

Unit 10

Understanding Media: The Inside Story

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

- Explain the value of a free and independent press to the American political system.
- Describe the relationship between the press and public officials.
- Describe how the press determines what is news.

Topic Overview

This unit demonstrates the role that a free and independent press can and does play in the American political system, serving often as the people's watchdog. But the unit also illustrates that the relationship between the press and public officials is also one of mutual dependence. Finally, this unit explores what constitutes news and how, out of the millions of things that happen each day, only a few are reported.

The American media, sometimes referred to as **the fourth estate**, can and often do serve as a valuable check on the powers of officials. As Justice Frankfurter once said, "A free press is indispensable to the workings of our democratic society." Frankfurter is alluding to the fact that without accurate information about events, people, and government policy, the public cannot make informed choices as it participates in the democratic process.

Throughout American history the Supreme Court has interpreted the **First Amendment** to mean that there are almost no restrictions on the content of news reporting. The Constitution thus provides the opportunity for the press to play an active role in public affairs, even when press reports are inconvenient or embarrassing to public officials. At their best, journalists can hold public leaders accountable to the people. At their worst, irresponsible journalists can distort the news in ways that are damaging to honorable people and legitimate political processes.

While the press has always enjoyed broad freedoms under the Constitution's First Amendment, the style of news gathering and other **journalistic norms** that guide the press have changed significantly over U.S. history. In our nation's early history, newspapers were overtly partisan tools of key interests in politics, including those that favored states' rights, strong central government, and big business (e.g., banks and railroads). In those early years, politicians often created and controlled their own newspapers to promote their interests. The circulation of these newspapers was necessarily small due to poor transportation and the high production costs.

Topic Overview, cont'd.

By the middle to late nineteenth century, newspapers were becoming less partisan and more independent of politicians and organized interests. But because they were increasingly dependent on mass circulation and commercial advertising to generate profit, their reporting style became more sensational, and the stories covered more scandalous. **Yellow journalism**, which was pioneered by prominent publishers such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, often featured graphics (e.g., comics, pictures, and colors) designed to appeal to the fast-growing immigrant population. **Muckraking journalists**, including Upton Sinclair, grabbed attention and readership by exposing corruption (real and apparent) among the political and business elite.

During the twentieth century, journalists began to police themselves through the use of professional codes of practice. Reporters were supposed to focus on the key facts, such as who, what, when, and how. With the advent of **electronic media**, first with radio and then television, news coverage increasingly went beyond basic facts toward more **interpretive stories** that analyzed the motives of political actors and the potential implications of their actions. In addition, news reporters and broadcasters sometimes became **media celebrities** who became part of the stories they were covering. The initial appeal of radio was its ability to present live coverage of events. But this role was supplanted by television, which could also present dramatic pictures. As television news grew, radio increasingly became a format for public affairs talk shows.

As their readership dropped, newspapers began adding longer news features that explained or embellished the previous day's events. In general, newspaper circulation has dwindled as more citizens rely exclusively on electronic media for their news. The days of two or more daily newspapers competing for readership in one city are almost gone. Instead, many cities are now served by only one daily newspaper, and often that source is part of a larger, nationally owned chain.

The so-called **adversarial culture** of the media arose during the 1960s. Events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate contributed to an "us versus them" attitude that often prevails today. People who are in the news complain that reporters are often more interested in casting allegations of wrongdoing and less inclined to follow up as those allegations are rebutted.

Although journalists and government officials often mistrust one another, the relationship between the two primarily remains one of **mutual dependence**. Political candidates and public officials need the media to get their message across to the public. Journalists, on the other hand, need candidates and public officials as sources of news. These mutual demands lead candidates and public officials to create **pseudo-events** with good visuals that will meet reporters' needs for interesting stories. And because the costs of investigative reporting are high, news outlets often rely on official government briefings and news conferences for information instead of conducting extensive independent investigations.

Most media organizations in the United States are privately owned. **Private ownership** contributes to the independence of the media from government controls. But it also means that media owners must attract a sufficient number of viewers and readers. Increasingly, programming decisions take into account the mass appeal of stories and features, and the graphics that accompany them. To increase profits, media owners buy additional media outlets. This trend has contributed to a large **consolidation of media sources** such as television and radio stations, magazines, and Web sites. Most small, independently owned news stations and newspapers have been bought up by larger media conglomerates such as Knight-Ridder, USA Today, Time Warner, General Electric, Fox Broadcasting, and Disney. Critics charge that consolidation of ownership contributes to a **homogenization of news**, where most news features echo each other, and often reflect the media and political elite's interpretation of events.

