

Chapter 9 OUTLINE

I. Development of the Mass Media

- The term “mass media” refers to means of communication that are technologically capable of reaching many people and are economically affordable to most.

A. The Partisan Press and the Penny Press

- The first daily newspaper in America was published in 1783. Prior to this, mostly weeklies were published. Some were affiliated with a political party.
- The rise of the penny press, which were newspapers selling for a penny in 1833, marks the birth of the media in America.

B. Newspapers and Magazines 1865-1920

- As readership expanded, newspapers changed. They emphasized local news, focused on sensationalism, and began including the human-interest story. They were still intensely partisan.
- After the Civil War, the press became more independent of political parties. The emphasis in the late 1800s was sensationalism, sometimes called “yellow journalism”. The great chains—Hearst, Scripps, and others—were formed around the turn of the century. Partisanship of newspapers declined, journalists became more professional.
- Inexpensive magazines that were aimed at the newly educated middle-class also made their appearance.
- Today, about 11,000 newspapers and 12,000 periodicals are published. Many newspapers and newsweeklies maintain their own Washington bureaus and send reporters all over the world. Smaller cities rely on news services like the Associated Press.
- The most important modern trends in the newspaper industry are the declines in the number, and the independence, of papers. Most cities are now served by one or two newspapers, and chains gobble up independent newspapers. Gannett owns more than 90 papers.
- Some worry that the print media in particular and the mass media in general are becoming increasingly homogeneous.

C. Radio and Television

- The use of radio flourished after the end of World War I. During the 1920s, several developments in radio were critical to its future importance: the licensing system, the importance of advertising, and the emergence of national networks.
- With the advent of radio it became clear that, in theory at least, it was possible to send pictures as well as sounds over the airwaves. In 1949 only 6% of Americans owned televisions; by 1959 90% of Americans owned television.

D. The Contemporary Scene

1. Television

- Today, the term “mass media” is used almost synonymously with television. There are more than 1500 television stations in the United States and about 99 percent of all households have at least one television set, with an average of four per household. The industry was organized under three large networks: NBC, CBS, and ABC.

- Cable television began to expand in the 1970s. Today, 51 percent of households get cable, 28 percent have a satellite dish, and 4% have both. Prime time network programming has lost more than a quarter of its audience to cable stations, mainly FOX, CNN, MSNBC, leading some scholars to suggest that the United States is in transition from an era of broadcasting to an era of narrowcasting.

2. Newspapers

- The development of television, along with a number of other trends in American life, has had a major impact on newspapers. First, there has been a marked decline in the number of cities with more than one newspaper. Another important change affecting newspapers has been the spread of chain ownership. Increasingly, the nation's newspapers are owned by companies that also own a sizable number of newspapers in cities across the country.

3. Radio

- With the development of television, radio quickly lost the dominant position it had in American life in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet radio continues to be a popular medium from which many Americans get a good deal of their news. One of the most noteworthy trends in American media over the last two decades has been the growth of talk radio.

4. Magazines

- Magazines are increasingly marginal as a source of news.

E. New Media

- Major examples of new media include cable and satellite television, the fax, email, DVDs, and the Internet. New media expands the range of options available to media consumers in the United States
- Both the Internet and cable television have added many new voices to the political debate, and allowed for greater competition among news outlets. However, the competition in cable news should not be over-stated; many of the cable news outlets are owned by older, established news organizations.
- How will the Internet and new media change politics? We've already seen changes in fundraising and the newly-important role of blogs. Although the Internet still lags behind television in terms of where Americans get their news, we may see this change in the near future.

II. What Information Sources Do Americans Rely On?

- Television is the dominant provider of information in American society, and its dominance is increasing as the electronic media progress and expand.
- However, while there is no doubt that the television is on a lot in the typical American household, in many cases, no one is paying much attention to it. People are cleaning or cooking or doing their homework—and the TV is little more than background noise.
- Also, there is also a fair amount of evidence to indicate that even when people do watch television news, they do not retain or remember much of what they see.

III. Media Effects

- Early studies done on the effects of mass media on people's opinions tended to show that Americans were remarkably resistant to attempts to change their views. The primary reason was selective perception. People were receptive to what they already believed and screened out what they didn't.

- Later studies on television showed various effects.

A. Agenda-Setting

- One researcher concluded that while media may not tell people what to think, they could tell people what to think about. This has been dubbed the CNN effect.

B. Priming and Framing

- Media may also be responsible for directing the public to think along certain lines such as evaluating a president based on a particular issue. This is called priming, and is similar to the idea of framing discussed in Chapter 5.

C. Socialization

- Many critics say that the media distorts reality and how children view the world.

D. How Strong are Media Effects?

- Effects such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing depend on both the characteristics of the audience and the nature of the information. The media can have a major impact on public opinion, but whether they do depends on both who they are reaching and what they are covering.

