EIGHT

IMAGE TRIBES

At its heart, this book has been about the way advertisers and the media worked to construct America from the 1970s through the mid-1990s. During the period, both industries showed a greater interest than ever before in detecting and exploiting social divisions. What consequences will their activities have for the way Americans see themselves and others in the coming decades? The findings here suggest answers that are disturbing.

Before exploring them, though, it may be useful to step back and consider what this study has to say about the general process through which advertisers develop images of people and their lives. Here are four propositions about the industrial construction of society. They might be tested against the advertising-media relationships of other eras, even of other countries.

- The industrial construction of society is a purposeful activity, though not a conspiratorial one. Throughout this investigation, it has been quite clear that the corporate imaging of society is not an accidental by-product of marketing activities. Understanding society is, instead, a major and explicit goal for advertisers, their clients, and the media firms with whom they deal. They spend lots of money supporting research organizations inside and outside their own firms that can advise them. They believe that expertise in this area affects their ability to reach consumers.

While a good deal of the data and interpretations to this end are proprietary, a substantial amount does get into the trade press and indus-
try meetings. An examination of the sources reveals that the discussions of society by media and marketing practitioners are pragmatic, speak to the needs of their clients, and rarely reflect on the social or moral meaning of their work. The free flow of contentions over one or another point of view is evidence that no central committee of the media system guides the discussions. When consensus appears it is because an idea makes sense to the people involved or because one or another organization pushing it has clout. But no one organization has all the clout, as the next proposition notes.

- **The industrial construction of society is an integral part of a company’s struggle for position.** Within marketing and media firms, the need to understand America is linked closely to the need for efficiency and effectiveness. Useful ideas about society are therefore coins of exchange among research firms that maneuver for clients, ad agencies that plot to get advertisers, and media firms that jockey for sponsors. Both large and small firms are intensely involved in this competition. Small firms often use debates about trends as a way to tell the industry that they are at the cutting edge of strategic thinking. Large firms want to prove to current and potential clients that they haven’t lost their edge.

The upshot is an unending stream of public and private rhetoric by companies that aim to show that they are able to analyze and package those portions of the population that their constituencies want to reach. Where they get their ideas about society and how they make them useful are questions addressed in the next proposition.

- **Companies look both outside and inside their industries to decide about how society is changing and what to do about it.** When it comes to looking outside, marketing and media practitioners find some areas more relevant than others. They tend to ignore religion, the fine arts, and literature. Instead, they look to government, academic, and private reports for trends on the economy, the family, and the population as a whole.

Chapters 3 and 4 show, for example, that during the late 1970s and early 1980s ad people found broad significance in the political victories of Ronald Reagan; the increasing gap between rich and poor; the changing dynamics of the American family; and the huge growth of Latino, African American, and Asian American populations. These develop-
ments became lenses through which executives thought they could understand and predict Americans' consumption patterns. They tested and expanded their ideas through focus groups and surveys.

While these notions about society came from outside the advertising and media system, the way marketers implemented them was very much driven by internal business concerns. The result was a portrait of America that, while borrowed from other institutions, was shaped to fit the demands for efficiency and effectiveness in advertising. Marketers and media firms channeled the insights they gleaned from outside sources in ways that might have even run counter to the aims of the people who generated the original data.

It is doubtful, for instance, that the academic and governmental groups that released reports about widening divisions of income in America would have expected that their information would be exploited to sell products. That, however, is what happened, as ad practitioners merged income details with other data in order to separate groups worth pursuing from those that weren't. When it came to blacks and Hispanic Americans, the separation involved drawing stark lines between winners and losers. As chapter 4 notes, ad people ignored members of those groups that could not meet expectations. At the same time, they revealed in data about high-consumption middle- and upper-middle-class blacks and Hispanic Americans that they divided even further by gender and lifestyle.

Marketers searched for gold in many social slices. Media firms were quick to develop formats that would create demographic and lifestyle labels that the advertisers equated with gold. Nickelodeon's executives talked of programming that would draw upscale suburban kids; executives for online companies exulted in the high-achieving early adopters that their services were chasing; the publishers of women's magazines fell over each other trying to prove to media buyers that the tone and topics of their articles reached out to the "best type" of working woman; and catalog companies touted their ability to create "books" tailored to a panoply of different wealthy lifestyles.

