

The Media

The History and Structure of the American News Media

Changes in the organization and technology of the press have brought major changes in the organization of American politics. In the era of the *party press* in the early years of the Republic, parties established and provided government support for newspapers. The press was relentlessly partisan and reached the commercial and political elites. Changes in society and technology made the *popular press* possible. Urbanization created large cities that could support mass circulations, and the invention of the rotary press made producing papers cheap and quick. In order to create mass circulation, newspapers—under the leadership of men like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst—stressed violence, romance, patriotism, and exposes of wrongdoing in business and government. The mass circulation newspaper facilitated the emergence of mass politics, the mobilization of voters, and the development of strong party loyalties.

The rising middle class was repelled by the *yellow journalism* of the popular press and provided the market for magazines of opinion. During their peak around the turn of the century, these magazines promoted the causes of the Progressive movement: business regulation, the purification of municipal politics, and civil service reform. *Muckrackers* such as Lincoln Steffens set the pattern for today's investigative reporting. Electronic journalism, which began with the emergence of radio in the 1920s and continued with the spread of television in the late 1940s, places great stress on the personal characteristics of politicians—whether they are attractive, speak well, or behave in a manner sufficiently colorful to justify inclusion in newscasts that must hold audience attention.

In the contemporary media era, the media's structure is characterized by (a) a decline in the number of cities in which there are competing newspapers; (b) an orientation to the local market; (c) a decentralized broadcasting industry; (d) three major national television networks, hundreds of television stations, and thousands of cable systems and radio stations; (e) national media consisting of the news magazines, television networks, and newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*; and (f) a rapidly expanding Internet.

Selection of Media and Bias in the News

The mass media do not simply mirror reality. The process of selection, editing, and emphasis provides an opportunity for slanting the news, further enhanced by the general absence of fast-breaking stories. Thomas Dye estimates that 70 percent of television news stories are preplanned (selected or insider), with only 30 percent involving spontaneous events. Additionally, national press is staffed by people who are more liberal than the public as a whole. The complaint of

media bias even reached Congress in 1995 when the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) was targeted by conservative Republicans.

The national press not only reports the news but also fulfills three additional roles for the public: gatekeeper-passing judgment on who is winning and who is losing; and watchdog-exposing scandals and intrigues. These multiple functions suggest that the media have a profound impact on politics. But social scientists have been unable to determine the extent to which the media influence public opinion. From a logical standpoint, an influential press would have converted the American public to liberalism long ago. Michael Parenti, a critic of the national press, challenges even the common assumption of media distortion in the liberal direction. He contends that the objective of the news media "is not to produce an alert, critical, and informed citizenry but the kind of people who will accept an opinion universe dominated by corporate and governmental elites, almost all of whom share the same ideological perspective about political and economic reality."

The media do influence the political agenda by determining what issues become prominent. This constitutes an entirely different sort of influence. In this capacity, the national press does exhibit a kind of bias. Its stories focus on activities in Washington D.C. FCC rules, however, have achieved a degree of balance by forbidding monopoly control of the media, forcing a local orientation outside the network news programs.

Government Influence on the Media

A free press is a rarity in the world: one study of ninety-four nations found that only sixteen had a high degree of press freedom. Even among democracies that do have a high degree of press freedom, many have restrictions not found here. Britain has an Official Secrets Act that can be used to punish any leak of confidential governmental information. In France, broadcasting is controlled by a government agency that acts to protect the image of the government in power.

There are significant governmental restraints on what the American media can print or broadcast, however.

1. *Libel.* To sue a news organization for libel successfully, one must show that what was published was not merely untrue but was printed maliciously-that is, with "reckless disregard" for its truth or falsity. This is very difficult to do.

2. *Obscenity.* Governments in the United States may outlaw obscenity; however, the definition of obscenity has been steadily narrowed by the federal courts. Laws against obscenity have no effect on newspapers and magazines primarily interested in reporting political news.

3. *Incitement.* Media may not directly incite someone to commit an illegal act. However, the mere advocacy of, say, the violent overthrow of the government, is protected under the First Amendment.

A newspaper may, in theory, be punished for any of the foregoing, but none of them may be used as a basis for *prior restraint*: government action to prevent the publication of the material. Radio and television face further controls.

1. *Licensing.* To stay in business, every broadcaster must have a license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and the license must be renewed every seven years for a radio station and every five years for a television station. This makes broadcasters quite sensitive to the FCC's view of what constitutes the informational needs of the community. Recently, a move to deregulate broadcasting that would allow each station to define and serve community needs has gained prominence.

2. *The equal-time rule.* If a broadcaster allows time for one candidate for public office, it must allow equal time for all other candidates. (Newscasts are exempt.) Because "all other candidates" include minor party candidates to whom few people really want to listen, in order to stage a presidential debate it is necessary either for Congress to suspend the rule (as it did in 1960) or for a private organization like the League of Women Voters to sponsor the debate (as in 1976 and 1980). Though laws guarantee that candidates can buy time at favorable rates on television, television may not always be the most efficient way of reaching the voters.

Given the weakness of government controls on the media, it is not surprising that officials devise other strategies to manipulate the media. These may include the gift of *background stories* with much inside information to favored reporters, private tongue-lashings administered to reporters who publish embarrassing stories (a technique used by Kennedy and Johnson), and public attacks on the press (used by Nixon). In the long run, the press wins.

The Presidential Press Conference-Manipulation of the News?

Presidential press conferences, particularly in the hands of an effective communicator/ image-maker, can be effective vehicles of distortion rather than realistic channels of information for the public. Why is this so?

In the third edition of *Presidential Leadership, Politics and Policy Making*, by George C. Edwards III and Stephen J. Wayne (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), the reasons for the deficiencies of the modern presidential press conference become abundantly clear. Edwards and Wayne argue as follows:

1. Presidential press conferences do not occur frequently enough (averaging once or twice a month), so when they do occur, the wide range of questions that have accumulated guarantees the superficiality of coverage by the press.
2. Presidents' press conferences are too biased, inhibiting the "likelihood of follow-up questions to cover a subject in depth." Also, the size of the press conference creates too formal an atmosphere.
3. Presidential rehearsal before the press conference and total control over which reporter is allowed to ask a question prevent true spontaneity.
4. Televised press conferences prevent the informality and candid nature of presidential answers (those of FDR, for example) that once existed before the days of television. Presidents must choose their words carefully, so "responses to questions are often not very enlightening."
5. Because presidents are in control, they can evade tough questions or, conversely, call on a friendly reporter for a "soft" question. The authors quote a scholarly study of press conferences between 1961 and 1975, which found that there were "only two occasions in fifteen years when the number of hostile questions asked by reporters at any press conference exceeded three."

The advent of television has further increased the potential for distortion, since a president's physical attractiveness, delivery and flair for the dramatic may leave more of an impression on the public's mind than the substance of his answers.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the desire of American newspapers to be "objective" prevent hard questions from being asked? Is political debate in the United States less informed for this reason?
2. Does a popular press pander to the lowest common denominator of interest and taste?
3. Explain how the localism and decentralized qualities of the American news media contribute to the promotion of democracy.
4. The media have much freedom in the selection and publication of material in the United States. Should the government have intervened to prevent publication? What standards should be used in determining when information can be kept from publication? Should a government agency like the FCC be established to regulate the press?

5. Freedom of press has greater First Amendment protection than freedom of broadcasting. To illustrate, cigarette advertisements are forbidden on radio and television but not in newspapers and magazines. Are the two forms of media so different to justify this disparity in treatment? How so? Doesn't the decentralization of the broadcast media make enforcement more difficult?