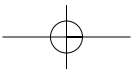
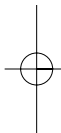
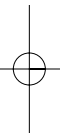


PART IV

Media and Public Life



Media and Politics

11

Our next two chapters discuss the media and public life. There are big issues here: How do the media represent public life—how do they cover it as news and what views of political reality predominate in such coverage? What role do the media have in political behavior and how can we best describe the relationships between the public and media? In dealing with these, we will try to connect the answers to perspectives we have introduced earlier: seeing media and politics, media and public life, is best accomplished through multiple lenses, those of historical narrative, ideological frame, and studies of behavior.

A beginning point in this discussion must be a distinction: In the explicitly political realm, we will concern ourselves largely with media representations of reality. As we explain below, the principal influence of the media on public life is through the ways media present information and the contexts within which they present it—how, in short, they treat the “real world” and how we, in turn, react to those presentations.

There are significant differences between the ways various media sectors approach reality: The news and information media attempt to represent it. Advertising and public relations practitioners try to focus attention on those aspects of reality that further their clients’ interests. And producers of entertainment may use the “real world” as a source of raw material for fictional content and, as we noted in Chapter 6, are usually bound by requirements of verisimilitude.

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NEWS AND REALITY

From a contemporary vantage point, we couple the goal and purpose of journalism—the news and information function—with an attempt to represent political reality. Thus we begin there, approaching news in three ways: through a quick history of the evolution of news as an idea, through a discussion of how news might be defined, and by returning to the question of how news gets made.

A Thumbnail History of News

Journalism historian Mitchell Stephens (1988) argues that it is impossible to find any society, past or present, without a “thirst for news.” The members of all human societies in any historical epoch are marked by a “need to know” what is going on around them. But as Stephens, and virtually any other media historian will also tell us, how each society satisfies this need varies drastically. In “primitive” societies, everyone is a journalist, keeping up on what’s happening through oral communication. Stephens observes that news in preliterate cultures could travel over great distances with breathtaking speed, as gossip can even today. In such cultures, however, it is not wholly correct that everyone is his or her own journalist, for virtually every known culture has evolved “news specialists”—criers, drummers, messengers, and minstrels. Interestingly, these bearers of news are almost always adjuncts of commercial or political power: They carry news along trade routes or are the servants of the king or chief.

Over time and across cultures, societies vary in how they conceive of, gather, and disseminate news, and, as we note below, how news is gathered and disseminated is deeply related to how it is defined.

From the American colonial period through the first third of the twentieth century, newspapers were the principal means of news delivery for the nation. The newspapers of the early period in American history were quite different from today. Access to information was limited in two pivotal ways: The audience had limited access to newspapers and newspapers had limited access to information. Early newspapers were expensive, beyond the reach of the average American. In the late 1700s, too, literacy rates were low, and much of the population lived on farms or in small towns. Because long-distance communication was slow, costly, and hazardous, news in early newspapers consisted of

local stories, most usually written by the editor (who frequently doubled as the newspaper's publisher); texts of political addresses, proclamations, and laws; clippings of stories from papers in other cities with whom the editor exchanged papers; and commercial notices. The most important—the most timely—of these were notices of the availability of goods on ships docking in the harbor or river. The bulk of the news in each paper concerned commerce, trade, and politics—the important concerns of the elites that read the newspapers. Each important town had multiple newspapers, and newspapers differentiated themselves mostly in terms of the faction or political party they represented. As the discussion “Old News, New News” (Box 11.1) suggests, the division that we now take for granted between news and opinion—news on the front pages, opinion on editorial pages—was then non-existent. News *was* opinion, with facts selected to buttress the point of view of the editor and his political and commercial benefactors. Moreover, papers were small in size (typically four to eight pages), circulation (in the hundreds of copies, except in the largest cities), and staff: A “typical” newspaper in about 1800 might have an editor-publisher-printer and one or two other employees to help him print and distribute copies of the paper; distribution was largely local.¹

BOX 11.1

Old News, New News

Below are the first few paragraphs from two New York newspaper stories, one a front-page story from 1734 (we have modernized the orthography and spelling) and the other from the front page of *The New York Times*' Web site in early 2005.

The New York Weekly Journal

New Brunswick (NJ), March 27, 1734. (By) Mr. (John Peter) Zenger—I was at a public house some days since in company with some persons that came from New York; most of them complained of the deadness of trade. Some of them laid it to the account of the repeal of the Tonnage Act, which they said was done to gratify the resentment of some in New York in order to distress Governor Burnet, but which has been almost the ruin of that town, by paying

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the Bermudians about 12,000 pounds a year to export their commodities which might be carried in their own bottoms, and the money arising by the freight spent in New York.

They said that the Bermudians were an industrious frugal people, who bought no one thing in New York, but lodged the whole freight money in their own island, by which means, since the repeal of that Act, there has been taken from New York above 90,000 pounds and all this to gratify pique and resentment.

But this is not all; this money being carried away, which would otherwise have circulated in this province and city, and have been paid to the baker, the brewer, the smith, the carpenter, the shipwright, the boatman, the farmer, the shopkeeper, etc., has deadened our trade in all its branches and forced our industrious poor to seek other habitations, so that within these three years there has been above 300 persons have left New York; the houses stand empty, and there is as many houses as would make one whole street with bills upon their doors. And this has been as great a hurt as the carrying away the money and is occasioned by it, and all degrees of men feel it, from the merchant down to the carman. . . .