This point about formats can be generalized:

- The ideas about society that companies develop are embodied in the structure of the media as well as in their content. More than a few writers have observed that the commercials, songs, articles, and programs which
appear throughout the media system mirror their creators’ perspectives on society. This look at the ad world shows that the struggle of marketers and media firms over the nature of U.S. society goes even further. It affects the distribution and nature of formats—the very structure of the media system.

Media executives decide whether the layouts and “tones”—the formats—of their outlets are acceptable to the audiences that they think marketers will find attractive. Drawing on their business priorities and visions of consumers, they continually assess the existing mix of formats in magazines, newspapers, radio stations, online services, and other ad vehicles. Marketing executives, for their part, decide whether the number and nature of outlets are acceptable from the standpoint of audiences they want to reach efficiently.

This format-building process sets the ground rules for selecting content. Doing so ensures that marketers’ assumptions about audiences are reflected in the different formats that they support. When high-visibility formats in magazines, cable, and the Internet emphasize upscale twenty-somethings, for example, it seems logical that there will be much hunting for entertainment, news, and information with these consumers in mind. By contrast, the relative lack of advertiser interest in men and women older than fifty—and especially over seventy—will mean a smaller and less visible part of the media mix aimed at them, fewer formats targeted to them, and therefore less content with them as central, active characters.

Inertia is an important feature of the media system. It takes much effort to make major alterations in the media mix and the formats that populate it. When significant changes do take place, they signal that executives are going through a major rethinking of either society, advertising, or media. The decades covered in this book are remarkable because they show the beginnings of a paradigm shift in all three areas at the same time.

Beginning in the late 1970s, national advertisers and their agencies advanced the notion that Americans were becoming more fractured, frazzled, self-indulgent, and suspicious than ever before. They said that U.S. consumers were getting harder to reach, and were sharing fewer common views of the world, than in previous years. They noted that the
growing social divisions paralleled an increasing fractionalization of U.S. media, as seen in the growing number of radio stations, magazines, cable networks, VCRs, video games, and computers.

Advertisers believed that the social divisions and media fractionalization presented opportunities to create and sell new products. But this would work only if they understood the new social realities and if the media targeted the groups that marketers wanted. As a result, both marketing and media executives worked to develop a shared understanding of how America was splitting up and to make sure that changes in media would take place in ways that would help advertisers persuade their chosen segments as efficiently as possible. As chapters 2 through 4 show, the discussions reflected a broad range of demographic and lifestyle labels. Advertising and marketing practitioners jockeyed to present their versions of the way men, women, blacks, Hispanic Americans, suburbanites, seniors, and a wide spectrum of other groups were changing.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 note that with these activities came an appreciation of media that could help marketers meet their targeting needs. Proponents of these media argued strongly, and increasingly successfully, that while people might use mass-market vehicles such as network television in their everyday activities, they identified more strongly with the worlds portrayed in formats aimed at them. Reaching the right groups with “rifle shot” efficiency became an important part of marketing plans. Media formats that signaled an interest in people with specific backgrounds and lifestyles grew in popularity.

Momentum toward creating targeted spaces for increasingly narrow niches of consumers accelerated despite the consolidation of giant media firms during the 1980s and 1990s. The deals that linked Time to Warner, Viacom to Paramount, and Disney to ABC were not consummated with the aim of turning back the clock on media fractionalization or audience segmentation. If anything, the conglomerates’ global reach could speed the segmentation process along, since it gave them the ability to amortize the costs of targeted ventures not just across audience segments in the U.S. but across their counterparts around the world. In addition, the conglomerates’ multimedia ownership meant they could make additional money by spinning different versions of the format or content to the target audiences in a panoply of media locations. Viacom’s MTV could stand for upscale young adults on U.S. cable, on international satellites, on clothes, CDs, and on a variety of printed paraphernalia.
All this meant that the cutting-edge competition was no longer over the creation of mass-circulation media with huge audiences, as it had been in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Rather, it was over the creation of primary media communities that covered a variety of places. The aim for the media firms as well as for the marketers was to make the target audience feel part of a tight-knit extended family, attached to the program hosts, other viewers, and sponsors, wherever they went.

In tandem with these developments, a sea change was taking place in the forms of advertising that marketers used. The business of “advertising” was broadening far beyond its traditional meaning of discrete messages that were clearly meant to persuade. During the 1980s and 1990s the money spent on time and space for ads in traditional media typically remained level or rose slowly compared to previous decades. By contrast, the cash channeled into other ways of getting persuasive messages in front of targeted consumers—ways such as product placement, in-store promotion, discount coupons, sponsored events—took off.

