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 America.
- Explain who owns the media in America and how they 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 presentation of news by broadcast media can influence opinions and attitudes. Responding to perceptions of liberal bias in the broadcast news media, FOX claimed to offer “fair and balanced” coverage of news. The popularity of FOX and the more general shift in coverage by the cable networks suggest the importance of access to the airwaves by multiple and competing news organizations. 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 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 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.

Development of Mass Media in the United States

This chapter focuses on the political uses of mass media in the news industry (that is, print and broadcast journalism).

American 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 newsgathering 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. News personalities became nationally known.

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, for instance, makes information readily available and even helps to break news. It also allows users to share their opinions. The Internet and related technology have been adopted by citizen organizations, government organizations, and election campaigns.

Private Ownership of the Media

In America, 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.
Ownership of the media in America 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 Federal Communications Commission (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.

Reporting and Following the News
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.

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.

Political Effects of the Media
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 linked to television news coverage.

Nevertheless, most scholars believe that the real power of the media consists of its 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**

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.

In general, the media improves 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
- newsworthiness
- market-driven journalism
- infotainment
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
- gatekeepers
- horse race journalism
- media event
- television hypothesis
- political agenda

**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 will 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:
  


- Somewhere in the center, generally striving for editorial balance:


  *Daedalus*. An academic quarterly; each volume focuses on a single topic and offers a variety of viewpoints.

  *Harper’s*. Similar to *Atlantic*, 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.thenewrepublic.com>.


- And finally, some on-line addresses for “alternative” publications mentioned in the text:


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


**USING YOUR KNOWLEDGE**

1. Select one of the following controversial subjects:

   - welfare reform
   - affirmative action
   - abortion
   - reforming the income tax

Using the *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature*, the Internet search engine <http://www.google.com>, or 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 may 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 Web site at <http://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.

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: The 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


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. The deadline for summer is February 1; for the academic year, May 1. Telephone: 202-331-7494.

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 best served 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 mainly featured comics, sensational journalism, photographs, and sports sections.
   b. They were primarily intended to advertise products.
   c. They featured nationwide news services.
   d. They were mainly political organs.
   e. They had very large circulations.

3. Which of the following groups is politically influenced by the content of the magazines they read?
   a. Europeans
   b. advocates for the poor
   c. attentive policy elites
   d. continental communicators
   e. congressional special interests

4. What is the primary criterion of a story’s newsworthiness?
   a. timeliness
   b. degree of sensationalism
   c. close-to-home character
   d. treatment of familiar people or events
   e. audience appeal
5. What term do we use to describe the mixing of news and theater to re-create or simulate an event?
   a. pack journalism
   b. infotainment
   c. horse race journalism
   d. the two-step flow of communication
   e. yellow journalism

6. Broadcast media first came under regulation as a response to which of the following?
   a. To ensure political candidates equal treatment under the fairness doctrine.
   b. As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attempt to impose socialism.
   c. As a response to broadcasters’ need for order on the airwaves.
   d. As an attempt to limit media concentration.
   e. During the Vietnam War.

7. Which of the following is not a consequence of private ownership of the broadcast media?
   a. Media dependence on advertising.
   b. Increasing amounts of airtime devoted to news on the major networks.
   c. Media attention to ratings.
   d. Media selection of stories based primarily on political significance.
   e. Media emphasis on entertainment value in the presentation of news.

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. When a person gives information that reporters may not quote or use, the informant is said to be
    a. speaking “for the record.”
    b. “floating a trial balloon.”
    c. speaking “off the record.”
    d. speaking “on background.”
    e. interpreting new news.

11. Which of the following FCC regulation 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 which of the following?
    a. An almost 50% increase in their viewing audience.
    b. An almost 50% decrease in their viewing audience.
    c. Almost no change in numbers in their viewing audience.
    d. An almost 25% increase in their viewing audience.
    e. An almost 25% 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. United States Postal Service
   b. Federal Aviation Commission
   c. Federal Telecommunications Panel
   d. United States Communications Agency
   e. Federal Communication 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’s ahead in the polls and not on the candidate’s position on the issues?
   a. gatekeeping
   b. placement doctrine
   c. horse race journalism
   d. wolf pack journalism
   e. competition journalism

16. Which of the following best describes those people who rely on the 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 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 which of the following?
   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 of 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. Most people do not realize how quickly most news stories are shown. How long does an average televised news story last?
   a. thirty seconds
   b. about one minute
   c. about two minutes
   d. about three minutes
   e. less than thirty seconds

23. What does the television hypothesis postulate?
   a. Those who watch more television are more informed and involved than everyone else.
   b. Those who watch more television are more liberal than those who do not.
   c. Those who watch more television are more conservative than those who do not.
   d. Those who watch more television are less informed and involved than everyone else.
   e. None of these

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. the political parties
   e. interest groups

25. Market-driven journalism describes
   a. the pressures that lead to concentrated ownership of media.
   b. favorable coverage of capitalism by the broadcast media.
   c. the fact that reporters must pay for their stories.
   d. the effects of production costs on news quality.
   e. the way that news and commercials are targeted to specific demographic groups.

**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. Are the national news media biased? Answer this question by discussing research outlined in the chapter.

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 a person’s news affect the bias of their news?

ANSWERS TO MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. a
2. d
3. c
4. e
5. b
6. c
7. e
8. a
9. b
10. c
11. e
12. b
13. e
14. d
15. c
16. c
17. a
18. a
19. d
20. b
21. e
22. b
23. d
24. c
25. e