MASS MEDIA

The president holds a televised press conference; members of the administration as well as congressional leaders go on the Sunday morning news shows to present their respective positions on the budget; a reporter writes a series of articles on cost overruns in the Defense Department; an important Senate race is covered heavily by both the national press and the major networks; a State Department official holds a daily briefing with journalists on the latest developments in the Middle East. These are just a few examples of the relationship between the mass media and American politics.

Evolution of the Mass Media

The mass media is composed of two parts: print media and the broadcast (or electronic) media. The print media refers primarily to newspapers and magazines, but can include books, such as an instant campaign biography as well as a reporter's lengthy analysis of a campaign. Radio, television, and the Internet constitute the broadcast media. While the number of daily newspapers in the United States has declined somewhat over the past twenty years, access to cable television and the Internet has grown tremendously. Americans get most of their news and information from the broadcast media.

The earliest newspapers in the country were little more than mouthpieces for partisan politics— Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists published the *Gazette of the United States* while Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans put out the *National Gazette.* Improvements in technology and rising literacy rates led to mass-circulation newspapers (known as the **penny press**) by the 1840s. Late-nineteenth-century newspaper publishers like William Randolph Hearst often turned to sensational reporting, known as **yellow journalism**, to boost readership and to shape public opinion. Yellow-journalist stories about alleged Spanish atrocities against Cubans trying to win their independence were a factor in President William McKinley's decision to declare war on Spain in 1898. The Progressive Era (1900–1920) saw the rise of the **muckrakers**, reporters committed to bringing political corruption and unsavory business practices to the public's attention through articles in national magazines as well as books. Ida Tarbell's exposé of the activities of John D. Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Company is a good example of muckraking.

Most newspapers today focus on local coverage. There are only a handful that cover national issues in depth, and whose editorials can influence national policy. These are the *New York Times, Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* followed closely by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today*. The most important national magazines are *Newsweek, Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. In addition, there are weekly public affairs periodicals such as *The Nation* (left), *National Review* (right), and the *New Republic* (liberal) that reflect different points on the political spectrum.

How important the print media is to the average American is subject to debate, however. The number of Americans reading newspapers and magazines is down, and polls indicate that the

public has more confidence in the accuracy of stories aired on television than in the papers. On the other hand, those who get their news from the print media are better informed. Commercial radio first began to broadcast in 1920, and got into politics very quickly carrying the results of that year's presidential election. President Franklin Roosevelt effectively used radio to communicate directly with the American people through his "fireside chats" during the worst days of the Depression. Radio's importance as a news and information source declined however with the introduction of television in the late 1940s. The new media changed the nature of running for office—the first campaign ads for a presidential candidate appeared on television in 1952 and the first presidential debate was aired in 1960 between Senator John Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon. It is interesting to note that those who heard the debate on radio believed that Nixon won, but people who watched the debate felt Kennedy did. Television also provided Americans with insights in the political process at work by covering party conventions as well as such momentous national events as the Watergate hearings and the impeachment and trial of President Clinton. A glimpse into the work of Congress became available in 1979 when the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) began to cover the proceedings of the House. In 1996, both President Clinton and challenger Bob Dole reached out to voters with their own Web sites. Today, the Internet provides access to a wealth of information on how government operates as well as political news and commentary.

Today, news and public affairs programming through the broadcast media is expanding. The major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) have supplemented their half hour national news coverage with shows like *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*, and *20/20*. Whether the latter are less hard news and more "infotainment" is a matter of debate. Cable stations such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Network created the twenty-four-hour news format. The need of cable stations to fill time, however, often leads to redundancy and a reliance on "talking heads" or pundits to explain the most minute details of a story. The impact of this explosion of news outlets is not clear. Although cable is cutting into market share, most Americans continue to watch network television. Of that group, the viewership for local news, which only devotes about a quarter of its time to government and politics, is much larger than for the network news programs.

The Organization of the Mass Media

The media in the United States is privately owned. Public radio and television, which receive part of their funding from the federal government, are comparatively small. Although it provides coverage of the House and the Senate, C-SPAN is a private, non-profit public service of the cable television industry. Private ownership, however, particularly for the broadcast media, does not mean freedom from government oversight, as will be discussed presently. Many newspapers in the United States are not individually owned. Indeed, chains such as the Gannett Company and Knight-Ridder, which control newspaper across the country, account for close to 60% of the daily circulation. A clear trend is the limited competition among newspapers in many of the nation's largest cities. While there were once five or six dailies in New York and Los Angeles offering readers a range of editorial opinion, today there are just two. The availability of a national newspaper such as *USA Today* or the national edition of the *New York Times* alleviates the problem somewhat. While the First Amendment protects newspapers from direct government interference, this does not mean they are free from political pressure. It is

not unusual for a reporter, editor, or even the publisher to get a call from a White House official. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, newspapers such as the *Washington Post* left out details in some stories dealing with terrorism so as not to divulge intelligence-gathering techniques at the request of the Bush administration.