So did direct marketing. A previously disdained area of the business, it began to look good as direct practitioners’ ability to use databases to pinpoint and customize persuasive messages to individuals and groups grew in sophistication. Advertisers’ interest in direct work suggested that they would naturally grab onto an interest in interactive television and the “mass customization” of news, information, and entertainment.

Some interactive technologists groused that advertisers were slow to appreciate the potential of their business. Advertisers responded that the practical implementation of their futuristic ideas was not yet clear and that realistic targeting could take place elsewhere. As chapter 7 notes, by the mid-1990s the largest marketers and their ad agencies were proclaiming that they would move decisively to influence the new interactive world as it developed. Interactive TV proponents expected that the amount of subscription and pay-per-view programming would rise in the future (implying that advertising would decline). Yet more and more advertisers declared that they were ready to associate themselves with these domains even if no commercial spots would be allowed. They would do it by subsidizing the use of interactive TV for consumers whose attention and loyalty they cared to cultivate.

In general, all signs indicated that marketers’ support of the media in return for hyping their products to audiences would remain a corner-
STONE OF THE MEDIA WORLD. WHETHER THE ACTIVITY WAS PRODUCT PLACEMENT IN MOVIES AND COMPUTER GAMES, SUBSIDIZATION OF CABLE AND VCR PROGRAMMING IN RETURN FOR PUBLICITY, OR PAYMENT FOR LINKS ON INTERNET HOME PAGES, MARKETERS VIEWED THE NEW AD TACTICS AS HELPING THEM REACH THE CONSUMERS THEY WANTED IN ENVIRONMENTS CONducive TO SELLING.


THE MOMENTUM TOWARD SEGMENTATION IS BOTH NATIONAL AND GLOBAL. AS THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS HAVE NOTED, MEDIA PRACTITIONERS ARE ALREADY BEING REWARDED FOR DELIVERING HOMOGENEOUS AUDIENCES TO MARKETERS IN CLUSTERS OF PRIMARY MEDIA COMMUNITIES. ALL SIGNS INDICATE THAT THIS WILL CONTINUE TO BE THE CASE IN PRINT AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND THAT NEW TECHNOLOGIES WILL SPEED THE PROCESS ALONG, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE START OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. THE CAPABILITIES OF PRINT AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA WILL ALLOW VIRTUALLY ALL MEDIA TO ADOPT TWO MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF DIRECT MARKETING THAT HAVE TRADITIONALLY MADE MAINSTREAM ADVERTISERS JEALOUS. ONE IS SELECTABILITY—AN ABILITY TO REACH AN INDIVIDUAL WITH ENTERTAINMENT, NEWS, INFORMATION, AND ADVERTISING BASED ON KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDIVIDUAL’S BACKGROUND, INTERESTS, AND HABITS. THE OTHER IS ACCOUNTABILITY TO ADVERTISERS—AN ABILITY TO TRACE THE INDIVIDUAL’S RESPONSE TO A PARTICULAR AD.

SUCH “RIFLE-SHOT” POWER WILL BE HARD TO TURN DOWN IN FAVOR OF MASS-MARKET TACTICS, WHICH WILL APPEAR AS INEFFICIENT SCATTERSHOT IN COMPARISON. CERTAINLY, AS DISCUSSED IN CHAPTER 7, THERE WILL BE COMPANIES THAT WANT TO GET THEIR BRANDS OUT TO THE BROAD POPULATION AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AND SO WILL FIND MASS-MARKET MEDIA USEFUL. THEY WILL SUPPORT THE PRESENCE OF BILLBOARDS, SUPERMARKET SIGNS, AND TV SHOWS SUCH AS THE SUPER BOWL,
the World Series, and the Miss America Pageant that are designed to grab millions of viewers in a short period. That kind of programming will help create immediate national awareness, and maybe word-of-mouth, for a new car model, a new athletic shoe, or a new computer to as many people as possible.

An impulse toward mass-market media will probably also exist in the interest of media firms’ efficiency. To make back the high production costs for a TV movie about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Warner Brothers Television might try to reach as many people as possible by targeting their personal navigators with plot descriptions that are tailored to their backgrounds. Descriptions might be written for people old enough to remember the incident, others for people interested in science, others for people who have a habit of viewing films with the lead actor, and so on. As another example, NBC might set up its election coverage so that it can be tailored to viewers with different interests. People who care especially about foreign affairs, people specializing in agricultural issues, people who want to know about environmental issues on a state-by-state basis—they and others may be given the option of choosing versions of the network feed that add experts in their areas in addition to generic NBC coverage.

