

THE MASS MEDIA

This lecture stresses the importance of the role of the mass media in politics. Specifically, how the media **shapes public opinion** and **sets the agenda for public debate** (what issues will be debated and to what extent). Also understanding the media's role in **shaping** the manner in which **campaigns** are conducted, the **political behavior** of candidates and voters, and in controlling what information and which political issues and events are conveyed to the public (**who gets what, when, how, and why**).

READING ASSIGNMENTS:

- *Understanding American Government*, Chapter 8.

OBJECTIVES:

- To understand the mass media's influence on American **social and political life**; especially the **connection between public opinion, the media, and policy-making**.
- To understand the source of the mass media's **power**, and the **financial, social, and economic structure** of the mass media.
- To understand the **major functions** of the media as **gatekeeper, watchdog, and scorekeeper**.
- To illustrate the **possible connection between the growth of the media and decline of political parties in political campaigning** (particularly at the national level) and the influence of media on elections.
- To **think critically** about the media and its role in a democracy
- To explore the wide variety of political media resources available to Americans.

OUTLINE:

1. Definitions
2. Outlets for News
3. Advertising and Public Relations
4. Structural Constraints
5. Media Bias
6. Ownership
7. Interdependence
8. Covering the Political Process
9. Alternatives

The function of the press . . . is almost holy. It ought to serve as a forum for the people, through which the people may know freely what is going on. To misstate or suppress the news is a breach of trust.

-Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis

Again, let's begin by defining our terms. **Mass Media** includes: television, radio, newspapers, recordings, magazines, motion pictures, and the Internet – any medium that reaches and influences millions of people, and shapes and maintains our dominant ideas and culture. Obviously, to be included within the phrase 'mass media' requires that a media organization have substantial reach – in other words, when we refer to CNN, we refer to mass media; when we refer to the *Warren Weekly*, we're simply referring to media. Both are media sources, but greatly differ in terms of influence and resources.

Regarding **politics**, the importance of the mass media cannot be overstated. Today, political struggles are carried out in and largely defined by the mass media. It is where we acquire most of our **knowledge of political issues**. It is our primary source for political information, especially through **television**. What we know is largely due to what is covered by the media, in what manner, and for how long. Furthermore, and perhaps of greater importance, is what is not covered, and therefore not known. In Congress, for example, power is as much the ability to get things done as it is the ability to keep things from being done; we should think of the media in the same way.

Who decides what is "newsworthy" and what isn't? **News editors, reporters, publishers, and owners** decide what will be covered and from what angle. Regarding information, then, the mass media are **agenda-setters** and **gate-keepers**. The media not only controls what information is presented, but also **interprets the meaning** of the news.

What Function Does the Media Serve in a Democracy?

If you recall, belief in democracy is one of our core values, and **democracy requires free speech and expression**. For democracy to be successful it also **requires an informed and educated public**. It follows that the news media in a democracy should be committed to discovering and reporting the truth in the public interest. In this respect, the media is referred to as the "fourth branch of government." It has a power similar to **checks and balances**. Congress, the Presidency, and the Judiciary all hold each other accountable to varying degrees, and in a free and democratic society, an important job of the media is to hold government (and other powerful institutions) accountable – to be a **watchdog**. Recently, former FBI officer Mark Felt identified himself as the source for *The Washington Post's* uncovering of the Watergate scandal and illegal activities within the Nixon administration. The reporting on that scandal is an example of the media as a watchdog – in this case, holding government accountable for its actions.

The watchdog role of the media is not always an easy role to fulfill, especially today. To be a watchdog requires independence. For example, can an “embedded” reporter in Iraq be considered truly independent? We’ll explore these kinds of questions below and in class.

Different Forms of News Coverage

Let’s examine our main sources of news and consider some questions that might help us gain a greater understanding of how they function.

