

## Lecture Outline: Chapter 9

### **Media and Politics**

- I. There can be little doubt that the press plays a vital role in American politics. Indeed, the rise of the mass media has clearly changed American politics.
  - A. This sense that the press has changed American politics often gives rise to the myth of media manipulation, the belief and fear that the media indoctrinate Americans.
  - B. In their defense, journalists argue that they serve as simply a mirror to society, reflecting the world. “The news is not a reporter’s perception or explanation of what happens; it is simply what happens.”
  - C. As the chapter shows, neither view is an adequate explanation of the media in American society. The relationship between the media and public opinion is not as straightforward as the myth suggests. Nor is it true that journalists are simply passive instruments through which events are transmitted.
- II. Today Americans have thousands of media sources to choose from, but this has not always been the case.
  - A. Before 1830, the American press consisted of specialized publications designed to reach elite audiences, such as the party faithful. There was no mass media.
    1. The publication in 1833 of the *New York Sun* marked the beginning of the mass media. The *Sun*, selling for a penny on street corners (thus the term *penny press*), was greatly imitated.
    2. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of a more sensationalist press known as “yellow journalism.” Two publishers, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, became particularly famous and powerful through their control of newspapers. *The New York Times* attacked the excesses of yellow journalism and set a new standard of objectivity in reporting.
  - B. The first regularly scheduled radio station began broadcasting in 1920. Owned by Westinghouse, the major producer of home receivers, KDKA was initiated to spur the sale of home sets.
    1. Although initially, most radio stations were owned by non-profit institutions dedicated to using the medium to educate the public, the Federal Radio Commission reallocated, in 1928, radio licenses awarding them to commercial owners.
    2. CBS radio was the first network to devote substantial attention to public affairs programming.
  - C. Like radio, television was an immensely profitable business that resisted programming news and public affairs.
    1. Throughout the 1950s, network television news was limited to one 15-minute program five nights a week.
    2. Not until the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates demonstrated the commercial potential of news and public affairs programming did the networks significantly expand their coverage.
    3. Following the 1960 debates, the major networks began a fierce competition to produce the most highly rated newscasts. As a consequence, the audience grew into the millions, as television became for many the most believable source of news.
  - D. Although the media present thousands of outlets, many observers are concerned about the increasing concentration of media ownership.

1. About 80 percent of all daily newspapers are owned by the 12 largest chains.
  2. Only 2 percent of America's cities have more than one newspaper.
  3. About 85 percent of American television stations are affiliated with one of the three networks, which are themselves owned by huge conglomerates with multiple media interests.
  4. The rise of cable television, direct satellite transmission, and a variety of technologies that combine video and computer processing with microwave transmissions imply a future of infinite choices. But the question remains: who will own these sources of communication?
  5. Many observers believe that concentrated media ownership is no longer important, because the rise of the Internet has made their control irrelevant. Nevertheless, major media conglomerates are quickly integrating the new technology into their holdings.
- E. The American press is more free of government restrictions than that of any other nation. Nevertheless, the government does exercise control, especially over the broadcast outlets.
1. The Federal Communications Commission is charged with issuing licenses to broadcasters. License renewals are to be granted for "satisfactory performance" that "serves the public interest, convenience, and necessity."
  2. Despite the vagueness of this mandate, the FCC has refused to exercise significant control over broadcasters.
  3. The equal-time rule requires broadcasters who permit one candidate to campaign on the station to allow equal time at identical rates to all candidates for the same office.
- III. Contrary to the view of the media as the mirror to society, news must be picked from a multitude of happenings, only a few of which will ever be covered.
- A. News is "what reporters, editors, and producers decide is news."
  - B. Although the basis for news judgment often seems vague, three criteria can be identified:
    1. Stories must be timely and novel.
    2. Newsworthiness is heightened by the presence of violence, conflict, disaster, or scandal.
    3. Familiarity is also an element of newsworthiness. Events are more likely to be covered if they involve people the public already knows.
  - C. In addition, reporters rely almost exclusively on interviews.
  - D. These criteria stress ways of keeping the audience interested and profits large by selling their audience to advertisers.
  - E. The growth of media outlets has made even these standings problematic. The fierce competition to get the story and get it fast, plus the blurring of lines between news and entertainment has led to a relaxation of the standards for what constitutes news.
- IV. Contrary to the myth of media manipulation, most research suggests that the media fail to change people's political beliefs.
- A. Individuals exercise selective exposure, absorbing only information that agrees with their own existing beliefs.
  - B. For those subjects on which individuals lack knowledge, however, citizens often adopt the views of media commentators.
  - C. Moreover, television news presentations are particularly effective in shaping the public's attribution of responsibility. Episodic presentations encourage the public to blame the individuals involved, while thematic coverage leads the viewers to attribute responsibility to societal forces or public officials.