The newest electronic source of news is the Internet, which offers a wide range of news formats from online versions of major newspapers and magazines to newsgroups and gossip sites. To date, the Internet has remained unregulated in terms of the content that individuals or groups can choose to post. Thus, this format may offset the effects of media consolidation of ownership in print and other electronic media formats. The potential downside to no regulation is that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between news that is produced according to journalistic standards (e.g., with verification of sources and source citations) and news that reflects rumor and unsubstantiated facts.

The media's impact on democratic processes is complex and subject to debate. Some critics contend that news reporters are predominantly liberal in their outlook, and some scholarly studies support that contention. At the same time, other studies suggest that news editors and publishers have a more conservative outlook that often reigns in reporters' liberalism. Typically, conservative-leaning consumers of news media think the media is biased toward a liberal viewpoint, while liberal-leaning consumers believe the news is too conservative.

Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- What are some of the limitations on the freedom of press according to the Supreme court?
- According to Tocqueville, the press of the nineteenth century was violent. Why did he say this? Is it true today?
- What are the advantages of a privately owned press in America? What are the disadvantages?
- What power does the press have in America?

Watch the Video (30 minutes) and Discuss (30 minutes)

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and then pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. *Washington Post* and DC Foster Care

The American media are a powerful force in our lives. We turn to the media for information and entertainment, but the media also play an integral role in our political system. This story about a long and difficult news investigation of local government mismanagement shows that the media often serve as a check to make sure our government officials remain accountable for their actions, or inaction.

Discussion Questions

- How typical is this type of investigative journalism?
- In pursuing stories, should journalists be given special access to materials?

2. The True Smoking Gun: How David Kessler and the FDA Used the Media to Fight the "Tobacco Wars"

Journalists are often very rough on politicians and public officials. They often distort public officials' statements, question their motives, and scrutinize their personal lives. So why are politicians and public officials often so willing to talk to the press? A major reason is because the press and politics are highly interdependent. Journalists need public officials as sources of news, while public officials need the media to get their message out.

Discussion Questions

- Journalists and public officials are often portrayed as locked in combat. What does this segment tell you about the relationship?
- How important are leaks to the press?
- Why do people leak stories?

3. Who Chooses the News?

No media outlet can report all that happens. Television news in particular must be brief in what it shows, and discerning in what it airs. In addition to deciding what are the most important stories, television news must appeal to a sufficiently broad audience to keep its advertisers happy. What ultimately gets shown on a daily news program is the product of journalistic and editorial judgment made under severe constraints and often with the financial bottom line well in view.

Discussion Questions

- What is news? Can you identify criteria that make something worth reporting?
- What role do the interests of the audience play in the selection of news?
- How do the norms of professional journalism interact with the need to attract and keep an audience interested?

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Suggested Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists (20 minutes)

Throughout American history, newspaper readers have complained when they perceived that news coverage in print was biased, incomplete, or misleading. Newspaper publishers and their reporters, writers, and editors struggle to provide fair and accurate coverage of the news. Recently, the Freedom Forum initiated a series of conversations with the public in communities across the country and asked people what bothered them about the press. Participants affirmed that they were strong believers in a free press as an important institution of democracy. But they also raised concerns about basic journalistic practices that they consider unfair and misleading. The following section highlights some of their major concerns, and summarizes some of their recommendations, or “best practices,” to remedy those concerns. As you read through these complaints and possible remedies, think about other possible additions that could be made to this list. Hopefully, by becoming more familiar with these common problems and proposed solutions, we can all become more discerning readers of print media.

According to people who participated in the recent Freedom Forum study on journalistic practices, newspapers are unfair when:

- **They get the facts wrong.** While journalists may think that errors in spelling, grammar, and facts like names, titles, and dates are minor and of little consequence, the public thinks otherwise. Among the study’s participants, the frequency of factual errors was cited as a major factor in the public’s skepticism of what it reads. Comments about such errors included: “I couldn’t believe they got that wrong”; “He’s lived here for 40 years and they can’t even spell his name right?”; and “Don’t they have people to check that stuff?” One way to address the problem is to make the elimination of these seemingly simple mistakes a top priority. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, has developed a system to track down and reduce such errors, including employing an outside proofing agency that reads the newspaper line by line every day to find mistakes that elude the regular staff. The result has been a marked decrease in such errors from 4.5 errors on average per page in 1992 to 2.5 errors per page in 1997. Undoubtedly, many people would still consider an average of 2.5 errors a page too many.
- **They refuse to admit errors.** Many newspaper readers feel that newspapers not only make too many mistakes, but when they do make mistakes they seem unwilling to correct them fully and promptly. This problem may be partly due to how journalists view their role in a free society. Many see themselves as writing the “first draft” of history, usually under strict deadlines, and that the public should expect some initial errors and misunderstandings. Only the most egregious errors should be corrected in the newspaper, while historians should sort out the rest. The reading public, in contrast, expects newspapers to clean up their errors promptly and fully when they realize that mistakes are made. Study participants also preferred that newspapers publish corrections on the front page, or in another prominent place within the newspaper, and not near the back.

