

Chapter 6

The Mass Media

The role of the media in democracy

- The duty of the media is to inform the public
- Monarchies depend on the wisdom of the monarch
- Oligarchies depend on the wisdom of a select few.
- Aristocracies depend on the wisdom of the elite
- Democracy depends on an informed polity

-
- Definition Polity: a politically organized unit. (Word Reference.com)
 - If the people have the right to make decisions they have the obligation to be informed.
 - As the world becomes more complex, and the nature of problems and solutions grow correspondingly in complexity, the people have an obligation to either understand those issues or delegate someone to do it for them.
 - Trust in the character of the politician is more important than ever because of these complex issues requiring expertise and critical thinking.

Where will the people get their information?

- The government
- Candidates (incumbents & challengers)
- Advocacy groups or Lobbyists
- Political Action Committees (PACS)
- Talk Show Hosts
- The Internet
- Word-of-mouth

-
- The complexity of the information needed has left the people more vulnerable to misrepresentation, diversion or distraction.
 - For journalists finding out the truth independently of biased sources is an expensive process.
 - Media personalities have emerged who are entertaining, charismatic, confrontational, opinionated, and often totally devoid of facts, either intentionally or through ignorance.
 - These personalities offer the masses simplistic answers to complex problems, and their answers are more often than not simply wrong.
 - The Internet is a tremendous source of information and misinformation.

- On the Internet there are no editors checking journalists' credibility nor peer review process for checking academics' and researchers' accuracy.
- A critical test for any source of information is to ask oneself if that advocate (an individual or a group) will financially benefit from the position they are advocating.

The Information Cycle

- Democracy must depend on the media to inform the public.
 - The media depends on politicians to inform them
 - Press Secretaries
 - Press Releases and Press Conferences
 - Candidate
 - Subordinates (like the Press Secretary)
-
- An independent and inquisitive media is essential to the success of the democratic process.
 - But journalism, either print or electronic, must also be profitable, at least that's the current view.
 - All Federal Communications licenses to broadcast include mandatory provisions that direct broadcasters to provide public services. These are largely not enforced.
 - Since the advent of television, and particularly since the emergence of 24/7 cable news channels, news media outlets have been purchase by large multi-national corporations.
 - Journalists are dependent on their sources of information.
 - Powerful politicians have realized they can control some journalists by controlling their access to these sources.
 - If the White House doesn't like your questions you can lose your White House pass which is your invitation to attend presidential news conferences and briefings provided by the presidential news secretary.

Additional Sources

- Committee Reports
 - Committee Hearings
 - Departmental reports
 - Commission Reports
 - Public Records
 - Legal documents.
-
- With certain independent commissions staffed by professionals there is a better chance of getting unbiased information than from partisan-staffed committees.

- Many hard-to-find public records can verify as to who is more accurate (or simply telling the truth) and who is not.
- The problem is it takes many long hours to research topics.
- Most profit-oriented businesses that now own the news media do not want to spend the time or money necessary.

The Process is Expensive

- To develop independent sources is more costly
 - The media are profit-oriented businesses
 - Only public broadcasting is non-profit.
 - Depend on advertising to be profitable.
-
- In the early days of television providing news was seen as a public service, an obligation to the public, which did not need to be profitable, and all indications are that they were not profitable.
 - As is always the case, whether its putting in the cheapest seatbelts allowed by law (which leads to more traffic deaths each) or reporting the news, money and profit are the primary determinants.
 - Only public radio and television are free from the profit motive, however, they are fearful of losing what federal support they still get if the offend the majority party in Congress.

The media functions in a free market environment

- The people decide the success or failure of media enterprises
 - *The Enquirer* would stop publishing if people stopped buying it.
 - Television ratings determine TV news success
 - Dramatic news stories raise ratings.
-
- Fox News Channel (FNC) has siphoned off viewers of CNN by appealing to conservatives perception that CNN is too liberal.
 - Cable news outlets have cut into broadcast news viewing audiences because of the convenience of the constant 24/7 availability of cable news.
 - MSNBC has added more conservative commentators in an attempt to get viewers to leave FNC.
 - Ideologically-influenced news reporting has become part of the free-market competition among 24/7 TV news channels.

The Media Marketplace

- Broadcast networks have been bought by multinational corporations
 - Broadcast network seen as simply a business which must be profitable
 - Virtually every news department has been reduced in size and budget.
-
- News reporting has become merely another “product” for these multinational corporations that now own the major broadcast networks.
 - American media is often dependent upon foreign media sources because so many American news organizations have cut back their foreign staffs that they cannot adequately report the news.
 - Some observers have speculated that many Americans were completely unaware as to how much America was hated in the Islamic world prior to September 11, 2001 in part because there were so few American journalists reporting from other countries.
 - This is not to imply that the hatred of America was justified.

