

CHAPTER 15 THE NEWS MEDIA

Narrative Lecture Outline

The news media are a diverse lot of individuals and institutions that can have enormous influence on the political process. However, in some situations, they seem to have little influence. It is important for us, as citizens and scholars, to understand the influence of the media and to learn how to critically consume it. Often, we blame the “messenger”—the media—for problems in society, but perhaps, we should also take responsibility and think about not only the “message” but in how we think about that message. Are we unthinking consumers of media, believing all we see and hear? Or do we try to think about what we see and hear and come to our own conclusions about what to believe? These and many other questions should be kept in mind as we talk about the media.

It is also important to remember that media encompass a variety of outlets and perspectives, from CNN to Fox News on cable, from CBS to NBC, from The Economist to Newsweek, from The New York Times to The Grand Rapids Press, from The Drudge Report to AllPolitics.com and Policy.com, and from Hardball to Geraldo.

All media have biases, though it is rarely simple enough to say those biases are liberal or conservative. Usually, they have multiple perspectives and multiple biases, and the best way to discern those perspectives and biases is to compare a number of channels, papers, Web sites, and so on until you can decide where they are coming from.

(An important skill we can teach our students is to be educated consumers of the media and not passive recipients.)

The Evolution of Journalism in the United States

The first newspapers were printed in the 1690s in the American colonies and the number grew throughout the 1700s. In the late 1780s, newspapers were controlled by political parties, and by the 1890s “yellow journalism” was in vogue—untrue, oversimplified, sensationalized stories designed to titillate the readers. Doesn’t that sound familiar? Muckrakers were the original investigative reporters who saw it as their job to expose real and apparent misconduct by government and business in order to force the pace of reform. Again, this sounds awfully familiar.

Throughout the nineteenth century, payoffs to the press were not uncommon. Editorial pages or editors were bought, investigations were halted after payoffs, patronage positions were exchanged for good press and so on. By comparison, today’s media are Boy Scouts!

Technological advances caused a rapid transformation of journalism. Papers became cheaper and easier to produce and distribute, the telegraph and telephone made reporting simpler and faster, and the invention of radio and television changed things entirely. It is easy to forget what modern inventions radio and TV are. Radio only became widely available in the 1920s; television was introduced in the late 1940s and was not

common until the 1950s. Cable was invented in the 1970s, CNN was founded in 1980, and the Internet didn't become well-known until the late 1990s.

Today, there are thousands of daily and weekly newspapers, periodicals, magazines, newsletters, and journals also known as the print press. And there are the electronic media—television, cable, radio, and the Internet. It often seems like the media are everywhere today.

Print Media

More journalists cover politics today than ever before. More than 4,100 print reporters are accredited to the U.S. Capitol alone. Their audience, however, doesn't seem to be growing. In the top 50 U.S. markets, around 44 percent of people claim to read a daily paper (the numbers are higher for people over 65 and a lot lower for folks under 30).

Fewer people are reading the print media, and we get less diversity in coverage as well. Forty years ago, most major metropolitan areas had competition among newspapers. Now, fewer than 14 cities have more than one serious newspaper. Chains have bought up smaller news organizations and led to a homogenization of the print media.

Still, a number of newspapers have a national audience and are considered quite influential:

The New York Times
The Wall Street Journal
USA Today
The Christian Science Monitor
The Washington Post
The Los Angeles Times

These newspapers have a huge effect on television. The networks and cable outlets usually pick up these newspapers' top stories. Millions of people also subscribe to news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. The Web also supplements other media outlets, and in some cases, is replacing them.

For fun, have students subscribe to, or regularly read, a news source that is not U.S.-based. Maclean's (Canada) and the Economist (UK) offer unique perspectives about U.S. politics that we might not otherwise consider.

Radio and Television

Network television stations also have reduced viewership. The number of people who get their news from TV remains quite high, but there are such a large number of options available that the viewership has splintered. Cable TV has taken away many viewers who used to watch ABC or CBS. Now, when the president addresses the nation, he does not get everybody, or even most people, with their TVs turned on. Large numbers of people are watching *ESPN* or *The Brady Bunch* on cable instead.

