlight to further their own causes and financial interests. New York real estate developer Donald Trump is an example. Over the years, Trump has been available to the media for profiles about his empire, including his numerous high-rise buildings and development projects in New York City and his hotels and casinos in Atlantic City, New Jersey.
Despite his billions, Trump at one time appeared in McDonald’s ads selling dollar-priced sandwiches,24 and he hosts reality shows like The Celebrity Apprentice, on which candidates vie to win money for their favorite charity, and The Apprentice, which pits noncelebrities against each other as they seek to win an at least six-figure prize—a job with the Trump organization. In these reality shows, Trump plays a starring role, personally firing some candidates and leaving others to compete for the big prize in the final round.

Since 2007, the class-based nature of Donald Trump’s courting of the media to help serve his own interests has been visible in Scotland, where he is working to install the “world’s greatest golf course.” Trump spent an extensive amount of time with journalists at a packed press conference discussing a proposed golf resort and the fact that he would build it despite one hold-out resident, Michael Forbes, who refused to sell his land to Trump and instead planned to sell it to Tripping Up Trump, a group formed to oppose the massive resort on the Aberdeenshire coast. On several occasions, Trump called Forbes the “village idiot” and informed the media that the Forbes family home at the Mill of Menie was a “slum and pigsty.”25 Media stories about this encounter emphasized the extent to which media hog Trump seems not to care what he says about other people:

“We want to build a great hotel,” Mr. Trump said. “He [Forbes] doesn’t maintain his property. It’s a slum. It’s a horrible way he maintains it. I don’t know if he’s doing that on purpose. I think that’s just the way he maintains his property. So it’s a very sad situation. You have rusted oil tanks all over it. You have tractors that are rotting and rusting into this beautiful sand. You have oil tanks that are leaking into the sand. I think somebody should do something about it.”

Warming to his theme, the tycoon continued: “He does have an impact on the hotel because if we build a $300m or $400m hotel, I don’t think you want the windows looking down into a slum. I don’t think anybody wants to build where your view is obliterated by a slum. . . .” During his wide-ranging press conference, an ebullient Mr. Trump waxed lyrical about everything from the state of the euro to his golf handicap.26

According to some analysts, Trump seeks out the media spotlight to maintain his high profile and his business image. In his role as media hog, however, he emphasizes class-based differences among people and often earns a reputation as a bad-but-very-successful apple. But Trump is not alone in being framed by the media in this manner. A Forbes magazine article called “The Most Overexposed Billionaires” describes how individuals such as Donald Trump, Cirque du Soleil cofounder Guy Laliberte, investor Warren Buffett, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, Virgin Group chief Richard Branson, and Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones have had more than their requisite “fifteen minutes” in the media spotlight.27
If Trump and other high-profile wealthy individuals are framed as bad apples because they are media hogs, some other rich people become subject to bad-apple framing due to problematic behavior that suggests they believe their wealth can buy anything.

**BAD-APPLE FRAMING #2: SOME WEALTHY PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY CAN BUY ANYTHING**

News stories have used bad-apple framing to show how the wealthy buy, or attempt to buy, whatever they want. Of the many possible examples, perhaps the “nursery school scandal” in New York City received the most media attention. What happens when your child is not accepted into a nursery school? Most parents simply find another school. However, this is not what the now discredited $20-million-a-year stock analyst Jack Grubman chose to do when his twin daughters were not accepted at the exclusive Ninety-second Street Y preschool in Manhattan. Instead, Grubman allegedly bargained with Citicorp’s Sanford I. Weill (who was also an AT&T director), offering to increase his rating of AT&T stock if Weill would make a few calls to Ninety-second Street Y board members to arrange admission for Grubman’s toddlers. Citicorp also pledged $1 million to the school. According to media accounts, Grubman sent Weill an e-mail stating, “There are no bounds for what you do for your children.”

In the aftermath of the “nursery school scandal,” Grubman was later banned from the securities industry for misleading investors who trusted him with their money. According to one telecommunications analyst, “It is one shock that this kind of horse-trading is acceptable within some organizations, yet another that AT&T’s investment rating and $1 million of shareholder cash were apparently treated as chips in such an odd game as nursery school poker.” This statement epitomizes this form of bad-apple framing: the rich believe that everything and everybody has a price; you only have to find out what that price is and pay it.

This type of behavior did not, however, surprise many other wealthy parents, given the competitiveness of everything in their lives, including the nursery schools their children attend. One journalist summed up the situation as follows:

To normal people living anywhere else, the news that someone might offer a pledge of $1 million just to get a child into the right nursery school must seem absurd. That an analyst might recommend a particular stock in order to curry favor with a powerful banker who might then help that analyst’s child win a coveted spot in a nursery school seems stranger still. But on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, the story that Jack Grubman, the former star telecom stock analyst
for Citigroup, attempted to get his twins into the 92nd Street Y nursery school by changing his rating on AT&T stock was greeted with knowing nods rather than disbelief.30

Some wealthy parents see rejection by a prestigious nursery school not only as harmful to their children but also as reflecting negatively on their family’s social standing. Sociological research bears out the extent to which wealthy elites will pay any price to get the right education for their children, whether in nursery school, high school, or college. In a study of elite private schools, sociologists Peter W. Cookson Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell concluded,

To be accepted into a private school is to be accepted into a social club, or more generally speaking, a status group that is defined as a group of people who have a sense of social similarity. People sharing the same status have similar life-styles, common educational background, and pursue similar types of occupations.31

Media coverage of a high-society scandal like the Grubman case provides audiences with more than a news account of just the facts—the who, what, when, and where. Media audiences get the message that some wealthy people think they can buy anything, a belief often confirmed by the way others acquiesce and do their bidding. Framing of media stories about how the rich buy what they want typically includes information for everyday readers and viewers about the competitive nature of life in the upper classes and how different the rich are from everyone else. News articles, television shows, and websites provide lengthy summaries of the wealth of the individuals involved and the value or prestige of the things they desire in their privileged social circles. Consider Grubman, for example. After all of his legal entanglements, journalists estimated his net worth remained between $50 and $70 million, and he owned a luxurious six-story Upper East Side town house in Manhattan and another mansion in East Hampton.32

Although bad-apple framing of wealthy people often centers on the purchase of some specific consumer service (such as attendance at a prestigious nursery school) or the use of some luxury (such as a corporate expense account and private jet to entertain, and thus curry favor with, important politicians), sometimes the media focus on how the wealthy use their resources as hush money to buy the silence of individuals with personal knowledge of their business or family indiscretions. The media have exposed many cases of hush money paid out in business; however, with social media gaining so rapidly in the information marketplace, one common form of framing about the wealthy suggests that the rich and famous believe they can buy anything. A case in point is the global media scandal in which Tiger Woods, one of the
world’s top professional golfers and highest-paid professional athletes (he earned $110 million in winnings and endorsements in 2008), was accused of having extramarital affairs with a dozen or more women during his marriage to Elin Nordegren. Throughout the separation and divorce, the media framed the issue of the “high price of celebrity divorce” and how much money Woods might have to pay to keep Nordegren from doing interviews and publishing a book about her life with him. Most journalists writing about the family crisis focused on how much money Nordegren might receive: Would it be $100 million or $700 million? Would the prenuptial agreement, allowing her a maximum of $10 million in case of divorce, be set aside if she agreed not to tell all about her marriage? Throughout media stories concerning how Woods might purchase his wife’s silence, journalists and bloggers provided audiences with lengthy descriptions of the couple’s vast possessions, including an $80 million Florida estate and a $20 million, 155-foot yacht (Privacy) with a 6,500-square-foot master suite, six staterooms, a theater, and a gym, to show media audiences that Woods truly lived an enviable life of wealth and luxury.\(^{33}\)

Given the media emphasis on the good life, it comes as no surprise that even when journalists and other commentators describe the unethical and often criminal conduct of some wealthy elites, many middle- and working-class and poor individuals believe that if they were rich, they would know how to live happily ever after and stay out of the trouble these people have gotten into.

BAD-APPLE FRAMING #3: BAD APPLES WITH GOOD TASTE—WEALTHY WOMEN AND CRIME

Scandals involving wealthy women such as Martha Stewart, the lifestyle expert, or Diana D. Brooks, former chief executive of the famous auction house Sotheby’s, are often framed in such a manner as to show that the women have impeccable taste, even when they are accused of committing crimes. Despite the charges of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and securities fraud against Martha Stewart, most people have forgotten these indiscretions and continue to view her as an icon of good taste and good living. Stewart successfully marketed her products and her lifestyle, referring to herself as “America’s most trusted guide to stylish living” and reaching millions of people through her television shows, books, \textit{Martha Stewart Living} magazine, and website.

As business authors Michael J. Silverstein and Neil Fiske write in their popular book \textit{Trading Up}, Martha Stewart “inspired millions of Americans to reach for a richer, more tasteful, more sophisticated lifestyle.”\(^{34}\) According
to Silverstein and Fiske, she is one of the leaders in “new luxury” spending on “products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category but are not so expensive as to be out of reach” for middle- and upper-middle-income shoppers. For example, new luxury products such as an $8,000 Sub-Zero stainless refrigerator or a $1,199.95 KitchenAid frozen dessert maker for ice cream and frozen margaritas have lower-cost competitors, but the less-expensive products do not have as many features or the same prestige as the more expensive brands. As a wealthy woman convicted of obstruction of justice, Stewart is still seen as having good taste and has remained popular with many of her followers:

Even during [Martha Stewart’s] difficulties . . . involving insider stock trading, her popularity and influence did not decline, although her company’s share price did. As one woman said . . . “Martha is one of the first people who said your home is important. She gives the family validity. She is a source of comfort.”

Even if many people, including this woman, did not condone Stewart’s behavior in the business world, some of them applauded her for the emphasis she placed on home, family, and other positive values. Admiration of Stewart’s good taste and comforting nature apparently outstripped the animosity some media audiences might have felt for her behavior.

Throughout Stewart’s legal ordeal—including five months served in the Alderson federal prison—the media frequently reminded audiences that she was the icon of good living. Even media reports describing her as a bad apple acknowledged Stewart as a major force in the trading-up phenomenon and as a homemaking icon. Comedians and nighttime television hosts who made seemingly cruel jokes about Stewart’s lifestyle and legal problems typically made disclaimers similar to David Letterman’s on his Late Show with David Letterman: “Now, don’t get me wrong. I like Martha Stewart; she’s been on our show a number of times, and she makes some really great stuff.”

Although some journalists focused on the positive aspects of Stewart’s good-living empire, some newspaper and magazine headlines told another story. Among these were a Newsweek cover story, “Martha’s Mess: An Insider Trading Scandal Tarnishes the Queen of Perfection,” and other articles such as “Martha’s Dirty Laundry,” “Tarnish, Anyone?” “Martha Stewart’s To-Do List May Include Image Polishing,” and “Canapés and Investment Tips Are Served to Well-Heeled.”

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Stewart’s reputation as the “doyenne of all things domestic” and “tireless dispenser of advice” has continued unabated. Although she has fallen from the Forbes billionaire ranks because of plunging stock prices, Stewart continues to make millions annually from her syndicated Martha Stewart Show, MarthaStewart.com website,
and branded products at stores ranging from PetSmart and Home Depot to Macy’s and Michaels. Despite bad-apple framing in earlier media stories about Stewart, today’s coverage typically conveys a positive image of her as the guru of good taste and a wealthy, hardworking businesswoman able to laugh at herself. Her detractors, however, have informed journalists on more than one occasion that this carefully packaged public relations image does not reflect the real person.

The use of bad-apple-with-good-taste framing is not unique, particularly in the coverage of privileged women accused of criminal activity. Another example includes stories accompanying the conviction of Diana D. Brooks, the former chief executive of Sotheby’s, for her admitted role in fixing commission rates with Christie’s, a rival auction house. As a cooperating witness in the antitrust prosecution of her former boss, A. Alfred Taubman, Brooks received a sentence of three years’ probation, a fine of $350,000, a thousand hours of community service, and six months under house arrest. As part of the agreement, Brooks returned her Sotheby’s stock options, worth $10 million, plus the approximately $3.25 million she had received in salary after the conspiracy started. Of all these penalties, which some considered too lenient given the magnitude of the charges, journalists were most interested in the idea that she was being punished by house arrest—in her twelve-room, $5 million co-op apartment on the Upper East Side. News stories carried headlines such as “When Home Is a Castle and the Big House, Too” and “You Say House Arrest, I Say Paradise.” A photo of Brooks accompanying one of the articles carried the caption “Velvet cuffs: Diana D. Brooks just before she was sentenced to home detention,” suggesting that the criminal justice system was treating her as a privileged person. The journalist set the stage by showing how well Brooks lived:

On August evenings, the limestone canyons of Park Avenue and the white-glove streets of the East 70’s are quiet, abandoned by the well-to-do for breezier destinations. But last week on East 79th Street, a solitary window emitted a hopeful rectangular glow. The window, on the 10th floor of one of Manhattan’s best co-op apartment buildings, belongs to Diana D. Brooks, the former chief executive of Sotheby’s, who is four months into a six-month sentence of home detention. She is allowed to leave her 12-room, $5 million apartment for two hours each Friday to go grocery shopping at any store selling food or products related to food preparation. Her forays have included trips to Gristede’s and D’Agostino supermarkets and to a Starbucks, according to a friend of Ms. Brooks. However, Ms. Brooks is not allowed to exercise in Central Park and may not travel to her $4 million oceanfront home in Hobe Sound, Fla., but she may use her telephone and work from home, which is where she has been continuing her volunteer work for troubled girls in public schools.
As this article suggests, aspects of Brooks’s elegant lifestyle, including her trips to other exclusive residences or appearances at high-society parties, were prohibited, but she was able to enjoy the luxury of her costly home, which protected her from interactions with “garden-variety criminals.” When found guilty, rich-and-famous women often receive seemingly lenient sentences, and media framing of stories about them continues to suggest that they are bad apples with good taste. Some, like Martha Stewart, remain in the media spotlight; others, like Diana D. Brooks, do not resurface except in articles like one newspaper report describing the wedding of her daughter at the Brooks home in Jupiter Island (Hobe Sound), Florida. According to this media account, Brooks’s daughter is a hedge fund director in New York, but it makes no mention of the fact that the family has remained close to controversial money issues in the aftermath of the earlier scandal.48

Wealthy celebrities accused of offenses such as insider trading, collusion, and even more mundane crimes like shoplifting typically receive extensive media coverage. Two examples of bad-apple-with-good-taste framing for shoplifting involve actress Winona Ryder and Dallas socialite Brooke Stollenwerck Aldridge. The Winona Ryder shoplifting trial became a topic not only of newspaper and magazine accounts but also of such television entertainment shows as E!, Entertainment Tonight, Inside Edition, and Access Hollywood. Writers for Saturday Night Live, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, and Late Night with David Letterman created numerous jokes about “Winona’s five-finger discount” and the expensive designer clothing she wore to her trial (“no cheap orange jump suit for Winona,” for example). In bad-apple-with-good-taste framing of stories about rich celebrities like Ryder, no detail is spared, particularly when it involves the individual’s insatiable desire for expensive goods or the preferential treatment he or she receives in everyday life:

Probably the biggest gasp in the Winona Ryder shoplifting trial... came when two sales clerks in a row testified that the willowy actress had asked them to fetch her Coca-Colas from the Saks Fifth Avenue cafeteria. By the testimony, Ms. Ryder not once, but twice, asked solicitous helpers hovering outside separate dressing rooms to please bring her a Coke on the afternoon of December 12, 2002, when she was in the midst of what authorities say was a $5,560 shoplifting spree. What was unclear was the reason for the gasp. Was it that the audience in the small, crowded Beverly Hills courtroom had caught the prosecutor’s intimation that Ms. Ryder had used a need for refreshment to give her more privacy for scissoring security tags from designer clothes and trinkets? Or was it the very notion that a person could actually order up a beverage while trying on clothes—that is, if one is the right sort of person?49
Another example of bad-apple-with-good-taste framing involves wealthy Dallas socialite Brooke Stollenwerck Aldridge, convicted of shoplifting: headlines included “An Unfashionable Turn for Stylish HP Socialite,” “Charity Co-chair Steps Down over Shoplifting Charge,” and “Shop Till You Get Caught.” In stories about the Aldridge case, journalists typically did more than simply describe the charges against this socially prominent woman, as evidenced by these introductory sentences from a *Dallas Morning News* front-page article:

It was sure to be another triumphant evening for one of Dallas’ society darlings. A good time, a good cause, a good place to see and be seen. As usual, Brooke Stollenwerck Aldridge would be a conspicuous focus of attention—this time, though, as a consummate contradiction to her lofty social status and inspired volunteer work. During the countdown to the big night, some of the city’s wealthiest jaws would drop over a shoplifting scandal that shattered the flawless image of a party planner nonpareil, a chic benefactor with a happy, privileged life.

