

## CH. 10 – MASS MEDIA

Any study of linkage institutions would be incomplete without a consideration of the role that mass media plays in the American political system. Political parties and interest groups serve as important links between citizens and government, but an increasingly important component is mass media that provides information, and also shapes, fosters, or censors it. Mass media has become such an integral part of the political system that it is sometimes called “**the fourth branch**” of government, and it both reflects and influences public opinion. The media link public opinion and the government, and the influence of the mass media on politics is enormous.

### THE FUNCTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF THE MEDIA

Mass media may be broken down into three major components: print media, electronic media, and the internet. Print media has played a role in American politics almost from the beginning, when the early political parties published their own, very partisan newspapers. Electronic media became a force during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first with the invention of radio, and later the invention and widespread access to television. The internet first came to be used in the early 1970s by the government, and developed into a major medium of communication by the century’s end.

### FUNCTIONS OF THE MEDIA

The mass media perform a number of functions in American society, and all have an impact on the political system.

- **Entertainment** - Radio and television both emphasize entertainment, with prime-time ratings for television often making or breaking the overall success of the networks and individual stations. Particularly in recent years politics has been a topic for entertainment, with numerous movies focused on the president as the star of fictional political sagas. A popular TV series, *The West Wing*, began as an obvious take-off on the real White House Office of President Bill Clinton, but it survived the transition to the very different style and personnel of George W. Bush’s staff. Popular late-night shows, such as *Saturday Night Live*, also entertain people with their humorous treatment of political figures and events. This type of entertainment may play an important role in political socialization, shaping opinions of political institutions and practices at the same time they are entertaining us.
- **News Reports** - Reporting the news has been a major function of print media since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and newspapers and magazines remain an important source for people interested in simply finding out what is happening in the country and the world outside. Today more people rely on television than on newspapers and magazines to provide news. In the early days of television, news was generally reported early every evening in a fifteen-minute segment before the night’s entertainment began. Today network news has expanded to thirty and sixty minute segments, but cable television has made round-the-clock news reporting possible, with CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC focusing on news stories and commentary virtually 24 hours a day.
- **Agenda Setting** - One important source of political, social, and economic power is the ability of the media to draw public attention to particular issues. Equally important are the issues that the media *doesn’t* focus on. For example, the media may promote terrorism as a major issue in American society by airing the latest tape by Osama bin Laden, but Americans may remain unconcerned about the AIDS epidemic in Africa because the media is silent about that issue. The media may promote a president’s agenda by focusing on his proposals, or they may distract from a president’s agenda by focusing on a “sideshow,” such as they did with Bill Clinton’s personal and financial life. Conservative radio hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, have developed large audiences that are influenced not just by the opinions expressed, but are also encouraged to focus on some issues but not on others.

- **Creation of Political Forums** - Politicians have learned to use the mass media to make important announcements or to encourage citizens to focus on their issues. The media wants to make politics interesting so that viewer ratings remain high, so politicians often respond by "making news" that will draw attention from the media. A presidential candidate may dress up in hunting gear, or pose in a "photo op" with a respected former president, as John Kerry did in 2004. Members of Congress may call attention to their causes through filibusters or public announcements of popular legislation passed. The individual that has the most direct access to the media is the president, who may command prime time for important announcements and speeches. Presidential press conferences usually get extensive coverage, and the president's daily activities are followed carefully.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE MEDIA

In the past 50 years, the broadcast, or electronic, media have gradually replaced the print media as the main source of political information. Today, the internet is the most rapidly growing type of mass media.

- **Print Media** - Most newspapers today are still locally based, although many of them are part of massive media conglomerates, such as Gannett, Knight, Ridder, and Newhouse. However, papers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have a national readership that makes them an important force in policymaking. Most magazines do not focus on politics, but news magazines, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Nation*, and *New Republic*, have considerable influence on American government and politics.
- **Electronic Media** - Radio was first invented in 1903, but made its big debut in politics when a Pittsburgh station broadcast the 1920 election returns. President Franklin Roosevelt used radio successfully in his "fireside chats" to the nation. Despite the advent of television in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, radio remains an important linkage institution, especially since many Americans spend time in their cars for work commutes and travel. Conservative talk shows provide commentary on national politics, and National Public Radio puts a great deal of focus on political events and personalities. Television's influence on the American public is tremendous, especially with the advent of cable television. Americans not only get information from television, but they also listen to commentaries and analysis of the news.
- **The Internet** - Internet technology and access has transformed communications in a very short period of time, particularly during the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The internet has become a tool for researching almost any topic under the planet, and also serves as a major entertainment outlet for millions. People across the globe may instantaneously contact one another by e-mail, and written letters have almost become a thing of the past. Today **blogs** and list serves devote much time to political topics, and provide an interactive forum for people to express and react to political opinions. Internet communications played an integral role in the election campaign of 2004, when candidates raised unprecedented amounts of money on campaign websites. In addition, 527s established internet sites that not only raised money, but spread their influence through interactive "chats." On election day in 2004, electronic news media pledged to not make public reports from exit polls until everyone had voted. However, internet sources made no such commitment, and strong rumors passed around the websites that predicted victory for Democratic candidate John Kerry. The predictions were wrong, and President George W. Bush was reelected, but the election affirmed the growing political influence of the internet.

