

Book Review

*How Fantasy Becomes Reality:
Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life*¹

Karen E. Dill-Shackleford

Oxford University Press, 2016, 268 Pages

KAWABATA Miki²

How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life was published in 2016 by Karen E. Dill-Shackleford. This book is the revised edition of *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing through Media Influence*, which was published in 2009 by the same author (with a different surname because of her divorce and remarriage between 2009 and 2016). The second edition came with a different subtitle and major updates, due to the rapid development of social media.

Our everyday life will not remain the same without media. We receive information, connect with other people, and enjoy entertainment by using media. Therefore, none of us are immune to its influence. In this book, Dill-Shackleford discusses media influence in a well-balanced and comprehensible manner instead of criticizing the media and treating it only as a villain, as is often the case in media studies since the 20th century. For example, she emphasizes not only the negative but also the positive influence of media on our lives. Furthermore, she describes media influences with plenty of familiar examples, sometimes with humor. Those examples are often drawn from her personal experiences, such as her being a fan of Harry Potter or her conversations with her children. Though she introduces numerous psychological research findings to explain, there are few difficult expressions that are often found in academic books. Overall, she writes this book as if she is talking to the readers so that they can understand it very well.

The author, Karen E. Dill-Shackleford, is a social psychologist and professor in the Media Psychology doctoral program at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara. During her doctoral course in graduate school, she studied under Professor

¹ The author of this Book Review published the Japanese translation of *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Information and Entertainment Media in Everyday Life* in 2019. The postscript of the translation was revised and used as a part of this article.

² Professor at Department of Media Studies, Faculty of Media Studies, Mejiro University

Craig Anderson of the University of Iowa (then of the University of Missouri), who is known for his research on media violence. She published her doctoral dissertation on the negative effect of violence in video games in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which is one of the renowned journals in the field of social psychology. After teaching undergraduate students for more than a decade, she published the first edition of the book, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing through Media Influence* in 2009. Then in 2013, she edited *The Oxford Handbook of Media Psychology*. Her career shows that she is one of the young prominent researchers in the field of Media Psychology. Besides her academic career, she has also been active in educating the public about both negative and positive media influence. In the years 2000 and 2007, she gave expert testimony before the U.S. Congress as a media psychologist, on media violence and the impact of violent lyrics in rap music. She is also one of the blog writers on the *Psychology Today* magazine website where she writes about the same topic as the book titled, “How fantasy becomes reality.”³ In this book, Dill-Shackleford states that she wants to employ her experience and expertise to make society a better place and that her life’s work is all about translating and communicating science to the public.

The focus of this book is mainly the influence of entertainment media on the public. In everyday use, the influence of television, movies, games, etc. as entertainment is the type of media that most people experience and constitutes a subject they are interested in. Through these media, we become immersed in fictional stories and characters, and we sometimes make life-altering choices by watching movies and dramas. We tend to believe that we fully know the celebrities and entertainers we often see in the media. In this way, our perceptions are strongly influenced by media without even realizing it. These impacts of media enrich our lives as they have not only negative but also positive aspects.

Dill-Shackleford describes various types of media influences in this book. If you watch violent TV programs or play violent games, you may become more aggressive. If you are exposed to advertising content, you may buy more things, put on more weight, or learn and adopt unhealthy social identities. If you watch a biased representation of other social groups, you may develop stereotypes about people of other races or gender. Those influences are described in detail with examples and scientific results in this book.

The outline of this book is as follows. The first chapter is the primer on media influence. Dill-Shackleford explains how media became so important to us, and why we must understand its influence. She further reveals her experiences as a researcher on media influence so that the reader can understand her motivation to publish this book. After introducing certain key topics, such as “fantasy and reality,” “the value

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/contributors/karen-e-dill-shackleford-phd>

of entertainment media,” and “narrative persuasion,” she explains why people tend to underestimate media influence or even refuse to believe that they are influenced by employing a social psychological point of view.