According to numerous articles, Aldridge, heir to part of her mother’s East Texas timber and real estate fortune, easily could have paid for the $485 pair of black designer pants, the $1,250 Hermes wallet, and the $120 Kate Spade wallet that she placed in her purse or shopping bag at the Neiman Marcus store. Most news accounts indicated Aldridge’s good taste by including the brand names of the stolen merchandise. In 2007, when Aldridge died of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, her *Dallas Morning News* obituary provided readers with numerous examples of her life as a socialite and civic volunteer but included the following statement: “In the fall of 2003, she drew unwanted publicity after she was arrested on a shoplifting charge at the Neiman Marcus store in NorthPark Center. She pleaded guilty and received probation.”

Articles and television accounts about the shoplifting convictions of Ryder and Aldridge utilized bad-apple-with-good-taste framing to depict a few wealthy individuals who could afford anything they wanted but apparently had psychological problems or other complicated reasons for engaging in such deviant conduct. All the same, even when they get caught, privileged elites are described as having the right connections to help them with their plight. Consider, for example, media reports about Aldridge’s arrest:

[Aldridge’s] $500 bond was paid in cash by her father, lawyer Henry Stollenwerck. . . . “It’s unusual to pay cash if you’re poor, but not for somebody of that stature,” Sgt. Don Peritz, the Dallas County sheriff’s spokesman, said of the bond. “It’s probably like walking money for them, I’m reckoning. My guess is Daddy was waiting there with his engine idling.”
Of course, such assumptions were confirmed by media reports at Ms. Aldridge’s death that she had received probation for her conduct and not the sentence that women of other classes or races might have received under similar circumstances.

Stories about the crimes of wealthy women maintain the rich-and-tasteful-socialite stereotype through the visual images that accompany articles or video segments about their misconduct. As communications scholars have suggested, photographs serve as a form of pictorial stereotyping in the media. Sometimes these representations create or maintain distorted images of individuals and contribute to bias against people based on their ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, or other characteristics.

Consider, on the other hand, what kind of media coverage, if any, a working-class woman would receive for shoplifting a $25 pair of shoes and a $49 pantsuit from Walmart or another discount chain. In any case, most media coverage of the rich and famous who commit crimes focuses on the wrongdoings of elite men.

**BAD-APPLE FRAMING #4: BAD APPLES WITH MOGUL STYLE—WEALTHY MEN AND CRIME**

Wealthy men’s high status and the cost of their entertainment and luxury possessions are key components of media coverage about the downfall of corporate CEOs and their companies. Mogul style refers to the idea that some rich corporate executives take less interest in conspicuous consumption for its own sake than in contemptuous consumption—spending money (sometimes not their own) not for the pleasure of ownership or connoisseurship but for the gratification they receive from making other moguls fearful or jealous.

According to one journalist,

> The gossip columns and the glossy magazines got it all wrong. For years they’ve been glorifying the homes and lives of the rich and famous by defining the rich and famous as movie stars, fashion designers and rap music impresarios. But it turns out that the trend they missed was Mogul Style: excessive spending on the chief executive’s imperial lifestyle.

Whether in the national news, business, or lifestyle sections of local newspapers or on infotainment TV shows like Dateline, 20/20, or 60 Minutes, executives’ arrests and trials have garnered headlines, giving media audiences opportunities to look at the mogul style these men display, be it at corporate parties or in their private residences. In fact, the lifestyles of some top (and former) CEOs have been described as “more flamboyant and expensive than
Hollywood Style, than anyone on MTV Cribs or in the pages of In Style magazine. . . . Whereas celebs are trying to impress their fans, moguls are trying to impress each other.**

Journalists and news correspondents employed media framing using the bad-apple-with-mogul-style theme in stories about the suicide of Finn M. W. Caspersen, heir to the Beneficial Corporation fortune. At the time of his death, investigators were building a case against Caspersen for federal tax evasion. Mogul-style framing is apparent in articles like “Suicide Victim May Have Harbored a Secret”:

He seemed, in many ways, like a man from another time, a Gatsbyesque figure who glided through a world of old money, private clubs and pedigree horses, his family name emblazoned on Ivy League halls. Then, in an instant, he was gone—his privileged life ended, by his own hand, with a single gunshot to the head.

No one can know exactly what Finn M. W. Caspersen, a prominent philanthropist and the heir to the Beneficial Corporation fortune, was thinking when he decided to take his life on Labor Day. Although Mr. Caspersen, 67, was battling kidney cancer, his suicide shocked his family and friends.

Notwithstanding Caspersen’s contributing millions of dollars to charities and to Princeton and Harvard universities (including a $30 million gift to the Harvard Law School), UBS, a giant Swiss bank, exposed him as an American client holding “secret” bank accounts in “offshore” havens to evade U.S. federal income taxes. In the Caspersen case and others like it, bad-apple media framing often describes the problem as an individual pathology, not a structural concern rooted in the larger economic, political, or social inequalities in society. From an individualized perspective, a few bad apples like Caspersen are responsible for all incidences of tax evasion and banking scandals; there is nothing wrong with the system.

The focus of bad-apple framing remains on the individual scoundrel even if that person’s illegal activities are embedded in a larger organizational context, such as a megacorporation or the Wall Street banking industry. Consider the scandal in which the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) accused Goldman Sachs of securities fraud. One individual’s name showed up most often in media coverage: that of Goldman Sachs vice president Fabrice Tourre. Little initial information disclosed the extent to which a number of Wall Street firms were operating in a corporate culture in which anything goes as long as you get rich but don’t get caught. Tourre became infamous for helping to create and sell an investment vehicle called Abacus 2007-AC1, which was secretly intended to fail. The idea behind this scheme was as follows: After analyzing the high number of extremely risky home mortgages made in various states, Goldman Sachs officials and some of their clients...
wanted a financial vehicle for betting against those high-risk loans. The analysts and their clients predicted that many of the risky mortgages would fail and contribute to the collapse of the already overheated housing market, a situation that did indeed occur. Tourre was the fall guy for the scheme because he supposedly committed fraud by failing to disclose to investors that a hedge fund that helped choose the mortgage-backed securities going into a Goldman-structured investment was the same hedge fund betting against that deal. The hedge fund involved...ultimately reaped a $1 billion profit while the deal’s investors lost more than $1 billion.\textsuperscript{62}

This type of activity violated a number of laws pertaining to the finance industry.

Why do journalists often focus on one or a few individuals rather than the corporate culture of places such as Goldman Sachs or Enron when they hatch such schemes? Media audiences have an easier time focusing on stories about individuals, for instance, about the role that Fabrice Tourre (nicknamed “Fabulous Fab” by the media) played in that scandal. People not in the financial industry find it difficult to comprehend how such frauds are perpetrated because understanding requires advanced knowledge of accounting principles, the law, and business practices. By contrast, highlighting the alleged wrongdoings and sumptuous lifestyles of one or a few individuals makes it easier for laypersons to point a finger and place blame.

In 2010, the SEC settled its complaints with Goldman Sachs for $550 million. The company agreed to pay $300 million in fines and $250 million in restitution to settle federal claims that it had misled investors in a subprime mortgage product as the housing market began to collapse. Clearly, the settlement made only a small dent in the $13.38 billion in profits that Goldman earned in 2009. In the settlement, the company admitted to no wrongdoing in the Abacus 2007-AC1 scandal but agreed to a judicial order barring it from committing “intentional fraud” in the future under federal securities laws. Many people thought of this as a slap on the hand rather than actual punishment for the wrongs committed.

Prior to the Goldman Sachs complaint and other Wall Street crises, one of the most widely publicized scandals involved Enron Corporation, then the country’s seventh-largest company. In the Enron case, the U.S. Department of Labor filed a civil lawsuit against CEO Kenneth Lay and a few other top executives in an effort to recover hundreds of millions of dollars in employees’ lost retirement money. Criminal charges were also filed against Lay and CFO Andrew Fastow, who later pleaded guilty to two counts of wire and securities fraud and was sentenced to ten years in prison. According to one
media report, “Enron hid billions of dollars in debts and operating losses inside private partnerships and dizzyingly complex accounting schemes that were intended to pump up buzz about the company and support its inflated stock price.” Apparently, Enron officials would not have been able to perpetrate their criminal acts had it not been for an accounting firm that looked the other way and for the government’s failure to take action when it should have. As one journalist stated, 

It is a failure of government: having greased nearly every campaigner’s palm in Washington, Enron worked overtime to keep the regulators from looking too closely at a balance sheet gone bad. And it is a failure of character, especially inside Enron, where managers who knew something was badly wrong did not say anything publicly until the subpoenas began to arrive.

Despite this collective responsibility, worldwide media coverage of the Enron scandal and the corporation’s subsequent collapse often employed bad-apple-with-mogul-style framing, regaling audiences with stories about Kenneth Lay’s broad influence in business and politics as well as the lavish lifestyle he and other top Enron executives had enjoyed. One journalist described Enron’s glory days in terms of its top employees’ material possessions: “You could always tell it was bonus time at Enron when the shiny new silver Porches began arriving in the company garage. The $100,000 sports car was the status symbol of choice among the young Masters of the Universe who worked at the global trading company.” Even the death notices for Clifford Baxter (a former Enron executive who resigned before the scandal broke and committed suicide after challenging the corporation’s secret partnership agreements) provided a laundry list of his mogul-style material possessions, including the Mercedes-Benz S500 sedan in which he died, the seventy-two-foot yacht, Tranquility Base, that he used for weekend relaxation, and his family’s $700,000 residence in an exclusive Houston suburb.

Media stories about Enron’s collapse emphasized the “lavish excess” typical of corporate events as well as the luxury travel and expensive restaurants enjoyed by top executives. Even when the economic tide had shifted at the corporation, officials had set aside $1.5 million for a Christmas party at Enron Field (now Minute Maid Park) in Houston. As one news report stated, “Everything Enron did had to be better and flashier—from the new business ventures it unveiled nearly every year to the way it celebrated Secretaries’ Day with gifts of Waterford crystal—and no gesture seemed too lavish, workers and competitors agree.”

Media reporting about the fall of former Tyco International CEO L. Dennis Kozlowski serves as another example of bad-apple-with-mogul-style media framing. Kozlowski was charged with enterprise corruption and grand larceny
for allegedly stealing $600 million from Tyco. Journalists reported in elaborate
detail on the $2 million weeklong party on the island of Sardinia that Kozlowski
threw for his wife’s fortieth birthday. According to court papers, Kozlowski also
used Tyco money to pay $80,000 to American Express and $72,000 to a German
yacht builder. For his residences, Tyco money bought a $15,000 umbrella stand,
a $6,000 shower curtain, and a $2,900 set of coat hangers, in addition to two sets
of sheets costing $5,960.68 In discussing these expenditures, business journal-
ists (who ordinarily do not describe accessories of interior design) learned that
bad-apple-with-mogul-style framing is very popular with audiences. Consider
this excerpt from a Wall Street Journal article titled “Newest ‘Tyco Gone Wild’
Video Is Out, and Jurors See $6,000 Shower Curtain”: “

Now it can be told: The $6,000 shower curtain was in the maid’s bathroom . . . in
Mr. Kozlowski’s opulent, $18 million apartment on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.
The dimly lit tape [shown during trial] showcased costly china, antiques, oil paint-
ings, and four-poster beds. Prosecutors contend most of the duplex apartment’s
furnishings, including a $15,000 umbrella stand, were improperly bought with
Tyco assets. But it was the famous shower curtain that everyone was waiting to
see. When news of the costly fabric first surfaced last year, it became a symbol of
corporate excess, the butt of jokes by late-night TV comedians.69

The shower curtain and umbrella stand were considered crucial evidence in
the Kozlowski trial; however, journalists’ and correspondents’ story framing
highlighted even more the excesses designed to impress other moguls, some-
times at the expense of lower-level employees and shareholders.

Media reports of the alleged crimes of real-life individuals like Kozlowski
and Lay occasionally parallel TV crime-drama story lines in a way that reveals
for viewers the elegant lifestyles of rich bad apples. The technique also typi-
cally suggests that the rich and powerful consider themselves to be above the
law or, at least, feel they should not be bothered by police officers or courts.

BAD APPLES IN TELEVISION CRIME DRAMAS:
“WE’RE ABOVE THE LAW”

Bad-apple framing of various forms in media stories about real-life rich men
and women in legal trouble are often stranger than fiction. Crime dramas, on
the other hand, frequently use fictitious characters to reflect the bad-apple
behavior of wealthy people who are victims of homicides or suspects in
criminal cases. For example, wealthy people seldom come out looking noble
in the syndicated crime series Law & Order, which, over many TV seasons
and in various spin-offs, has explored numerous crimes involving wealthy
and influential individuals. In at least one episode each season, detectives go to the residence of a rich family to investigate a homicide that has been committed. They routinely make unfavorable comments about the person’s wealth or affluent residence as they leave the bloodstained premises, such as “Well, I guess the maid forgot to clean up before she left.” *Law & Order* story lines involving the wealthy often portray them as above the law, too busy and important to help the detectives, or unconcerned about whether justice is done. In some episodes, the rich and famous make phone calls to higher-ups in the city’s administration or the judicial system, resulting in warnings to detectives or prosecutors to be careful in their investigation or prosecution (“you’d better be right, or there’ll be hell to pay”).

Three examples show how *Law & Order* frames stories about wealthy characters. One episode, “Family Business,” focuses on the police investigation of the murder of the president of New York’s most popular (and expensive) department store. Detectives are led to the feuding daughters of the store’s elderly owner as possible suspects; however, the store owner seeks to outsmart the district attorney. In another episode, “Entitled,” the police investigate the “wayward socialite daughter of a wealthy, politically connected—and threatening—grande dame” as a possible suspect in a murder. A third episode, “For Love or Money,” tells the story of detectives who investigate the murder of a rich man and come to believe that the victim’s widow might have hired a hit man to kill him.

In yet another episode, “Darwinian,” the detectives investigate a case in which a homeless, mentally ill person has apparently been killed in a hit-and-run accident. Subsequent investigation reveals that the victim “was trapped inside the car’s windshield after the accident and that the driver—a high profile publicist—left the man dying in her garage” before disposing of the body. “Darwinian” uses what *Law & Order* refers to as a “ripped-from-the-headlines” plot that combines two real criminal cases, one in which a woman (of more modest means than in the TV show) left a man to die on her windshield after hitting him with her car and a second involving a well-known society publicist convicted on a felony charge of leaving the scene of an accident after she backed her Mercedes SUV into a group of people going to a night club. This episode is characteristic of the bad-apple messages that *Law & Order* and other crime dramas send to viewers.