But this desire to combine production efficiencies of mass marketing with the audience draw of tailored materials may well end up pushing separation over collectivity. Over and over, the different versions of news will act out different social distinctions for different people. And even when the content is the same for the various segments (as in the Chernobyl movie), producers will promote the firm differently to different types of viewers or households. In addition, commercials clearly tailored to certain types of people, or to certain media communities, will encourage the perception that the viewing experience in America is an enormously splintered one.

It is likely that producers of news and information will be able to customize content to a greater range of demographic, psychographic, and lifestyle categories than will those who create expensive movies. The reason is simply that, at present at least, it is less expensive to customize news and information programs than top-of-the-line entertainment. From an economic standpoint, shopping, video games, light entertainment, and many sports are closer to news and information than to high-
cost films. It seems likely they will become major platforms for tailored television and online materials in the years to come. That will drastically splinter audiovisual audiences.

The major consideration driving these audience-slicing activities is the notion of identity. Marketing and media executives are sure that people gravitate to materials that most closely zero in on their likes and dislikes, their sense of themselves. But marketers also believe the converse: that people prefer not to confront materials that cause them discomfort. Advertisers already avoid associating with controversy if they can help it, since they believe that the displeasure people feel rubs off on them and their products. It stands to reason that when targeting becomes an efficient alternative to sending the same materials to everyone, even more sponsors will hesitate to support touchy topics and perspectives if they go to certain viewers. Research will explore who is angered by what, and media will adjust their formats accordingly. In both print and electronic domains, customized magazines will try to ingratiate themselves to readers and sponsors by trying to mirror the readers’ ideological viewpoints.

This picture of the emerging media system is closer to the prediction of “image tribes” that chapter 1 ascribed to Don Peppers and Martha Rogers than to the more optimistic balancing of the *Daily Me* with the *Daily Us* that Nicholas Negroponte augured. The reason, this book has shown, has to do with an aspect of the media world that neither Peppers and Rogers nor Negroponte consider: Marketers and media firms hold vested interests in constructing certain versions of the world and not others.

Negroponte argues that individuals will always be able to search out materials that move them beyond narrow concerns and link them to the larger society. His examples of social outreach—Sunday crossword puzzles, bargain hunting in the general classifieds, Art Buchwald’s column—may fuel conversations around the office water cooler between people who typically belong to different primary media communities. Yet the assertion that people will pay serious attention to *The Daily Us* rather than *The Daily Me* has first to be weighed against the question of whether individuals, if they can help it, truly want to relate to issues faced by people unlike them.

Negroponte himself admits that he would spend far more time with *The Daily Me* than *The Daily Us* and would naturally consider *The Daily
Turow, Joseph. Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World.

Marketing firms see this preference on a widespread basis, and they try to exploit it. With their ever more sophisticated databases, they hold a growing ability to learn what aspects of entertainment, news, information, and advertising specific types of people, or even particular individuals, would be in the mood to buy. It may be difficult for audiences to turn away from attractive materials that are associated with a feeling of narrow, close-knit identity, particularly in view of the discounts and loyalty programs advertisers may offer. Advertisers are convinced, and will act to ensure, that in the new media world the “Us” will lose out to the “Me” and the image tribe.

There is much reason to believe that marketers will continue to find reinforcement for their views of a divided America in a range of places. Popular and expert opinion in the mid-1990s seems permeated with the belief that America is moving through an incredibly centrifugal phase. Books with titles such as The Disuniting of America, American Apartheid, The Next American Nation, and Alien Nation have trumpeted the appearance of increased divisions in U.S. society.¹ Newsmagazines have amplified the books’ influence.