In Chapter 2, Dill-Shackleford discusses fans and fandom. The experience to be a fan makes us explore reality in fiction. She says fictional stories play an important role in our lives, by describing what happens psychologically when we engage with a character in a story. She suggests there are two types of fan styles: the personal fan and the participatory fan. To describe the personal fan, she refers to the recently developed concepts in narrative persuasion such as transportation, engagement, immersion, and flow. With familiar examples from movies and novels like *Avatar*, *the Matrix*, and Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice*, she helps readers to understand how we experience the reality through those works of fiction. Then she explains the participatory fan, using many examples including her own experience as a fan of Harry Potter. She also discusses the social meaning of Fandom.

In Chapter 3, Dill-Shackleford gives an overview of the media from the past to the present and discusses their influence. Then she specifically focuses on the social media. The rise of new media brings people both anxiety and hope, and she emphasizes that media brings both risks and opportunities. After listing the burning questions about new media, she examines the psychological aspect of social media and its networks.

Chapter 4 is about media violence, which is Dill-Shackleford’s specialized area of research. Recounting her experience, she shares that one of the characters in the most widely known video game, *Grand Theft Auto*, was named after her. She has publicly critiqued *the Grand Theft Auto* games on various media platforms, in scholarly journals, and in front of Congress in the past, so she believes the game company decided to tease her cleverly to name one character in the game after her. After talking about herself with humor, she discusses the issues of violence in films, TV, and video games. She shows various research results to prove media violence increases aggression.

In Chapter 5, Dill-Shackleford discusses representations of various social groups in media. Watching the presentation of stereotypes in media changes how we think. She refers to the research on racial stereotypes in the media, as well as on gender stereotypes and social power. The media representations she examines are not only from TV dramas or movies but also video games or music videos. She suggests more positive images of race and gender in the media will build a healthier media culture for all of us.

Chapter 6 is about advertising, consumerism, and health. She refers to many famous psychologists in this book, and here she talks about John B. Watson, who was a radical behaviorist and one of the first psychologists who influenced advertising. She explains how companies use psychological knowledge, especially social motivation, to sell products to us. She also criticizes that in advertising they

set agendas. For example, the products that are advertised most frequently are believed to be superior, and therefore, to be used and liked by more people. Also, she discusses food advertising and its influence. Obesity is currently one of the biggest national health problems in the United States. Commercials show the illusion that beautiful thin celebrities and fit athletes eat unhealthy junk food and remain thin, healthy, and fit. She especially warns about the consequences of those food commercials targeted against children and advertisements for prescription drugs directly aimed at consumers are getting more aggressive.

In Chapter 7, Dill-Shackleford discusses media and social identity. Our self-esteem is shaped heavily by media messages. We are always nervous about our body weight, body size, or how sexy or attractive we are. Marketers sell products as remedies to soothe our nervousness so that they can make money. As an example, Dill-Shackleford argues that the media send messages that little girls should wear sexy clothes like teenagers, or young boys should get six-pack muscle like a physically fit young adult. These media messages may disturb the healthy growth of their social identity. She also talks about domestic violence and the media. She explains that media coverage of domestic violence influenced how we understand and address intimate partner violence for years.

Chapter 8 is about political coverage in the media. Dill-Shackleford gives various examples of the role and influence of media in American politics, such as the influence of political ads, or the role of emotions in political decisions. She also picks up the lookism in political media coverage and the role of political comedy TV shows in public discourse. When it comes to the role of political comedy shows, she suggests parody and satire are powerful tools in political communication. These discussions show how the American politics is deeply intertwined with the media.

The title of Chapter 9 is “From the passenger’s seat to the driver’s seat.” In this last chapter, Dill-Shackleford suggests the readers take control of themselves to deal with media. She makes a series of recommendations such as being aware that we are influenced by media, limiting exposure to media, making smart choices about which media to use, seeking alternative viewpoints, and being media literate. She also suggests all the stakeholders, which are scientists/experts, the public, politicians, and business people, have an interest in media and its influence. She concludes that if all interested parties communicate more effectively, we’ll get more benefits and fewer problems from the media.

In the present day, media has become indispensable to us all. This book helps us to use media wisely and to understand the entire spectrum of its psychological influence. Dill-Shackleford hopes that this book will help the readers to understand overall media influence, avoid its bad influence, and enjoy more of the good ones. On top of that, the reader will know this book conveys the passion and energy of the author to make society better.

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