As we become busier, we take less time to inform ourselves. Newspapers take too much time to read, so we rely on television that is shallow and based on image. How much information on welfare reform can you get from a 60-second story? We demand

Headline News—around the world in 30 minutes. Is it possible to know everything that's happening in 30 minutes, including commercials?

The quality of reporting has declined since the 1950s. Television news desks are now owned by corporations, who want to maximize their profits. Research assistants, junior reporters, and desk assistants no longer chase down loose ends for senior correspondents. Stories needing extensive research generally aren't done. Instead, we get sexy, simple, and shallow eye-catching stories. And most Americans get their information from these news shows.

The latest development in TV news is the growth of comedy programs based on the news. *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and the *Colbert Report* dedicate their entire programs to current events. Many college age students claim that this is where they get their news.

While television remains the dominant method of getting news, one area that appears to be growing is talk radio. Until the 1980s, radio was not a significant presence for news. However, Rush Limbaugh, and the conservative talk radio hosts who followed him, changed that. By 2004, over 17 percent of Americans were getting their news from these highly ideological shows. Talk radio was so popular and so dominated by the right, that liberals got into the act as well in 2003. However, AM radio is still dominated by the conservatives.

The New Media

The Web is increasingly important as a source for news, especially for younger people. All major newspapers, news magazines, and branches of the federal government post daily on the Internet. Americans can also access the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and international newspapers online. Twenty four percent of Americans claimed to get most of their news from the Internet in 2005. The Internet is not where people get most of their news, but newshounds use it to get additional information or to access specific stories.

Current Media Trends

Media Consolidation

The news media in the United States are privately owned and, therefore, run on the basis of the profit motive. The quest for profits has led to a consolidation of the media. Print media are dominated by Gannett, McClatchy and the Tribune Company. Chains dominate 80 percent of daily newspapers. Only 280 individual papers (out of over 1400) are independently owned. The television networks are all owned by conglomerates as well. General Electric owns NBC, Viacom owns CBS, and Walt Disney owns ABC.

Increasing Use of Experts

Journalists are usually generalists. They don't really specialize, but run stories about just about everything. Couple that with the difficulties of filling a 24 hour news cycle, and we end up with experts, talking heads, pundits...whatever you want to call them. It seems like every report is filled with these experts. Who chooses them? Should we believe them? What is the impact of these experts? (*This would be a great class discussion!*)

Narrowcasting

Many programs today are directed at a narrow audience instead of a mass one. The proliferation of channels on cable and satellite television means that there is space for channels dealing exclusively with science fiction, news, for women only, for men, for kids, and so on. There are networks for African Americans, Spanish speakers, Christians, Muslims, and more. Niche programming is king. Even in news, more conservative viewers are drawn to FOX and more liberal viewers to CNN.

There is a social cost to narrowcasting. We may soon live in a society where few are tolerant of opposing views. If we tune in only to those with whom we agree, how do we change our minds? Learn new things? Expose ourselves to different perspectives? This may be part of the reason society and politics seem so polarized and contentious these days.

Public Discontent with the Media

In recent polls, only 11 percent of people said they had a great deal of confidence in the media. By contrast, 50 percent had confidence in the president and 71 percent in the military. A majority of Americans see the media as biased and feel that the media often report inaccurately and are unwilling to admit their mistakes.

The public briefly felt more favorably about the media after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but the numbers rapidly returned to normal. Fewer than half of Americans think the media behave in a highly professional manner and fewer than half of Americans think the media behave patriotically.

Technological Innovation

Web based journals, or blogs, have erupted in recent years. Blogs tend to be the opinions of individuals or small groups, but they have become quite influential. National newsmagazines and TV shows now do “roundups” of what’s hot in the “blogosphere.” Blogs exposed problems with FEMA during Katrina; soldiers in Iraq are blogging, giving us first hand accounts of the war; the Drudge Report has brought to light many scandals... This citizen journalism (to use the term loosely) can have a large effect. Many blogs are highly partisan and, much like narrowcasting, the audiences for these are fellow travelers. But this is a new and interesting media development.

Cellcasting and Podcasting are also innovations. The actor who played Kramer in *Seinfeld* was caught in a racist tirade on cell phone video. Saddam Hussein’s execution was caught, and distributed, by cell phone video. iPods are becoming ubiquitous too, with many podcasts available to listen to anytime.

What effect might these new technologies have?