- **Newspapers-** articles, some features, editorials. **Questions to ask:** Who is writing (the byline) the articles – a journalist, a guest editor, a wire service, or “staff”? What is the ratio of advertisements to news in a typical newspaper?
- **Magazines and Journals-** these offer more **specialized coverage**, and more often display a recognizable **political slant**. Examples: *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *The National Review*, *The American Spectator*, and *Foreign Affairs*. **Questions to ask:** Who writes the articles, and how is their background different from newspaper journalists? **Who owns/publishes the magazine or journal?**
- **Internet-** as you are probably aware, the Internet contains a vast amount of information sources for politics: newspapers and journals online, many with accessible back issues/articles, think tank research sites, university department sites, foreign news sources, political commentary sites, blogs, etc. A **great deal of information** exists on every imaginable issue, though deciphering what is **worthy and legitimate information** on the Internet is not always easy. Also, it is not always clear who is presenting the information, though the Internet does provide tools to find out. Basically, this is a tremendous resource that should be used cautiously and critically, like any other medium.
- **Television:** This is where most of us get our information from, and where the struggle for ratings and advertising is most apparent. Not only is television the source of most of our information, but for those in the 18-34 range, their understanding of political issues and figures tends to be greatly influenced by **comedians’ portrayal of politics:** The Daily Show, David Letterman, Saturday Night Live, etc. In class we will see more examples of this, and discuss its impact.

Understanding the Role of Advertising

Advertising is an important element in the mass media, if not the most important. Without ad revenue, major newspapers and network television stations (along with most cable stations) could not function. *The New York Times*, for example, has an average advertisement-to-news ratio of 60%-40% every day, and I'm sure all of us have complained at some point about the amount of commercials on television that seem to constantly interrupt what we're trying to watch.

Media sources lacking in advertising revenue are at a serious disadvantage. Consumer choice is no longer the determining factor in a paper's success – it is advertising. The financial success of a paper is determined by advertising dollars, and much less by subscription rates or newsstand sales.

Indeed, the primary function of mainstream media (television especially), like other industries, is to sell a product. So what is it that they are selling? They are selling us (the public) to other businesses (advertisers). We are the product. There is a reason that advertising during the Super Bowl is so expensive, and vast resources are spent on creating memorable ads – millions of people are watching, after all. Indeed, the Super Bowl advertisements are often talked about more than the game itself. Given the centrality of advertising, media programming must therefore be designed to appeal to the kinds of folks that businesses want to attract – middle and upper-middle class people (often white) with disposable income. For the political and racial effects of commercial pressures, see “Color and the Clicker” on page 146 in your textbook.

Public Relations and the News

Corporations, **Interest Groups**, and in recent years government, increasingly hire or create public relations firms to help craft and present their views to the public. Recently, an interest group was formed, funded by corporations such as Exxon Mobil, with the purpose of dismissing the scientific consensus about global warming and its primary cause – industry. During World War I, the Wilson administration created the **Committee for Public Information**, the first official government propaganda department, designed to change public opinion towards support of the war. Recently, the Bush Administration hired public relations firms to promote, or “sell,” the Administration's invasion of Iraq as well as improve the image of the U.S. abroad.

Today, many public relations campaigns appear as news. A recent study found that on any given day in the *Wall Street Journal*, 30-40% of the news stories are actually written and submitted by public relations firms.

Structural Constraints of Commercial Media

Another criticism of the mass media, especially television, is **time constraints and their effect on news coverage**. Anchors, guests and commentators on commercial networks have very limited time – it is difficult to present an in-depth analysis of a news item or issue with **time constraint** as a factor (news and commentary must be presented in a few minutes between commercials). Complex subjects that require in-depth analysis will most probably be covered poorly or not at all. Time constraints also make it **more difficult to express dissenting views** or new ideas that require more time for explanation. The result is a narrower spectrum of debate. With newspapers and journals, the constraint is one of space, but issues are often presented with more background information and broader analysis, especially in journals and magazines. Of course, neither a television news channel or a newspaper can cover *every* story worth covering, but a good question to ask is, given the amount of time or space available, what is covered, and what isn't?