When Bernard (“Bernie”) Madoff was accused of perpetrating a $65 billion fraud in a Ponzi scheme, set up through Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities, that cost many investors their life savings, a *Law & Order* episode combined elements of his crimes with the murder of a television reporter:

While investigating the murder of television reporter Dawn Prescott, detectives Lupo and Bernard discover that she was involved in a love triangle involving
another reporter at the station. This leads them to another suspect, veteran anchor Joe Delaney, who was threatened by the success of his younger co-workers and may have hacked into their email to gain an advantage. As they search for the killer, the detectives uncover that Dawn was working on a major story surrounding a huge hedge fund fraud and there may be a connection with the recent murder of Fred Decker, a whistle-blower who filed an SEC suit against hedge fund owner Fredric Matson and his wife Irene.73

Ironically, the true story of Madoff’s life is as bizarre as this Hollywood version. Some media accounts suggest that Madoff has $9 billion stashed away, even though he is serving a 150-year prison sentence. Other articles indicate that Madoff’s wealth and notoriety have earned him a privileged place in the prison hierarchy.74

After the cancellation of the original Law & Order franchise, NBC shifted the venue for this program to Los Angeles, where subsequent episodes, such as “Bling Ring Burglars,” portrayed teenagers accused of targeting the residences of wealthy actors like Paris Hilton and Orlando Bloom. Similarly, scenes in the “Pasadena” episode showed posh residences and tree-lined streets in an affluent suburb where the hit-and-run of a pregnant woman was linked to a political scandal inspired by John Edwards’s affair.

Whether in true stories about people’s lives or in story lines produced by television scriptwriters, framing about the downfall of affluent people has key commonalities. One is that the rich and famous live more glamorous and exciting lives than ordinary people. Even when they are in trouble with the law, their money and position in the community make them likely to avoid the harshest penalties the system might impose. In sum, their wealth provides them with a cushion that others simply do not have.

GILDED CAGES:
EFFECTS OF SOUR-GRAPES AND BAD-APPLE FRAMING

Media framing of stories about the rich and famous influences our thinking about how people in the top economic tiers of society live. It also plays a role in whether audiences see issues of inequality in terms of individual circumstances or larger structural conditions embedded in the social institutions of our nation. In contrast with the framing approaches discussed in chapter 2 (those that suggest the rich are like everyone else, deserve admiration for their achievements, or should be applauded for their virtues and good deeds), sour-grapes and bad-apple framing send divergent messages about wealth and how the rich conduct their lives.
Sour-grapes framing portrays the rich as often unhappy and dysfunctional people. The notion of the poor little rich girl may lead audiences to see the problems of the wealthy as self-inflicted and stemming from individual character flaws. Cautionary tales about inherited wealth or the problems of the nouveau riche suggest that wealth will cause a great deal of pain. At the same time, sour-grapes framing also provides the contradictory message that wealth generates a great deal of pleasure. In entertainment television as well, story lines about corruption and insecurity convey messages similar to the real-world stories of individuals whose riches have not brought them happiness or success to the extent that they would have liked.

As media coverage of the activities of the rich and famous creates the illusion over time that we know these individuals, the frames utilized to tell stories about them may distort our perception of reality. Bad-apple framing frequently includes elaborate discussions of what life is like in the rarified world of luxury estates, yachts, private jets, and $1 million office Christmas parties, perhaps subordinating the message about the evildoing of some of these individuals to descriptions of the good life. The sagas of corporate wrongdoing are often told as stories about individuals, making it appear as though purging one or a few bad apples would fix all problems, and business as usual could resume unimpeded. Only when news of a number of business scandals breaks at once, such as during the first decade of the twenty-first century, does a pattern of financial misconduct and corporate malfeasance actually receive attention in media accounts about the wrongdoings of wealthy business elites.

The milder forms of bad-apple framing merely portray the rich as seeking publicity (media hogs) or acting as if money can buy anything (or anyone). The stronger forms of such framing, however—employed, for instance, when wealthy individuals are accused of crimes—still emphasize the importance of material possessions and characterize the culprit as having either good taste in merchandise (as in the case of women shoplifters) or mogul style (as in the case of CEOs trying to impress other moguls and provide their families with the best of luxury living).

A number of television crime series portray the bad attitudes of the rich as revealed in their conduct toward law enforcement officials and the court system. Although I have focused only on NBC’s *Law & Order*, other shows carry similar messages about the elegant lifestyles and arrogance of the rich and famous. Even as some readers and viewers experience schadenfreude, they may also feel a desire to trade up, to own things they really cannot afford, and blame themselves for their failure to reach the American Dream of success and wealth.

When the wealthy commit crimes, we may believe that they should be punished, but we are not surprised to learn of their differential treatment by
the criminal justice system or about what their money can buy them in the process. Journalists make media audiences aware of the favorable treatment that some wealthy criminals receive. An article titled “For the Elite, Easing the Way to Prison,” for example, describes how A. Alfred Taubman, the (then) seventy-eight-year-old principal owner and former chairman of Sotheby’s, received a year-and-a-day sentence and a $7.5 million fine for leading a six-year price-fixing scheme (the same one that brought house arrest for Diana D. Brooks). It explained how high-paid lawyers representing such people attempt to get their clients into the best prisons with the lightest possible sentences if it appears that jail time is inevitable:

“In these cases, the defense attorney will act almost like an agent in Hollywood, negotiating the perp’s rights, wheeling and dealing to get her into the best spot,” [security consultant and investigator Bill Stanton] said. “He can say, ‘This prison has tennis, this one has nicer rooms.’”

Defense lawyers have some influence over where their clients serve time, legal experts say. . . . And in the last decade, dozens of specialists have begun marketing their services to experts in sentence mitigation. These are the lawyers, criminologists, or former corrections officials known as “postconviction specialists,” who—for fees that can reach into tens of thousands of dollars—navigate and cajole the prison and judicial systems, bargaining for the chance at a light, sweet sentence. They are a grim reality in the lives of the criminally convicted elite: counselors as valued in their way as the SAT prep teachers, personal shoppers and chefs who also serve the well-to-do.75

Media framing of the treatment of elite criminals typically focuses on hierarchies in the prison system. Madoff was sentenced to Butner Medium I, which the media pointed out is referred to as “Camp Fluffy” because it is filled with “soft” prisoners who might not survive in other institutions:

The facility had been planned during a brief period of penal optimism and was designed to humanize the prison experience. The physical space resembles a campus, with landscaped yards and hedges shaped by inmates into giant globes. There’s flowers and trees; you can lay out on the grass and tan. . . . There’s no bars. There are windows. There’s a gym, a library, pool tables, a chapel, a volleyball court, and an Indian sweat lodge. But however soft, prison is a hardship.76

Media reports also inform audiences that the rich often receive a “soft landing” on leaving prison. For example, elite felons like Diana D. Brooks and A. Alfred Taubman used their wealth to ease their reentry into society. One journalist contrasted the reentry of an “ordinary criminal” with that of Taubman after he had served nine and a half months of his sentence and was released:
Raymond Carter’s release from prison followed a familiarly bleak script. After two years at the Wyoming Correctional Facility in upstate New York for sale of a controlled substance, he was granted his freedom on June 23, and given back his personal belongings—a Social Security card and some medication—then handed 40 bucks and a one-way bus ticket to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan. He had a little time, so he savored a quiet meal at McDonald’s.

A. Alfred Taubman’s reintroduction to society went down a little differently.

Mr. Taubman learned on June 13 at a halfway house in Detroit that he was a free man. Mr. Taubman’s first move was to order his chauffeur to pick him up posthaste. After a quiet night at home in nearby Bloomfield Hills, Mich., with his wife, Judy, amid their collection of Jackson Pollocks and Kandinskys, Mr. Taubman boarded his Gulfstream IV and headed straight to his sprawling oceanfront estate in the Hamptons. By evening, he was savoring a meal at Mirko’s at the best table in the house.

In 2010, Taubman has a net worth of $1.5 billion. He owns twenty-five malls in sixteen states and possesses a vast, world-class contemporary art collection. He shows up each year in Fortune and Forbes on lists of the wealthiest individuals in the United States. From media reports like this, we learn that even when the wealthy reside in “gilded cages” and experience problems, their lives still have silver linings compared to those of people living in poverty or in the working and middle classes. Moreover, wealthy and powerful individuals may be excused for their conduct even beyond their death. After Enron founder Kenneth Lay, who was convicted of ten counts of fraud, conspiracy, and lying to banks in two separate cases, died of heart disease while vacationing with his wife in Colorado, a federal judge ruled that Lay’s death vacated his conviction on fraud and conspiracy charges connected to the downfall of Enron. Consequently, Lay’s criminal record is now clean, and the government has had difficulty collecting the $43.5 million it sought from his estate.

While cable channels in the second decade of the twenty-first century still glorify the rich and famous—even the downfallen—network television has reduced the number of programs shown about extremely wealthy people. Many reality shows, however, offer ordinary people a chance to compete for $1 million or more in prize money using their talent, knowledge, or other attributes. Television news media and social-networking sites are full of gossip about wealthy celebrities who go astray, including Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears. According to a Wall Street Journal article titled “Rich People on TV Aren’t Really Rich,” however,

The real economy may still be in crisis, but the TV economy has never been richer.
Chapter 3

It goes without saying that most of the wealth on TV isn’t real wealth. Most of these characters aren’t rich, they just play [rich people] on reality TV—usually in hopes of getting rich.

The problem is that these shows give us all a false impression of wealth. Economic and psychological research has shown time and again that wealth is a relative concept, based on a reference group of our peers. But in our media-saturated age, our “peers” are increasingly the rich people we see on TV. Rich reality-TV, in other words, distorts our own reality of wealth.

And therein lies the central problem discussed in this and the previous chapter: media distortion of reality about the wealthy. Positive media frames and their messages, including the consensus, admiration, emulation, and price-tag frames, create distortions in our thinking about how the rich and powerful live. Negative framing devices used to portray the upper class, such as the sour-grapes and bad-apple frames, may end up glorifying the rich, or at least giving the impression that the upper classes are somehow better than everyone else and, even in their weakest moments, above the law.
Chapter 4

Fragile Frames

The Poor and the Homeless

New York, January 30, 1870:

Down in the squalid environs of —— street this woman lives, whose story we shall tell, having been sought out in the crusade of a Times reporter among the haunts of a starving and in the main, ill-used class. Through a foul alley, reeking with noisome odors, lay the approach to a den of a room—odorous of pestilence, one might suppose, intuitively desiring to keep one’s mouth shut while waiting. . . . The dingiest of dingy old women threw out a tub of suds as we approached, then conveyed us to the room. A young child was there, begrimed and sooty. These and the mother of the latter were the occupants, and it is of this mother that we shall principally speak. Young she was, and pretty but for the pinched and perished look one sees so often, it is grievous to say, among this class of laborers. . . .

[The mother] was out of work now. Her last situation had paid her $5 per week.

“And you lost it—how?” we asked.

“I will tell you,” was the reply. “I was to have reached the place by 7 o’clock in the morning. I told them I would; but as it happened, one or two mornings there was no one to be with my little child, and I was behind time; it might have been forty minutes, at most, but hardly more than half an hour, I think. . . . Next day I was discharged, and here I am—nothing to help myself with, only because I wanted to do a mother’s part by my little one. I have sometimes heard of mothers drowning themselves and their children in straits like mine. I couldn’t do that, but oftentimes think could that be much worse than to live as we live?”

The reporter of this early article about poverty in New York City frames the story to show that the poor are to be pitied, particularly if they are willing to work. More than 130 years later, journalists still employ a sympathetic frame in some articles about the poor and homeless, but most articles and stories
about those on the bottom rungs of society either treat them as mere statistics or have a critical edge, portraying them as losers, welfare dependents, mentally ill people, or criminals. This approach differs quite a bit from that taken by articles and story lines about the rich and famous. As previous chapters discuss, frames presenting the upper class typically encourage us to believe that what is good for the wealthy and famous is good for everyone else (consensus framing) or that we should admire or emulate them, even if there are a few bad apples in the barrel.

Articles and stories about the upper classes appear frequently in newspapers and on television, but the poor are invisible, except when presented as faceless statistics or as “problems” to be dealt with in a community. This chapter shows how the media have generally ignored the poor, and when they do appear in what we read and watch, they are often portrayed in a negative light that ignores larger community and societal conditions that may have contributed to or exacerbated their condition.

MEDIA FRAMING OF STORIES ABOUT THE POOR AND HOMELESS

The relative invisibility of the poor in media reporting has been referred to as a case of “benign neglect”\(^2\) that hides the realities of poverty from middle- and upper-class readers and viewers. This neglect may be intentional because media audiences do not want to have the poor in their faces:

Fear of poverty rests at the very core of the American culture—the “American dream” is precisely the hope of rising from rags to riches. . . . The media offer those who are not poor, especially Whites, little guidance in reconciling the conflicting emotions toward poverty embedded within American culture, with its simultaneously sympathetic and impatient assumption that America offers the promise of escape from poverty to all who work hard.\(^3\)

By providing only a few stories about the poor, journalists do not have to deal often with middle- and upper-class fears about poverty or with the conflicting emotions potentially generated by a greater awareness of poverty, hunger, and homelessness in a nation referred to as the land of opportunity. How are the words “poor” and “poverty” employed in the media? There is no standard usage. Some journalists use them loosely to refer to people on the bottom rungs of the nation’s economic ladder, whereas others use them to specify those living near the official poverty line created by the Social Security Administration to indicate the minimum amount of money required to live at a subsistence level in any particular year. The poverty line is computed
by determining the cost of a minimally nutritious diet (a low-cost food budget on which a family could survive nutritionally on a short-term, emergency basis) and multiplying this figure by three to allow for nonfood costs. Based on this method of calculation, about 39.8 million people (more than 13.2 percent of the U.S. population) lived below the official government poverty level of $22,025 for a family of four in 2008. The poverty line increased only slightly, to $22,128, in 2009.

According to critics, however, measuring poverty in terms of cash income and household size does not take into account the increased cost of other basic necessities, such as housing, health care, and child care. When the formula for the official poverty line was created, low-income families spent about one-third of their earnings on food; food today constitutes about one-fifth of low-income budgets, and housing costs have sharply increased. The poverty line also employs a one-size-fits-all logic, operating on the assumption that the same standards for poverty can be applied in New York City as in rural southern communities.

The formulation of news stories based on statistics and trends is often referred to as thematic framing, which in this case means that journalists primarily write about such facts as changes in the poverty rate, government definitions of poverty, and the states with the largest increases in poverty or hunger. In these stories, the object of the coverage is abstract and impersonal, sending a message to media audiences that “the poor are faceless.”

According to some analysts, thematic framing of poverty is dehumanizing in that it “ignores the human tragedy of poverty—the suffering, indignities, and misery endured by millions of children and adults.”

By contrast, episodic framing reveals poverty “in terms of personal experience: the viewer is provided with a particular [episode] of an individual or family living under economic duress.” This type of framing gives poverty a human face but often ignores the larger structural factors (such as high unemployment rates) that affect the problem or portrays the poor negatively based on the actions of the few individuals featured in the article. For example, episodic framing of some stories may suggest that most of the poor are undeserving because they are welfare cheats, drug addicts, or greedy panhandlers. It may therefore cause audiences to conclude that the poor have only themselves to blame because of their bad attitudes and behavior. As communications scholars Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki state, media audiences may infer that “inexplicably, some people choose to live in deteriorating neighborhoods where they frequently commit or become victims of crime, or have trouble receiving health care and finding adequate schools.”

Such framing also suggests that the poor are an eyesore on the landscape of daily life. Stories about panhandlers disturbing people on city streets or
about individuals standing in line outside homeless shelters portray the poor as contributors to urban blight, particularly as viewed by middle-class observers interviewed because of concern about the placement of a homeless shelter or after being accosted on the street by a panhandler. Typically, the voices heard in this type of reporting belong not to the poor but to the middle class expressing disdain for them.15

Perhaps the most benevolent message that episodic framing conveys about poverty is that the poor are down on their luck.16 This type of framing is especially popular in news stories published near holidays like Thanksgiving or Christmas, asking readers to help meet some of the needs of the poor temporarily. Most newspaper coverage of the poor over the past 150 years, however, has seemed more intent on selling newspapers to middle- and upper-class readers than assisting the impoverished.

