Chapter One. Introduction
We live in a hyper-real world. Reality is mediated through the mass media. Our perception about the world around is fashioned by the newspapers, radio news, cinema, and advertisements. In a world saturated by images, symbols, and texts, reality is not what exists, fully formed, unchangeable, constant, fixed, frozen, and stable somewhere 'out there'. It is fashioned and actively arbitrated by the media. Reality is presented to us edited, packaged, and wrapped in a capsule as news, as TV soap, or as Advertisement. A distinctive role of modern media is to present events and issues to the public for some form of collective consideration. Reality is presented; rather represented. Representation is one of the key aspects of the media. If for example, we look upon democracy as a government which is the repository of delegated authority, where the will of the people resides, then the government acts and speaks on the ‘behalf’ of the people. Likewise if the representation of events and issues is delegated to the media, then this representation is mediated through editing, redacting, deleting, and is therefore subjective.

We live in a world where the dividing line between reality and the imaginary is collapsing and the real and the unreal are merging together to become ‘hyper-real’.
Through newspapers, magazines, and the 24x7 TV channels, viewers ‘suffer’ wars, pestilence, drought, suicide attacks, and ‘experience’ fashion shows, and ethnic cleansing all in the comfort of their room, over dinner tittle-tattle. For Jean Baudrillard, what can be experienced this way becomes more important than reality itself. Baudrillard calls this a simulated reality or ‘simulacra’, where the media’s version of reality becomes more important than and/or indistinguishable from the social reality. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements all mediate reality. But this reality is not so easily and passively consumed by the viewer/audience/consumer. Like a wary and conscious buyer in a supermarket the audience selects what it consumes. Audiences have their own ways of interpreting media’s messages. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, no matter what the content of the message, audiences will have their own way of interpreting it. An audience member may accept the broad thrust of a specific media message and yet either adapt or reject elements of the overall message because it does not fit with their own immediate experience of the world. So if consuming media’s content involves active decoding by the audience and the media’s content is interpreted by the consumer in a way s/he sees fit then media’s message will have no static meaning. Or to put it in another way, if the audience is an active agent in
the construction of meaning why bother to analyze the meaning at all? There will be as many meaning as there are audiences. Investigating the content of the message becomes a dead issue. But J. Kitzinger asserts that the discovery of the audience-text relationship must not blind us to the fact that 'cultural representation and media power' matters, and refusal to take it into account will render any study of the media’s content ‘doomed to failure’ 4.

References: