CHAPTER 6 The Mass Media

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
* Outline the technological changes and events that have influenced the development of the mass media in the United States.
* Explain who owns the media in the United States and how the media are regulated by the government.
* Discuss the consequences of private ownership of the media.
* Assess the validity of charges of media bias.
* Explain how people acquire news through the media.
* Describe how the mass media contribute to political socialization.
* Indicate the ways in which the mass media influence political behavior.
* Evaluate the contribution the media make to democratic government.

# The Mass Media and the Challenge of Democracy

The mass media link the people and the government by making possible a two-way flow of information. The media report government actions to the people, and they also poll the public to assess public opinion on specific issues.

The text’s opening vignette illustrates the ways that our relationship is changing. The Internet is playing a more vital role in politics with 24/7 information, discussions, blogs, videos, and campaign financing. Candidates are using the Internet more and taking it very seriously. The campaigns of the future will be played out over the Internet, and the mass media is changing to accommodate these changes. Although the basic functions of broadcast media are critically important to the majoritarian model of democracy, pluralist democracy also relies on open access to channels of communication for organized interests. The growth and proliferation of new information technology, notably the Internet, has facilitated this type of communication.

The relationship between government and media highlights the tensions between freedom, order, and equality. Although the government originally regulated the airwaves simply to provide order, later government limitations on the freedom of broadcasters have helped provide greater equality of access to the airwaves. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 relaxed many restrictions on media ownership, thus allowing for greater concentration of the media in a limited number of hands. In 1999, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to allow a single company to own two television stations in the same major market. This promotes freedom, but it limits equality. On the other hand, in terms of coverage of events over the years, the media have tended to promote social equality. This may be seen in the coverage of the civil rights and women’s movements.

The freedom issue of greatest interest to the media, not surprisingly, has been the question of freedom of expression. Yet, as this chapter indicates, media coverage of events can contribute to disorder. To accept any one interpretation of an event as absolute means paying a high price, because freedom of the press is about questioning and the ability to criticize.

Chapter Overview

## People, Government, and Communications

The media include the technical devices and processes used in mass communication, which allow individuals or groups to transmit information to large, heterogeneous, widely dispersed audiences. In democratic governments, the mass media promote a two-way flow of communication between citizens and the government. Today, media used in political communication include print media, such as newspapers and magazines; broadcast media, such as television and radio; and the Internet.

## The Development of Mass Media in the United States

This chapter focuses on the political uses of mass media in the news industry. Specifically, this section focuses on the history of newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.

U.S. newspapers offer broad, general coverage of contemporary topics. In the United States, newspapers generally began as party organs, sponsored by political parties to advocate their views. Large-circulation, independently owned daily newspapers grew up as new technologies made nationwide news gathering possible. The competition between newspapers that was characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had died out by the 1950s. By 2001, only thirty-two cities had more than one daily paper under separate ownership.

Magazines offer more specialized coverage of topics and often serve as forums for opinions rather than objective news reports. Even a magazine with a limited readership can exert influence by reaching attentive policy elites who in turn influence mass opinion.

Radio developed in the twenties and thirties and eventually became a truly national medium, linking stations across the country into a limited number of national networks. Many radio personalities have become nationally known, such as the conservative talk show radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Bill O’Reilly. Although it has been around over eighty years, over 90 percent of Americans still listen to radio today.

Television technology spread after World War II, and today it reaches nearly every home in the nation. Stations are linked via several major networks. As television has evolved, the importance of newscasters has grown, as has the emphasis on exploiting the visual impact of news events.

The last quarter-century witnessed the introduction of new technologies that have been used for political communication and interaction. The Internet has made information readily available, offers news 24/7, and allows users to share their opinions. Today over 70 percent of Americans under sixty-five use the Internet on a regular basis. The Internet and related technology have been adopted by citizen organizations, government organizations, and election campaigns.

## Private Ownership of the Media

In the United States, both the print and electronic media are privately owned. While this gives the news industry great political freedom, it also means that news is selected for its mass audience appeal, as judged by its impact on readers or listeners, sensationalism, treatment of familiar people or life situations, close-to-home character, or timeliness. The mass media are part of the entertainment industry, and news, too, is part of the entertainment package. The new and controversial trend toward “infotainment,” a mixture of journalism and theater, has further blurred the distinction between news and entertainment.

