

CHAPTER 6

The Media

PARALLEL LECTURE 6.1

The subject of this lecture is MEDIA. The purpose is to consider at its origin and growth, assess its objectivity, and examine its influence on politics.

- I. People, Government, and Communications
 - A. Communication is the process of transmitting information from one individual or group to another.
 1. Mass communication is the process by which information is distributed to large, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed audiences.
 - a) The term **mass media** refers to the technologies employed in mass communication.
 - (1) Print media communicate information through the publication of words and pictures.
 - (2) Broadcast media communicate information electronically through sounds and images.
 2. There are various means of providing communication from government to its citizens and from citizens to their government.
 - a) Mass media provide the major channels for the two-flow information, they have the dual capacity of reflecting and shaping our political views.
 - b) The media are not the only means of communication between citizens and government. There are voting, political parties, campaigning in elections, and interest groups.
 - c) Political content can also be transmitted through other mass media – recordings and motion pictures.
 - II The development of the mass media in the United States reflects the growth of the country, technological innovation, and shifting political attitudes about the scope of government.
 - A. Newspapers:
 1. The newspapers operating during the American Revolution were initially organs of political parties, and they advocated party causes—much as group media do today.
 2. By the 1880s, newspapers were largely independent and had mass circulations; by the 1890s, they also included entertainment fare, such as comics, advice, and sports sections.
 3. By the 1960s, newspaper circulation had dwindled because of competition from radio and television.
 4. By 2001, due to fierce competition, only 32 U.S. cities and towns had two or more competing daily papers under separate ownership.
 5. Today, the three largest national newspapers are
 - a) *USA Today*, circulation 2.2 million
 - b) *The Wall Street Journal*, circulation 1.8 million
 - c) *The New York Times*, circulation 1.1 million

6. By comparison, the *National Enquirer* sells about 2.5 million copies each week.
- B. Magazines:
1. Magazines tend to have a much smaller circulation and are often forums for opinion—to this extent, magazines are more like group media than mass media.
 2. In spite of their small circulation, magazines are politically influential through the **two-step flow of communication**.
 - a) They influence **attentive policy elites**—group leaders who follow news in specific areas.
 - b) Policy elites then influence public opinion by circulating their views in the mass media.
- C. Radio:
1. Radio, which began commercial operation in the 1920s, made celebrities out of news personalities.
 2. The novelty of radio was live coverage; it also presented reporters as “personalities” who then became celebrities.
 3. Today, radio is more important as a forum for talk than as a source of live coverage of events.
- D. Television:
1. Though the growth of television was stunted by World War II, this medium grew explosively after the war ended.
 2. Television increased the visibility of broadcast journalists and promoted the careers of politicians who learned to use the medium.
- E. Modern forms of group media include the Internet.
1. The Internet began operating in 1969 and was used primarily by academic scientists to transmit messages, known as electronic mail (e-mail).
 - a) By 1991, with advances in computer programs and encoding systems, a wide range of information could be viewed anywhere on the network.
 - b) The Internet began to explode in the mid-1990s with the development of “browser” software.
 - c) One sign of the Internet’s growing importance is that many news stories appear on the World Wide Web before they appear in the mainstream media.
 - d) The Internet is well incorporated into politics; today, virtually every government agency and political organization in the nation has its own web site.
- I. The mass media are privately owned in the United States.
- A. Private ownership of the mass media gives the news industry more political freedom in the United States than in most other countries.
1. But private ownership also makes the media more dependent on advertising profits.
 2. Potential news stories are judged for their **newsworthiness**.
 - a) Newsworthiness means audience appeal. This can be defined in terms of several characteristics:
 - (1) Potential (emotional) impact on readers
 - (2) Sensationalism (violence, conflict, disaster, scandal)
 - (3) Treatment of familiar people or life situations
 - (4) Close-to-home character
 - (5) Timeliness
 - b) As audience appeal is important, the news industry has to calculate its audience carefully (in order to assess advertising rates).

- c) Reporting news and running commercials geared to a target audience has been termed market-driven journalism.
 - d) Severe losses in the prime-time programming audience have led networks to succumb to **infotainment**, which is a mix of information and diversion oriented to personalities or celebrities, not linked to the day's events, and usually unrelated to public affairs or policy; often called "soft news"
 - B. Media owners acquire additional media outlets to increase their profits.
 - 1. The result has been a growing concentration of ownership in both print and broadcast journalism.
 - 2. Fears of concentrating broadcast media under single ownership had led to government regulation of ownership patterns.
- II. Government regulation of the broadcast media historically has addressed three aspects of their operation and has witnessed two political eras.
 - A. The 1934 Communications Act created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and formed the basis for media regulation for more than sixty years.
 - 1. Technical regulations arose because of the limited number of frequencies available for broadcasting.
 - a) With a limited number of frequencies, the many broadcasters stepped on one another's signals.
 - b) Broadcasters sought regulations and gave up freedom in order to impose order on the use of the airwaves.
 - 2. The FCC has also regulated the ownership of electronic media.
 - a) Broadcasters were limited in the number of television and radio stations they could own nationally.
 - b) Regulations also restricted the number of stations a single entity could own in any given community.
 - c) These regulations were essentially lifted by the Telecommunications Act of 1996; now there are no limits on the number of TV stations one company may own, so long as that company does not extend beyond 35 percent of the nationwide television market.
 - d) The 21st century has begun with a flurry of mega-mergers: companies like AOL-Time-Warner merge an Internet service provider with a huge cable network that had already merged with one of the biggest publishers in the U.S.
 - e) So far, this law has resulted in a greater concentration of media ownership.
 - 3. The FCC has also regulated broadcast content. (But note that content regulation has only applied to broadcasters, not newspapers, because broadcasters use the public airwaves.)
 - a) *The equal opportunities rule* provides that a station must make available an equal amount of time under the same conditions to all political candidates.
 - b) *The reasonable access rule* requires stations to make their facilities available to conflicting views from all responsible elements in the community.
 - B. Many changes began to undermine the basis for the 1934 Act.
 - 1. Technological change made television commonplace, and it also brought about computers, fax machines, and satellite transmission. Businesses began to pressure Congress to remove restrictions so they could exploit these new technologies.
 - 2. Many business leaders argued that with the expansion of the media, competition was sufficient to ensure a "marketplace of ideas," and therefore content