Quality Suffers

- This impacts on the quality of the news
 - News departments longer have the money to pay for investigative reporting
-
- Many journalists are no longer free to report on whatever they find.
 - Fear of angering sponsors has always been a factor in both electronic media and print journalism, now the interests of the multi-national corporation which owns either the broadcast or cable network play a role in news coverage.
 - The questionable materials used in the *60 Minutes-Wednesday* report on President Bush’s efforts to avoid combat in Vietnam through the Texas Air National Guard were more the product of sloppy journalism fueled by cost-cutting corporate policies than any unethical effort to harm the president politically.
 - With two more weeks and some flights to Texas someone could have discovered the materials were bogus.
 - CBS pulled well-reported and substantially-verified reports critical of President Bush following the *60 Minutes* debacle because of fear of angering president’s corporate supporters more.

The 24-Hour News Channel

- Competition from 24-hour cable news channels
 - Pressure to constantly have news flowing
 - Must fill time, but still no news bureaus to provide real journalism
 - Time is filled with duplication, speculation, and reporter interviewing reporter.
-

- Much of the obsession with high-profile murders, which though tragic should not replace coverage of issues that impact upon millions of Americans, is the result of the fact that sensational murder investigations and subsequent trials attract more viewers than dull and boring productions about significant policy decisions.
- The need to fill air time in the 24/7 news channel has resulted in non-news, such as speculation from so-called “experts,” which have little or no journalistic value.
- Report on what has happened, not what one might think might happen.
- The “split-screen polemic” has replaced substantive news reporting.
- It is cheaper, and attracts more viewers, to have two people of opposing views shout at one another than to do the costly research of finding out which position might be based in fact.

Reporting by Processing Versions

- He Said/She Said Reporting
 - Reporters copy from each other’s notes
 - No one checks the transcripts or the public documents to see what evidence there is.
 - Report what is being said by both sides, not what evidence there is.
-
- Regrettably, journalism has become simply reporting different views instead of putting forth the sometimes labor-intensive (i.e. expensive) effort to determine which view is likely supported by the facts.
 - The most common model is a variation on the “split-screen polemic,” where two sources with opposing views of some news item (or some salient issue) will be placed in opposition to one another with no regard as to which view is most accurate.
 - One exception is with the use of former military officers as “experts.” They are often placed on camera without opposition and with little or no hard questioning as to whether their assessment is correct.
 - Merely processing what each opposing side’s version as equally plausible, benefits the side which is better organized and better funded, not necessarily which side is correct.

The Sound Byte

- In the absence of personnel to investigate news sources
 - Broadcast time pressures want short-sweet statements / phrases which typify patterns
 - Audience demands that everything is simplified
 - Result: Catch phrases which simplify complex issues and distort the facts.
-

- Producing useable sound bytes has become the primary goal of most professional speech writers.
- As issues become more complex devising a “catch phrase,” which is what a sound byte really is, becomes more and more difficult.
- A poorly-crafted catch phrase, which results in a negative sound byte, can be as harmful to a particular position as being factually inaccurate.
- Long, complex answers, though they are likely more correct than short, simplistic ones, are avoided because of the electronic media’s desire to have need to offer more and more commercial time within news programs and the public’s desire to have simple, easy phrases to support their opinions.
- This “dumbing down” of journalistic standards has impacted upon the overall quality of news reporting.

The Unnamed Source

- With deep cuts in news staff and no one to do extensive and expensive research the leak has become the primary source of news.
 - Vital information is given by sources that request their names not be used.
-
- The unnamed source was first used by journalists to avoid retribution against the news source, as was the case in the Watergate scandal for the source known as “Deep Throat.” (now in Spring 2005 reportedly near death)
 - Some unnamed sources are elected officials or highly-placed career government employees who are unhappy with the course of events or the formulation of policy.
 - Now some unnamed sources are high officials, who support the majority’s position, in the governing administration who wish to impact upon the news without having to be held accountable.
 - Some news leaks are meant to destroy the political careers of opponents.
 - In the summer of 2003 the release of CIA secret agent Valarie Plame’s name to the press was done by some high official in the Bush II administration.
 - Only a handful of public officials had access to the top secret information that Valarie Plum (a wife of a diplomat who was critical of President Bush’s policies on Iraq) was a secret agent working for the CIA.
 - Releasing the names of secret agents is a violation of federal law.
 - The *Intelligence Identity’s Identification Act* (1982) was passed in response to a former CIA agent releasing names of other secret agents in a book released after that agent retired from the CIA.
 - That law was passed in 1982 after Phillip Agey, a rogue CIA Operative began publishing the names of undercover CIA officers and two were assassinated, one in Athens, Greece, and one in Beirut.