The New York Times

"Bush Praises Modest Pledge From NATO on Training Iraqi Forces," By Elaine Sciolino and Elisabeth Bumiller

BRUSSELS, Feb. 22 - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization announced agreement today on a modest plan to train and equip Iraq's new army and police force. The agreement is an important display of unity, but whether it can be translated into a dramatic change in the situation on the ground in Iraq remains to be seen.

The agreement by the 26 countries of the alliance came after France quietly dropped its refusal to participate under a NATO umbrella, pledging a modest \$500,000 to a fund for training and equipping Iraqi forces and assigning one French officer to the Iraq mission at NATO headquarters near Brussels.

The United States is eager to get Iraq's security forces in fighting form both to restore stability to the country and allow the eventual withdrawal of the 150,000 American service men and women there.

But the training mission is going much more slowly that was hoped for. In Congressional testimony early this month, two senior Pentagon officials acknowledged that less than a third of the Iraqi security forces that the Pentagon claims have been trained are capable of tackling the most dangerous missions in the country.

In addition, the officials said, Iraqi Army units are suffering severe troops shortages, and absenteeism and even corruption in the security forces is a problem.

The French about face has enormous symbolic importance because France, which fiercely opposed the American-led war in Iraq, has succumbed to American pressure and has agreed to work on the Iraq project through NATO.

But the mission is hampered by the fact that six NATO countries—France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece and Spain—have refused American and Iraqi requests to help train military forces and police inside Iraq, preferring to do training outside the country or to help pay for the mission.

If you find the 1734 story hard to follow, what we take it to say is that the correspondent is complaining that Governor Burnet's repeal of a trade act has led the city into a recession. This story was one of two that prompted the colonial government to bring seditious libel charges against Zenger (see Chapter 3).

The similarities and differences in these stories are worth comment. Both are political stories. Both rely on unnamed sources (Zenger appears to use anonymous sources to protect them from retribution; Sciolino and Bumiller, because the names of the sources are incidental—although on other occasions the *New York Times* and most other contemporary newspapers *do* use anonymous sources for the same reason Zenger did).

The dissimilarities, however, are more striking. Note first that the 2005 *New York Times* story reports events that occurred that same day. The 1734 *Journal* article report was written almost two weeks before it was published. The delay in publication reflects the time it took to get the report back to New York and the fact that the newspaper appeared but weekly. An important stylistic difference is that the *Journal* article is written in the first person (“I was at a public house . . .”), whereas the *New York Times* article is in the third person. Moreover, the 1734 article is discursive, with its information in no apparent particular order, whereas the 2005 article is in the inverted pyramid news form, with the most important information first, and information later presented in decreasing order of importance. But probably the most significant difference is in *point of view*: Zenger clearly is offering his own opinions, whereas Sciolino and Bumiller write a descriptive account, and the first few paragraphs offer virtually no opinions (later in the story, there were statements of opinion, but they were offered by government sources, not by the writer).

Source: Copyright © *New York Times*. “Bush praises modest pledge from NATO on training Iraqi forces” By Elaine Sciolino and Elisabeth Bumiller BRUSSELS, Feb. 22.

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The Newspaper as Mass Medium

As we noted in Chapter 4, a variety of factors in the middle half of the nineteenth century transformed the newspaper from a “class” to a “mass” medium: increasing literacy of the population, a technological revolution that enabled the rapid and cheap production of thousands of copies of papers, the emergence of mass advertising to supplement the economic support of the medium, and increasingly rapid modes of transportation that enlarged the potential distribution area of newspapers.² Transformation to a mass medium was also accompanied by a gradual evolution in what news was—what was considered to be news and how news was gathered and produced. From the 1820s onward the content of American newspapers slowly became “democratic,” popular, fast, and “objective” (see Emery & Emery, 1984; Nerone, 1987; Schudson, 1978).³

More Democratic: To say that the press became more democratic is to say that, for both ideological and commercial reasons, the press first geared itself toward producing news that attracted and represented the tastes and interests of a wider, generally less elite audience, and, second, actively promoted a post-Revolutionary ideology of democracy and interest of the common people over those of wealth and privilege. Sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) has noted that the press even today promotes a value he calls *altruistic democracy*: Briefly, that popular democracy is *the* valued form of government, and individuals (and the press) have responsibilities for, and the right to, preserve and extend it.

More Oriented Toward the Popular: We’ve noted that newspapers evolved from a *class* to a *mass* medium. This evolution was in both audience and content. The content became less focused on politics and more on crime, human interest, and sensational content. This is not to say that sensationalism in the press was new; Stephens (1988) finds it in the ancient Greek, Roman, and Chinese precursors to newspapers. The important point, however, is that newspapers began to compete for a mass audience on the basis of the popularity and attractiveness of their content.

More Event Centered and Timely: News becomes more timely as news-gathering technologies allow for this to happen. We noted above that a

1734 newspaper features a “lead story” by John Peter Zenger that is more than a week old, whereas modern newspapers tell what happened yesterday. Two years stand out as pivotal in accelerating the speed at which news is delivered: the first American telegraphed news item (announcing the Whig presidential ticket) in 1844 and the 1963 launch of the Telstar communications satellite. As we noted in Chapter 2, the telegraph for the first time separated time from space, information from transportation. News could be known virtually instantaneously anywhere there were telegraph wires. Communications satellites allow for instantaneous transmission of visual images anywhere on earth.⁴ In part, the technologies help account for why news becomes event centered rather than discursive: A reporter on the scene of an event “covers” that event and transmits a report to a newsroom rather than digesting it and other events for later writing. And media compete with each other to bring the latest news to audiences first. (See Box 11.2, “Coming Into Their Own.”)