- D. Although the media may not be able to change attitudes, they have a strong influence on their audience's view of what is politically important. This ability to influence the public's agenda is greatest when the events are outside an individual's experience or are new to the society.
- E. Agenda setting also involves priming, or highlighting certain themes, while ignoring others, as the criteria for evaluating politicians.
- F. Politicians are much more attuned to the press than is the average citizen.
  - 1. Candidates and public officials tailor their activities to the needs of the press. In order to attract reporters to their campaign, candidates routinely create pseudo-events—staged events designed specifically to attract media attention.
  - 2. Despite the coverage, candidates have become voiceless, as reporters present the candidates in ever-shorter sound bites.
  - 3. To reach the public directly, candidates have come to rely heavily on the video news release (VNR)—a news-like talk program or interview, produced and paid for by the candidate.
  - 4. Candidates increasingly are also making use of the so-called new media—radio call-in shows and late night entertainment shows.
  - 5. Media coverage of political campaigns stresses campaign tactics rather than issues.
  - 6. Journalists defend this preoccupation with tactics by arguing that the audience prefers to hear about strategy rather than issues. Whether this is true or not, it is clear that the focus on strategy provides the kind of drama that makes for interesting stories.
  - 7. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that the constant coverage of politics as a game increases the public's distrust of candidates.
- V. Although journalists and government officials are often portrayed as adversaries, they are also dependent on one another. Their mutual dependence forms an uneasy alliance.
  - A. The uneasy alliance is seen most clearly in the coverage of the president. Since almost everything the president does is news, occupants of the office reach the American public on a daily basis. Nevertheless, few presidents are entirely happy with their press coverage.
    - 1. Most members of the White House press corps simply repeat the information given to them by the president's press secretary.
    - 2. Presidential press conferences represent an important opportunity for the president to communicate to the public. They are not, however, the spontaneous events that they seem. Presidents carefully prepare for these events.
    - 3. Presidents frequently complain of leaks to the press, yet many leaks originate in the White House as, for instance, "trial balloons."
  - B. Congress is more difficult for the national press to cover, primarily because it lacks a single leader. To cope with this situation, reporters pay particular attention to party leaders, committee chairs, and others who hold key leadership positions. Members do, however, receive extensive local media coverage, often writing columns and producing radio and television tapes for broadcast in the constituency.
  - C. The least covered branch of the government is the courts. The complex nature of court decisions and the specialized knowledge necessary to interpret them make judicial decisions subject to misinterpretation. This is aggravated by judges' refusal to meet with the press and explain their decisions.
- VI. We began this chapter by noting that the mass media have a significant effect on American politics. Clearly, that is the case.

- A. The myth of media manipulation is, however, an exaggeration of media power. The media do not change individual's attitudes, but media coverage does have a significant effect on what people think about.
- B. Similarly, the defense of the media as simply the mirror to society misrepresents the function of the media in American society. As the chapter demonstrates, news is simply out there. Reporters, editors, and producers make choices in news coverage.