**HISTORICAL FRAMING: THE POOR YOU WILL HAVE WITH YOU ALWAYS**

Framing of early newspaper articles about the poor used vivid terminology to portray their plight, including descriptions such as “squalid environs,” a “foul alley reeking with noisome odors,” and “begrimed and sooty.”17 Today, the language of newspaper reporting has changed somewhat, but the format for describing the poor has not been modified significantly. It still fails to examine the larger structural issues that perpetuate poverty, such as growing rates of economic inequality, a decline in the number of available jobs, continuing racial and gender discrimination, and other social and technological changes that reduce opportunity.

A systematic examination of the *New York Times* archives between September 1851 and December 1995 reveals 4,126 articles with the word “poverty” in the headline. Many of the early articles linked poverty to other social problems, such as suicide and murder. “Distressing Case of Poverty and Suicide,” for example, describes the suicide of John Murphy, a forty-five-year-old Irish immigrant tailor and father of five who had lost his job. According to the article, Murphy’s unemployment produced mental illness and ultimately led to his taking his own life: “Finding his family in a starving condition, it affected him so at times he was out of his mind.”18 In the end, “the deceased . . . came to his death by cutting his throat with a razor, while laboring under a temporary derangement of mind, consequent upon his destitute condition.”19 This article is typical of a number of nineteenth-century articles that blamed the suicides of indigent people on derangement resulting from their destitute condition. Other examples include “Melancholy Case of Suicide: Pride and
Poverty the Cause"\textsuperscript{20} and “A Sad Case of Poverty: A Woman Commits Suicide, Her Husband at the Point of Death,”\textsuperscript{21} both of which tell of residents in tenement houses who took their own lives when they could no longer stand their impoverished condition. People who had once been more affluent and ended up in poverty were believed to be prime candidates for suicide. “A Sad Life Story: Reduced from Wealth to Poverty and Dying Almost without Friends”\textsuperscript{22} describes the death of a “remarkable septuagenarian lady, Mary Jane Marquis,” who ended her own life after being reduced to penury.

The framing of nineteenth-century articles about the relationship between poverty and suicide was in keeping with the common sociological thought of the day, as found in the works of French sociologist Emile Durkheim. According to Durkheim, fatalistic suicide is likely to occur among “persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline.”\textsuperscript{23} Many reports in the \textit{New York Times} told of people overcome by such fatalism, including poor women with children to feed, recent immigrants who were lonely and had no home, merchants whose businesses had failed, and the elderly.\textsuperscript{24}

Just as suicide and poverty were often linked in early media reports, so too were crime and poverty. “Down among the Lowly: The Sights That One Sees in the Fourth Ward” describes the “intense, and perhaps undeserved suffering” in New York City’s Fourth Ward, where “coarse-looking men and slovenly women stand listlessly in the doorways of the huge tenement houses, or gaze stupidly out of the windows.”\textsuperscript{25} The reporter focused his article on the relationship between poverty and crime:

The reputation of the Fourth Ward for crimes of every nature has created a general distrust toward all of its inhabitants, which has prevented or neutralized many efforts for their improvement. Dismal tales of foul outrage and drunken brutality, combined with the loathsome appearance of the place, have given to it a far worse name than it deserves, for Police records will show that though there are none that can equal it in misery, there are several wards in this City that surpass it in criminality. Indeed, almost all of the crimes committed there can be traced directly or indirectly to the common curse of poverty, which has blighted the hopes and aspirations of its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{26}

Of all poverty-and-crime stories, journalists took the most interest in cases in which parents killed their children. For instance, “Terrible Tragedy: An Insane Mother Kills Her Daughter”\textsuperscript{27} describes how the Elliott family’s poverty brought about the insanity of the mother, who murdered her seventeen-year-old daughter. Like most of the poor in news stories of that day, the Elliott family lived in a tenement house; the father had been unemployed for some time, reducing the family to almost abject poverty. Worse yet, according to
the journalist, Mr. Elliott had become “addicted to the use of intoxicating liquor, and for the last three weeks he had been on a continual spree.” When he left the house one day, Mrs. Elliott strangled their daughter, laid her body out on the bed, and calmly informed her husband when he returned home that the girl was dead. Headlines for articles about parents in poverty who killed their children frequently summarized the entire story, as in this example: “A Father’s Awful Crime: Shooting His Three Little Girls. Why John Remmler, of Holyoke, Killed His Children—Poverty and a Fear for Their Future His Reasons.”

Linkages between poverty, region, and race were quite evident in the framing of stories about the poor in the South. Northeastern newspapers like the New York Times periodically published articles informing urban dwellers how bad off the poor were in the South, particularly in the former slave states, and many contemporary stereotypes of “poor,” “black” African Americans can also be found in nineteenth-century news reporting.

From the 1850s to the present, many stories about the poor have been embedded in articles about the charitableness of the wealthy. An 1870 New York Times article, “Poverty and Charity,” states that acts of public and private charity, particularly by the wealthy will take care of “all God’s poor”:

In no other country of the world is public charity dispensed more lavishly or with so tender a regard to the feelings of those whom vice or misfortune [has] compelled to solicit our bounty. . . . And [the poor] do move us, as a community, to deeds of disinterested endeavor and practical succor that should put all other countries under heaven to the blush. In this way, better than any other, is the humanizing influence of our republican form of government made apparent. Here the brotherhood of man is fully recognized. . . . Our rich men may be self-seeking, and even avaricious—they may be worldly and even irreligious—but they are not uncharitable. They pity poverty and are always ready and willing to relieve it.

This article is framed more to praise the generosity of the rich than to explore the condition of the poor. Similarly, “Feeding the City’s Poor: Giving Bountiful Dinners to Children and Poverty-Stricken People” tells how the “city’s poor, its prisoners, and its other charges had their share yesterday of the good things that are distributed on Thanksgiving” when about “11,000 mouths” were fed at “the various hospitals, prisons, and asylums.”

Journalists in the 1800s also reported on the problem of the homeless; the framing of these articles focused on the destitute situation of homeless children. One article, “Walks among the New York Poor: Homeless Children,” for example, describes children whose most frequent statement is that they “don’t live nowheres!” Another article, “Homeless Children,” emphasizes
how difficult it is at Christmastime for the more affluent to walk by and see “the number of wretched little children in our streets who have no homes to go to, nor any parents or guardians to provide them.” Reporters also praised charitable groups that provided residences for homeless children. “Lodging-House for Homeless Girls a New Project of the Children’s Aid Society” describes the Girl’s Lodging-House as “a place which is intended to invite to a decent bed and satisfactory meal, she of the unsuccessful search after a situation, or the little pilgrim through the busy streets, attracting purchasers for her basket variety of temptingly arranged wares.” Similarly, the News Boy’s Lodging-House, a residence for homeless boys and young men, was opened “in view of the terrible destitution and homelessness of the poor this Winter.”

**CONTEMPORARY FRAMING OF STORIES ABOUT THE POOR AND HOMELESS**

The media serve as important sources of information about the extent and distribution of hardship in the contemporary United States. Some media reports provide causal analysis that demonstrates how political leaders and governmental agencies contribute to, or seek to reduce, poverty, hunger, or homelessness. Other news items focus on the lives of the poor, sometimes portraying them as partly responsible for their plight due to certain actions (such as dropping out of school or taking illegal drugs) or their failure to act (for instance, by not looking for a job or being unwilling to utilize the services of a homeless shelter).

When news stories frame poverty as primarily an individual problem, they assign responsibility to those who are poor. This individualistic perspective makes it possible to blame them both for their own situations and for numerous other community problems. Suggestions that homeless people create disorder on the streets, are bad for business because they discourage shoppers, and are a drain on taxpayers because of the added expense of maintaining law and order are only a few of the ways homeless people might be blamed for other social issues. By contrast, when journalists frame stories in a manner that portrays poverty as a general outcome—meaning they take a systemic perspective that places responsibility on communities and the nation—they characterize poverty, hunger, and homelessness using a structural approach that focuses on such factors as how local and national economic and housing conditions produce homelessness.

As mentioned previously, news reports and articles about poverty and homelessness in the United States use two general categories of framing
devices: thematic framing, which places events in broad context and provides details about trends; and episodic framing, which puts a human face on poverty by telling true stories about people who are poor and homeless. Episodic framing of poverty has four major subcategories: sympathetic framing, negative-image framing, exceptionalism framing, and charitable framing. Before turning to these forms of episodic framing, let us examine thematic framing in greater detail.

**THEMATIC FRAMING: THE POOR AS STATISTICS, NOT REAL PEOPLE**

In a newspaper headline or the title of a television news segment about poverty or homelessness, words relating to numbers or rates can indicate thematic framing in the accompanying story. For example, the headlines “Last Year’s Poverty Rate Was Highest in 12 Years”\(^{39}\) and “Nation’s Economic Collapse Triggers Rise in Homeless Families”\(^{40}\) refer to numbers, in this case the number of homeless families, or rates, the percentage of poor individuals, families, or households according to some standard, usually the official poverty line established by the federal government. The newspaper account of the rise in the poverty rate is an example of a thematically framed article that views the poor primarily as statistics rather than real people:

In the recession, the nation’s poverty rate climbed to 13.2 percent last year, up from 12.5 percent in 2007, according to an annual report released Thursday by the Census Bureau. The report also documented a decline in employer-provided health insurance and in coverage for adults. The rise in the poverty rate, to the highest level since 1997, portends even larger increases this year, which has registered far higher unemployment than in 2008, economists said. The bureau said that 39.8 million residents last year lived below the poverty line, defined as an income of $22,025 for a family of four.\(^{41}\)

On television, a story like this may be accompanied by video footage of a poor Latino or African American man shuffling despondently down a city street. Newscasters typically report this information in a detached manner, as if there is much more important news to cover—such as war, crime, missing children, and current market trends.\(^{42}\) Stories about poverty have similar formats on television and in the newspapers, and they offer virtually identical information, frequently prepackaged by the Associated Press or other news organizations that provide news, photographs, and audio and video feeds to thousands of newspapers and radio and television outlets throughout in the United States.
Thematic framing is not only used to position stories about poverty; it is frequently used to describe a rise or fall in the number of homeless families in a given period. An example is the following:

Record job losses and foreclosures helped push more than 170,000 families into homeless shelters in 2009, up 30 percent since 2007 when the recession first gripped the nation, a government report released Wednesday shows. While the total number of homeless people on any given night fell by 5 percent from 2008 to 2009, the number of homeless families increased for the second straight year, according to the 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress prepared by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “Throughout the course of a year, approximately 1.56 million people found themselves without a place to call home,” said Mercedes Marquez, HUD assistant secretary for community planning and development. The report is the first comprehensive national homeless study to capture the full impact of the economic downturn. It shows how badly the recession has shaken the stability of families nationwide.

The format of this article is typical in that it begins with data from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report, then provides a quote from a spokesperson commenting on that data, which is often followed by statements from experts who hold differing views as to what the figures actually mean. Later in the article cited above, Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, points out that statistics about how many people are homeless are misleading because some families without permanent residences move in with other people (“double up”). Eventually, however, many of these doubled-up families become homeless. As some media sources point out, it is difficult to determine how many people actually are homeless in the United States because estimates, such as the one used in the HUD report, are based on a national “snapshot” count of the homeless on a single night along with full-year statistics from shelters across the country.

When journalists report on statistical data issued by government agencies, their articles sometimes reveal political controversies about how the data are gathered, computed, and interpreted. Discussions regarding these data are often contentious topics for politicians, and journalists quickly pick up on these issues as newsworthy. Many of the topics remain in the news year after year, as an examination of the *New York Times* archives shows.

Two recurring issues raised in thematic framing about poverty entail who the poor are and how many people in the United States should be considered poor. The dividing line for identifying them is a contested terrain because many analysts believe that the government’s definition of poverty is out-of-date. Headlines in the 1990s reflected articles about these statistics: “In Rising Debate on Poverty, the Question: Who Is Poor?”44, “Poverty Rate Is the
Highest in 16 Years, a Report Says\textsuperscript{45} and “A Proposed Definition of Poverty May Raise Number of U.S. Poor.”\textsuperscript{46} These issues remain unresolved in the 2000s, and headlines continue to identify the same issues and to ask similar questions: “One Number Can’t Measure Poverty”\textsuperscript{47} and “Who’s Poor? Don’t Ask the Census Bureau.”\textsuperscript{48} Here is one article’s description of the problem in determining the poverty line:

As soon as the government announced the second straight yearly increase in the nation’s poverty rate, politicians and special-interest groups began tossing around the numbers like the political football the poor have become. But researchers say the government is not very good at keeping score. There is a near-unanimous agreement among experts and politicians that the method used to measure poverty—based on the spending habits of the 1950s—is flawed and outdated. The current measure of poverty, which takes into account household size and income, underestimates the number of poor by as much as 50 percent, some experts contend.\textsuperscript{49}

Why is the government unable to update its method of identifying the poor? According to some media reports, changing the current method would have unpopular political ramifications. Counting the poor more accurately would add millions of people to the eligibility rolls of antipoverty programs, dramatically increasing the national debt and further sinking states into budget deficits. Consider this news report, for example:

Who is poor in America? This is a hard question to answer, and the Obama administration would make it harder. It’s hard because there’s no conclusive definition of poverty. Low income matters, though how low is unclear. Poverty is also a mindset that fosters self-defeating behavior—bad work habits, family breakdowns, out-of-wedlock births, and addictions. Finally, poverty results from lousy luck: accidents, job losses, disability. . . .

The existing poverty line could be improved by adding some income sources and subtracting some expenses (example: child care). Unfortunately, the administration’s proposal for a “supplemental poverty measure” in 2011—to complement, not replace, the existing poverty line—goes beyond that. The new poverty number would compound public confusion. It also raises questions about whether the statistic is tailored to favor a political agenda. . . . It’s legitimate to debate how much we should aid the poor or try to reduce economic inequality. But the debate should not be skewed by misleading statistics that not one American in 100,000 could possibly understand. Government statistics should strive for political neutrality. This one fails.\textsuperscript{50}

This article refers to an effort to create a new way of measuring poverty. Media reports point out that the plan generated extensive controversy even before it could be finalized. The new Supplemental Poverty Measure takes
near-cash benefits and taxes into account to supplement conventional poverty measures. It links poverty thresholds to more accurate measures of people’s expenditures not only on food but on shelter, clothing, and utilities. It takes into account work-related expenses, such as child-care spending for employed parents. Although some media reports and blogs suggest that these changes will eventually produce more accurate data on poverty, others stress that we are “defining poverty up,” which will ultimately create more “poor” in the United States.

As debates continue in the political arena and in newspapers and television reports about how to define poverty and which statistics are most accurate, larger societal issues about the causes of poverty and homelessness and what to do about them are largely ignored. Because controversy sells more newspapers and draws larger TV and website audiences, the media are likely to focus on those issues that bring in revenue.

Like news reports about poverty, stories about hunger frequently use thematic framing. The headline “Hungry Families in U.S. on the Rise” is typical of articles about the growing problem of American families that cannot afford to buy adequate food. Hunger is most often the subject of news stories shortly before holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas and at times when new statistical data on the problem have been released. On the basis of data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Census Bureau, media reports have described an increase in the number of hungry people in the United States, indicating that about 36.2 million Americans, including 12.4 million children, live in households that experience hunger or the risk of it each year. Thematic framing of stories about the USDA’s categories of hunger, such as “food insecure” and “food insecure, with hunger,” convey to audiences the message that the messy topic of hunger (among the poor) is not the problem of middle- and upper-income readers and viewers. Articles like “Of Fuzzy Math and Food Security” describe the extent to which tabulating hunger “is an inexact science and a political test” rather than a cause for concern about the number of people in this country who are hungry on a specified date.