BOX 11.2

Coming Into Their Own

The New York Times has described “defining moments” for various news media, times when a medium “came into its own” as a purveyor of news. Their defining moments include the following:

Newspapers: April 13, 1861

Newspaper circulation shoots up during the Civil War, beginning with the siege of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. The *New York Herald's* readership grows from 77,000 in 1860 to 107,520 the day after Fort Sumter is attacked.

Radio: December 8, 1941

Sixty million people tune into President Franklin D. Roosevelt's address asking Congress to declare war on Japan the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Network Television: November 22, 1963

CBS, NBC, and ABC drop regular programming to broadcast news the day President John F. Kennedy is assassinated. From 4 p.m. until 11 p.m., more than half of America's 51.6 million homes with television tune into these broadcasts.

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Cable Television: January 17, 1991

When the United States and its allies bomb Baghdad in the Persian Gulf War, CNN, with Peter Arnett filing reports from the Iraqi capital, reaches a record audience for a cable network, with 12.9 million households (a 22.7 Nielsen rating) tuning into the network.

The Internet: July 4, 1997

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) reports 45 million "hits" on its Web site and mirror sites in the week following the landing of its Mars Pathfinder robot explorer.

Source: *New York Times*, July 14, 1997 (national edition), pp. C1, C5, citing Frank Luther Mott's (1941/1962) *American Journalism*, NASA, CNN, and the A. C. Nielsen Co.

More "Objective" and Less Partisan: Whereas early American big-city newspapers were largely the creatures of parties and interest groups bent on promoting their own point of view, modern mass news purveyors—newspapers, television networks, and news radio—largely deal in "objective" news. By objective, we mean two things: First, that media become more neutral, less likely to take overt political positions on their own, and, second, that *news* itself becomes less politically colored. In other words, news becomes facts, whereas opinions and values, when expressed in media, are labeled and compartmentalized as commentary, editorials, and news analyses.

Media historian Donald L. Shaw (1967) has written that the development of the first great American telegraph wire service, the Associated Press (AP), is in large part responsible for news's becoming less partisan and more objective after 1848. Serving varied newspapers with varied political allegiances required the AP to develop a news style that would be acceptable to all, and this led to an objective, "just the facts ma'am"⁵ AP news style that in time came to be imitated by newspapers and, later, other news media.⁶ The notion of objectivity was important not just to the development of journalism, but also to other professions and especially to science (Schudson, 1978). The early twentieth century saw what historians call the Progressive Era, an era of popular reform in which many writers and thinkers popularized and glorified science, *scientific management* (the rise of efficiency experts), and the importance of the expert.

News Today

To describe what news is today requires us to do two things. First is, finally, to *define* what we mean by news, anyway. Second is to describe how news is made. Both aspects are important, because both how we define news and how we make news shape the types of stories or information presented in the media as being important or the truthful version of events.

Defining News

The *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines news as "1. New information about anything; information previously unknown. 2. Recent happenings, especially those broadcast over the radio, printed in a newspaper, etc. 3. reports of such events, collectively." A widely used news reporting textbook adds two other definitions: "News is information about a break from the normal flow of events, an interruption in the expected," and, "News is information people need in order to make rational decisions about their lives" (Mencher, 1984, p. 72).

Defining news is also asking what makes something newsworthy or worth reporting to audiences. Following a reporting textbook tradition, author Melvin Mencher (1984), a former reporter and longtime professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, lists seven factors that determine the newsworthiness of a potential story:

1. *Impact*: The significance, importance, or consequence of an event or trend.
2. *Timeliness*: The more recent, the more newsworthy. In some cases, timeliness is relative. An event may have occurred in the past but only have been learned about recently.
3. *Prominence*: Occurrences featuring well-known individuals or institutions are newsworthy. Well-knownness may spring either from the power the person or institution possesses (the president, the speaker of the House of Representatives) or from celebrity (the late Princess Diana or Paris Hilton).
4. *Proximity*: Closeness of the occurrence to the audience may be gauged either geographically (close by events, all other things

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being equal, are more important than distant ones) or in terms of the assumed values, interests, and expectations of the news audience.

5. *The Bizarre*: The unusual, unorthodox, or unexpected attracts attention. Boxer Mike Tyson's 1997 disqualification for biting off a piece of Evander Holyfield's ear moves the story from the sports pages and the end of a newscast to the front pages and the top of the newscast.
6. *Conflict*: Controversy and open clashes are newsworthy, inviting attention on their own, almost regardless of what the conflict is over. Conflict reveals underlying causes of disagreement between individuals and institutions in a society.
7. *Currency*: Occasionally something becomes an idea whose time has come. For example, national news attention in the summer of 2002 focused on the abduction of children. The matter assumes a life of its own, and for a time assumes momentum in news reportage. What had been local news stories became national for a time.

Other textbooks add *human interest* as another dimension, although one can argue that it figures in Mencher's *proximity*, *prominence*, *the bizarre*, and *currency* categories. The more cynical phrase, "If it bleeds, it leads," is also used in considering the newsworthiness of events.

Presumably, the more categories or dimensions any potential news story fits into, the more newsworthy it is. Years ago, journalism folklore suggests, a British journalist was asked for a definition of news, and he replied using a similar categories approach. News, he said, is anything with mystery or sex or religion or the Royal Family. "I guess that would mean," he quipped, "that the most newsworthy story in the world would begin, 'Oh my God, the Queen's pregnant. I wonder who did it?'"