The News Leak

- Leaks can be used to manipulate press
- Leaks can be unauthorized or authorized-- planted.
- Example: Clinton's closed grand jury testimony in the morning is leaked to the evening news though testimony is confidential.

-
- The news leak is the information which produces news released by an unnamed source.
 - Some reporters have regular sources from whom they can get "leaks" from on a regular basis.
 - The group who were captured in the Watergate building having burglarized the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee were part of a group formed by President Nixon's aides called the plumbers, whose job it was to find the sources of news leaks.

Before September 11, 2001

- All of the networks and most newspapers have closed foreign bureaus.
 - Foreign bureaus are expensive
 - Americans are not interested in foreign news
 - Media is financed by advertising
 - Result: Most Americans are ignorant of foreign current events.
-
- Some critics of the American press believe that the average Americans' profound ignorance about international issues is a direct result of the lack of serious reporting on international issues by American journalists.

Who Reports News in Other Countries?

- The BBC owned by the British government
 - No U.S. governmental domestic media source
 - U.S. Information Agency broadcasts abroad-- Radio Marti broadcasts to Cuba
 - Radio Free Europe broadcasted to Soviet block.
-
- For all its problems the American media is one of the best in the world.
 - European press and Canadian media are equally proficient.

Many countries have no free press

- China*
 - Third-World dictatorships
 - Saudi Arabia*
 - Serbia
 - Kuwait *
 - *foreign journalists operate with relative freedom.
-
- Some countries, like Saudi Arabia, which are friendly to America do not have a free press.

In some countries the press is intimidated

- Drug dealers kill & kidnap reporters
 - Government-sponsored death squads
 - South America
 - Muslim Fundamentalists in Algeria & Pakistan
 - Intimidation is both official & unofficial
-
- In Latin America, journalists who report on drug cartels and corrupt politicians are routinely killed for their work.
 - Journalists killed in the line of duty during the last 10 years.
 - http://www.cpj.org/killed/Ten_Year_Killed/Intro.html

What happened in the past here in America?

- In the 19th Century the media was all print based.
 - Some owned by millionaires
 - Big city papers
 - Friends of industrialists
 - Small independent papers relying on telegraph.
-
- If today a majority of the American press is liberal, which may or may not be relevant, it was not always the case.

The Muckrakers

- Yellow Journalism
- Investigative Reporting.

- *The Jungle*
 - Upton Sinclair's exposé about meat processing
 - Progressivism in journalism.
-
- During the height of the Industrial Revolution some reporters broke with the trend to be apologists for the rich and powerful and began to write about the abuses of this profit-at-any-cost system.

Who becomes a journalist?

- Ambitious and bright
 - Dissatisfied with the status quo
 - Wanting to be part of politics without being in politics
 - Print: Good writers & analysts
 - Broadcast: Physically attractive, good speakers, celebrities.
-
- People who become journalists are often dissatisfied with the status quo.
 - They seek to be journalists to address what they believe to be the inadequacies of the system.
 - The medium of television has changed the equation. Now it is more important to be physically attractive and have an good voice than to be journalistically competent.
 - Much of the real journalistic research for television news personalities is actually done by “producers” not the so-called television news personality.
 - In England television anchors are more accurately called “news readers,” removing any false sense that they are reading work which was their journalistic product from beginning to end.

The press and Franklin Delano Roosevelt

- Never showed him in a wheel chair
 - Never showed his leg braces
 - Never reported on his romantic affairs
 - They respected his privacy
 - They wanted him to be a symbol
 - Do not report on rumored affairs
-
- President Roosevelt (FDR) had become a personification of the federal government's efforts to deal with the ravages of the Great Depression.
 - Even the FDR's most virulent critics did not mention the fact that he was paralyzed from the waste down.

- On the day of FDR's death he was being visited by a woman with whom he had an adulterous relationship with many years earlier.

The press and President Eisenhower

- Female military aide who was always with him; in full view of war journalists
 - She write memoirs about affair in 1960's
 - The press helped keep presidential secrets which were believed not to impact upon the performance of the office.
 - Most most newspapers owned by pro-Republican publishers
-
- The almost exclusively male corps of journalists condoned infidelity by not reporting on it.
 - The journalists believed such adulterous conduct to be personal having little bearing on the performance of duties.

The press and John Kennedy

- rumors rampant about numerous affairs.
 - Kennedy gave more access to the press than previous presidents
 - The male-dominated press had their own failings
 - Kennedy was not self-righteous; the press liked him
 - Handsome, articulate and most broadcast journalists are pro-Democrat.
-
- One of the women President Kennedy was having an affair with was also a girlfriend of a Mafia leader from Chicago.
 - Kennedy talked openly about girlfriends in the presence of people who were not part of his immediate and loyal staff.