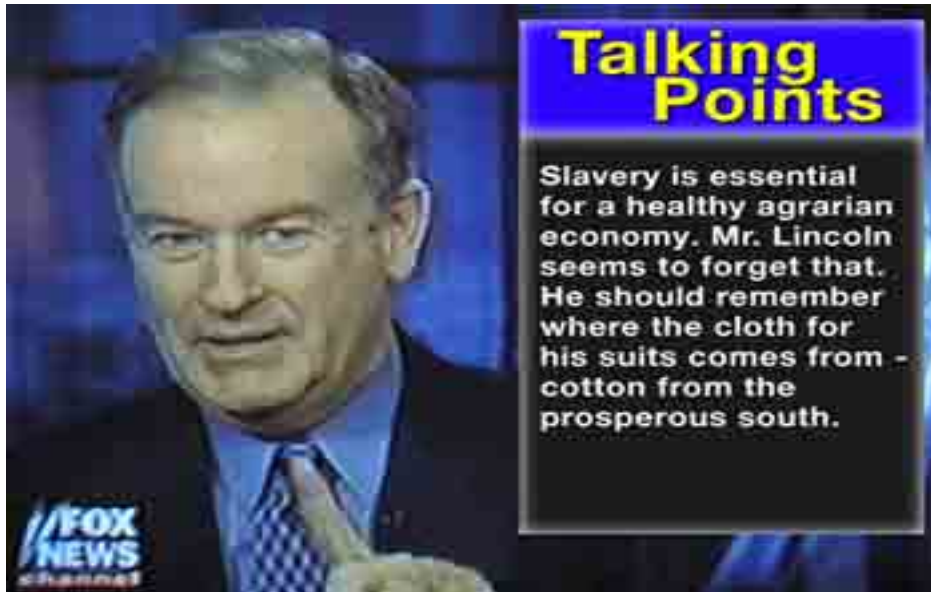
The Question of Bias

Many Americans, especially those on the ideological right, regard the media as having a “liberal bias.” Interestingly, there is little or no discussion about the media having a “conservative bias” – the assumption is that the media are inherently liberal, and the only question worth asking is “are the media too liberal?”

There is little evidence for this claim, however, at least any evidence based on empirical studies of news coverage. To demonstrate bias, one would first define “liberal,” and then study the media’s output, which of course takes a great deal of work. Instead, most claims of liberal bias cite the fact that many journalists tend to vote Democratic (**This does not mean most papers/publications endorse Democratic candidates** – on the contrary, in fact).

One can certainly note a “modern” bias in news coverage, reflected generally around issues of race, gender, and religion. So, for example, on a news program discussing issues of race, there are probably not going to be any members of the Ku Klux Klan. Or if discussing issues related to gender, we probably won't see someone declaring that women are intellectually inferior or that women should not vote. But that seems to be less of a liberal-conservative issue, and more a reflection of how our understanding of human rights has evolved over the centuries. There are studies that have analyzed the actual output of news organizations, and these demonstrate that regarding military issues, foreign policy issues, and trade and economic issues, the press is far less adversarial to government, takes a centrist to right-wing stand, and is usually very pro-business. Here's a fun cartoon:

If Fox News Was Around on the Eve of the Civil War:



Another common criticism of the mass media, related to the last, is that it functions as a voice for powerful interests (government and corporations) that largely control public and private activity and policy. This criticism stems from studies of media **ownership**, the **institutional structure** of media organizations, and more recently, if journalistic integrity is sacrificed because of journalists' need for access to government officials.

Ownership

To study how any system works, we must first look at its **institutional structure** – how is it organized, controlled, and funded? Earlier, I mentioned studies that show journalists tend to vote Democratic, and that this was cited as evidence that the media has a liberal bias. The problem with this claim is that it makes little sense when we consider the media as an institution – what is it, exactly? Media systems are corporations, usually owned by larger conglomerates (such as General Electric, Westinghouse, and Disney). From an institutional perspective, to suggest that journalists have such control over content is kind of like of saying that if most of the workers on an assembly line at Ford are members of the Green Party (a left-wing environmental political party), then the cars they build will be safer and more fuel-efficient. Well, that's ridiculous – marketers, designers, and financial managers make such decisions. The same is largely true of media companies. Furthermore, the companies that *own* media outlets often have **business interests separate from media**: from consumer goods and services to publishing and entertainment to weapons and defense manufacturing, among many others. What news is covered and how it is covered can either aid or hinder the success of these industries. On the next page, let's examine the ownership status of the company Disney:

DISNEY

FILM

Walt Disney Pictures
Touchstone Pictures
Hollywood Pictures
Caravan Pictures
Miramax Films
Buena Vista Home Video
Buena Vista Home Entertainment
Buena Vista International