Rules Governing the Media

Journalistic Standards

Most journalists, like most politicians, are ethical. The industry has professional norms and each journalist is judged and promoted based on their performance and integrity. However, there are lapses. Some journalists are unethical. There have been cases in which reporters have made up stories, faked notes and sources, lied, etc. But these are rare.

Issues more subtle than fraud and plagiarism are tougher, and perhaps more common. How does a reporter make use of material from a source wishing to remain anonymous? In tragic situations, what is the balance between getting the story and respecting the grief of a family whose child was killed? In the 24/7 news cycle, is getting the story first more important than getting it right?

Government Regulation of the Electronic Media

Print media are exempt from most governmental regulation. Electronic media are not. Airwaves are considered public property and are leased to networks and private broadcasters by the government. Government also allocates the use of frequencies and channels so that radio and TV do not overlap and jam each other's signals.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is an independent regulatory agency that oversees electronic media. It oversees radio, television, telegraph, satellite, and foreign communications in the United States. In 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which deregulated whole segments of the media like local phone service, cable television, and more. The hope was that increased competition would lower prices and improve quality. The Act also raised the cap on how many TV and radio stations a single group or person could own in any market. Two of the more controversial portions of the Act were the part on Internet decency (struck down by the courts on First Amendment grounds) and requiring TVs to have v-chips so parents could monitor content for their kids.

In 2003, the FCC enacted reforms further deregulating the media. Media corporations are now allowed to own more different kinds of media in any media market. Previously, a TV station couldn't own a radio station in the same market, now they can. In some cases, a company can own multiple TV stations within one market. In addition, the FCC raised the limit of total national audience a corporation can reach from 35 percent to 45 percent. This meant that each company could own more TV stations. These changes, and others like them, meant that a single media corporation could dominate all types of media within a community.

Republicans and Democrats, as well as large swaths of the public, protested. By July 2003, a large bipartisan majority blocked the new FCC rules (the vote was 400 to 21). However, in December, Congress raised the 35 percent cap on audience to 39 percent.

Content Regulation

Since broadcasters use public airwaves, the electronic media are forced to "serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity." Hence, the commercials we see about school bus safety and anti-smoking messages. Stations also run "public interest shows," like carrying the State of the Union Address, campaign debates, and so on.

There are also a number of rules (some now defunct) that television and radio are subject to:

- **Equal Time Rule:** This rule requires that IF a station sells time for campaigns, they must sell it equally to all candidates. An exception is made for political debates where minor party candidates may be excluded

- Right-of-rebuttal: This requires that a person who is attacked be offered the opportunity to respond; abolished in 2000
- Fairness Doctrine (now defunct—1949-85): This required broadcasters to be fair in coverage of news events and present contrasting views.

Efforts to Regulate Media Practices

Journalists in the United States have substantial amounts of freedom to report. While government officials can be prosecuted for divulging state secrets, journalists cannot. Prior restraint is extremely rare and is almost always deemed unconstitutional, so censorship has no legal basis here.

Many countries have substantial amounts of media censorship, including England. In the UK, the Official Secrets Act prevents civil servants from writing books about their years in office. The BBC is owned by the government and does not have nearly as much leeway as our television media does.

Media freedom in times of war is more problematic. The Department of Defense in the U.S. restricted access and information to the press during the Gulf War. This caused considerable controversy after the war, when the media learned they had been lied to. More recently, the government has embedded media with the military to deal with the criticism. There were still problems, but at least more aspects of the war were covered. Balancing the military need for secrecy and safety of the troops with the need for journalists to cover the conflict, so the citizens back home can hold government accountable, is tough.

How the Media Cover Politics

For our purposes, we are primarily interested in how media covers government. Let's look at how the press covers each branch of government and how the tenor of coverage has changed since Watergate.

Covering the Presidency

The president receives the most news coverage of any political figure. Presidents hold press conferences to shape public opinion and explain their actions. Today, a press secretary often briefs the media on a regular basis, instead of having regular press conferences with the president personally. Many scholars feel that the president does get a lot of attention, but most of it is negative. Negative coverage encourages cynicism in the population at large and alienates people from politics.

The media have encountered challenges in covering George W. Bush's administration. President Bush prides himself on the "tightlipped, no leaks nature" of his White House. No one from the administration appears in the media without prior approval, and no one talks about what goes on behind closed doors. The administration is happy and the media are unhappy, but the effect on the public, and whether this is good or bad for the public, remains to be seen.