The Press and Watergate

- Presidential corruption exposed by journalists
 - Journalists use investigative reporting to expose broad scandal
 - Interview used only in concert with evidence
 - Use of high level source to verify information
 - The media experiences a boom spawned by scandal.
-
- The story of Watergate, though commonplace in the vernacular, the substance of the scandal seems to have been forgotten.

- Not many papers then and only a handful now would have invested the time and money into working through the vast amounts of information and countless interviews necessary to effectively report on this far-reaching scandal.
- The pattern of adding the suffix “gate” to minor scandals, and non-scandals alike, diminishes the seriousness and the magnitude of the Watergate scandal.
- The essence of the scandal was that President Nixon formed a group of political operatives whose job it was to burglarize the offices of opponents to gain embarrassing political information.
- The second part of the scandal was that President Nixon, once the burglars were arrested, sought to use the office of the president to facilitate a cover-up, including the payment of hush money, the destruction of evidence, and perjury.
- President Nixon even asked the CIA and the FBI to assist in the coverup and claim that there were national security reasons for the burglary.

President Nixon’s Response

- The press is intimidated.
 - FBI investigates journalists
 - IRS audits reporters
 - Nixon’s enemies lists
 - The relationship between the presidency and the press will never be the same.
-
- At first Woodward and Bernstein were threatened by Nixon administration officials.
 - President Nixon would claim there were national security issues involved in the Watergate break in and ask the C.I.A. and the F.B.I. to back up his version of the cover-up.
 - This was the most serious offence, one that only a national leader in the position of the president could attempt to accomplish.
 - This was the offence which was most likely to result in a conviction after impeachment.
 - Congressional investigators had found evidence that President Nixon had misrepresented facts on his personal income tax but the House committee that was looking into the scandal determined that simple tax fraud was not an offence unique to the office of the president and was not an offence for possible impeachment.

The press and Vietnam

- The combat becomes the substance of evening news
- The press not part of the military.
- Extensive film and video of combat

- Press can verify or refute military claims
 - Many military claims were false.
-
- The American people saw the death, the suffering and serious injury war causes on the evening news.
 - Journalist were independently roaming the Vietnamese countryside and seeing that the military was offering an overly optimistic view of the war (some reporters would say in some instances the military were offering outright falsehoods).
 - The journalists challenged the official versions with their reporting.
 - The press was free to talk to any soldier they chose and to film any event they wanted.
 - This is why current U.S. military leaders will not allow the press to roam freely where there are military operations.

The Pentagon Papers

- The Pentagon in the Johnson Administration hires a contractor to evaluate the history of Vietnam policy.
 - Employee of the contractor, Brookings Institute, Daniel Ellsberg, leaks report to the *New York Times*.
 - The report was critical of policy on Vietnam.
-
- The Nixon administration declared “top secret” a document which called into question the decisions which led to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.
 - Though the *Pentagon Papers* were critical of two Democratic administrations (Johnson’s and Kennedy’s) and two Republican administrations (Eisenhower’s and Nixon’s) Nixon sought to have the information suppressed.

Nixon Administration Response

- Pentagon claims the report is “Top Secret.”
 - FBI breaks into the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist to blackmail him and/or to discredit him.
 - Directed by White House staff
 - Pentagon seeks federal courts to block publication of the *Pentagon Papers* by the *New York Times*.
-
- Radio talk show personality G. Gordon Liddy was, before he became a primary player in the Watergate scandal, one of the F.B.I. agents who routinely broke into the offices of people who were critical of American policy.

- The F.B.I. agents broke into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist hoping to find proof that he was gay (in an era when divulging one's homosexuality would end a career).
- Some historians believe that President Nixon created his own ring of spies, many captured at the Watergate break in site, because the F.B.I. would no longer perform such illegal tasks.
- President Johnson, with the assistance of F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, had F.B.I. agents gather information about critics of his administration.
- Throughout his tenure as F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover collected personal information about critics of the F.B.I. and anyone whom he believed too critical of America or American policy.

The Supreme Court Rules

- Supreme Court rules that the Pentagon Papers are of historical value and cannot be prohibited from publishing by prior restraint.
 - The "Top Secret" designation cannot be used to inhibit publications which draw critical conclusions about past policy.
-
- The term "top secret" was applied indiscriminately.
 - It is highly unlikely that the Supreme Court's current conservative members would have allowed the court to reach the same conclusion as was reached in the *Pentagon Papers*.
 - Critics of the Bush II administration have alleged that information related to the 9-11 Commission were designated "top secret" and subsequently redacted (i.e. blacked out), when the materials in question were merely potentially embarrassing to the administration.