Making News

A *second* approach to defining news begins by noting that many journalists and communication researchers have discovered that reporters and editors have a hard time defining news for themselves: News is just something "they know when they see it." A reporter might

say, "I can't really define it, but tell me a story, and I'll tell you if it's news." Communication researcher John Dimmick (1974) once performed a very elaborate experiment, asking working reporters and editors to tell him how newsworthy a group of stories—ones he had constructed using categories or dimensions of news like the one above, and then statistically analyzed the journalists' answers. What he found, using the powerful statistical approach of factor analysis, was that no categories really explained how the journalists selected the stories they did. "A possible interpretation, of course," he wrote, "is that for the newsmen-subjects, the single dimension is 'news'" (p. 35).

So perhaps the way to figure out what news is is to describe what journalists *do* to make news. In other words, we describe the structure and process by which news gets made. Sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1973) began doing research in newsrooms by asking journalists to define news. She got puzzled "I don't know" looks from reporters and editors. And so she took a slightly different approach, which was to ask how reporters worked on stories. When she did so, she found that journalists tended to classify stories into a relatively small number of categories—"hard" and "soft" news: that is, "breaking" stories about current events and feature stories that were less time-bound. Moreover, hard-news stories were further subdivided into *spot* stories, news that develops unexpectedly and quickly (a fire or a plane crash); *developing* stories, or spot-news stories that continue to develop over time, requiring follow-up stories; and *continuing* stories, or stories known about in advance, which, like developing stories, require a news organization to devote a reporter to the story for an extended period (a trial, a presidential candidate's campaign tour). An interesting feature of this classification system is that not only does it describe the way journalists think about their work, it also describes the way the news organization itself can organize reporters to cover the news: Some reporters can be assigned in advance to cover developing and continuing stories; others can be shifted around to cover the spot stories that develop without warning; and when there's time, the news organization can have reporters spend time on soft news or feature stories. Tuchman calls this "routinizing the unexpected."

Because news is "new information," it very much is, as Tuchman and many, many others note, "unexpected." But as Tuchman notes, journalists' conceptions of what news is and how it's covered also clue us in to the way news becomes routinized or made predictable (sort of).

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Only a fraction of the news stories in any newspaper and in any newscast are unanticipated events that break without warning. The rest can be predicted in advance. News is made predictable by several structures and processes; together, they help answer the question, *Where does news come from and who gets to make it?*

First, consider individual news stories and who gets to make them. There are essentially three origins for stories:

1. Naturally occurring events such as disasters, floods, earthquakes, fires, and airline crashes are inherently unpredictable, and journalists must respond after the fact. News stories about disasters follow a predictable pattern: Early reports, which frequently overestimate the severity of the disaster, rely on everyday people, because they're frequently the only witnesses; later stories, assuming the story is newsworthy enough to become developing news over several days, tend to rely on officials—mayors and governors, insurance company representatives, disaster relief agency officials, and the like—another way that news becomes routinized.⁷

2. Created and “subsidized” news is more frequent than unpredicted news. It occurs because a person, group, or organization does something public and newsworthy (for example, files an important lawsuit, passes a law, breaks a law, opens or closes a plant) and/or seeks and gets press attention. We will discuss both of these in a bit more detail below.

3. So-called enterprise news is made when journalists act rather than react, as they do to accidents and disasters. In enterprise news, an editor or reporter takes the initiative on a story. There are two main cases: beat coverage and investigative journalism. We will discuss both in a bit more detail below.

In two of our three types, news doesn't “just happen” but rather is made. Billions of events occur daily, and only a tiny fraction of them can become news. Tuchman (1978) uses the metaphor of a “news net.” Not knowing in advance exactly where news might come from, journalists strategically organize themselves to be in places where news is most likely to happen, hoping to catch news in their net. Coping with too much potential news is too costly, not only in terms of money but in psychic costs as well. Walter Lippmann (1922) observed long ago

that, "Without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would die of excitement" (p. 222). Much journalistic work, particularly on newspapers, magazines, and network television, is organized around a beat system; that is, reporters are assigned to a particular topic or specialty—city government, the police and courts, the White House. Most beats are *geographic*—reporters cover places and the people who occupy them and make news there (science, environment, medicine, the arts are exceptions)—and most of these places are official. In fact, several content analyses of the news show that two thirds to three quarters of all sources quoted in the news are public officials (Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987; Gans, 1979; Whitney, Fritzler, Jones, Mazzarella, & Rakow, 1989). In part, officials make news because they do newsworthy things, and, in part, they make news simply because journalists are known, familiar, and accessible to them, and vice versa (see also Chapter 3). By extension, nonofficials are relatively *disadvantaged* in their ability to make news: They have to work harder to capture journalists' attention or they fall between the holes in the news net. Furthermore, official news, because of its familiarity to reporters and editors, starts off with a presumption that it is legitimate—it's news because that's the way news is.

There is one major potential problem for journalists who spend much of their time covering public officials. Journalists fear "going native": That is, there's a risk of journalists adopting the goals and values of the people they cover rather than keeping an objective distance. Sociologist Mark Fishman (1980) noted that journalists who cover officials virtually inevitably also frame their news stories according to what he calls the "bureaucratic phase structures" of the organizations they cover. That is, the organization's routine decides for them when something is news. Think, for example, about crime stories: When do we get news about crime, and where does information in the story really come from? Virtually all crime stories are about the commission of a crime (police report) and when a person is arrested (arrest report), charged with the crime (arraignment), brought to trial, convicted or acquitted, and, if convicted, sentenced. In other words, news is organized in exactly the same way as the criminal justice system organizes crime. And because it is organized that way and follows the same routines, the coverage tends to assume or take for granted the official organizational ideology.