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

- **They won't name names.** Evidence suggests that newspaper readers are uncomfortable with the common practice of reporting information from "anonymous sources." For example, 70 percent of the Freedom Forum study participants disagreed that "using anonymous sources was an appropriate way for the media to report" on what was happening inside a grand jury room. When asked what they thought the press should do when it was impossible to get anyone to confirm the facts of a story, 45 percent said the story shouldn't run at all, 28 percent said the story should run with quotes from unidentified sources, and 23 percent said they were not concerned with the problem of unidentified sources. Journalists defend the practice saying that major stories such as Watergate and the Pentagon Papers episode would not have run without journalists' reliance on unnamed sources. Rules for using anonymous sources vary greatly among major newspapers. The Associated Press (AP), which provides news reports to every daily paper in the United States, has a reputation for fairness and lack of bias. The AP guidelines on using unnamed sources allow such sources to be used when: (1) the material involves information that is essential to the story, not opinion or speculation; (2) the information is only available under conditions of anonymity imposed by the source; and (3) it is determined that the source is in a position to have accurate and reliable information.
- **They concentrate on bad news.** A long-running complaint is that the press focuses too much "on what is wrong, violent, or bizarre, and that it never prints 'good news.'" Study participants offered several examples of the dearth of positive news, including several involving the performance of public institutions such as local governments and schools. Some journalists respond that the news is not the story of all the airplanes that landed safely yesterday, but of the one that did not. Newspaper editors also defend their paper's content by saying that there is a lot of good news reported, but that the public tends to recall reading only about bad news. In response to the ongoing complaints about too much bad news, several newspapers designate "doing good" reporters whose beats include positive stories such as profiles on a group dedicated to saving old trees or feral cats, and a regular "local heroes" column.
- **They insert editorial bias into news stories.** Several study respondents complained about editorial or political bias in news stories, and said they sometimes have difficulty separating what they read on the editorial pages from what they read on the news pages. In particular, they were concerned that when newspapers ran a major investigative series they often supported that series with items in the editorial page, and this gave the impression that the newspaper was engaging in an intensive "campaign" or "crusade." Commenting on the perceived problem of editorializing in the news media, respected TV journalist Jim Lehrer has written that the news media's credibility problem arises from the blurring of three types of journalism: straight reporting, analysis, and opinion. Other journalists who were questioned about this problem during the study said that newspapers would never completely rid themselves of complaints about bias. However, journalists should be ever on guard against letting their personal bias interfere with accurate and fair reporting. One way to do that is for reporters to take periodic "temperature checks" to question themselves that all sides are being treated fairly.

2. Media Bias: Do You Know It When You See It? (10 minutes)

Pick a national story such as a war, a Supreme Court ruling, an election, or a scandal and build an exercise on media coverage around that story. Pick a news source to analyze and examine the content and style of reporting, including any noteworthy facts that were omitted, any bias they detected, and the overall tone of the stories. Is the coverage biased? If so, explain why. Is the news coverage biased, incomplete, or inaccurate? Are there more reliable sources?

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 11 to prepare for next week's session.

- Introduction—Public Opinion: Voice of the People
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: "Political Associations in the United States"
- Paine, *Common Sense*
- *Federalist Papers*: "Federalist No. 10"
- Hahn, "Student Views of Democracy: The Good News and Bad News"

Read next week's Topic Overview.

Critical Thinking Activity: Go to the course Web site and try the Critical Thinking Activity for Unit 10. This is a good activity to use with your students, too.

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Classroom Applications

You may want to have your students do the post-viewing activities: Suggested Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists and Media Bias: Do You Know It When You See It? They are provided for you as blackline masters in the Appendix.

Web-Based Resources

www.fair.org—**Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting** is a media watchdog group that seeks to end media bias and censorship. Its Web site contains many reports on media bias.

www.newseum.org—**The Newseum** bills itself as "the interactive museum of news." Now based in Washington, D.C., the Newseum maintains an interactive Web site that includes a cyber museum and interactive education tools, including lesson plans.

www.appcpenn.org—The **Annenberg Public Policy Center** Web site offers easy access to current and past reports involving media coverage and campaign advertisements.