The news media serve five specific functions for the political system: (1) reporting the news, (2) interpreting the news, (3) influencing citizens’ opinions, (4) setting the agenda for government action, and (5) socializing citizens about politics. They attempt to provide firsthand coverage of national news events. Their reporters may rely on news releases, news briefings, press conferences, leaks, and cultivation of background sources for their material. The tendency for news reporters to rely on the same sources of information has given rise to a style of reporting sometimes referred to as pack journalism.

Americans are more interested in domestic news than national or international news, and their primary concern is being informed about their local community. In an effort to make news understandable and interesting to viewers, television typically concentrates its attention on individuals rather than on political institutions, and on political horse races rather than on campaign issues.

Ownership of the media in the United States has become more and more concentrated as the same corporations control many newspapers and radio and television stations.

## Government Regulation of the Media

The broadcast media operate under the regulations of an independent regulatory commission, the FCC. The FCC licenses broadcasters using the airwaves. In 1996, in a bipartisan effort, Congress undertook a major overhaul of the framework created under the 1934 law that established the FCC. Limits on media ownership were relaxed, and rate regulations were lifted. One immediate effect of this new system was increased concentration of the media. The long-term effects of this complicated law—part of which was declared unconstitutional in 1998—are uncertain.

The First Amendment guarantee of freedom of the press has been taken to cover all the media and has helped make the U.S. news media among the freest in the world. Historically, the broadcast media, which use the public airwaves, have been subject to some government regulation such as the equal opportunities and reasonable access rules.

## Functions of the Mass Media for the Political System

Media executives function as gatekeepers, deciding which stories to report and how to handle them. Any selection process reflects something about the values of the selector, and in the case of the media, the process often leads to charges of media bias. News reporters have been criticized for liberal bias, while media owners are often charged with having a conservative bias. A study based on newspaper stories during the last weeks of the 2000 presidential election campaign showed that both major party candidates received negative coverage.

The mass media influence public opinion, the political agenda, and political socialization. People believe that the media influence public opinion. A number of studies, described in the text, have shown systematic and dramatic opinion changes, and errors, linked to television news coverage. Nevertheless, most scholars believe that the real power of the media consists of their ability to set the national agenda. Through the kind of stories they cover, the media help define the issues that get government attention.

The media also act as agents of political socialization. In this regard, their role is often contradictory. On the one hand, they contribute to American self-confidence by supporting public celebrations as great media events; on the other hand, they give airtime to events and activities that reduce the sense of national well-being. The entertainment divisions may promote the values of law-abiding citizens, or they may do the reverse. Some scholars maintain that the most important effect of the media is to further the dominance of the existing order, yet protests, strikes, and violence all receive extensive coverage.

## Evaluating the Media in Government

Although presented as objective journalism, much of the media is criticized for their biased reporting, so almost everyone is skeptical of anything they encounter in the media. Studies have shown that although many television reporters are liberal, good press goes to both sides of the aisle. Conversely in radio, conservative radio seems to serve many more people than liberal radio, and both sides are extremely biased in their attitudes. We find that newspaper endorsements do not hold much weight with their readers anymore.

Since the 1960s, people have reported that they get more of their news from television than from any other source. However, studies have suggested that people’s reliance on television for their news and their trust in the medium might be overstated. Furthermore, research also indicates that the television hypothesis—that TV is to blame for Americans’ low level of political knowledge—oversimplifies the reality. They note that what people learn from different media is related to their cognitive skills. In addition, attentiveness to news tends to be related to people’s level of education, age, and gender.

In general, the media improve the quality of information citizens receive about the government. They also report on public opinion. Both of these functions help make responsible government participation possible. The media have mobilized government action to advance racial and sexual equality. They also uphold the value of freedom, when the freedom in question is freedom of the press. Nevertheless, press freedom may conflict with order and thus, like all democratic values, it is not without its costs to society.

Key Terms

mass media

attentive policy elites

two-step flow of communication

blogs

newsworthiness

market-driven journalism

infotainment

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

gatekeepers

horse race journalism

media event

television hypothesis

political agenda

watchdog journalism

# Research and Resources

Are you ready to become part of the attentive public? Why not get to know the public affairs magazines that help shape American opinion? *The* *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* and some of the other indexes briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 of this study guide point you to articles in these publications. Many of them have set up websites where you can sample what they have to offer.