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It is, however, possible that anyone can make news. As we noted above, public officials are relatively advantaged in making news, and others are less so. Recall our discussion of resource dependence in Chapter 3: Journalists want access to news and can offer publicity; potential news sources often have information that, if known, would be newsworthy, and they may want several different things. Public officials may want to inform the public about new programs. They may be engaged in conflict with other officials (a Republican president versus a Democratic congress, a state senator who wants to increase the income tax versus a governor who does not) or others in the public and may want publicity for their side of the issue. Social action groups likewise want to promote their side of an issue and seek press attention as well.

In a classic study of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, researcher Leon Sigal (1973) discovered that about two thirds of stories in those papers originated from news releases, handouts, and documents provided by news sources to reporters; in other words, the initiative for the story was with the *source*, rather than the reporter. Potential sources who go to the trouble of providing information to journalists in a form they can use with relatively little reportorial “leg-work” or in-house editing work of their own will have greater success in making news than others. The past few years have seen the development by large corporations and public relations agencies of video news releases, DVDs, and satellite links provided directly to stations; particularly in smaller TV markets, stations have frequently aired such news releases without acknowledging their sources. Now the Internet is being used to distribute such “news” (see, for example, the Web site www.prnewswire.com). Communication researcher Oscar Gandy (1982) refers to such tactics as *information subsidies*. Clearly, the ability to shape news this way favors groups that are already advantaged—companies and organizations able to do skilled public relations or to hire others to do it for them.

But anyone who has ever visited any newsroom knows that, for every news release used, dozens of others end up in the wastebasket. What makes the difference? Several things do, and each of them also applies to making news more generally.

Timing is important. It’s better to have information arriving in newsrooms at slack times—at the beginning of the cycle (as editors get started on the day) and especially on weekends; on weekends, there’s less official news to cover. It’s also better to focus on topics of

current interest (recall that Mencher, 1984, mentioned currency as a news value).

Those who angle news toward satisfying one or more of those values are more successful at making news than are others. Gans (1979) has argued that for ordinary people to attract the attention of the news media, they frequently have either to demonstrate or resort to violence (the conflict value) or engage in odd or unusual activities (the bizarre value). And media scholar Todd Gitlin (1980) has suggested that this can have the impact of altering a social movement that is trying to attract the public's attention through the media. Gitlin argues that the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) evolved in the 1960s from being a left-liberal mainstream social action group to a radical and violent one because media accounts of its activities focused on one aspect of its work—demonstrations against the Vietnam War—rather than its full agenda of civil rights and antipoverty work. Media coverage attracted to the SDS antiwar activists willing to be violent, people far less interested in peaceful action. Finally, prominence as a value is attractive to journalists. The already famous and powerful again are advantaged in making news.

Another powerful resource is expertise. To help them make news, journalists often turn to sources who are in a position either to know what's going on (present or former public officials, topic specialists in universities, interest groups, and think tanks) or who are believed to have valuable insights into current events. The key characteristics of a media expert are not only expertise but also accessibility and reliability. The accessibility factor favors experts in places where journalists are concentrated, especially in the key news centers of New York and Washington. The reliability factor favors people who have already been in the news, whose information has been solid, and who can deliver a quick, understandable sound bite. Because journalists are always in a hurry, they tend to rely on sources who appear in what researchers Mark Cooper and Lawrence Soley (1990) refer to as the "Golden Rolodex," the list of sources already known about.

What may become news also depends on the news cycle—what's news for a particular day, for a newspaper or TV evening newscast, or a particular week or month for a magazine. Again, the potential number of stories is mammoth. Perhaps 20% of the news stories that the typical daily newspaper has in hand during a day will appear in the paper; at major dailies such as *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles*

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Times, or *Washington Post*, perhaps 5% will; and at the network evening newscasts, perhaps 1% will (Whitney & Becker, 1982). Where do these stories come from and how do editors decide which ones to use?

Where do stories come from? At large newspapers, the networks, and newsmagazines, many stories come from the organization's news staff. Each has several hundred reporters, most of them covering specific beats. But at both large and small news operations, the large majorities of stories come from wire services such as the AP; supplementary news services, most of them organized by newspapers (*The New York Times*, the Gannett news service); and, in the case of broadcasting, from the parent network for each station as well. These are supplied to newsrooms either by high-speed computer links or satellite feeds.

What becomes news? Much of this news is redundant: A paper or station may have several stories about the same news event, in which case it will most likely use the version prepared by its own staff member. If there is no in-house version of the story, an editor making selection decisions relies on several determinants to decide what's news. First is to follow cues provided by news suppliers: At the beginning of each news cycle, for example, the AP runs a "menu" alerting editors to the most important stories it will transmit. It may follow cues from opinion leaders within the news media themselves, especially *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the major newsmagazines, and the networks; these processes are sometimes called *intermedia agenda setting*. (See the discussion of agenda setting later in this chapter.)

These and other forces lead to a great deal of *standardization* of news. You have no doubt noticed that the front page of your daily newspaper is not terribly different from the news you see on television or hear on the radio, particularly in terms of what stories you see in a given day. There are several reasons for this: First, newsmen and women are constrained by the values they share for what news is. Second, each works for an organization with routines that constrain what news is. Third, each organization operates in a larger news environment in which other organizations are influencing their own news decisions (competition, we have noted, often leads to

standardization rather than to differentiation);⁸ moreover, in that environment, each relies on other, common suppliers of news such as the wire services. Fourth, given the number of media mergers, many of the different news outlets might be owned by the same company. Finally, each lives in a social and cultural environment that exercises its own influences on reporters, editors, and the organizations for which they work.