Media reporting about hunger often increases following the release of data about changes in the number of hungry people in this country. After the U.S. Conference of Mayors (an organization that includes the mayors of 1,204 cities with populations of thirty thousand or more) reported a 26 percent increase in the demand for emergency food and a slight decrease in the number of individuals who were homeless, news sources highlighted the fact that individual homelessness had decreased but de-emphasized a sharp increase in the need for food assistance in many cities. Such framing tends to diminish the human face of hunger and reduce the impact of the sharp increase in the
need for hunger assistance between October 2008 and September 2009, the latest period for which data are available at the time of this writing.\textsuperscript{53} Thematic framing that focuses on statistics and emphasizes increases or decreases in hunger may deflect people’s attention from more pressing issues about the causes and consequences of hunger, particularly for children. “Are some groups exaggerating the numbers of people who are hungry?” is a far different question from “What can be done about the problem of hunger?” Articles about the numbers debate make hunger seem like a numbers game and of little consequence. Consider, for example, one journalist’s allegation about the likelihood of service providers, such as soup kitchen operators and food bank administrators, exaggerating in order to sustain contributions to their organizations:

So what’s the real story? Social ills like hunger and need for food assistance are notoriously difficult to measure. In a flagging economy, or even in boom times, those on the front lines—soup kitchen operators and food bank administrators, who must rely on donations and government subsidies—are always in the shadow of a shortfall. So it is not surprising that the mayors’ survey, which relies primarily on the collected impressions (and varied record keeping) of these agencies, would consistently report an increase in demand.\textsuperscript{54}

The visual images that accompany articles and television news accounts about hunger typically show political leaders like the president helping out at a Washington, DC, food bank or the mayor of a major city serving lunch at a homeless shelter on Thanksgiving Day. This imbues the seemingly dry statistics related to poverty and hunger with empathy and erects a humanitarian façade. Important officials are portrayed as caring individuals who feed the hungry rather than vote-seeking politicians who show up for the occasional photo op with the less fortunate.

Stories about homelessness, like those about poverty and hunger, often describe how counting the homeless is problematic. Since statistics on homelessness are not available from the Census Bureau, news organizations rely on data gathered by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National Coalition for the Homeless. According to the latter, there is no easy answer to the question of how many people in the United States are homeless: “In most cases, homelessness is a temporary circumstance—not a permanent condition. A more appropriate measure of the magnitude of homelessness is therefore the number of people who experience homelessness over time, not the number of ‘homeless people.’”\textsuperscript{55} According to some media reports, the homeless are seriously undercounted because most studies count only those who are on the street or living in shelters on a specific date. As previously mentioned, many homeless people stay with relatives and friends in crowded,
temporary arrangements and are not counted if they are not visibly homeless when the data are gathered.\textsuperscript{56}

Over the past two decades, media reports about the homeless—often carrying headlines such as “The Real Face of Homelessness”\textsuperscript{57} or “Homelessness Grows As More Live Check-to-Check”\textsuperscript{58}—have outnumbered those about poverty or hunger. According to legal scholar Gary Blasi, homelessness has won out over poverty in media accounts because both politicians and the general public react more favorably to it.\textsuperscript{59} Turning poverty and homelessness into separate issues has shifted the focus of media coverage and public policy: “The homeless” have come to be viewed more favorably, at least temporarily, than “the poor,” even when the terms are used to describe the same individuals, perhaps because media audiences and the general public can more easily empathize with the homeless. Moreover, homelessness appears to have an easier short-term solution than poverty. It can be declared an “emergency situation” resolvable by providing individuals with temporary shelter so that they will not freeze to death on a park bench, whereas poverty is a more complex problem. As Blasi states, “We may not be willing to support the kind of massive restructuring that would end poverty, but surely we could provide the homeless poor the same kind of shelter we provide to victims of natural disasters.”\textsuperscript{60}

Media coverage of homeless statistics, however, has illustrated the shortsighted nature of this solution to the problem. Stories about homeless shelters often refer to these establishments as having revolving doors:

You don’t see homeless people as much as you did in the ’80s because the one great policy initiative of the past 20 years has been to move them from grates into the newest form of the poorhouse, the shelter. Even though cities are building shelters as fast as they can, the homeless are pouring out of them again, returning to the grates.\textsuperscript{61}

Television news reports particularly have focused on homeless individuals who have given up on shelters, providing local data on the number of beds available, the overcrowded conditions in winter, and individuals who choose not to stay inside regardless of conditions outside.

As we have seen, thematic framing in news reporting emphasizes data and how they are gathered. Although the media may occasionally show audiences the “human face” of the poor, the larger issues associated with poverty, hunger, and homelessness are easily lost in debates over how government statistics are generated, interpreted, disseminated, and employed in social policy decisions. The concern expressed by Gregory Mantsios remains valid: the manner in which the media frame many stories about poverty renders the poor faceless,\textsuperscript{62} as does the lack of media attention generally given to this
problem. Journalist and author Barbara Ehrenreich stated this best in a New York Times opinion piece titled “Too Poor to Make the News”:

The human side of the recession, in the new media genre that’s been called “recession porn,” is the story of an incremental descent from excess to frugality, from ease to austerity. The super-rich give up their personal jets; the upper middle class cut back on private Pilates classes; the merely middle class forgo vacations and evenings at Applebee’s. In some accounts, the recession is even described as the “great leveler,” smudging the dizzying levels of inequality that characterized the last couple of decades and squeezing everyone into a single great class, the Nouveau Poor. . . . But the outlook is not so cozy when we look at the effects of the recession on a group generally omitted from all the vivid narratives of downward mobility—the already poor, the estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of the population who struggle to get by in the best of times. . . . The current recession is knocking the working poor down another notch—from low-wage employment and inadequate housing toward erratic employment and no housing at all.53

As Ehrenreich suggests, the invisible poor are becoming even more invisible during a recession in which some people claim that everyone has suffered hardship because of the world economic crisis. Some former members of the working poor (discussed further in chapter 5) have joined the hardcore poor, and there is no end in sight to the problems of unemployment, foreclosure, and short-term measures like “doubling up” with relatives in an effort to avoid homelessness. Media accounts of the Great Recession typically devote more attention to the downsizing of elite lifestyles and less to the struggles of the already down and out.

Because television news reporting is often organized around assigned beats, such as medicine/health, crime/police, consumer news, and government/politics, the problem of poverty does not surface unless it arises in connection with one of these areas—for example, a report on infant mortality rates and poverty on the health beat.64 As media analysts have pointed out, the tacit rule “if it bleeds, it leads” prevails in most television newsrooms, where stories about crime, disaster, and war predominate while topics like poverty receive about 1.8 percent of airtime.65 Even when social issues such as poverty or hunger are briefly presented, the context is usually absent, and attention focuses on a tragic event (such as the death of a homeless person) rather than on what might have caused the event to occur.

Episodic framing of newspaper and television stories about poverty may provide more insight than thematic framing does regarding what it means to be poor, hungry, or homeless in an affluent society like the United States. By examining the individual’s personal experience, reporters provide their audiences with specific examples of individuals or families living under economic
The four forms of episodic framing—sympathetic, negative image, exceptionalism, and charitable—are discussed below.

**SYMPATHETIC FRAMING: CHILDREN, THE ELDERLY, AND THE ILL**

Episodic framing of media stories about the poor uses the personal experiences of individuals living in poverty to represent those of a larger category of people undergoing extreme economic duress. The impoverished most likely to receive sympathetic media portrayal are children, the elderly, and the chronically ill.

“Locked Out at a Young Age,” journalist Bob Herbert’s op-ed piece about how poorly some children in low-income Chicago families fare, provides an example of sympathetic framing that does not wag a disapproving finger at the poor. According to Herbert, U.S. involvement in the war in Iraq has drawn attention away from “millions of young people in America’s urban centers” who are “drifting aimlessly from one day to the next. They’re out of school, out of work, and . . . all but out of hope.” Herbert’s article discusses data from Chicago, where about 22 percent of all residents between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four were neither in school nor employed at the time of the report. Ridiculing the popular sound bite about disconnected youth, widely employed to describe the situation of young people like those in Chicago, Herbert argues that the difficulties they face will become, in one way or another, “difficulties to be faced by the society as a whole.”

A child’s death typically produces sympathetic portrayals of the plight of the poor; however, news reports about such an event often question one or both of the child’s parents’ judgment. For example, a *New York Times* article describes the loss of two children in a residential fire allegedly set deliberately. The journalist paints the scenario as follows:

Last Sunday, as her night shift neared, Kim Brathwaite faced a hard choice. Her baby sitter had not shown up, and to miss work might end her new position as assistant manager at a McDonald’s in downtown Brooklyn. So she left her two children, 9 and 1, alone, trying to stay in touch by phone. It turned out to be a disastrous decision. Someone, it seems, deliberately set fire to her apartment. Her children died. And within hours, Ms. Brathwaite was under arrest, charged with recklessly endangering her children.

Although the children’s mother was not a suspect in the arson case that destroyed their residence, law enforcement officials held her responsible for leaving the children unattended—a decision that, according to the journalist,
“experts suggest, cuts uncomfortably close to some choices made every day by American families.”

Such news reports from across the nation briefly call attention to the fact that more than 3 million children under age thirteen, including some as young as five years old, are left alone at least a few hours a week on a regular basis.

Although the journalist attempts to portray the Brathwaite family in a sympathetic light, because many families have no choice but to leave children at home alone, photos accompanying the article show the two smiling children whose lives were cut short by the fire. The journalist comments, “What age is old enough to be left alone? The law rarely specifies.” Like many members of the working poor, Ms. Brathwaite found herself in a catch-22 situation: if she did not go to work, she could not support her children, but if she went to work, she had no one to care for them, and her low-wage job at McDonald’s made it impossible to afford reliable child care. According to Brathwaite’s lawyer, “She is guilty of nothing more than being a single mom working a 12-hour shift.”

Sympathetic framing regarding children living in poverty appears in newspaper columns authored by political and social analysts affiliated with think tanks like the Brookings Institution. Consider “Handing Out Hardship” by E. J. Dionne Jr., a senior fellow at Brookings and a Washington Post columnist. In this article, Dionne chastises the Bush administration for wanting $87 billion in new spending for Iraq and proposing cutbacks on child care for mothers trying to leave welfare. Using a satirical approach, Dionne writes,

Not to worry. It may be good for those poor working mothers not to have the child-care money. Warning against the idea of child care as an entitlement, Sen. Rick Santorum, a Pennsylvania Republican, reassured us: “Making people struggle a little bit is not necessarily the worst thing.”

You should be inspired by those words the next time you see a mother working behind the counter at an ice cream place or a Burger King with her kids in tow. Just tell her having the kids around is good for family values. Struggle will build character. The kids can always do their homework in the corner.

Like stories about impoverished children, media reports about the elderly poor often employ sympathetic framing that focuses on the problems of individuals deemed representative of a larger category of people. One article, “Golden Years, on $678 a Month,” tells the story of Anna Berroa, who is sixty-eight and poor:

She trudged languorously along the thrumming streets of Elmhurst, Queens, lost in her early evening thoughts. . . . Walking consumes time, and in the awkward caution of her life it drains her of troubled memories. She does this loop from her
apartment every day. She derives comfort from one of the few things she can do that carry no price tag. . . . This is a doleful life that Anna Berroa never anticipated. It seems to catch her unawares. One moment she was middle class, envisioning a placid old age, and then a series of untoward events ambushed her. . . . Poverty is particularly frightful from the lens of old age, when there are few, if any, opportunities to enhance one’s prospects and the only escape hatch seems to be death. 

Tracing the steps in her life—from Havana, Cuba, to New York—and the road that took her from a relatively comfortable economic status to poverty, the journalist shows the austerity of Berroa’s current circumstances. For example, she spent her sixty-eighth birthday alone in her room; a friend had asked her to dinner, but “she felt funny because she knew she couldn’t reciprocate, so she declined.” Most of this article focuses on Berroa’s experiences. The journalist frames her story sympathetically and seeks to show that her situation is not unique among the elderly living in large cities like New York. However, poverty among older people is often invisible because others assume that the elderly can take care of themselves. Unlike the generally sympathetic journalist of the Berroa article, many news reporters tend to juxtapose the needs of the elderly poor with those of young people and community budgets. “An Aging Population, a Looming Crisis,” for example, discusses the problems of older people in upstate New York and quotes officials who state that the bill for caring for the poorest of the state’s elderly is beginning to strangle communities, and the problem will only get worse in the future:

“We are dealing with seniors burning through their financial resources and having to go on Medicaid,” County Executive [Mark] Thomas, a Democrat, said in an interview at his office in Mayville, the county seat. “And because of the way the system is financed in New York, their overwhelming health care needs become a burden to the rest of us. These expenses dwarf everything else.”

According to this article, the aging population in Chautauqua County and other areas of upstate New York potentially places a great onus on younger area residents, particularly when the older people have limited economic resources. As young residents have relocated to other communities for better jobs, they have left behind the senior members of their families, whose “needs are often overwhelming: the county helps many people pay their heating bills, build wheelchair ramps outside houses, clean up after themselves, get to doctors’ appointments and get food.” Although it describes the problems of the elderly poor in somewhat sympathetic terms, the story clearly considers these individuals in terms of their potential burden on others and on the budgets of their counties.
Many other articles have been written, with somewhat sympathetic framing, about the health concerns of people of all ages living in poverty. The cover of a New York Times Magazine greets readers with a sepia-toned photo of a hazy city in the background and a shirtless African American man walking barefoot, head down, in the foreground. The caption reads, “There’s a killer haunting America’s inner cities. Not drugs. Not handguns. But . . . Stress?” The accompanying article, “Enough to Make You Sick?” describes “America’s rundown urban neighborhoods” and explains how the “diseases associated with the old are afflicting the young.” Beginning with the lived experiences of a woman residing in a housing project in southwest Yonkers, the article describes her many medical problems, including asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, an enlarged heart, and blood with a dangerous tendency to clot spontaneously. The journalist partly attributes the woman’s problems, like those of many other inner-city residents, to the fact they live in “poor urban minority neighborhoods [that] seem to be especially unhealthy.”

The article characterizes the stress of living in poverty in these neighborhoods as producing “weathering, a condition not unlike the effect of exposure to wind and rain on houses.” The description of these neighborhoods can evoke in readers a sympathetic or negative response (“thank God, I don’t have to live there”):

The neighborhoods where Beverly, Monica, Ebony, Dominique and Jo-Scama live look like poor urban areas all across the country, with bricked-up abandoned buildings, vacant storefronts, broken sidewalks and empty lots with mangy grass overgrowing the ruins of old cars, machine parts and heaps of garbage. Young men in black nylon skullcaps lurk around the payphones on street corners. These neighborhoods are as segregated from the more affluent, white sections of metropolitan New York as any township in South Africa under apartheid. Living in such neighborhoods . . . is assumed to predispose the poor to a number of social ills, including drug abuse, truancy and the persistent joblessness that draws young people into a long cycle of crime and incarceration. Now it turns out these neighborhoods could be destroying people’s health as well.

In this article, journalist Helen Epstein paints a candid portrait of the poor and their health problems, emphasizing that those who are able to move away from their troubled neighborhoods feel much better—their health improves away from the stress brought about by living in deprived conditions. According to Epstein, stress relates not only to the objective condition of poverty but also to the subjective condition of hopelessness, which is associated with such factors as rising rates of unemployment, an increase in job loss in many occupational sectors, a sharp rise in the number of people being added to the
ranks of the poor, and the lack of effective governmental action to reduce these problems. For Epstein, all of these factors produce a psychological miasma that damages people living in poverty and generates many of the stress-related illnesses that afflict the poor.