News and public affairs are not the major business of network television, which is concerned with maximizing advertising revenues from programming. ABC, CBS, and NBC have proven to be quite willing to reduce staff and make programming changes in their news departments to enhance profits; in contrast, there are cable stations that are completely devoted to news such as CNN, C-SPAN, Fox News Network, and MSNBC (the latter two are affiliated with networks).

Both network and cable stations are subject to regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Regulation of the electronic media began in 1927 when the Federal Radio Act declared that the public owned the airwaves, and broadcasters were required to obtain a license to operate from the federal government.

The licensing requirements continued with the creation of the FCC in 1934, and the scope of regulation was expanded to include ownership and content. The FCC limits the number of radio and television stations owned by a single company. These limits were relaxed in the 1980s during the Reagan Administration and again under the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Today (2002), the Federal Communications Commission is considering a rule change involving **cross-ownership** that will permit a corporation to own a broadcast outlet and a newspaper in the same market. Other FCC rules include the following:

- With respect to content, broadcast stations must include educational and information programming for children.
- Although obscene material is banned, the FCC prohibits the airing of "indecent material" at times when children may be able to watch it.
- If a station provides airtime, either free of charge or on a fee basis, to a candidate for political office, all candidates for that office must be given the same opportunity to be heard. This is known as the **equal access rule**.
- Under the **equal time rule,** broadcasters are required to give candidates for political office access to air time on the same terms.
- A person who is attacked verbally on a radio or television station must be given a "reasonable opportunity" to respond. The station is required under the **right-of-rebuttal rule** to identify the broadcast in which the attack was made and provide the individual involved with a tape or accurate transcript.

The FCC abolished the **fairness doctrine** in 1985, which obliges broadcasters to present opposing sides of controversial issues. Congress attempted to control the content of the Internet through the Communications Decency Act, which was part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. It made it a crime to transmit "indecent" materials over the Internet to individuals under 18, but the Act was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1997 as a violation of freedom of speech under the First Amendment.

Reporting and Presenting the News

In covering the national news, there is a close relationship between journalists and the federal government. Reporters rely on sources within the government for a good deal of the information they use in their stories. A news release issued by a federal agency, the daily briefing by the White House press secretary, an interview with a member of Congress, sitting in on a congressional committee hearing or oral argument before the Supreme Court—all these can be part of a journalist's typical day. One type of contact that has become less common over the years is the presidential press conference. When a president goes before reporters nowadays, the give and take is not as spontaneous as it appears. The White House staff does not know the actual questions journalists will ask, but they are very familiar with the key issues and the administration's position. Presidents rehearse their responses on important topics before the news conference, and often tape and review these sessions.

Reporters are bound by the rules of their profession in collecting news. If an interview is **on the record**, the name of the interviewee can be mentioned and anything he/she says can be quoted in the story. Information provided **off the record**, on the other hand, cannot be printed at all, but it may lead to other sources. A government official may agree to talk with a journalist **on background**, which means that the substance of the interview can be published and even quoted, but the official cannot be specifically named, for instance a news report attributes a statement to "a senior White House aide." Even an indirect reference to the source is not used in a story obtained **on deep background**, however. Reporters who violate any of these rules soon find that no one in the government will talk to them, the result of which is that it eventually becomes impossible to do their jobs. Perhaps for this reason, they insist on protecting the confidentiality of their sources. While the Supreme Court has generally upheld the right of the government to force news organizations to reveal their sources when a crime is involved, several states have passed **shield laws** to protect journalists.

Government officials use the media to promote their own interests. All administrations are skilled at staging **media events**, which are opportunities for reporters from both the print and broadcast media to see the president in action, pushing an important policy or program. These media events can range from President Nixon's trip to China to President Bush reading to elementary school children in an attempt to put pressure on Congress to pass his education bill. Politicians also are not averse to giving a story to the press just to gauge the public's reaction. This is known as a **trial balloon**. If the reaction is favorable, Congress may push for the legislation or the Executive Branch might proceed with a new foreign policy initiative.

A **leak**, on the other hand, is the unauthorized release of information to the press that is mutually beneficial; the reporter gets an exclusive while the individual providing the story makes points with the media. Administration officials may intentionally give a friendly reporter a tip to advance the president's agenda, blurring the distinction between a leak and a trial balloon. Not all leaks are orchestrated by the administration. Indeed, government officials as well as members of Congress or their staff have provided confidential information to reporters, resulting in embarrassment to the president. Every administration wants to prevent politically damaging stories from getting out to the public. President Nixon created a group known as the "Plumbers" to stop leaks in the White House.