Bush has given fewer press conferences than any previous president—only 20. Gerald Ford, who served only two years, gave 39! George W. Bush has favored staged events in which he answers no questions.

Covering Congress

Coverage of Congress is different. Congress has 535 members and is quite decentralized. Not everyone knows each member of Congress. The committee system is unfamiliar and confusing to many citizens. Given these problems, the media tend to focus their coverage on the leadership—the Speaker, majority and minority leaders. Key committee chairs may also get some attention and local stations and papers cover local favorite sons and daughters.

The media also tend to cover congressional investigations, of which there seem to be an ever-growing number. From McCarthy in the 1950s to Watergate in the 1970s to Iran-Contra and the various Clinton-gates, we get first row seats to some incredible dirty laundry and a lot of partisan rhetoric. Again, most of the coverage is negative, focusing on conflicts among members or parties or conflicts between the president and the Congress. This negative coverage is probably at least partly responsible for the public's negative perceptions of Congress.

Coverage of Congress has also greatly expanded, thanks to C-SPAN and C-SPAN2 that show gavel-to-gavel coverage of the legislature.

Covering the Courts

The courts receive little media coverage. This is partly because many judicial deliberations and decision making are conducted in private. Court TV and expanded coverage of hot topics in front of the Supreme Court are slowly changing the amount of media coverage the courts receive.

The Media's Influence on the Public

Media Effects

Most of the time, media coverage has little effect on what people think or believe. Most of us seem to selectively tune out things with which we don't agree. However, on issues on which people don't already have strong opinions, there is room for media influence. Media can have an impact on the uncommitted and can also affect our opinions about things that are far away from our personal experience. Media impact is increased on issues about which we know little and can also set the agenda and move some issues up, in terms of how important we think they are. Media can also frame issues. By framing, we mean they provide context and define the ways in which we think about issues. The example in the book about the KKK is a good one. Lastly, the media can affect the way the public views government and politicians (perhaps even more than that: racial/ethnic/religious groups for example). Negative coverage, or negative images, can have a lasting effect.

Media Bias

Are the news media biased? Of course they are! But how? Journalists are people with preferences, attitudes, and values just like us. Many journalists lean to the left, and many talk radio commentators lean to the right. Do their biases and political preferences affect their reporting? Sometimes. But good, responsible journalists will give all sides of a story and be objective, despite their personal biases.

Studies have shown that on some issues, there is a routine liberal bias. Abortion is one example in which studies have shown a clear preference among major media outlets on the pro-choice side/liberal side of the debate. And there are also conservatively biased networks like Fox News. Three of Fox News' biggest news shows feature conservative hosts: Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Brit Hume. And AM talk radio is definitely of a conservative bent.

It is not that simple, however. There is not only one set of biases in journalism—liberal/conservative. There are many sources of bias. The media love to create controversy and make horse races out of campaigns (focus on winners/losers). Reporters favor some politicians and give them good coverage, and dislike others and give them poor coverage. TV has biases in favor of good images and pictures. Many media outlets are now owned by huge corporations who want profit...that's a bias, isn't it?

Narrowcasting also favors forms of bias. If a program was designed to target a certain subset of the broader audience, it would do so. There are many other channels from which to choose if you disagree.

The best way to look at media bias is to decide for yourself, using evidence. Read widely. Watch different news outlets. Check out a variety of sources on the Internet.

Conclusion

Television (network and cable) has transformed American society. There is a large amount of competition among media outlets, and audience share is dropping for any given outlet.

Is it all that different from the “early days of journalism”? In some ways it is different, and in other ways, not. Scandals made headlines in 1790 and do so today. Corrupt politicians have always been newsworthy. The Internet changes the way information is disseminated and pushes us ever closer to a true 24-7 lifestyle. But it is still information.

Do the media have too much influence? If so, why? If not, why do so many people think the media are so influential? What should be the role of the consumer? When an advertisement tells us something is “all new” or “the best ever,” do we believe it? Should we always believe the news media when they make claims? How can we become better consumers of information? These are not easy questions, but highly worthy of thought and discussion.