IV. Media Biases

A. Selection Bias

- Selection bias refers to what the media presents as news. One type of selection bias is a bias toward the negative in the media. One political scientist argues that the negative tone of the media has become much more prominent in recent decades. Others observe that this has contributed to increasing voter cynicism.
- Another selection bias is what constitutes news. Events and crises, heroes and villains, dramatic events, colorful personalities, and sound bites all make better news than their counterpoints.

B. Professional Bias

- Some journalists work a particular beat, but most are generalists who lack specific substantive expertise. Then, too, there is the pressure of ratings in television news) The lack of internal expertise and the competitive pressure for ratings contribute to what is called pack journalism, wherein reporters unanimously decide something is the big story and attack it like wolves tearing apart their prey.

C. Ideological Bias

- Is there a liberal media bias? Liberal viewpoints are over-represented among practicing journalists, but do these journalists let their views bias their reporting? It is a fact that the endorsements of today's newspapers seem to be disproportionately Republican whereas in the past it seemed to be disproportionately liberal and Democratic.
- There is not much evidence of a significant liberal or conservative bias in media coverage of politics.

- Some studies have concluded that the media are harder on Republicans, but other studies have shown just the opposite.
- One researcher concluded that the media are harder on incumbents than challengers.
- The fact that the media are business enterprises pulls them in a conservative direction. This is especially true as it pertains to the very affluent owners of CNN and FOX, Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch.
- The CBS “letter” of 2004 example will continue to provide fuel to the “liberal” tag of the media. In September 2004, CBS News and its venerable anchor Dan Rather suffered a major blow to their credibility, admitting they were duped by the source of a story purporting to show that George W. Bush was given favored treatment in avoiding the draft during the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

D. Prospects for Change

- As the network system declines, more independent stations begin operation, and the news media continue to advance, we may see the development of numerous specialized informational channels that reflect values different from the entertainment values that have shaped the modern mass media.
- Selection biases might gradually become undermined by technological change.

V. A Word about Entertainment Media

- Much of what are generally thought of as entertainment media—movies, situation comedies, detective shows, soap operas—may also contain material that has significant political implications. Over the last 20 years, for example, American attitudes toward homosexuality have become significantly more tolerant and even approving, in ways that have important consequences for such issues as gay rights and same-sex marriage. And while this change has probably taken place for a number of reasons, one major source has almost certainly been the way that gay and lesbian characters are portrayed in movies and on television.

VI. The Media and Electoral Politics

A. Campaign Coverage

- Critics charge the media with providing far too much coverage of candidate personalities and not enough of the issues. In recent years, the media has increasingly treated elections as horse races, with an emphasis on who is winning and who is losing.

B. The Conventions

- Since the primary process for nominating candidates was instituted in 1972, the conventions are not nearly as important as in earlier eras, and media coverage has dropped accordingly.
- Consequently, the parties now treat the conventions as huge infomercials, with the networks providing less coverage. In 2000, MTV provided more coverage than the three networks combined.

C. The Presidential Debates

- The Commission on Presidential Debates was established in 1987 to ensure that debates, as a permanent part of every general election, provide the best possible information to viewers and listeners. Its primary purpose is to sponsor and produce debates for the United States' leading presidential and vice-presidential candidates and to undertake research and educational activities relating to the debates. The organization, which is a nonprofit, nonpartisan corporation, sponsored all the general election debates in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004.
- The debates also don't hold good news for independent and third party presidential aspirants. The nonpartisan commission established a rule that explicitly states that presidential candidates must have an average of at least 15 percent support in five national polls in order to take part in the fall debates.
- Moreover, there are indications that performance in the debates can sway the undecided voter.
- As in campaign coverage generally, the first question the media raise about debates is "who won?" If a candidate has misspoken, that often becomes the subject of a feeding frenzy. With polls showing that the percent of Americans were still undecided between John Kerry and George Bush, in the fall of 2004, their respective performances in the three debates agreed upon some contend may have ultimately decided their fate in the elections.

VII. Media Coverage of Government

- The media views much of what government does as dull, and as a result, it goes looking for what is less dull.
 - A. Emphasis on the President (and Other Personalities)**
 - The media pay more attention to the president than to Congress. He is one person and has personality and character.
 - By focusing on personalities, the media encourages individualism and discourages teamwork.
 - B. Emphasis on Conflict**
 - The media emphasizes conflict, name-calling, and the like over thoughtful, intelligent discussion.
 - C. Emphasis on the Negative**
 - From the media's standpoint, what government does well is less newsworthy than what government does badly.
 - D. The Response: Exaggerated Concern with the Press**
 - Government officials have become more concerned with the press than with the voters.