The consensus seems to be that at every level of society Americans are separated by their own problems, allegiances, and interests. Many suggest that the nation’s White Anglo-Saxon Protestant power elite has given way somewhat to a professional and managerial class containing a broader mix of races and ethnic backgrounds at the top. Yet the same analysts note that competition within this multifaceted “overclass” has itself become intense. This is because of a belief that the U.S. economy will no longer lift everyone up with it. The sense is that turf battles have become the norm for individuals within and across income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, and lifestyles.²

Accurate or not, this widespread talk about social schisms is quite likely to continue shaping the way that advertisers, their agencies, and media firms approach Americans in the last years of the twentieth century. In view of the discussions of social conflict and alienation swirling around marketing and media, executives in that business might protest that it would be foolish to act differently. After all, they might say, their mandate is to channel developments of U.S. society into tools for selling. Ad people, in particular, might note that their campaigns are more subtle and less inflammatory than those provided by many radio talk-show hosts, cable television programs, and magazine columns.
In the face of such protestations, three key points of this book are worth repeating. One is that the advertising industry depends heavily on ideas from other areas of society. The second is that advertisers are not passive regarding these ideas. They take action to incorporate them into their business activities, which often means trying to find ways to exploit social problems rather than to ameliorate them. The third is that the ad industry affects not just the content of its own campaigns but the very structure and content of the rest of the media system. The advertising industry's cash and philosophy provide the principal supports for those explicitly divisive talk shows, cable programs, and magazine columns. Whether ad people like it or not, they are centrally responsible for images of social division.

A parallel example of the way that perceptions of social division are being built into structures that guide people's lives can be seen in the design of communities during the 1980s and 1990s. In areas throughout the United States, home builders have been attracting buyers by creating communities that have gates and guards around them. The architecture critic of the *Dallas Morning News* estimated that in 1994 an estimated four million Americans were already living in gated communities. The number was growing quickly. That year, between one-third and two-thirds of all new housing construction in southern California were gated. The percentage was said to be about one-third in Phoenix, Arizona, the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and in many parts of Florida. Typical features of upscale gated communities were tight security (walls, electronic tag access), exclusivity (homes in the $450,000 to $1.2 million range), and income and lifestyle segregation (what the *Morning News* called "social homogeneity").

Observers agreed that the force driving these communities was fear of crime and its erosion of property values. Tied to that was a skepticism of government's ability to do much about either. In fact, gates and guardhouses were popping up in urban neighborhoods as well as suburban ones, and they were cutting across traditional racial and economic lines. The *Morning News* reported that Dearborn Park, a popular middle-class neighborhood near downtown Chicago's Loop, installed gates and cul-de-sacs. In Los Angeles, several public housing projects erected gates and walls.
One planning expert asserted that the gating of communities indicated a fundamental shift in American life that was related to “a dramatic lack of trust in public order.” It wasn’t that there was necessarily more crime, added a sociologist, “but that it has become so random. . . . It used to be that if you stayed out of bad neighborhoods you’d be OK. That no longer works.” The effects of the fear had even spread to suburban mall shopping. “In the past . . . most malls didn’t want visible security,” a security consultant told a Washington Post reporter. “Now more and more of them want it, because the public wants it. They want to see armed guards.”

In that environment, the builders of such communities saw reason to market their developments as “safer, friendlier and more economically stable than traditional urban or suburban neighborhoods.” One called its development “a perfect place to live . . . outside the pandemonium of the city,” where there can be “a return to simpler times, when you know you were secure within the boundaries of your own neighborhood . . . [and] where children could play unattended and be safe after dark.”

Critics of gating didn’t quarrel with the desire to protect home and family. They did, however, point out that while gating might be useful for the individual, it was actually divisive for society. That was because communities with gates separated not just the violent and the nonviolent, they put walls between people of different incomes, races, ethnicities, and even ages. Once gates and guardhouses were built, they tended to reinforce the values that created them. Such structures, literally built into the society, would be very difficult to change.

“[Wanting to be safe and hold good property values] are perfectly good motives, right and honorable,” said Rice University sociologist Stephen Kleinberg. “[But] [t]he problem with enclaving is that it leads to the deterioration of any sense of connectiveness to the larger community. ‘If I’m making it, it’s not my responsibility to look after others.’ That’s the direction American society seems to be going, and it’s ominous.” University of Pennsylvania sociologist Douglas Massey added a pragmatic warning about the effects of this separation: “A nation so subdivided at home, so miseducated, can’t compete in the global economy. . . . If you build up a wall you inevitably pay other prices.”

The same conclusion could be drawn about the emerging media world. The wide diversity of media channels, the fascination of the Internet, the excitement of interactivity through cable systems, phone
systems, or even satellites are hard to deny, or to want to relinquish. Many people who have moaned over the small number of choices on TV, aimed at the lowest common denominator, may delight at the prospect of a television system that is like the magazine industry. One person can get the *New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair* or the *National Inquirer* or *Field and Stream*—or all of these.