When you use publications for information, you should be aware that magazines often have an explicit or implicit ideological orientation. Certain publications present views from the American left; others give the opinions of those on the right. If you are trying to examine an issue thoroughly, you will probably want to weigh arguments from each side so it is important to make sure that not all of your background material comes from right-wing or left-wing publications.

Some important journals of opinion include the following:

* On the right

*National Review*. William F. Buckley’s magazine, a long-time standard-bearer of conservative ideas. <http://www.nationalreview.com>.

*The American Spectator*. Often has a highly polemical tone. <http://www.spectator.org>.

*The Weekly Standard*. A conservative publication that debuted in 1995. <<http://www.weeklystandard.com>>.

* Somewhere in the center, generally striving for editorial balance

*The Atlantic Monthly*. A monthly publication that includes several lengthy articles each month on aspects of U.S. foreign or domestic policy. <http://www.theatlantic.com>.

*Daedalus*. An academic quarterly; each volume focuses on a single topic and offers a variety of viewpoints. <<http://www.amacad.org/publications/daedalus.aspx>>.

*Harper’s*. Similar to the *Atlantic Monthly*, it now includes readings excerpted from other works and a wonderful index of offbeat facts in the front of each issue. The index is among the features included in the online site. <http://www.harpers.org>.

* On the left

*The New Republic*. A leading liberal periodical that has moved more to the right in recent years; highly opinionated and often acerbic. <http://www.tnr.com>.

*The Nation*. The oldest continuously published journal of opinion in the country; it covers wide-ranging political topics. <http://www.thenation.com>.

*The Progressive*. Another venerable and respected journal of liberal thought. <http://www.progressive.org>.

* And finally, some online addresses for alternative publications mentioned in the text

*Mother Jones*. <http://www.mojones.com>.

*The Utne Reader*. <http://www.utne.com>.

* If you are unsure about a particular magazine’s ideological leanings, here is one source you might consult.

Katz, William A., and Cheryl Laquardia. *Magazines for Libraries 2008.* 16th ed. New York: Bowker, 2007; free online version available at <<http://www.ulrichsweb.com/ulrichsweb/mfl/update>>.

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Select one of the following controversial subjects:

* Welfare reform
* Affirmative action
* Abortion
* Reforming the income tax

Using an Internet search enginelike <www.google.com> or one of the Internet resources listed above, locate three or four articles on your topic in various magazines that have different ideological slants. Skim the articles. Do the opinions expressed in the articles seem to be consistent with the ideological orientations of the publications as described in the list above?

2. If it is possible in your television viewing area, watch two or three different evening network newscasts. Compare the stories covered in each. Make a log listing the stories in order, and record the length of each story. Compare the way each network treats each story. Do they use film footage? Is it relevant? Do they use graphics? Is the presentation strictly factual, or does a commentator give more of an editorial perspective?

3. Watch a televised news broadcast, and select the major political story covered. Compare the television coverage of that event or issue with newspaper accounts of the same story. What are the differences and similarities in the two accounts?

4. Many television news services have established online links, which can be found at the end of the chapter in your textbook. Watch the television news program, and then check out the online service. For example, try the all-news station MSNBC and then visit their website at <www.msnbc.com>. How does using the website affect your political knowledge?

5. What is the difference between hard news and soft news? Compare the treatment of a major political news story on *A Current Affair*, *Hard Copy*, or *Larry King Live* with coverage of the same issue on the PBS *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* or the Sunday morning news programs such as *Meet the Press*, *This Week*, or *Face the Nation*.

# Getting Involved

Students who want to learn more about the media from the inside may be interested in applying for internships with broadcasters, newspapers, magazines, or other media-related organizations. Here are a few of the opportunities available. Some may require previous experience in journalism, such as work on your college newspaper.

C‑SPAN has internships for students interested in communications and politics. Students must meet three basic criteria: They must be college juniors or seniors, they must be interning for college credit, and they must be able to work a minimum of sixteen hours per week. Address: C-SPAN, Internship Program, 400 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20001. Telephone: 202‑737‑3220.

