



THE MEDIA AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Class Notes || Updated 11/15/14



I. Three Important Roles of the Media

- A. **Gatekeeper (agenda setting)** - influence what subjects become national political issues, and for how long.
- B. **Scorekeeper (horse race journalism)** - the national media help make political reputations, note who is being “mentioned” as presidential candidates and decides who the winners and losers are in Washington. This often leads to the coverage of presidential elections as if they were horseraces (what happens during the primaries).
EX: who’s up and who’s down in the polls; body count in Vietnam; size/amount of bombs in Iraq
- C. **Watchdog** - Following closely the front-runner candidates, searching for any past or current history that will make “news”. Media maintains close eye on all important happenings of major candidates; expose corruption, wrong-doing by candidates and government officials (ex: Watergate)

II. Effect of the Media on Political Preferences?

- A. **Framing** - the media focuses on certain events, and places them in a field of meaning; how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information.
- B. While TV may influence the political agenda (*agenda setting*) to a certain degree, people are very unlikely to take cues from the media on issues that affect them personally.
- C. Media usually does more to reinforce beliefs than to change opinion.

III. Trends in News Coverage >>> **media = primary link to American politics**

- A. **TV News**
 - 1. Coverage of the news has been reduced to 15-45 second sound bites
 - 2. 24/7, around the clock news coverage
 - 3. “Real time” news reporting
 - 4. Rise of reporting the news with an ideological agenda (FOX News, MSNBC)
 - 5. Many Americans, particularly young people, getting the news from late night television (*Daily Show*)
- B. **Rise of Talk Radio**
 - 1. 9 of 10 Americans listen to radio especially in their cars
 - 2. radio personalities: Rush Limbaugh, Oliver North, G. Gordon Liddy
 - 3. “legit” news radio >>> NPR
- C. **Newspapers** >>> even with competition from cable, internet, etc., 63 million Americans read the paper
 - 1. Rise of national papers: *Wall Street Journal, USA Today, NY Times, Washington Post*
 - 2. Death of local newspapers
 - 3. Newspapers laying off journalist, photographers
 - 4. Intense advertising competition
 - 5. 60% of cities have competing newspapers
- D. **Internet:** a major source of news and information
 - 1. According to the Pew Center for the People and the Press, currently, 35% of Americans go online for news at least once a week
 - 2. The online news audience has been younger, male, better-educated and affluent, and this remains the case. Americans under the age of 50 are twice as likely as those 50 and over to go online for news at least once a week (43%-22%).
 - 3. Blogs - many Americans pay follow and contribute to blogs
- E. **Rise of Social Media**
 - 1. Growing influence of social media (FaceBook, Twitter, email, texting) on communication, public opinion, reporting the news
 - 2. Politicians use social media to connect with voters (ex: Obama effectively used FaceBook in 2008 and 2012 campaigns)

- F. *Intense Competition* – so many news sources; pressure to get the news out first, get the “scoop” >>> Result is Race to Get It First, NOT Get It Right!
- G. *Narrowcasting*
 - 1. Targeting media programming at specific populations within society >>> “niche journalism”
 - 2. May promote the interests of parts of the population
 - 3. Ideological examples: MSNBC stresses liberal perspective, FOX News emphasizes conservative viewpoint, traditionally >>> Cultural examples: BET (African Americans), CBN (Christian conservatives), Telemundo (Hispanic Americans)
 - 4. Consequences
 - i. Contributes to polarization of public opinion
 - ii. Reporting the facts are much less important
- H. *Media Conglomerates* >>> mega news empires
 - 1. EX: Newscorp (owns Fox News, *Wall Street Journal*), Disney/ABC/ESPN; TimeWarner/Turner Broadcasting, Garnett Corp owns 92 daily newspapers, 11 radio & cable stations
 - 2. Consequences?

IV. Criticism of the Media

- A. *Profit motive* -Media must be free to serve its roles as gatekeeper, scorekeeper and watchdog, but that freedom also forces them to act in their own interests. They have a strong incentive to investigate personalities and expose scandals. This is particularly true of radio and TV because they are both intensely competitive. Election night 2000 prime example of profit motive behind major networks (strong competition, have to stay one step ahead and can not be behind).
- B. *Sensationalism* - “feeding frenzy” i.e. “we like dirty laundry”
- C. *Homogenization of the news* - uniform consistency of the news i.e. everyone’s covering the same stories (gatekeeper)
- D. *Media bias* >>> “liberal bias” say conservatives; FOX News and MSNBC
- E. *Rise of Smashmouth Media* – less effort to be fair and objective; more overtly ideological
- F. *Decline of professional journalism* – fewer “real” journalism/reporting jobs, so who’s researching the facts of a story????
- G. *Irresponsible?* – is the media irresponsible

VI. Who Regulates the Media?

- A. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) - regulates electronic media
- B. Supreme Court - consistently upholds 1st Amend. right of written press including great latitude w/ celebrities & politicians; Am. press much less regulated than in almost any country in the world including Britain
- D. Congress – may hold investigative hearings; pass new laws and regulations
- C. You do!!!! >>>> through ratings; you can always turn the channel