Like newspaper accounts, television news reports about poverty often focus on interviews that can be turned into brief sound bites and aired along with an accompanying story. Coverage of the poor often involves cut-and-paste interviews with public officials, providers of services (such as the director of a food bank or soup kitchen), and a few poor individuals who benefit from these services. When funding cuts threaten, the poor who are interviewed typically state that they do not know what they would do without the food, clothing, shelter, or other services provided by the organization facing budget cuts.

Sympathetic framing of the poor occasionally surfaces in television news programs, as it did in the 20/20 segment in which Diane Sawyer examined poverty in Appalachia. Sawyer was empathetic toward the people she interviewed because she had family ties to the region that stretched back for decades. According to Sawyer, “I’m always so moved by the bravery and the vitality of these American fighters. And now they’ve got a battle that they aren’t wining.”

Among the children that Sawyer interviewed were eleven-year-old Erica, who wanted her mother to overcome a drug habit, and Courtney, age twelve, whose family was completely out of food. Sawyer demonstrated a special appreciation for the problems they were facing, and she was familiar with the area because she had covered the Louisville, Kentucky, region as a local television reporter during the late 1960s. This prime-time special, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains,” was one in a series of ABC programs focusing on poverty. Another looked at the lives of impoverished children in Camden, New Jersey.

When prime-time specials deal with the subject of homelessness, they typically aim to show the homeless and near-homeless sympathetically. As a downside, however, media messages about who is homeless and why can cast them in a negative light without necessarily intending to do so and convey the idea that many poor people are responsible for their own condition.

NEGATIVE-IMAGE FRAMING: DEPENDENCY AND DEVIANCE

Negative-image framing in stories about poverty is often subtle and thus open to a variety of interpretations by readers. Two topics that frequently form the subject of such framing are welfare programs and homelessness.
Although readers might expect partisan publications, produced by politicians, public interest groups, or conservative think tanks, to take moral stands on these issues, they might assume that newspaper and television news reports will be more balanced and less judgmental; however, this is not always the case.

Welfare is one issue that often receives negative-image media framing. Research examining media depictions of welfare in 252 magazine articles published between 1929 through 1996 identified four recurring (but contradictory) themes: welfare helps the needy, provides family support, creates dependency, and undermines families.\textsuperscript{83} Although the prevalence of each of these themes shifted over time, each could be identified in magazine articles throughout the twentieth century. The idea that welfare results in dependency and undermines families was most widely found in articles in the 1960s and 1970s, but this theme remains popular in newspaper and television news today.

A keyword search for “welfare dependency” yielded more than thirty-five hundred newspaper articles, television news reports, and Internet blogs on welfare between the early 1990s and 2010. When President Bill Clinton originally signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, he stated his hope that this welfare-reform legislation would end “welfare as we know it” and bring a new day of hope for former recipients. The new law replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children—a program that had provided both short- and long-term cash assistance to poor families since 1950—with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Now the assistance would be temporary and require women to participate in job-training programs or meet work requirements that would eventually get them off welfare altogether. Some analysts assert that the overhaul of welfare was a success, particularly prior to the economic recession of the early twenty-first century. They cite data showing that hundreds of thousands of people moved from welfare to work, and many had higher incomes. Other analysts believe either that the 1996 reform failed completely or that the Barack Obama administration’s stimulus bill passed by Congress in 2009 will undermine any success it had. According to some conservative scholars, the stimulus bill will further increase welfare spending, perhaps by as much as $800 billion over ten years, and the new mechanism will contribute to even more welfare spending than in the past because larger numbers of people will swell welfare rolls in the future.\textsuperscript{84} Some media reports take a sympathetic tone toward the plight of individuals living near the poverty line; however, others obscure the problems of people who have fallen through the cracks, ultimately judging some to have slipped because of their own moral failings.
So-called welfare mothers are particularly vulnerable to negative media images. In a 2010 study of television news coverage of welfare reform, sociologist Maura Kelly found that negative stereotyping of poor mothers remained the norm in media coverage and that these images often framed the public debate in terms of welfare recipients’ responsibility (or irresponsibility): “[My] analysis demonstrates that the controlling image of the welfare mother was ubiquitous in television news coverage of U.S. welfare reform from 1992–2007. This controlling image consists of racist stereotypes of women on public assistance as childlike, hyperfertile, lazy, and bad mothers.” As Kelly emphasizes, negative media stereotypes about poor, single mothers incorporate a number of factors:

1. Race: African American women are overrepresented in news stories about welfare.
2. Childlike nature: These women do not know how to get off welfare because they are unintelligent, naïve, or childlike.
3. Hyperfertility: They have more children than average, have children out of wedlock, have children as teenagers, and have children they cannot afford.
4. Laziness: They have a poor work ethic, do not work, stay on public assistance for a long time, or drop out of school and job training.
5. Bad parenting: They raise children as single parents, set a bad example, and reinforce a “culture of poverty.”

When we consider all of these attributes, it becomes obvious that some media representations are glaring indictments of the lives of mothers in poverty, particularly if they receive public assistance. As Kelly further states,

In the discourse on welfare reform, these stereotypes were deployed to support policies intended to control poor women’s reproduction and mothering. The welfare mother image was central to framing the debate in terms of the responsibility of public assistance recipients rather than the structural constraints that lead families to require public assistance.

By using framing that focuses on the lives of individuals, media reports may point a spotlight on the negative attributes of poor people believed to be welfare dependent. Such framing may predispose media audiences to think of the issue primarily in terms of welfare dependency and to ignore larger societal conditions (structural constraints) that contribute to poverty initially. In the aftermath of welfare reform, some journalists cited reports about individual women that suggested welfare reform had been somewhat successful and
that many low-income single mothers had left welfare for work. Consider, for example, this description of the problems experienced by Shelly Vaughan:

Survival keeps getting in the way of Shelly Vaughan’s attempts to improve her life. The Garland resident earned an associate’s degree in junior college, but it wasn’t enough to begin a career in her chosen field. So she ended up working minimum-wage jobs in retail and manufacturing. Later, she studied to become a medical assistant and then missed taking the certification test because she became pregnant. Now, the 38-year-old single mother of two, including one with special needs, has a full-time job and help from relatives, but has trouble making ends meet. She recently separated from her children’s father and started receiving housing assistance. But she said she wouldn’t consider relying only on welfare to get by. “I’m raising two boys. I don’t want them to grow up thinking this is how it should be,” she said.55

This description tells us not only that Vaughan is optimistic about the welfare-to-work process but that her attempts at education have been fragmented, that pregnancy derailed one of her attempts at a career, that although she holds a full-time job, she cannot make ends meet, and that she is no longer living with the father of her two sons. Single parenthood, whether through out-of-wedlock births or divorce, is one of the key factors raised by critics of welfare programs, who argue that some women seem to enjoy welfare dependency. By contrast, the journalist quotes Vaughan as saying that she does not want to become dependent on welfare; nor does she want her two sons to think “this is how it should be.”

Other journalists have focused on the temporary nature of most work found by postwelfare mothers and indicate that these individuals have shifted their reliance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to unemployment insurance benefits.88 The articles typically do not take into account why many of the women have become unemployed. Media framing of these stories omits factors such as layoffs and downsizing, the offshoring of jobs, the lack of affordable child care and transportation, and numerous other structural issues.

One of the subtle judgments sometimes found in articles about welfare has to do with how poor people perpetuate the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency. For example, an article titled “Millions Have Left Welfare, but Are They Better Off? Yes, No and Maybe”89 provides a generally sympathetic frame in reporting on studies about the overhaul of welfare, but it concludes with the example of one woman whose situation shows the difficulty of breaking the cycle. After comparing the arguments of authorities who believe that welfare reform is a success with studies by the “left-leaning” Urban Institute, the journalist concludes that some former welfare recipients are better off, others are worse off, and still others fall somewhere in between. Families
off welfare but unemployed were among the hardest hit, particularly when no one had been employed for three years or more. Cynthia Brown serves as an example of people in this category:

Cynthia Brown of New Haven is feeling that pinch. Ms. Brown, 31, who says she is healthy, has spent most of her life on welfare. “I just came from that,” she said with a shrug.

In 2001, Connecticut denied her benefits, saying she had already hit her lifetime limit. Ms. Brown and her three children did not cope well. They lived with an aunt in public housing until she made them leave, fearing the overcrowding would cause her to lose her lease. They lived in a park for a week and then in a homeless shelter for three months, until Ms. Brown obtained subsidized housing and a year’s extension on welfare, the last reprieve she will get under state law.

Two months before the extension will expire, Ms. Brown says she is earnestly looking for work but has not found any. She was briefly employed at Yale as a cook, but says she lost the job after her cutting skills were found wanting. Now, she says, her only chance is that something in her life will go so wrong that she will be exempted from the state’s rules. “I am hoping for a disaster,” she said.

Although Brown’s plight receives a generally sympathetic description, readers may interpret this piece judgmentally based on the snippets presented of her life. Here, it would seem, is a “healthy” woman who “came from welfare” and thus expects others to take care of her and her children. Moreover, she cannot keep a job doing something as simple as cutting up the ingredients for meals.

Like coverage of welfare and laws to reform it, media representations of hunger describe some politicians’ concern that low-income families will become dependent on food stamps and subsidized school lunches. Media reports have described, for example, how advocates of revamping these programs argue that they serve too many people who do not need the help and that even those who do need it can become dependent on food stamps.

A Heritage Foundation spokesperson quoted in “Welfare Wars: Are the Poor Suffering from Hunger Anymore?” stated, “Food stamps and cash welfare are two halves of a whole. All the things about cash welfare that discouraged work and marriage, and encouraged long-term dependence, apply identically to food stamps.” The issue of food stamps is politically charged and provides a hot topic for media coverage because any family with an income that falls below 130 percent of the poverty line is eligible for the program.

By telling the stories of individuals who have recently experienced hunger but are considered by medical standards to be obese, journalists frame stories to suggest a linkage between governmental food handouts and the growing weight problem in the United States. “Welfare Wars” quotes a spokesperson for the conservative American Enterprise Institute’s Project on Social and
Individual Responsibility in this regard: “We are feeding the poor as if they are starving, when anyone can see that the real problem for them, like other Americans, is expanding girth.” Advocates for the poor deny any causal relationship between food stamps and increasing obesity among low-income individuals but also acknowledge that the nature of hunger has changed in the first decade of the twenty-first century because, although the “food insecure” may occasionally miss meals and feel hungry, hunger is not an epidemic. Media framing of stories about hunger often end with statements like this: “No longer are advocates for the poor discussing ‘hunger,’ with its dire implications, but ‘insecurity,’ a more nuanced, less compelling justification for help. If conservatives have got food advocates to concede this much, perhaps they have already won Round 1 of the battle.”

Just as articles about poverty and hunger often use negative-image framing, much contemporary media framing of stories about homelessness either directly or indirectly relates to the problem of deviancy. In Reading the Homeless: The Media’s Image of Homeless Culture, Eungjun Min argues that media images depict the homeless as “drunk, stoned, crazy, sick, and drug abusers.” Although he acknowledges that these images may be accurate in some cases, he points out that they create obstacles that limit others’ understanding of the homeless and the issues surrounding the larger problem of homelessness. According to Min, media framing of homelessness presents homeless individuals as socially dysfunctional rather than giving them the chance to “describe their conditions in their own discourses to provide a more accurate and balanced depiction of the homeless.” In Min’s view, “media narrative and image blur and distort the distinction between fact and fiction and between information and entertainment.”

Nowhere is the problem Min describes more evident than on some Internet postings about the homeless. “Down and Out in Santa Monica,” an Internet article by Eric Olsen, shows a concern with both dependency and deviance on the part of homeless individuals: “The problem with the homeless is the problem with social welfare policies in general: we want to provide for the individual, legitimately needy, but we don’t want to encourage dependence upon such help, to foster a ‘culture of dependency.’” After describing Santa Monica, California, as having been very liberal until it was “inundated with the homeless, who like all other organisms are drawn to where the living is easiest: it’s just gravity,” Olsen argues that this group has taken unfair advantage of local residents and is largely to blame for its own problems:

Not all homeless people have themselves to blame for their homelessness, especially in hard economic times, but many, if not most, do. Besides those legitimately down on their luck and temporarily unable to house themselves—for whom we must do all we can to keep them invested in society—the homeless
also consist of alcoholics, drug addicts, the mentally ill (these three categories often blend together), general misfits . . . sluggards, and miscellany others. Please do not accuse me of lumping them all together because every homeless person has his/her own story to tell, but collectively, past a certain level of density and visibility, the homeless are a blight on a community for all of the obvious reasons: sanitation, petty crime, eyesore, annoyance, all of which lead to downward pressure on property values, and downward pressure on one’s beach side property is the fastest way to turn a liberal into a conservative.

Although the presence of large numbers of homeless individuals clearly placed a burden on Santa Monica, causing the city to crack down on the problem, the vitriolic language of Olsen’s blog calls attention to the judgmental attitudes often expressed about the homeless. The Internet now makes it possible for people to express their opinions to much larger audiences than they could sitting in the local coffee shop expounding on their beliefs.

Just as Olsen’s blog points out negative attributes of the homeless, stories about the homeless in mainstream print and television news typically focus on what the homeless have done wrong. This negative-image framing is often found in articles describing tragedies or crimes for which homeless individuals are deemed at least partly responsible. An example is an Associated Press article about how a homeless couple was charged in the deaths of six firefighters in Worcester, Massachusetts. According to the article, a homeless couple “allegedly knocked over a candle during an argument” on the second floor of an abandoned warehouse where they had lived for several months and, after trying unsuccessfully to extinguish the fire, fled without attempting to report it. The blaze grew rapidly, and when firefighters arrived, two went into the building to rescue the “squatters who had been living there.” Lost in the thick smoke, the firefighters called for help, and four others entered the structure. All six firefighters died in the blaze, and the homeless couple was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

Some articles about homeless individuals make them look irresponsible and willing to lie about their actions. Others make them seem desperate or mentally deranged. “Homeless Woman Arrested for Threatening Postal Worker,” for example, was the lead story on a San Diego County television station. The homeless woman, who allegedly held a thirteen-inch knife to a postal worker’s side and threatened him as he was sorting mail, said she only wanted to secure shelter in jail because she had nowhere else to stay. According to media reports, as a reward for her efforts she was jailed on suspicion of kidnapping and attempted carjacking.98

Just as this woman’s behavior received widespread media attention, stealing shopping carts has also received much coverage. A Dallas city ordinance makes it illegal to possess a shopping cart off the premises of the business
that owns it. One article about this ordinance, “Losing Their Cart Blanche: Police Say Basket Ban Is about ‘Safety and Crime,’ not Targeting Homeless,” begins with episodic framing, telling the story of one homeless person with a shopping cart:

Darryl Johnson is homeless and doesn’t have a car. So he uses an abandoned shopping cart he found near a creek to move around his blankets, clothes and other belongings. Because of a new city ordinance that police will start enforcing today, Mr. Johnson may want to ditch the cart—or face jail or a fine. . . . Police and city officials announced the law in November as part of a crime-fighting initiative. But Mr. Johnson, other homeless people and their advocates say the ordinance unfairly targets the homeless. “We have no place to stay, and we have to move our stuff when they run us off,” said Mr. Johnson, 38, who’s been homeless for several years and sleeps near downtown Dallas. “It’s not hurting anybody.”

According to the article, the main purpose of the shopping-cart ordinance is to cut property losses: “Taking a shopping cart from the owner is theft,” police officials stated. The article suggests that it is mainly the homeless who steal shopping carts to store their possessions in them on the streets. A homeless-rights advocate quoted in the article asserts that the shopping-cart ordinance punishes and criminalizes this group: “The focus is taken off the more underlying and serious problem of homelessness.”

However, the article concludes with this statement from Mr. Johnson: “All these people are running around robbing, killing and raping, and they focus on the homeless. That’s not right. We’re just trying to survive.”