The Center for Investigative Reporting, a nonprofit, independent organization committed to investigative reporting, offers six-month paid internships to students who want to pair off with senior reporters and learn the techniques of investigative journalism. For winter internships, the deadline is December 1; for summer, it is May 1. Address: The Center for Investigative Reporting, c/o Communications Director, 500 Howard Street, Suite 206, San Francisco, CA 94105. E-mail: [CIR@igc.apc.org](mailto:CIR@igc.apc.org). Find them online at <[http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org](http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/)>.

The *Los Angeles Times* hires interns for its California offices as well as one intern for its Washington bureau. Summer internships are eleven weeks long, with a December 1 application deadline; part-time internships lasting seventeen weeks are available in the fall and spring, with June 1 and October 1 deadlines, respectively. Address: *Los Angeles Times*, Editorial Internships, Times Mirror Square, Los Angeles, CA 90053. Find them online at <http://www.latimes.com>.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* offers paid summer internships in reporting. Internships run from Memorial Day to late August. Applications are due in mid-January. For further information, contact Internship Coordinator, 400 North Broad Street, P.O. Box 8263, Philadelphia, PA 19101. Find them online at <http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer>.

The *Boston Globe* offers full‑time paid work for summer interns from June 1 to Labor Day. The program also includes seminars on legal issues, constitutional issues, and other issues related to journalism. An application form must be obtained from the *Globe* and returned by the application deadline of November 15. For further information, contact the *Boston Globe*, P.O. Box 2378, Boston, MA 02107-2378. Telephone: 617-929‑2000. Find them online at <http://www.boston.com>.

The *Washington Post* offers summer internships to current college juniors and seniors interested in journalism. For further information, contact News Personnel, 5th Floor, *Washington Post*, 1150 15 Street, NW, Washington, DC 20071. Telephone: 202-334‑6000. Visit their website at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

The *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* provides unpaid internships running twelve to sixteen weeks in New York, Washington, and Denver. For summer internships, apply by March 31; for fall, apply by July 31; and for spring, apply by October 31. For more information, write to PBS *NewsHour*, Internship Coordinator, 356 West Street, New York, NY 10019. Find them online at <http://www1.pbs.org/newshour/home.html>.

The *New Republic* offers paid internships to prospective journalists who wish to read unsolicited manuscripts, check facts, and write short articles, reviews, and editorials. They have rolling internships every season. Send a résumé and cover letter to Ben Wasserstein at [job@tnr.com](mailto:job@tnr.com). No phone calls or postal mail accepted. Visit their website at <http://www.tnr.com>

The *Atlantic Monthly* offers students an opportunity to work at an award-winning national magazine. Learn more online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/a/intern.mhtml#web>.

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple‑Choice Questions

1. When is a democracy bestserved by the media?

a. when it allows for a two-way flow of information

b. when it allows for a one-way flow of information

c. when it emphasizes the entertainment value of news

d. when it does not publicize citizen grievances

e. when it does not attempt to reflect popular views

2. Which of the following is true about the first American newspapers?

a. They had very large circulations.

b. They were mainly political organs.

c. They featured nationwide news services.

d. They were primarily intended to advertise products.

e. They featured comics, sensational journalism, photographs, and sports sections.

3. Which of the following won an Oscar for his environmental and political documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*?

a. Michael Moore

b. Rush Limbaugh

c. Newt Gingrich

d. Al Gore

e. Jimmy Carter

4. Which of the following magazines has the greatest circulation?

a. Time

b. AARP Magazine

c. Newsweek

d. U.S. News & World Report

e. Reader’s Digest

5. What term do we use to describe the mixing of news and diversion oriented to personalities or celebrities?

a. soft journalism

b. infotainment

c. journiety

d. the newsie news

e. yellow journalism

6. After a 2006 court decision decided that bloggers had the same protection of sources as established media organizations, many feared

a. a return to the fairness doctrine.

b. a return to equality and civility.

c. a move toward a wild west atmosphere.

d. a move to decentralize mass media.

e. the beginnings of a media war.

7. What percentage of adults surveyed admitted that they learned about the 2008 political campaigns from comedy shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*?

a. 10 percent and under

b. 15 percent

c. 20 percent

d. 25 percent

e. 30 percent and over

8. Most Americans rely on which of the following as their *chief* news source?

a. television

b. newspapers

c. magazines

d. radio

e. the Internet

9. Americans are *most* concerned about what is happening

a. in the world.

b. in their own community.

c. in their state.

d. to the president.

e. in Congress.