Web Sites for Instructors

The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** of the University of Pennsylvania conducts content analysis on TV coverage of politics.

www.appcpenn.org

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) is a liberal watchdog group looking for media bias. In their own words: “FAIR believes that independent, aggressive, and critical media are essential to an informed democracy. But mainstream media are increasingly cozy with the economic and political powers they should be watchdogging. Mergers in

the news industry have accelerated, further limiting the spectrum of viewpoints that have access to mass media.” The Web site offers examples of bias and more.

www.fair.org

Media Research Center is a conservative group that claims the media have a liberal bias. Their Web site offers links to conservative media and political sites.

www.mediaresearch.org/

Newseum is the museum dedicated to the history of news and media, scheduled to reopen near the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in 2006. Their Web site currently operates in lieu of the museum and has some interesting cyber exhibits, including coverage of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, war correspondents, editorial cartoonists, women photographers, and front-page stories from around the country.

www.newseum.org

The Pew Center for Civic Journalism works to encourage “good journalism.” The institute is trying to battle cynicism and re-engage citizens in the political process.

www.pewcenter.org/

The Pew Center for People and the Press is an independent opinion research group that studies attitudes toward the press, politics, and public policy issues. Its Web site offers the results of numerous surveys including those of public attitudes toward the media’s coverage of politics and offers information trends in values and fundamental political and social attitudes.

www.people-press.org

The Project for Excellence in Journalism is sponsored by Pew, the Columbia School of Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists. They are trying to raise the standards of journalism and are running several projects, including one on local TV news and the state of newspapers in America. This and more are available through their Web site:

www.journalism.org/

Web Activities for Classes

- 1) Have students locate three or four credible news sites on the Internet. How do they determine reliability? What types of information is found there? Does it differ from more traditional types of media? How and why?
- 2) Have the students search the Web for media bias and bring in examples to discuss.
- 3) Each of the TV news organizations also has a Web site. Have students check out CNN, ABC, FOX, etc. on the Web and compare the coverage to that of the TV version. Discuss why they differ and which offers “better” information.

General Class Activities and Discussion Assignments

- 1) During the past decade, television news has changed dramatically. One aspect of that change is the recent acquisition of all major news organs by large corporations. ABC is now owned by Disney, others by GE, etc. Hold a discussion on the impact of these media mergers/buyouts on the amount and types of information available to American citizens, as well as on the “quality” of news we now receive.
- 2) Hold a class discussion on the relative merits of network, cable, and Internet news sources.
- 3) Hold a class discussion on what kind of influence the media have on the public’s attitudes and opinions.
- 4) Hold a debate on media bias. Have at least three sides: liberal, conservative, and profit-oriented biases.
- 5) The airwaves are a public good. Hold a debate on whether and how the government should regulate the airwaves.
- 6) Have students do the following: For several days, tape each of the major networks’ newscasts (ABC, CBS, NBC) and the two largest non-networks (FOX and CNN). View at least two days of each broadcast. Pay attention to the order and length of each story, the tone of the report, and the graphics/images used. How are these broadcasts similar or different? Which reports seem most objective and why? What kinds of information are they offering? Is it the type of information we need to make educated decisions about politics and world affairs? Why or why not?
- 7) Have students choose a current event and compare the coverage in local press, national press, network news, and cable news. How and why do the ways each of these types of media cover the issues differ? How are they similar? What media outlets do you find most useful?
- 8) Have students do the following: Using a major national newspaper (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or the like), analyze the way in which the current president is treated. Is he treated well or poorly? Why? Is there an obvious bias? What is it? Is he treated similarly or differently than other major political figures? Why?
- 9) Hold a discussion on media coverage of a specific issue, event, or person. Choose a political event such as an election, a scandal, a Supreme Court ruling, or an

issue. Discuss the nature of the coverage it receives from a variety of media sources and discuss why that coverage may differ or be similar.

Possible Simulations

- 1) Print off the AP wire stories for the day (or contact a local TV station and ask for theirs). Divide students into groups. Each group, using the same list, should operate as a news director/producer and determine which items will go—in what order, and at what length—into the 24 minutes of news that evening. They should be prepared to defend their choices.
- 2) Hold a class press conference on an issue or the week's events. Assign some students to be reporters, others as government officials, and others as "spin" doctors. Discuss what happens afterward.

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