The government does not always share information with the press. This is particularly true in time of war. During the Vietnam War, reporters and television crews went along with troops into combat. Vietnam was the first television war, and the media coverage was certainly a factor in turning Americans against our continued involvement. Perhaps because of the Vietnam experience, the press's access to the front lines during the Persian Gulf War was much more limited. A good deal of the reporting was through briefings given by the military.

Time and space are factors in determining how the news is presented. The major networks only have a half hour (minus commercial time) to cover the international and national news of the day; frequently the depth of news coverage suffers. Television news is often little more than headlines. In covering a presidential campaign, for example, stations are satisfied with giving just a brief excerpt from candidates' speeches. The so-called **sound bite** has become shorter and shorter over the years. To get the full flavor of what the candidates are saying takes a little effort. The full text of major speeches by presidential candidates is available on the Internet or may be carried by one of the national newspapers, and may be shown live or by tape delay on C-SPAN. All-news cable stations obviously have more time, but as discussed earlier, they are often forced to repeat stories in the 24-hour format and rely on "pundits" to provide analysis. Newspapers have a finite amount of space, and editors must decide where to place a story and how many column inches to give it. A front-page story that is "above the fold" is more important than one that is "below the fold." In the *New York Times,* the story that is in the extreme right column is the lead story for the day.

The charge is often made that the media has a liberal bias. Numerous studies have shown that journalists, both print and broadcast, are more liberal in their personal views than the general public and usually vote for the Democratic Party. It therefore would be surprising if strongly held beliefs did not affect coverage to some degree. But there are other factors that come into play. Reporters are trained to be objective, which means keeping their biases in check by presenting both sides of an argument. As a group, publishers, network executives, and the heads of corporations that control many media outlets are more conservative than their news staff. Moreover, the media is a business; news and political coverage is less about ideology and more about increasing readership and audience share.

Media and Politics

As noted in a previous chapter, the media has a role in political socialization; it helps shape our views on politics and our understanding of how the political system operates. In addition, newspapers and magazines, television, and increasingly the Internet, help set the political agenda, play a key part in electing a president, and expose government wrongdoing.

The **political agenda** refers to the issues the American people think are important for the government to handle. The extent to which the public thinks the economy, crime, immigration, foreign policy, and military spending have a high priority depends on the amount of coverage these topics get in the print and broadcast media. Coverage can also affect attitudes on particular subjects. There is no doubt that during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the war in Vietnam was a critical issue facing the nation. It was also a televised war, and every evening brought

words and pictures about the conflict into American homes that contributed to the growing opposition to the war. Sometimes the media get it wrong. The Monica Lewinsky scandal and the subsequent impeachment and trial of President Clinton received extensive media coverage even though polls showed that Americans were not interested in light of the strong performance of the economy.

Presidential elections have become media events. The hordes of reporters and television crews follow candidates through the primaries and the general election campaign focus more on who is ahead than on policy questions. The networks, cable stations, and major networks join together to issue tracking polls that show the candidates' relative support. Candidate debates are covered in terms of who won or lost, not the issues raised. Broadcasters give considerably less time to the party conventions because the race for the nomination is already over and there are no surprises. Candidates have media consultants whose job is to present them in the best possible light; they are masters of the media event and the sound bite. A good part of the money raised by presidential hopefuls goes to television advertising. More often than not, the purpose of the television spots is not to state the candidate's views but to attack his/her opponents. Although the press and the public often complain against negative advertising, the fact is that it works — votes shift according to what people see on television.

New broadcast formats give candidates free airtime. In recent elections, radio and television talk shows have become regular stops during presidential campaigns. A candidate can expect to field relatively easy questions on a show like *Larry King Live* than might be the case with an interview by a network news anchor. H. Ross Perot, a wealthy businessman who ran surprisingly well in the 1992 election, created the political infomercial (a paid for half-hour block of airtime) to speak at length to the American people.

Muckraking or investigative reporting as it is called today has been a tradition in American journalism since the early twentieth century. The most classic recent example are the stories on the 1972 Watergate break-in by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* that ultimately led to the resignation of Richard Nixon. National leaders are far from the only targets. Reports about abuses in the treatment of the mentally ill in public hospitals and the residents of nursing homes have forced state legislatures to make meaningful reforms. Coverage of the civil rights movement in the South during the 1960s, both print and broadcast, contributed to changing attitudes toward race. Journalists have also raised awareness about corporate wrongdoing on matters ranging from product liability to environmental hazards. In sum, a key function of the media is to serve as a watchdog on government and business, thereby exposing corruption, misconduct, and the abuse of power.