10. From a 2005 analysis of 16,800 stories that were reported by newspapers and national news programs, over 50 percent of the stories were from which of the following categories?

a. government and politics

b. economy

c. entertainment

d. crime

e. foreign affairs

11. Which of the following FCC regulations has been imposed on the print media?

a. equal opportunities rule

b. reasonable access rule

c. fairness doctrine

d. legibility criteria

e. none of the above

12. As our population has increased, ABC, CBS, and NBC have experienced

a. an almost 50 percent increase in their viewing audience.

b. an almost 50 percent decrease in their viewing audience.

c. almost no change in number of their viewing audience.

d. an almost 25 percent increase in their viewing audience.

e. an almost 25 percent decrease in their viewing audience.

13. Which independent regulatory agency of our government set the social, economic, and technical goals for the communication industry up through 1996?

a. U.S. Postal Service

b. Federal Aviation Commission

c. Federal Telecommunications Panel

d. U.S. Communications Agency

e. Federal Communications Commission

14. What term do we use to describe the people who decide which events to report and how to report them?

a. horse race journalists

b. fairness doctrinaires

c. policy specialists

d. gatekeepers

e. top dogs

15. What term do we use to describe news stories which focus on who is ahead in the polls and not on the candidate’s position on the issues?

a. horse race journalists

b. fairness doctrinaires

c. policy specialists

d. gatekeepers

e. top dogs

16. Which of the following *best* describes those people who rely on television as their major source of political news and information?

a. more informed about politics than everyone else

b. no more and no less informed about politics than anyone else

c. less informed about politics than everyone else

d. more independent voters who rely on facts to make decisions

e. a new breed of young, informed Americans

17. The mass media’s coverage of the civil rights movement tended to advance

a. equality.

b. order.

c. majoritarian democracy.

d. freedom.

e. pluralism.

18. Which of the following can the media have the greatest influence with?

a. setting the political agenda

b. influencing the outcome of elections

c. keeping an accurate historical record

d. blending news and information

e. creating and maintaining TV personalities

19. Which value is *most* likely to be held as absolute by the media?

a. liberalism

b. equality of access

c. social order

d. freedom of expression

e. political equality

20. What term do we use to describe the tendency of many journalists to view their job as a search for inaccuracies in fact and weakness of arguments from politicians?

a. focused journalism

b. watchdog journalism

c. sentinels

d. gatekeeper journalism

e. guardhouse journalism

21. What term do we use to describe the use of sophisticated data collection and analysis techniques to report the news?

a. gatekeeper journalism

b. analytical journalism

c. focused journalism

d. statistical journalism

e. precision journalism

22. Which Congressional act in 1996 scrapped limitations on media ownership at both the national and local areas?

a. Telecommunications Act

b. Multi-Media Act

c. Internet Reform Act

d. Electronic Reform Act

e. Public Airways Act

23. The television hypothesis postulates that those who watch more television are

a. more informed and involved than everyone else.

b. more liberal than those who do not.

c. more conservative than those who do not.

d. less informed and involved than everyone else.

e. none of the above.

24. The two-step flow of communication relies on what actors to influence public attitudes and opinions?

a. reporters

b. editors

c. attentive elites

d. political parties

e. interest groups

25. YouTube teamed up with CNN to host a presidential debate in 2008. What animated figure posed a question about global warming and the environment?

a. Santa Claus

b. Flakey, the snowflake

c. Rudolph, the reindeer

d. Larina, the polar bear

e. Billiam, the snowman

Essay Questions

1. Has the availability of Internet news sources improved the type and quality of information available for citizens? What are the advantages and drawbacks of relying on the Internet for information about politics?

2. Explain how media executives, news editors, and reporters function as gatekeepers in directing news flow. What types of news are likely to get through the gate?

3. How do the media affect elections? Be sure to include an explanation of bias and perception.

4. What are the consequences of private ownership of the media? Explain how concentration of media ownership might undermine democratic government.

5. Where does the public get its news? How does the source of people’s news affect the bias of their news?

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. a

2. b

3. d

4. b

5. b

6. c

7. e

8. a

9. b

10. a

11. e

12. b

13. e

14. d

15. c

16. c

17. a

18. a

19. d

20. b

21. e

22. a

23. d

24. c

25. e