News as Report. The dictionary definition notes that news is not the event itself, but the *report* of an event. Not only is news made by newsmakers, but “raw” occurrences must be made into stories. Each medium imposes its own demands on what a story is. TV stories, for example, demand a visual element; print media stories frequently are structured (and have been for more than a century) in inverted pyramid style, with the most essential information at the beginning of the story and less essential detail and explanatory information further down. A useful exercise, always, is to compare across different media to see how they have structured their stories.

At another level, stories must be structured in terms of their content. We have noted that many news stories feature conflict. Conflict is important and frequently interesting; moreover, conflict serves journalistic interests. Because what’s news in an event or issue is frequently unknown and ambiguous, journalists can employ conflict in the interests of their value of objectivity; an objective story is one that covers “both sides” (or “all sides”) of an issue. Gaye Tuchman (1972) has pointed to objectivity as a “strategic ritual” for journalists: By quoting both sides in a story, the journalist can remain detached and nonpartisan. But, as Tuchman further notes, the routine practices of journalists usually mean that the sides quoted tend to be the usual, and usually powerful, sources of news. Journalistic objectivity, then, meets the standards suggested in Chapter 7 to describe an ideology (see also Glasser, 1985; Hackett, 1984).

News and Reality, Today and Tomorrow

News is supposed to be a representation of reality, something even some of its most vocal critics suggest. (Note that “representation of reality” is a pretty good definition of ideology.) For example, critical scholar Todd Gitlin (1979) admits that journalists seek “truth—partial,

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superficial, occasion- and celebrity-centered truth, but truth nevertheless” (p. 263). But what can a 10-second sound bite capture the truth of? How we interpret how well journalism succeeds in truth seeking is a matter of perspective. Recall the three theories of reality set out in Chapter 7. Those of us who adhere to the first (reality as a collection of facts) or second (reality as differing from appearances) views of reality tend to believe that the relationship between news and reality is fairly close. Faced with information that news tends to advantage the already powerful and advantaged, those holding one of these two views might well answer, “Well, yes; journalists are doing no more than reflecting the world in which they, and we, live.” Faced with the same set of circumstances, those who hold the third view (reality as socially constructed and its ideology-and-hegemony cousins) would conclude something slightly different: that journalists reflect, uphold, and support the existing power relationships of the society.

The summer 1997 movie hit *Men in Black* had a running joke that the most reliable source of news and information about human contact with space aliens was the supermarket tabloid newspapers. The joke is funny because the movie—based on a comic book—is a sheer fantasy, but within the parameters of the fantasy, supermarket tabloids could be a reliable source of information. We note this because the lines between reality and unreality are far less clearly drawn than the preceding pages might suggest. During the 1990s, on television, in motion pictures, in magazines, and in a variety of ways, the genres of the real and unreal have blurred.

All media bear some relationship to reality, but not all do so as directly as do news media. Most fictional programming is, of course, fantasy; but as we noted early on, entertainment producers must aim for the appearance of reality, so that the audience will willfully suspend its disbelief and thus be entertained.

Advertising presents a separate set of concerns. In the first place, advertisers are watched over by the Federal Trade Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, and the National Advertising Review Board of the self-regulatory Council of Better Business Bureaus. All prohibit outright lying and deception. But the reality of much advertising, especially for many consumer products, is that the products within a particular category are far more similar than they are different. Still, none of us expects to hear any time soon a commercial that says, “Our pain reliever works just as well as half a dozen others, and it might

cost a little more because we advertise.” Rather, when the products in a category are not very different, the creative genius of the advertiser is either to find what advertiser Ted Bates called a “unique selling proposition” for the product, some characteristic that differentiates that product from others, or else to create an image for the product that associates the product with an emotion or image that the audience-market desires. Is this reality? It is not deceptive; it is in the interstices.⁹

By the same token, ethical public relations practitioners—those who, for example, belong to the Public Relations Society of America and adhere to its code of ethics—will not purposefully lie to the public or the media. At the same time, they are obligated to present clients in the best possible light, to advance the client’s goals. Is this reality, deception, or something in between? (See Box 12.4, “Codes of Ethics,” in the next chapter.)

In the last decade, the ability to digitally manipulate images increased as desktop computers became more powerful. The ethics of the practice (manipulating images for compositional, aesthetic, or political reasons) became the subject of debate in the 1980s and 1990s as such notable examples came to light as *National Geographic* moving one of the pyramids in a cover photo or *Time* magazine darkening O.J. Simpson’s mug shot so that he looked more menacing.

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We have spent as much time as we have on the relationships between news, information, and reality because they are so important to the sort of society we have. As we further detail in the next chapter, reliable information is the cornerstone of a civil, public society, something the framers of the U.S. Constitution clearly understood. For a citizenry to make intelligent choices, it must have access to the day’s intelligence before it can act. The next few pages outline the influences that media have on how we make up our minds and then act politically.

Media clearly perform important functions in politics. First, by the time we are teenagers, media are our most important source of political information (Atkin, 1981). Second, media serve as potential sources of persuasion and decision making, both directly, through endorsements and editorials, and indirectly, as a vehicle for candidates’ and parties’ speeches, platforms, and advertisements. Finally, information and persuasion may lead to behavior or political activity.