## GOVERNMENT REGULATION OF THE MEDIA

As a general rule, print media has much fewer government restrictions than does electronic media. The First Amendment to the Constitution has been interpreted to mean that no government, federal or state, can place **prior restraint** on the press before stories are published. Once something is published, a newspaper or magazine may be sued or prosecuted for libel or obscenity, but these charges are very difficult to prove. Most journalists value **confidentiality of sources**, or the right to keep the sources for their information private. However, the Supreme Court has upheld the right of the government to

compel reporters to divulge information as party of a criminal investigation, so the conflict between reporters and the government is still an issue.

In contrast, broadcasting is carefully regulated by the government. No one may operate a radio or television station without a license from the **Federal Communications Commission**. The government must renew licenses, and until recently the FCC used its power of renewal to influence what the station put on the air. For example, they might require a network to change their depictions of racial or ethnic groups, restrict the number of commercials aired, or decrease the number of shows that emphasize violence. In recent years a movement to deregulate both television and radio has taken hold. With the increasing choice of television and radio shows available to the American public, supporters of deregulation argue that competition should be allowed to determine how each station defines and serves community needs. Now many of the old rules are less vigorously enforced. Radio broadcasting has been deregulated more than televisions, and in 1996 the **Telecommunications Act** allowed one radio company to own as many as eight stations in large markets and as many as it wished nationally.

Despite these recent trends, the content of radio and television is still regulated in ways that newspapers and magazines are not. One example is the **equal time rule** that requires a station selling time to one candidate for office to make the same amount of time available to another. Also in force is the **right-of-reply rule** that allows a person who is attacked on a broadcast the right to reply over that same station. A candidate may also reply if a broadcaster endorses an opponent. For many years a **fairness doctrine** was in place, which required broadcasters to give time to opposing views if they broadcast a program giving one side of a controversial issue. The FCC abolished the doctrine in 1987, arguing that it inhibited the free discussion of issues. However, most broadcasters still follow the rule voluntarily.

### **THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON POLITICS**

The media influences the political system in many ways, as reflected in the functions of the media summarized earlier in this chapter. Electronic media has been criticized for forcing political figures and events to conform to **sound bites**, or comments compressed into several-second segments. Although newspapers and magazines have longer formats, most Americans today are much more reliant on television and radio for their news. As a result, stories are boiled down to their basics, and those that don't fit are not covered. The impact of the internet is yet to be seen, but the interactive nature of the medium allows the user to spend as much or little time with an issue as he or she likes.

### **THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**

Media influence is probably most obvious during political campaigns for office, especially during presidential years. Because television is the primary news source for Americans, candidates and their consultants spend much of their time strategizing as to how to use it to their benefit. Television is widely used by presidential and senatorial candidates, and increasingly by candidates for the House of Representatives.

- **Advertising** - Television advertising is very expensive, and as a result, the cost of campaigns has skyrocketed. Most campaign ads are negative, making them even more controversial. The typical pattern is for one candidate to attack the other, who in turn counterattacks. Even though most people claim to dislike these ads, political consultants believe that they work, so it appears as if negative ads have become the norm. Critics worry that this type of advertising reduces political participation and encourages citizens to be cynical about politics.
- **News Coverage** - Television ads cost money, but news coverage - as long as you can get it - is free. So candidates and consultants spend a great deal of time planning news events that will be covered on the evening news and by cable news shows. They may also arrange to be invited to appear on news shows to comment on particular issues or events. As a result, an invitation to appear on CNN's *Larry King* show can be worth thousands of dollars in campaign ads. Some campaign staff specialize in media techniques, such as camera angles, necessary equipment, timing, and deadlines, so that even if the news coverage is free the advice is not. An important

position on any campaign staff is that of **spin doctor**, or one who tries to influence journalists with interpretations of events that are favorable to a particular candidate.

- **Presidential Debates** - The most famous series of television events in American politics are the presidential debates. The television precedent was set in 1960, when the Democratic candidate, John Kennedy, was generally perceived to “defeat” the sitting Vice President Richard Nixon. Challengers generally benefit more than incumbents from the debates because they are not as well known. However, the results are often unpredictable, since usually the differences come down to style. Both candidates are prepared extensively for the debates, and usually don’t make any serious mistakes. An exception occurred in 1976 when President Gerald Ford argued that eastern European countries were not communist. In 2004 President George W. Bush was criticized for inconsistent performances over the course of the debates, but challenger John Kerry was widely criticized by the media (and the Republican Party) for bringing up the sexual orientation of Vice President Cheney’s daughter. The debates give the public an opportunity to see both candidates together, and even though the ability of debates to change votes has been questioned, they are now a part of political campaigning tradition.

### **THE MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

The media impacts all officials in government on local, state, and national levels. Town newspapers often cover local school board candidates, and town meetings often appear in full broadcasts on local television stations. Governors - particularly those in large states - often have staff members that help them with news coverage. On the national level, members of Congress must share the stage with 534 others.

However, party leaders and committee chairmen often play to media events. The importance of the presidency is reflected in the existence of the **White House press corps** that is assigned full-time to cover the activities of the president. Once or twice a day they are briefed by the president’s **press secretary**, who is responsible for handling the press corps. Because the reporters are in close proximity to the president, they tend to report almost every visible action he takes. Presidents, then, live their lives in public view, a situation that they may use to their benefit since they have a built-in audience. However, the need to get a story may lead reporters to emphasize the trivial and leave a president frustrated by a focus on matters he considers to be unimportant.

The media do not make direct policy decisions, but their influence on American government and politics is tremendous. Whether they manipulate the policymakers or are manipulated by the politicians is a matter of some dispute, but their presence is an integral part of American society. They link the public to government and often set the public agenda, two very important components of the political system.