regulation was an unnecessary abridgment of broadcasters' First Amendment rights.

3. A U.S. Court of Appeals struck down both the equal opportunities rule and the reasonable access rule in 2000.

III. The media **make** the news by deciding what to report as news.

A. The major news media maintain journalists in major cities and government centers to report political events firsthand.

1. Washington, D.C., has the largest press corps of any city in the world—over seven thousand reporters.
2. White House correspondents rely heavily on information they receive in the pressroom in the west wing of the White House.
3. They receive stories routinely through news releases, news briefings, and news conferences.
4. Reporters are expected to observe rules associated with news given “on background” and “off the record.”
5. Through its press secretary, the White House feeds reporters the information and “photo opportunities” they need.
6. Fewer reporters regularly cover Congress, which does not maintain as tight a control over news stories as the White House does.
7. Recently, television coverage of the House and Senate has attracted a small but loyal audience.

B. Media executives, news editors, and prominent reporters function as **gatekeepers** in presenting the news and deciding which events to report and how to handle their elements.

1. Television in particular operates under severe time limitations, and the average news story lasts about one minute.
2. Television news devotes far more time to the president than to Congress or the Supreme Court.
3. The media tend to personify issues for the purpose of audience appeal.
4. The result in covering election campaigns is **horse race journalism**, which focuses on “who’s ahead” rather than on what the candidates stand for.
5. Many news events are staged as **media events** to attract coverage because of audience appeal.
6. Television news is particularly partial to news that has visual impact.

C. Since the 1960s, most people report that they get most of their news from television. (See Figure 6.3.)

D. However, people do not remember very much of the political information they see on television.

1. In a 2002 survey, only 61 percent of respondents could name the vice president (Richard Cheney), 48 percent knew the name of the secretary of state (Colin Powell), and only 29 percent could come up with Donald Rumsfeld as secretary of defense – at the time when the administration was preparing for the war against Iraq.
2. The **television hypothesis** suggests that television is a prime reason for the public’s low level of knowledge of public affairs.

IV. Virtually all citizens must rely on the mass media for their political news.

A. Almost nine out of every ten Americans believe that the media strongly influence political institutions and public opinion.

1. It is difficult to determine the extent of such influence.
2. Research indicates that television news commentary is probably the single greatest influence on public opinion.

- B. The media play a role in setting the **political agenda**—the issues that get government attention.
 1. The media heighten the public’s concern about social problems, such as crime.
 2. However, the media also distort the incidence of social problems and confuse policymakers and the public alike about what should or can be done.
 3. There is ample evidence that public opinion is influenced by media coverage.
 4. Political leaders believe that the media are influential, and they act accordingly.
- C. Even through its entertainment programs, television operates as a medium of **political socialization**.
 1. Compared with the early days of radio, however, television programs tend to erode confidence in the criminal justice system.
 2. Although the media promotes popular support for government in celebrating national holidays, they also erode public confidence by publicizing citizen grievances, airing investigative reports of corruption, and covering assorted political critics, protesters, and terrorists.
- V. The media have diverse impacts on democratic government.
 - A. Critics contend that the media color reality in reporting it.
 1. News reporters are said to have a liberal bias in reporting the news, whereas editors and publishers are suspected of having a conservative bias that tones down their reporters’ liberalism.
 2. Several studies of voting behavior and ideological self-placement show that reporters do have a liberal orientation.
 3. However, the more pronounced bias of reporters is against politicians, especially **front-runners** and **incumbents**.
 - B. The media contribute to majoritarian democracy in the United States in two ways.
 1. By being critical of politicians and searching for weaknesses in their public statements, reporters improve the accuracy of communication from government to citizens.
 2. By polling citizens’ reactions to political events and governmental actions, the mass media improve communication from citizens to government.
 - C. The media have played an important role in advancing equality, especially racial equality, in the United States.
 - D. Although the media are willing to mobilize government action to infringe on personal freedom for equality’s sake, they resist attempts to infringe on freedom of the press to promote public order.
 1. Compared with the public, journalists are far more likely to regard freedom of the press as sacrosanct.
 2. On the topic of press freedom, the media operate as an interest group in a pluralist democracy.
 3. The media’s interest in reporting whatever they wish, whenever they wish, may erode government’s efforts to maintain order.