MUSIC

Buena Vista Music Group

Hollywood Records
(popular music and motion picture soundtracks)

Lyric Street Records
(Nashville based country music label)

Mammoth Records
(popular and alternative music label)

Walt Disney Records

RADIO

Disney Broadcasting
Over 60 Radio Stations, including WDRQ, WJR, and WDVD in Detroit

TV AND CABLE

ABC Television Network
10 TV stations owned and operated

Cable
ABC Family
The Disney Channel
Toon Disney
SoapNet

ESPN Inc.
(80% - Hearst Corporation owns the remaining 20%. Includes ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN News, ESPN Now, ESPN Extreme, Classic Sports Network.)

A&E Television
(37.5%, with Hearst and GE)

The History Channel
(with Hearst and GE)

Lifetime Television
(50% with Hearst)

Lifetime Movie Network
(50% with Hearst)

E! Entertainment
(with Comcast and Liberty Media)

International Broadcast
Disney Channel (UK, Taiwan, Australia, Malaysia, France, Middle East, Italy, Spain, and others)

TV Production and Distribution
Buena Vista Television
Touchstone Television
Walt Disney Television
Walt Disney Television Animation (has three wholly owned production facilities in Japan, Australia, and Canada)

PUBLISHING

Book Publishing
Hyperion
Miramax Books
ESPN Books
Theia
ABC Daytime Press
Hyperion Audiobooks
Hyperion East

Disney Publishing Worldwide
Cal Publishing Inc.
CrossGen

Hyperion Books for Children
Jump at the Sun
Volo
Michael di Caupa Books

Disney Global Children's Books
Disney Press
Global Retail
Global Continuity

MAGAZINES (partial list)

Automotive Industries Biography
(with GE and Hearst)

Discover
Disney Adventures
ECN News
ESPN Magazine
(distributed by Hearst)

Institutional Investor
Top Famille
(French family magazine)
US Weekly (50%)

Disney holdings also include interactive software and video games, **TiVo**, websites, theatrical productions, theme and amusement parks, professional sport franchises, retail (The Disney Store), and financial investments in crude petroleum and natural gas production.

Why should ownership be a consideration? Remember, we want to think critically. We understand the power of the mass media: it transmits **information** to Americans in the forms of news and entertainment, and more importantly, it **indoctrinates** and **reinforces** values, beliefs, and norms of behavior and thought that bring us into the **cultural mainstream**. Also, government policies have allowed control over the mass media to become increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, especially since the late 1970s. It makes sense, therefore, to assume that the picture of the world presented to us is one that will reflect the interests of those who own the media. Remember, corporations have political interests, both in affecting policy and public opinion. Chances are if you owned your own media company, you might think twice before publishing stories or news that threaten your own interests. General Electric builds nuclear power generators. It owns NBC. What happens if NBC plans to air a half-hour investigative report about the potential dangers of nuclear power?

Interdependence

We should also consider the level of dependence and interaction between media and government. The **airwaves are the property of the public**; therefore media companies and networks all require government licenses and franchises. Access to government officials and figures is essential for news, but also for lobbying – such as legislation limiting or expanding ownership of media outlets, or laws mandating decency standards. For example, there is currently legislation pending on how many media outlets one company can own in a given market – media companies want ownership restrictions relaxed, and they lobby government officials to vote in their favor. How might the legislative interests of media companies affect their news coverage of this kind of legislation?

Here's a term you might recognize: the **revolving door**. Regarding the media, this refers to former government officials taking positions in media companies, or vice versa (this also applies to other industries: former members of congress taking jobs as lobbyists, or former military commanders taking positions in defense companies). **Examples include:** Colin Powell, former Joint Chief moves to the executive board at AOL/Time Warner, and then back in government as Secretary of State; Pat Buchanan (former Nixon speechwriter), now an author and commentator on MSNBC; Bill Moyers (formerly in the Johnson administration) produces programs and documentaries, often on PBS; Diane Sawyer (formerly in the Nixon administration) and ABC.