Descriptions of the actions and appearance of homeless people, even when objectively stated, may imply a negative judgment when interpreted from a middle-class perspective. A news report on CNN from Phoenix, Arizona, “Treating the Homeless Where They Live,” is an example. The report begins as follows:

Blood was oozing from Joel Holder’s scalp and from Shelly Holder’s face one recent morning as nurse Kay Jarrell and case manager John Gallagher walked into their trash-strewn campsite near 35th Avenue and the Salt River bed. Jarrell and Gallagher were making their daily rounds on behalf of Healthcare for the Homeless, a program of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health. Shelly sobbed as Jarrell daubed her face. Joel sat in a chair, smiled and drank from a can of Natural Ice. Two other residents of the campsite also downed beer. “We’ve been drinking pretty steady for two days now, and I’m afraid we had a little violence a few hours ago,” Joel said, smiling with as many teeth as he could muster.

The report then describes how another homeless camper became angry and punched Shelly in the face and whacked Joel over the head with a baseball.
bat. Although the focus of this report is actually Healthcare for the Homeless, a program that helps homeless individuals with their medical needs, its framing, which highlights the Holders’ problems, carries a less-than-sympathetic tone, which the reporter follows up with interviews with Gallagher and Jarrell, the health professionals:

“Most of the people we see don’t want to live in a shelter and feel safe in their own little camp. . . . Most have drug and alcohol problems.” Such people need more than just a few weeks of drying out, [Gallaher] said. . . . “They get sober and remember that they spent 10 years being sexually abused by Dad,” Jarrell said. “All they want is to forget their pain. Drugs and alcohol are their way of doing that.”

Alcoholism and drug dependency are recurring themes in stories about the homeless—problems made more vivid by framing that tells the stories of how particular individuals were unable to change their lives. Also apparent in many articles is the fact that a number of homeless individuals dislike shelters so much that they are willing to risk living outdoors or in other undesirable settings to avoid the problems that they believe exist in them.

The writers of many television legal and crime dramas take a “ripped-from-the-headlines” approach to developing story lines, and the portrayal of the homeless in series like the Law & Order franchise often conveys a negative message similar to that found in newspaper articles and Internet postings. The relationship between homelessness and mental illness is an especially popular topic on Law & Order, in which numerous plots have included characters like the “homeless schizophrenic allegedly killed by a car” (in an episode titled “Darwinian”), the “delusional homeless man” accused of stabbing a man to death in front of a coffee shop (“Asylum”), and the “bloodied and bruised homeless man” accused of murder by a neighborhood-watch group that wanted the transient off their street (“Volunteers”).

Homeless characters on medical dramas such as Grey’s Anatomy and ER (now in syndication and on DVD) are brought into the hospital because of drug overdoses, fights, and other injurious conduct or because they have exhibited raving, psychotic behavior. One episode of ER featuring Sally Field, playing nurse Abby Lockhart’s homeless mother, particularly frustrated a homeless advocate, who posted this summary online:

This is the show I most often slap my forehead about for its stereotypical and reductive portrayals of homeless characters. On ER those characters are always crazy or chronic public inebriates. They’re usually violent (e.g., the mad genius student who stabbed Dr. Carter and Lucy the intern) or smelly. . . . Playing intern Abbie’s mother, Field arrived at the ER unexpectedly last fall, having been evicted from her apartment and burnt the bridge of connection to her son.
Although she charms the other residents, it doesn’t take long to figure out she has bipolar disorder. We watch helplessly, as Abbie does, while Field goes through her cycles. Abbie is alternately seduced and frustrated by her mother’s energy, and finally says, “I just can’t do this anymore,” refusing to let her continue staying at her apartment. Then Abbie relents, and we watch her hold her sobbing mother at an El station. Next episode we hear the mom has had a brainstorm and returned to Florida.104

In a number of television series, homeless people witness crimes, and in this context, they are often shown as incapable of providing good eyewitness accounts of what happened at the crime scene. Despite the fact that many eyewitnesses—regardless of class—cannot provide investigating officers with accurate information about events or a good description of perpetrators, homeless individuals in particular are portrayed as incompetent and “off the wall” in their remarks to law enforcement officials. An episode of ABC’s The Practice is a classic example of this problem. In “Trees in the Forest,” a homeless pedestrian is killed in a hit-and-run accident to which the only witness is another homeless man. Mr. Snow, the witness, is able to describe the driver of a Mercedes as having committed the crime, but his statements are dismissed as flippant or bizarre in the courtroom. When Assistant District Attorney Helen Gamble asks Snow if he knew the victim, he replies, “Nope, he’s a homeless man, bigger bum than me.” Gamble becomes frustrated with every homeless person she sees, including a “squeegee man” who cleans her windshield at a stoplight. However, when Gamble learns that Snow has led a hard life, including having had his throat slit in a fight with another homeless man, she shows empathy in her closing argument to the jury:

If a man dies in a forest and nobody hears him cry . . . then he doesn’t make a sound, does he? The other day I was stopped at a traffic light and some bum came up asking to wash my windshield. I couldn’t tell you what he looked like ‘cause I never looked at him. I never look at ’em. Do you? Easier not to. But when you run one of these bums over . . . maybe we should stop the car. Take a look. I guess that’s the question for you to go back and decide . . . is there any intrinsic value to human life? Or does he have to be somebody? I don’t know. It’s your call.105

After the wealthy Mercedes driver is acquitted, the final scene shows Gamble going home alone, passing homeless men huddled around burn barrels on Boston street corners. Burn barrels are a central prop in crime dramas that involve homeless characters. Whether in Las Vegas, New York, Boston, or other major cities around the nation, television depiction of homelessness usually includes these items. A typical scenario is described in this Internet summary of “The Hunger Artist,” an episode of CSI:
We’re . . . at a highway underpass outside Vegas; the sight of a man huddled over a burning trash can provides the visual indication that this is where Las Vegas’s homeless population lives. We see Brass and Gil met by a shopping cart; they’re hemmed in by a perimeter of yellow police tape marking off the area surrounding the cart. Brass . . . tells Gil that the body hasn’t been ID’d. The body in question is a woman, blonde, wrapped in a blanket and stuffed into a shopping cart.106

This brief description provides many of the key ingredients for story lines involving homeless individuals: the highway underpass, the burning trash can, and the shopping cart. As a result, media audiences may come to see the homeless, warming their hands over barrels, not only as omnipresent on the streets but also as unreliable witnesses because they are deviants—dirty, surly, alcoholic or drug dependent, and often visibly mentally ill.

Like newspaper articles, television news and entertainment programming about the poor and homeless has the potential to make viewers and readers more aware of those who have serious, sustained problems in our society. There is a fine line, however, between a sympathetic portrayal of such individuals and a judgmental approach that perpetuates old stereotypes and introduces new ones as times change.

EXCEPTIONALISM FRAMING: “IF THIS PERSON CAN ESCAPE POVERTY . . .”

Some media stories focus on people who have lifted themselves out of poverty or left lives of homelessness. These inspirational stories show the importance of the human spirit in rising above adversity; however, they also suggest that others might be able to do likewise if they set their minds to it.

“Bronx Girl Follows Vision: A Future Far from Home” begins with a description of Faile Street in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx:

Its painted women sell themselves at the bodega on the corner. Its ragged men sell bags of dope from cars along the curb. It passes underneath the ruckus of the elevated highway and then dead-ends in the stench of a sewage treatment plant. Faile Street is poor. It is loud. It is often dangerous. Often, it smells.107

From these humble origins comes Jenise Harrell, who gets good grades at a private school, where she serves on the student council, participates in many other activities, and hopes to attend a prestigious university like Harvard. According to the journalist, “She is trying to escape. ‘I know I have it in me to get out,’ [Harrell] says. ‘I have to get out. There’s nothing for me here.’”108 After describing the problems in Harrell’s life and her hopes for the future,
the journalist concludes, “It is nonetheless understood that Jenise’s life will not be like her mother’s. ‘I love my mother . . . but she grew up in Hunts Point and she’s still in Hunts Point. I don’t want to be like that.”

While it remains to be seen whether Jenise Harrell will fulfill her dream of rising above poverty and the problems in her neighborhood, the television movie *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story* convinces media audiences that just such a move is possible. Based on the true story of a young girl who spent her early years worrying about whether her parents were going out to score drugs and when she would eat her next meal, the movie tells of how Liz Murray survived by sleeping on subway cars and eating from dumpsters. Despite these obstacles, she pursued an education, graduated from high school, and won a scholarship to Harvard University.

Similar success stories are sprinkled through newspaper accounts and “happy-talk” reports typically aired on evening television news programs. Another example is the story of Richie Spagnole, who rose from poverty and homelessness to a life of respectability with a job and an apartment of his own. “Amid Manhattan’s Wealthiest, a Beggar Found Open Hearts” describes how, after ten years on the streets of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Spagnole succeeded in his quest for a decent life:

To many New Yorkers, the Upper East Side is a clubby, outsiders-beware territory, where immaculately uniformed doormen and snotty co-op boards guard the gates for billionaires and their personal trainers; a sometimes heartless province where poodles get manicures but maids get minimum wages. But for Richie Spagnole, who lived for a decade on the streets of the city’s richest neighborhood, the Upper East Side was a place of astonishing generosity.

Merchants gave Spagnole food; residents provided him with contributions of as much as $50 at a time; he slept in the boiler rooms of tenement buildings on cold nights. Growing tired of using crack cocaine and being homeless, Spagnole decided to turn his life around when he was offered a job as a delivery person for Rosedale Fish Market. Attributes that the journalist states helped him to get off the streets include having “an infectious smile and a rat-a-tat-tat speaking style,” being a “man of energy and humor,” originally “coming from a good family,” being “a special homeless guy . . . who wasn’t dirty or smelly, and he was helpful,” being “clean,” and always caring about people. According to the article,

Being helpful was part of Mr. Spagnole’s come-on [when he was homeless]. He told restaurant owners that he would not beg in front of their places during the day and would keep an eye out for thieves at night if they would just donate left-over food. He also did favors like clearing snowy sidewalks with shovels
“borrowed” from local buildings. For the employees of one restaurant he was the lookout, watching for the police while they gambled inside. Eventually, Spagnole was reunited with a daughter whom he had not seen for a number of years, and this Valentine’s Day news article concludes with an apparent “lived-happily-ever-after” ending.

Media reports about poor and homeless individuals who have successfully overcome their problems provide heartwarming stories. This is exceptionalism framing: singling out individuals who have surmounted obstacles, praising their accomplishments—such as leaving the streets, finding a job, and graduating from high school or college—and creating the impression that anyone in a similar situation can do the same thing. “Man Overcomes Homelessness, Will Graduate from ASU” is an example: Chris Newton, who learned that “shaking the image of [being] a homeless kid” was almost as hard as being homeless, completed his college education and received a degree from Arizona State University. The article points out that, by taking charge of his life at an early age and never giving up, Newton attained a better life for himself and his son: “When things are bad, you maintain an image. You keep the rest inside,” Newton stated to the reporter.

Individuals like Newton, who improve their living conditions, overcome hardships and addiction, and find happier lives are clear examples of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, but exceptionalism framing ignores the more typical experiences of the poor and homeless, leaving media audiences with an individualistic view of poverty and homelessness that does not focus on the larger societal issues associated with these problems. The individualistic approach to framing of news reports is particularly prevalent in fundraising appeals on television and in “neediest-cases” articles in newspapers.

**CHARITABLE FRAMING: HOLIDAYS AND DISASTERS**

Although sympathetic framing of media stories about the poor typically shows empathy for those who are down on their luck, it does not suggest that readers or viewers should take action on behalf of individuals in need. By contrast, charitable framing highlights individuals and families in need of financial assistance with the goal of motivating audiences to contribute money or goods to the poor (for instance, through programs like “Coats for Kids” or “Toys for Tots”).

Research shows that most forms of media give minimal coverage to the poor and homeless throughout the year; reporting gradually increases over the fall, peaks during the Christmas holiday season and cold-weather months, and then drops sharply through late winter to early spring. During the height of
these human-interest stories, members of the press barrage service providers at soup kitchens and homeless shelters for interviews; volunteers are shown serving turkey dinners to the poor at Thanksgiving and preparing baskets of food for indigent families at Christmas. Cartoonist Gary Trudeau captures the essence of media reporting about holiday assistance to the poor by showing how out of place some reporters are when they try to impose their own thinking on the homeless people they are interviewing. In one Doonesbury comic strip, for example, a homeless man stands in line waiting for his free meal on Thanksgiving Day. A journalist says to him, “You’re getting a free meal today . . . but afterwards . . . what do you hope for?” The homeless man replies, “Seconds.” The journalist counters, “No, no . . . I mean in the long term.” The homeless man replies, “Dessert . . . definitely dessert.” As this cartoon shows, the homeless man and the journalist are operating under different assumptions about life and what the future should hold for people.

Holiday coverage of the poor and calls for donations appear in reports across the nation. One of the longest-running series is “The Neediest Cases,” published in the New York Times. People seeking assistance range from families who need medical care or a place to live to individuals who have recently arrived in the United States with no money and no way to escape a life of poverty. Each article employs charitable framing to tell the human-interest story of a person or family seeking financial assistance. A representative example is “Offering a Hand, and Hope, in a Year of Record Homelessness in New York,” which describes the problems of Gloria Hernandez:

Gloria Hernandez tries to be strong for her five children, but strength, like privacy or full stomachs, does not come easily when you and your family live in a shelter for the homeless. “The children say, ‘Mommy, when are we going to get out of here?’” Ms. Hernandez, 40, said softly, her eyes downcast. “You see it in their faces: they don’t speak, but they show it. They say it’s your fault.”

A new landlord had purchased the apartment building where Hernandez lived for ten years and told her and her children to move out, claiming that he needed the space for himself and that too many people were living in her unit. The photo accompanying the article shows Hernandez, looking depressed, standing with her nine-year-old son, who wraps his arm protectively around her neck. The article also carries the story of several other families and explains how the Neediest Cases Fund provides temporary assistance for “the homeless, the gravely ill and the down and out.”

According to the New York Times, publication of stories like the one about Hernandez has been an annual occurrence since Adolph S. Ochs, publisher of the paper from 1896 to 1935, came across a “shabbily dressed beggar” on
Christmas Day 1911, leading Ochs to publish stories about the poor in the hope that readers would show compassion toward them. Newspapers and television news programs across the country replicate the New York Times’s “The Neediest Cases” series; journalists and anchors appeal to audiences to send money, toys, food, and clothing to help the less fortunate in their communities. Programs like “Toys for Tots” at Christmas and “Coats for Kids” during the cold winter months have been a big success at many television stations, as the media work cooperatively with local community service organizations to provide at least a minimal level of assistance to those living in poverty.

In the past, researchers have found that charity fund-raising activities publicized in the media typically show more images of minority-group members, particularly African Americans and Latinos, than of white (European) Americans. According to these analysts, even though charity fund-raising through the media is done for a worthy cause, such portrayal of people in need might firmly establish in readers’ and viewers’ minds the notion that poverty and minority status are synonymous. A 1990s study of news magazines and television news found, for example, that stories about poverty featured African Americans between 62 and 65 percent of the time, although only 29 percent of poor Americans are black. Based on a systematic examination of Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report, political scientist Martin Gilens concluded that news magazines exaggerated the number of poor African Americans, with African Americans shown 62 percent of the time in stories about poverty. In weeknight news shows broadcast by ABC, CBS, and NBC, a similar pattern was identified: African Americans represented the poor 65 percent of the time. According to Gilens, media stories framed to show the negative aspects of the underclass, such as welfare dependency or drug abuse, typically presented African Americans, whereas those showing the poor in a more sympathetic manner, such as articles about the elderly poor or poverty-level workers in job-training programs, were more likely to feature white Americans. Gilens argues that overrepresentation of African Americans in stories about poverty perpetuates stereotypes about race and provides white Americans with more reason to express discontent regarding social welfare programs.