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Political Behavior

Media effects on politics have been studied extensively, not only because they are socially important, but also because they're easy to study: Political campaigns have a reasonably definite beginning and a very definite end—election day—and that end is a concrete, measurable behavior: People either do or do not vote, and if they do, they vote for a named candidate. There are, of course, other forms of political behavior: volunteering time to campaigns, contributing money, trying to persuade others. And there are likewise strong individual differences in how much the American public actually engages in each of them: On average, about half of Americans vote in presidential elections, fewer than a quarter in presidential primaries; one in five wear campaign buttons or display posters, and only about one person in nine has worked in a political campaign or given money to one.¹⁰

Why is there so much variation in how people do—and do not—behave politically? There are a number of causes: level of political interest, strength of political attitudes and opinions, amount of political information, degree of attention to politics (largely through the media), and strength of partisanship. Moreover, these are deeply interrelated—mutually causal—so that a person high on one of these variables (a strong partisan) is likely to be high on others as well (politically well-informed), and those low on any one variable are likely to be low on others as well.

Information

We've noted before that the media serve as the principal source of political information, determining how well we are informed about politics (or most other matters). The average American, it is safe to say, is *not* well informed about politics: At the height of the fall electoral campaigns, for example, fewer than half can name any candidate for U.S. House of Representatives from their district or both candidates for U.S. Senate from their state (Neuman, 1986). But, as with political behavior, there are profound individual differences in what, and how much, we know about politics.

Communication researcher Philip J. Tichenor and his colleagues (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) have postulated, and they and

many others have found a great deal of evidence to support, what they call the *knowledge gap hypothesis* (see also Gaziano, 1983). It suggests that, in the development of any social or political issue, the more highly educated segments of the population know more about the issue early on and, moreover, acquire information at a faster rate than the less well educated. In other words, the information-rich get richer, and the gap between them and the information-poor widens over time. Why should this occur? Just as the causes of variation in political behavior are multiple, the causes of knowledge acquisition are, too. Level of education predicts not only what and how much we're likely to know on a given topic at any given time, but also how interested in and motivated we are to learn about that topic. It also predicts the quality and quantity of media attention we pay to it, and how able we are to learn new information about that topic, a notion that E. D. Hirsch (1987) has labeled *cultural literacy*. Tichenor and other scholars, however, point out that whereas knowledge gaps are widespread, they are not inevitable: Gaps can close. They do so particularly when issues "heat up" to an extent that all segments of the public are likely to learn about them—when, in other words, issues become so important that they generate interpersonal discussion and saturation media coverage, motivating people usually not interested in the topic to pay attention and to learn. Extensive research on how people learn about timely events supports this: We're more likely to learn about the most intensely newsworthy events—a presidential assassination attempt, the crash of a spacecraft—from other people rather than from the media. We learn about the most newsworthy events from other people because those people want to talk about what they know. To the extent that we're likely to hear about unimportant things at all, we learn them from other people, simply because the media do not report on them. We're more likely to get intermediately important news from the media because the media do report on them but people aren't likely to focus conversations on them.

Persuasion and Decision Making

How persuasive are the media in political questions? Much of the communication research literature suggests that the effects are quite

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limited, for it is often difficult to separate the effects of media—the messengers—from the messages and their initial sources—candidates, parties, and interest groups. At the same time, a half-century of research does help us understand the process of political communication effects.

Fifty years ago, the first large-scale studies of the impact of media on politics were conducted by the legendary Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his Columbia University colleagues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). In two communities in two presidential elections, they conducted panel studies or repeated surveys of the same samples to ascertain when potential voters made up their minds for whom they would vote. The panel design allowed them to speculate on what led these potential voters to the decisions they made. They initially suspected that mass media messages would be enormously important in vote decisions, but they found in each study that this was simply not so. In each, as a matter of fact, solid majorities of voters had made up their minds for whom they would vote *even before the candidates were officially nominated*. Their explanation for this was simple and straightforward—a social categories one: Blue-collar families said they would support the Democrat, white-collar ones the Republican. Moreover, they found two other important things: First, among those who had not made up their minds at the beginning of the campaign, relatively few cited any media source as the determining influence on their vote. Far more cited the influence of other people. Second, voters who make up their minds early in a campaign are different in several respects from those who make up their minds later on.

The Opinion-Leader Concept

Surprised by their failure to find large-scale media effects, Lazarsfeld and his fellow researchers followed up on those who had identified “other people” as their sources of a vote decision. They found that these other people were not a random assortment, but the same names cropped up as sources. In their voting studies and subsequent research, they did find a media effect of a sort: These other people, whom they dubbed *opinion leaders* or *influentials*, were not remarkably different demographically (or in social categories terms) from the people they influenced, but they were different. As Elihu Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explain it,

Who or what influences the influentials? Here is where the mass media re-entered the picture. For the leaders reported much more than the non-opinion leaders that for them, the mass media were influential. Pieced together this way, a new idea emerged—the suggestion of a “two-step flow of communication.” The suggestion is basically that ideas, often, seem to flow *from* radio and print [remember that this study was conducted in the 1940s, before TV] to opinion leaders and *from them* to the less active sections of the population. (p. 32)

The two-step flow model proved a very important one for understanding communication influence and was heavily studied for many years. As a trickle-down theory, it suggests that media influence is *limited*, because most people (the less active) can be affected only indirectly. At the same time, media do play an important role in political influence. Subsequent research on the model, however, has modified it and how we understand its importance considerably.