Media and the Political Process

How does the media effect the political process, such as elections? Earlier I discussed the **agenda setting** function of the media. The mass media plays an important role in electoral process. Several issues need to be examined:

The use of **sound bites** is widespread. Very little attention is paid to the substance of speeches or the details of policy proposals; rather, catchy two- or three-second sound bites are repeated. This is especially prevalent in television. Why would news programs resort to sound bites?

The media tend to give a negative portrayal of politics. News items involving scandals, corruption, or something that might be considered offensive are a high priority for coverage, as opposed to elected officials successfully representing their constituents or acting in their behalf.

This also occurs in more subtle ways. When a major speech or address is given, such as the President's State of the Union address, the media often respond with a **"thumbs up or thumbs down"** verdicts within seconds after a speech ends; treating **politics as a performance or a game** (What will this mean for the Democrats? How will the Republicans respond? Did the President look/sound 'presidential'?) The focus is on the battle and the **horse race**, with less on analysis of the issue and the proposals made. *How does this affect our perception of the political process?* **Time constraints**, as discussed above, make television and radio a less-than-ideal source for in depth information on election issues and candidates.

The media can also **dissuade voters from voting by making early predictions** in elections. Let's say it's 1:00 pm on Election Day, and you're going to vote when you get out of work at 6:00. But all morning, the media has repeated early exit polls showing that one or another candidate is well ahead. What's the point of going to vote, then, if victory for that candidate seems already assured? Wouldn't you rather go home and put your feet up? I hope you would all say no, but you can see the problem with early predictions.

Here is an important point: the media has **the power "make or break" politicians**. The amount and tone of media coverage can greatly influence the flow of campaign contributions, and who is ahead in the polls, or who is the "front-runner." 2004 Democratic presidential hopeful Howard Dean received enormous media attention in the lead up to the primary in Iowa, and this had great effect on his standing compared to other candidates. Yet, this kind of media attention does not always mean success for the candidate, and the media can ignore other candidates or issues when overly focused on one candidate. Kerry's victory in the Iowa primary came as a surprise to many in the media, who had not given him much consideration.

Remember Dean's famous "scream" on the night of the Democratic primary in Iowa? This is a perfect example of both the prevalence of sound bites, as well as the media's ability to make or break a candidate. The scream was re-played constantly, and continues to be a prominent sound effect on talk radio. Whatever hopes Dean had of recovering from his poor showing in Iowa were dashed by the media's attention on this scream. Interestingly, Diane Sawyer, who had commented repeatedly that the scream signified a character flaw on the part of Dean, conceded that the sound bite did not represent the reality of the speech – the microphone feed for Dean was gated, meaning it blocked out the noise of the crowd. When the same scream was played from a different angle, from the floor of the rally, the roar of the crowd was so deafening that one could not make out anything Dean was saying, much less his infamous scream. Unfortunately for Dean, Sawyer made this concession on 60 Minutes weeks afterwards; by that time, the damage of the sound bite was irreparable.

Are there alternatives? Of course! **Public Broadcasting** (PBS and NPR) usually has a far wider variety of programming and is more in-depth regarding news and analysis, with commentators representing a wider range of political opinion, and focusing less on the horse-race element and more on actual policy. Public Radio and Television are listener-supported to a large extent, with a small percentage of funding coming from government and corporations ("sponsors"), but several media watchdog groups have expressed concern that public broadcasting is increasingly reliant on corporate advertising and susceptible to funding restrictions based on the party in power.

There also exist a vast array of political news sources that exist outside the corporate realm of mass media, such as some of the journals listed earlier. With the Internet, there has been a sharp increase in citizen-based media, such as political blogs. Another recent example is **Independent World Television** – a non-partisan news/current events broadcast organization soon to be launched that rejects any funding from government or corporations, and instead relies solely on financial donations from listeners. As with any news source, however, the information presented in non-corporate sources should be viewed critically and intelligently.

As noted in earlier sections and lectures, for democracy to have any success, an uncensored, truthful, relevant, and informative media is essential. The record of the U.S. press in this regard is mixed; it offers up-to-date and usually accurate information yet is constrained by its structure and commercial pressures. The obligation of the press is to serve the public interest; while it has had several successes in this regard, often it has not fulfilled its obligations; several important concerns regarding the structure and commercial bias of the media demand our attention.