But what cheers the individual may hold problems for the collectivity. Many of the key players shaping the wonders of the new media world have a vested interest in emphasizing differences between people. The social price may be alienation, reduced social mobility, anger, and fear of others.

As it often has been with gating, income is a central issue in contemporary media trends. Ad practitioners construct income in terms of winners and losers. People with relatively low incomes are typically the big losers, since marketers and media executives show little interest in attracting them to specialized areas. By contrast, upscale individuals and families have marketers falling over each other to reach them. They differentiate income further by lifestyle. The more a company can connect someone to a set of high-consumption lifestyles, the more chance that the person will be tracked and wooed across a variety of targeted and personalized media. Wealth follows wealth.

Measured against the problems of getting food and a roof over one’s head, marketers’ separation of people into income classes may not seem like a problem. Yet the cultural experiences of different income groups are likely to become increasingly divergent. That will happen because people of different income groups will be segregated by different news, entertainment, and information options, sorted by disposable income. People will be attracted to different options in these three areas, according to financial wherewithal. And it will happen because in the name of efficient targeting, marketers and media firms encourage people of different incomes toward certain formats and not others. Mutually reinforcing, these activities taken together will lead some groups more than others to have better and larger windows on the culture of success.

As noted in chapter 7, marketers, ad agencies, and media firms have supported a minimum universal standard so that it will allow them to reach “everyone” through advertising, should they want to do that. But their support is supremely self-serving. Marketing and media folk recognize that hooking up huge numbers of people also allows them to find
out as much as they can about them. Then they can selectively target the ones they want, ignoring the ones they don’t.

With income differences growing in the U.S. between those designated “upscale” and everyone else, with poor immigrants streaming into many parts of the country, and competition for good jobs enhancing existing social tension between races and sexes, it will only compound the problem to encourage media separation on top of physical separation. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton in their book *American Apartheid* argue that people’s life chances are inextricably linked to where they live.10 It does not seem too much of a stretch to suggest that the same idea applies to the media worlds in which people live. Because of targeting and tailoring, income and age labels will route people toward certain cultural experiences, certain types of commercials, or certain discounts. As a result, people increasingly will live in different media spheres. Marketers and media will guide the relatively well-off into cultural tracks pointedly designed for their income brackets while they will let everyone else find their own ways on the shoals of “universal service.”

But income is only the tip of a broad gamut of prejudices that marketers and media act out. They link income to notions about such categories as age, education, gender, race, and ethnicity. Personality and lifestyle labels are also put into play with the aim of uncovering individuals who are both predictable media users and useful customers. As previous chapters have shown, the “audience talk” that swirled through the ad industry and the media during the 1980s and early 1990s amounted to an eager dissection of U.S. lifestyles. The overall aim was to find many different segments that would please marketers because of their substantial disposable income and thus their ability to buy.

Some advertisers’ actions in the name of selling actually opened doors for previously marginalized groups. Consultants, advertisers, and agency executives used the idea of “disposable income” to justify pursuing certain emerging identities in society. Along with rethinking their understanding of the wealthy, the upscale, women, suburbanites, and other clearly desirable groups, ad people rewrote their books on homosexuals; African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans, and seniors. Marketers established that many members of these groups ought to be targeted for their buying abilities.

The down side of this labeling process, though, was that some people who may have considered themselves part of those groups—of
gays or blacks or seniors—did not make it into the market-driven categorizations. Those people were labeled as less useful or simply different than other members of their group because they didn’t meet the same income or consumption criteria. The resulting targeting and tailoring might well distance upscale blacks from downscale ones, lesbians (especially those with children) from male homosexuals, executive women from others, seniors over seventy years old from younger ones.

The many other demographic and lifestyle labels that marketers acted out during the 1980s and 1990s extended the portrait of America as splintered by distinctions. Doing that, they signaled that people should find their own kind in media communities designed for them. They also signaled the irrelevance of many geographic relationships. In an era of satellites, physical distance is becoming less and less a concern for media companies. Huge media firms interested in target marketing increasingly find it far more useful to distribute materials for far-flung consumers with similar tastes than to produce entertainment, news, or information for audiences of relatively narrow geographical areas who have little in common.