In addition to raising much-needed money for charitable organizations and bringing in toys or clothing for children, charitable framing provides media audiences with a way to feel good about themselves. After one series, “Season for Caring,” the Austin American-Statesman, for example, printed a follow-up about the families that benefited from readers’ contributions. One article, “Thanks, Austin!” described the gratitude of Clydia Jones, who “[did]n’t know where to begin thanking people. ‘It’s been a blessing. Just a
blessing,’ she says.” According to the article, Jones’s disabled eleven-year-old granddaughter had received an electric wheelchair donated through the Season for Caring campaign.\(^{118}\)

Although such campaigns perform a valuable service for a few of the poor, Gregory Mantsios suspects that “these ‘Yule time’ stories are as much about the affluent as they are about the poor: they tell us that the affluent in our society are a kind, understanding, giving people—which we are not.”\(^{119}\) The seasonal nature of charitable framing in the media has also been criticized because the problems of the poor exist throughout the year and not just during holidays. As one *Los Angeles Times* editorial acknowledged,

> The charity of the holiday season is traditional—and welcome. The problem is that so much is seasonal. . . . Come January, when people go back to their normal routines, the hunger and homelessness recognized in the holiday season will remain. It would be nice if most of the spirit of giving remained, too.\(^{120}\)

As in news stories, charitable framing of the poor in the story lines of television “family” entertainment shows is also seasonal. A representative example is “Here Comes Santa Claus,” an episode of the WB’s *7th Heaven* (1996–2007) that takes place during the Christmas season, when Rev. Eric Camden (Stephen Collins) encourages his oldest children to do charity work for the community. Mary Camden (Jessica Biel), one of the daughters, is working in a soup kitchen feeding the homeless when her father comes in to volunteer. Reverend Camden sees that his daughter is unusually happy to be doing the charity work that she initially did not want to do, but then he realizes she is flirting with Carlos, a client at the soup kitchen. When she tells her father about Carlos, she states, “That is Carlos. He got hit by a bus. Isn’t he cute?” She also tells her father that Carlos is homeless and that she would like for him to stay at the Camden residence for the holidays. Other than Mary’s description of Carlos as homeless, viewers would have little indication of his status based on his appearance, described by one reviewer in this way:

> How stupid is Mary to invite a homeless man she barely knows to stay at her house? It’s a good thing he’s a sanitized, *7th Heaven* version of a homeless guy, with his healthy complexion, perfectly kept hair, sparkling white teeth, and rugged good looks, and not, like, a more realistic depiction of a homeless person.\(^{121}\)

By the end of the episode, viewers learn that Carlos is not really homeless after all. Such media portrayals of homeless persons as devious contribute to negative public perceptions about them and their attempts to harm or mislead honest, law-abiding citizens.
Like media representations that focus on the need to extend a helping hand to those down on their luck and homeless during the holidays, stories about disasters focus on their effects on the poor. A typical example is the article “At River’s Edge, Left with an ‘Empty Feeling,’” which describes the devastation wrought by a flood on a formerly homeless person:

Things were looking up for Robert Gray. After three months in a homeless shelter in Calvert County, he landed a job paying $10 an hour doing ironwork, found a home in the Hallowing Point trailer park along the Patuxent River, and filled it with enough furniture so that he could live comfortably. But in the time it took for the rising flood waters of Hurricane Isabel to crash through the glass storm door, burst through his closet wall and fill his home with three feet of water, Gray was down again.

“I lost everything,” said Gray, who returned Tuesday to sift through his mud-filled quarters for anything salvageable. “I came here with nothing and I pieced it all together, and now it’s like, damn, I have to start over.”

Although disasters such as floods typically harm people across all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic categories, the poor are often in greater peril because they lack insurance and do not have the money to purchase replacement items. Describing the differential effects of a hurricane, one journalist stated,

Hurricane Isabel was an equal-opportunity destroyer, flooding the houses, snapping the trees and cutting the power of rich and poor alike. But the lingering hardships imposed by the storm are not likely to be so democratic, officials from across the region say. People with low or fixed incomes, the elderly and the unemployed are struggling harder to rebuild, the officials say. Many had little or no insurance; many lost everything they owned.

Unlike the widespread media appeals for the poor at the holidays, disaster relief draws only brief coverage, often describing how government agencies and volunteer organizations like the Red Cross are helping the victims. Overall, the recurring framing focuses on how natural disasters spare neither the poor nor the wealthy. This point is emphasized in headlines like “A Great Equalizer: Isabel Was Her Name,” although the poor are harmed more significantly by even moderate losses than are the more affluent in our society.

Some reality television entertainment shows acknowledge that homelessness itself is an ongoing disaster that continually affects the lives of many people. A&E staged a reality show, House of Dreams, in which sixteen would-be homeowners who had never before built a house came together for thirteen weeks to build a home that one contestant would ultimately win.
Some of the contestants wanted to win the house for other, less fortunate individuals; for example, a real estate broker wanted to win the house for a family she hoped to rescue from poverty, and a former investment banker wanted to win for an at-risk high school student he was counseling. Another of the contestants, however, was Tony, an out-of-work landscaper who—with tears in his eyes—told his competitors in the first episode that if they did not win the house, they could go back home, but he and his family had no home to return to, only a homeless shelter.\(^\text{125}\)

Although reality shows, such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, focus on homebuilding or rebuilding for less advantaged people, few of the episodes feature home creation for the homeless. Typically, those chosen to receive assistance are families that include a disabled veteran, a seriously ill child or other family member, or a hero, such as a firefighter injured in the line of duty. Occasionally, a television news show, such as *20/20*, will feature humanitarian organizations like Habitat for Humanity to show their good works on behalf of homeless and nearly homeless families, but not homeless single people.

**EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS**

How do media representations of poverty affect viewers and readers? Clearly, portrayal of the poor and homeless sends a different message than do depictions of the rich and famous. Whereas the upper classes receive framing based on consensus, admiration, emulation, and the price tag, the poor, at best, are accorded sympathy and applauded when they manage to escape poverty. At worst, the poor are depicted thematically, as “faceless” statistics, or episodically, remaining all but invisible except at holidays or following natural disasters. For the most part, the poor are framed as bearing some degree of responsibility, allowing media audiences to blame the victims if they choose to do so. Over the past 150 years, poor individuals have been considered not only outsiders, or Others, but objects to be observed, commented on, and derided. They have sometimes been represented as neediest cases or the beneficiaries of elaborate charity fund-raising events attended by wealthy patrons who dress up in their finery to eat and dance the night away while patting themselves on the back for raising money for organizations that benefit the less fortunate.

An examination of thematic framing in the media shows the extent to which print and television news reports about poverty, hunger, and homelessness provide audiences with statistics and trends while ignoring the untold
stories of millions of people living in poverty in the United States. Reporting about increases and decreases in the poverty rate or in the number of hungry or homeless people gives media audiences a relatively sterile perspective on a major social problem with many systemic causes and large-scale social consequences for everyone in the nation. The media, however, largely ignore macrolevel concerns.

By contrast, episodic framing too often turns exclusively to discussions of individuals and what audiences may perceive as their personal troubles. When the media frame stories in such a way as to emphasize the shortcomings of the poor or homeless, those who are better off may conclude that these less fortunate individuals have created their own problems. The exception, perhaps, is the category known as the working poor, people who typically work long hours for low wages, as discussed in the next chapter. Otherwise, the poor are usually portrayed as violating middle-class values (about cleanliness, hard work, and moral behavior) and as committing crimes that are far less interesting than those of wealthy elites, who engage in stock fraud or other clean, white-collar offenses. As noted in chapter 3, even when convicted of major crimes, the rich may be admired and praised for their good taste and expensive material possessions.

Throughout my research, I was surprised by the consistency of media coverage linking poverty and deviance. Although most people living in poverty do not commit suicide, homicide, or other crimes, articles over the past 150 years have usually focused on how different the poor are from middle- and upper-class people and how much less interesting their lives are. Whether the poor steal food to eat or shopping carts to transport their few worldly goods, their deviant behavior is more pronounced in media representations than their “normal” behavior.

Children, the elderly, and the ill are most likely to receive sympathetic framing in media stories about the poor. In the latter category, however, the illness typically includes a physical health problem or disability; sympathetic framing often does not extend to individuals deemed mentally ill, particularly if they exhibit frightening or threatening behavior. Subtle derision of the mentally ill homeless in television crime shows, for example, may convey the message to viewers that all homeless people are dangerous and should be feared, when the central problem for many is one of economic hardship and deprivation.

When the media need heartwarming or feel-good stories, particularly during holidays and disasters, the poor are good subjects because they are easily accessible to reporters. Of course, some holiday and disaster coverage of the poor results from the efforts of nonprofit agencies and poverty advocates to gain media coverage for their cause in order to raise money to help affected individuals and families.
One of the major problems that my research identifies in regard to media representations of the poor is the shifting of the larger, structural nature of the issues associated with poverty, hunger, and homelessness onto a softer, more humanitarian type of coverage that provides media audiences with only isolated examples that show the problem’s immediate effects on individuals at the personal level. I agree with other scholars’ assessments of how television news reports, as well as the “professional” behavior of news anchors, influence audiences’ perceptions of homelessness:

The anchor’s gaze functions as an ultimate window through which . . . all other views of the world must be relayed, including the public’s view of itself. Due to this authoritative, omnipotent and reliable quality of the anchor’s position, he is able to comfort the viewer and relieve the tensions accumulated throughout the narrative [about poverty]. His concluding remarks sound as if he were saying to us, “We have some problems out there. But don’t worry. I’ll take care of them. Everything will be fine. You have a good night.”

Perhaps it is this feeling that comes to audiences when they reach the end of other news stories or entertainment shows in which the subject or character has spent several hours serving the poor in a soup kitchen or taken clothing to a homeless shelter. We can easily believe that someone else is looking after the problems of the poor, that we need not worry about these issues or demand political and economic changes to reduce their gravity. Perhaps it is for this reason that some poverty advocates are creating their own media resources, through grassroots efforts and extensive use of the Internet, to get the message out about poverty and homelessness and to provide audiences with the “real” story of the poor rather than the packaged, sanitized sound bites and video clips presented in news reports or the occasional subplot in a television drama.

A number of media analysts, however, including Wall Street Journal reporter Jonathan Kaufman, have questioned the extent to which media audiences actually want to know about poverty, hunger, and homelessness:

Coverage of race or poverty has begun to mirror the intractability of these problems. I sometimes worry we have succeeded too well in communicating the bleak prospects of the inner-city underclass. . . . Have [these stories] had the unintended consequence of making these problems seem beyond solution or hope? Faced with bleak statistics of poverty, single-parent families, dropout rates, and incarceration, most readers throw up their hands. They read these stories the way many of us read about tragedies in distant lands. . . . It’s a shame, but it doesn’t really affect us and, therefore, it is not news to which we find connections.
Thus, the question remains, Have U.S. media audiences seen too much, or too little, of the true nature of poverty? Regardless of the answer to this question, one fact remains undisputed: how the media cover the poor differs vastly from how they cover the upper and middle classes, which serve as the norm for how things ought to be in this country. The effects of classism in media coverage deserve far more attention and systematic research in the future than they have received in the past.
CHAPTER 1: CLASS ACTION IN THE MEDIA

Notes to Pages 5–9


28. Norris, Kern, and Just, Framing Terrorism.

29. Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 623.

30. Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 623.

33. Entman, “Framing.”
34. Entman, “Framing.”
40. See Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching*; Norris, Kern, and Just, *Framing Terrorism*; Reese, Gandy, and Grant, *Framing Public Life*.
CHAPTER 2: TWENTY-FOUR-KARAT GOLD FRAMES

15. Cable, Top Drawer.
20. Cable, Top Drawer, 198.


34. Gilbert, The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality, 90.


41. Croteau and Hoynes, Media/Society, 222.


55. Cowley, “They’ve Given Away $24 Billion.”
56. Domhoff, “The Women’s Page As a Window on the Ruling Class.”
64. Maynard, “If a Name Is Tarnished, but Carved in Stone,” BU4.
74. “School Cooks Win over $95 Million in Powerball,” 5A.


87. “Move to the Head of Your Class” (advertisement), Texas Monthly (October 2003): 137.


CHAPTER 3: GILDED CAGES


47. Kuczynski, “When Home Is a Castle and the Big House, Too.”
64. Duffy, “What Did They Know and When Did They Know It?” 50.
71. “Law & Order.”
76. Fishman, “Bernie Madoff, Free At Last,” 35.

CHAPTER 4: FRAGILE FRAMES

3. Entman and Rojecki, The Black Image in the White Mind, 94.
5. Kunerth, “One Number Can’t Measure Poverty.”


24. See, for example, “Poverty Leading to Suicide”; “Cause of Mr. Hilsen’s Suicide: His Capital Exhausted and Poverty Staring Him in the Face,” *New York Times*, January 25, 1883, 8; “Driven to Suicide by Poverty,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1884, 8; “Unable to Endure Poverty,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1884, 2; “A Violinist in Despair: Domenico Mariani on the Verge of Suicide, Seized As He Was about to Jump from a Hoboken Dock—Poverty in His Old Age Unbearable,” *New York Times*, August 30, 1885, 12.


30. Headlines such as “Alabama: Mobile a Prostrate City, Alarming Decline in the Value of Real Estate, Two Hundred and Fifty Stores without Occupants. Poverty
and Depression Some of the Causes” (New York Times, October 21, 1874, 1) and “Destitution in New Orleans: The Existing Poverty and Its Causes—Lotteries and Beer Shops” (New York Times, May 7, 1875, 10) emblazoned stories about poverty in the South. Written by “Occasional Correspondent,” who reported on the “decay and dilapidation which everywhere prevails,” these articles were framed in such a manner as to suggest that depressed economic conditions were not the only causes of poverty in the South but were exacerbated by the presence of lotteries, beer shops, and other attractions that usurped money from the poor. In the 1870s, the media popularized the category of “poor whites,” as evidenced by headlines such as “Poor Whites in the South: Their Poverty and Principles” (New York Times, May 13, 1877, 5). The headline of the article shows the contempt “Occasional Correspondent” held for people in this category: “The most degraded, ignorant, and hopeless class in the South—the poorest of the poor whites—how they live in the mountains—loose notions of morality and utter ignorance their chief characteristics.” Although the article is framed in a seemingly sympathetic manner, explaining that poor whites were to be pitied because they had been barred from commerce and other success by the “monopoly of money and power in the planter,” the journalist also emphasized that their plight might not have been so dire if they had developed a sense of discipline and subscribed to the work ethic.

38. Iyengar, “Framing Responsibility for Political Issues”; Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible?
41. Eckholm, “Last Year’s Poverty Rate Was Highest in 12 Years,” A1.


56. “How Many People Experience Homelessness?”


60. Blasi, “And We Are Not Seen.”

61. Stein, “The Real Face of Homelessness.”


64. Dean and Brady, “Local TV News Project—2002.”


66. Iyengar, “Framing Responsibility for Political Issues”; Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible?

67. Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible?
75. Kleinfield, “Golden Years, on $678 a Month,” B1.
80. Epstein, “Enough to Make You Sick?” 76.
81. Epstein, “Enough to Make You Sick?” 76.
86. Kelly, “Regulating the Reproduction and Mothering of Poor Women,” 76.
94. Eungjun Min, ed., Reading the Homeless: The Media’s Image of Homeless Culture (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), ix.
95. Min, Reading the Homeless, ix.
96. Min, Reading the Homeless, x.
100. Horner, “Losing Their Cart Blanche,” 1B.
101. Horner, “Losing Their Cart Blanche,” 1B.
103. Hermann, “Treating the Homeless Where They Live.”
105. Quoted in Marchand, “On the Air and Outside.”
113. Kossan, “Man Overcomes Homelessness, Will Graduate from ASU.”

CHAPTER 5: TARNISHED METAL FRAMES

4. Shipler, “A Poor Cousin of the Middle Class,” 22.