These far-flung groups of people may be more like one another in their backgrounds and lifestyles than the people who live in neighborhoods two miles away. People may increasingly feel that links to individuals in their immediate space and time—people they work with, see in stores or on the streets—are not nearly as important as their far-flung virtual communities. News about their own neighborhoods will probably draw people who care about schools and property values. Beyond those tangibly important concerns, though, they may care to learn little about people who live close to them—in the same or nearby neighborhoods—but whom they consider substantially different. Links between suburbs and cities, already tenuous, will likely become even thinner.

Given the chance to separate themselves electronically from types of people they believe are threatening their well-being, media users are likely to do so. Keeping “different” people out of mind when they don’t have to deal with them may become as important as keeping them out with gates. Those who can afford it will deal with the fear of going out by dialing into malls set up for individuals like them. Media firms will customize e-mail, interactive games, and online chat rooms to create virtual communities of people from around the world who hold similar interests, and attract similar advertisers.
It will take time, perhaps decades, for the full effects of the emerging media world to take shape. Eventually, it is likely that children growing up in the hyper-segmented environment will see the pictures of division as reflecting the real thing. Compared even to today, the media of the future will be far more fragmented, with hundreds of market-driven options targeted and tailored to carefully calibrated types. While that may engender a tight sense of community among people who share similar backgrounds, it could also reinforce suspicion, lack of empathy, and alienation between people of different backgrounds, income classes, and lifestyles. Primary media communities—image tribes—will guide consumers’ sense of social separation by helping them understand whom to label as not like them.

In that kind of environment, it is easy to imagine critics worrying that the absence of strong collective media poses a threat to democracy. Society-wide argumentation will be harder and harder to sustain. People who fundamentally disagree may simply not argue with one another; key political and social issues may not be thrashed out as well as they should. With people so accustomed to their own image tribes, they may be unwilling to connect in debates with people outside their circles. And advertisers, traditionally wary of controversy, certainly won’t encourage it.

The proper response to this hyper-segmentation of America is not to urge a return to the mass-market world of the 1960s and 1970s. Even if it were possible, it would not be desirable. The explosion of media during the past few decades has led marketers to address many parts of the U.S. population that previously lacked audiovisual identities. Ethnic groups, racial groups, gender groups, and groups arrayed around political positions have seen versions of entertainment and news aimed at them. This sort of cultural diversity ought to be celebrated as the font of a strong, idea-rich society.

But to do that it ought to be shared among the population as a whole. The major problem with the emerging media world is its impulse to keep diversity hidden. Signaling, tailoring, and other targeting activities encourage people to join their own image tribes apart from other image tribes. As a result, marketers’ concerns with diversity act to push groups away from one another rather than to encourage them to learn
about the strengths of coming together to share experiences and discuss issues from different viewpoints.

Another problem with this approach to diversity is that advertisers have by and large been the ones defining it. In fact, one of the enduring problems of the U.S. media system is that advertisers have had a monopoly on descriptions of America. Terms such as “cost per thousand,” “pass-along rate,” and “upscale eighteen- to forty-nine-year-old men” have become ground-level labels that determine whether a public medium will survive.

However, there are—or should be—many other ways to characterize populations. One can do it from political, sociological, historical, religious, and literary standpoints. A television program can be geared toward “those who went to Catholic schools” or “those whose parents migrated to the U.S. from Eastern Europe” or “those who somehow feel part of the Old South.” These labels describe a lot of people. They are undoubtedly connected to a gamut of “lifestyles” and actions in one way or another. But they are not categories that advertisers use because it isn’t clear that they relate in any predictable way to the purchase of products. Should the ability to share the consumer experience be the one characteristic linking us together?

Individuals who are intent that the answer should be no may be able to push against the tide by going out of their way to use media not intended for them and by making it difficult for advertisers to label them. Unfortunately, though, the strength of trends charted in this book do not make one optimistic that growing momentum toward a divided media world will be reversed. Advertisers have been major forces guiding the formats of this new world, and they will resist derailing it. One reason is that companies believe that the American population is in tune with their sense of division. Another is that they suspect that once selling takes off on the Internet, interactive TV, and other futuristic channels, it will be quite profitable.

Once the emerging system is solidified, it will not be easy to change. Media technologies and formats that have been shaped by the values of social division will reinforce those values even when leaders in their rhetoric are trying to bring people together. Like heavy gates separating one community from another, the very structure of the American media world will drive people apart for a long time to come.