We now believe that the model is general, not restricted to politics: We find examples of opinion leadership on virtually any topic—popular music, buying computers, fashion, food, and so on. And there are variations, topic by topic, on the relative influence of opinion leaders and of the media.

By the same token, opinion leadership is not general. We see few generalized opinion leaders. Think of your own conversations with others: You’re likely to discuss what are good movies, good cars, good cameras, or good manners with different people. Moreover, in the original conception, opinion leadership was taken to be an ideal type: Either you were an opinion leader or you were a follower. More realistically, there are probably degrees of leadership, so that a person sometimes leads and sometimes follows.

Moreover, the idea of “ideas” in the model is too simple. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) say “ideas . . . flow,” but the media (and opinion leaders) transmit two distinct things: information and attempts to influence or persuade. Most usually, it would appear, opinion leaders gather information from the media to craft persuasive arguments. The relative importance of media and interpersonal influence is subject to a wide range of variation: Extensive research on the diffusion of innovations—how people learn to do new things—shows that both media and opinion leaders serve important functions. Media, for example,

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may make us aware of and/or interested in some idea, but we may be hesitant to try it out, to buy it, or otherwise to behave in accordance with what we have learned, particularly if the behavior implied by the idea is risky or expensive (for example, buying a High Definition TV set). For that, we need the advice of an opinion leader, who is more likely to be knowledgeable and experienced.

The flow need not be two-step. It can be multistep (from the media to one person, to another, to another, and so on), two-step, one-step (directly from the media), or no-step: Some ideas find no popular resonance at all and drop from sight. A one-step flow suggests direct media influence—from the media to the individual, without the intervention of an opinion leader. And given the vast variety of topics and issues to which we are all exposed, and the unlikelihood that we will discuss most of them with another person, the potential for the two-step flow model to come into play is vastly restricted: We don't talk about it, hence the model does not apply.

In politics, for example, repeated surveys have found that even during the course of a presidential election campaign, roughly half of all potential voters simply do not discuss the elections with other people. Then, the only source of potential influence on such people is the media. Communication researcher John Robinson (1976a), for example, notes that in the 1968 presidential election campaign, more voters surveyed said they were aware of having seen a newspaper endorsement than reported having been subject to any interpersonal attempt to persuade them how to vote. Thus, absent any interpersonal discussion, the media may emerge as the sole source of political influence.

When Voters Decide

Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, and again this has been verified in subsequent research (Chaffee & Choe, 1980; Whitney & Goldman, 1985), also found that there are important differences in voters that relate to when they reach their vote decisions. *Early deciders*, those who make up their minds early, tend to be strong partisans, likely to identify with a major party, to be interested in politics, to pay close attention to political media, to be better informed about politics in general and about the campaign and candidates in particular, to be likely to discuss politics, and to eventually vote. Moreover, like all other voters, once they've made up their minds, they are unlikely to change them. *Campaign deciders* are less

partisan: They are more likely to be political independents but are somewhat less interested in politics than early deciders; they pay lower routine attention to political content in the media but are somewhat more likely to follow political news during the campaigns (motivated, we would guess, by a desire for information on which to base a vote choice); and they are intermediate in the amount of political discussion in which they engage and in their ultimate likelihood of voting. *Late or last-minute deciders* are lowest on all these measures: They are the least partisan and the least likely to follow politics in general or the campaign in particular, to discuss politics, and, for that matter, to vote.

What does this typology tell us about media impact? Something subtle. Early deciders pay close attention to media, and so we might guess that the potential effect of media on them would be great. But because they've already made up their minds, media messages have little impact on their political decisions. Because they make up their minds during the campaign, campaign deciders, on the other hand, are open to influence by media because they lack the strong partisan ties early deciders have and because they pay closer attention to media (and especially candidate debates) during the campaign. But because they discuss the campaign with others, they're likewise open to interpersonal influence. The last-minute deciders are the most perplexing and, at the same time, most interesting of all: Because they don't discuss the campaign or follow it closely in the media, are unlikely to watch televised debates, and lack the political party ties that tell them how to choose, it's not clear what leads them to a choice. (In fact, fewer of them vote than in the other categories; some of them flip coins; still others resort to *latent partisanship*, voting for candidates of parties with which they very weakly identify.) But political scientist Philip Converse (1962) has suggested a paradox: Even though late deciders pay the least attention to media politics, they are the *most* susceptible to media influence, for they have so little else on which to base vote decisions. For this reason, last-minute saturation advertising, particularly on television (and during or between entertainment programs) may be very effective.

Endorsements and Advertising

Media messages make evaluative statements in efforts to persuade and to influence behavior, most usually in two ways: through

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endorsements, in which a medium urges voters to support a particular candidate or referendum position, and through *political advertising*, in which third parties—the candidates, political parties, or others—urge a course of behavior.

Over the years, the U.S. print press has become decidedly less partisan, and declining numbers of newspapers endorse candidates for office, particularly for the office of president. However, many papers, including most of the largest ones, do endorse candidates, and whether endorsements have an impact is an important question. The answer is yes, they do have an effect, but the effect is modest in size, particularly at the presidential level. The most careful statistical study of the effects of newspaper endorsements on presidential voting, conducted by John Robinson (1976a, 1976b) over five presidential elections (1956–1972), indicated that the presence of an endorsement made an average three percentage point difference in the vote for endorsed candidates. Although that's not a large difference, we've previously noted that, in close elections, a small difference can have a large effect. However, Robinson (1976b) found the largest endorsement effects (an endorsement persuading voters to vote for a supported candidate) in the two landslide elections (Lyndon Johnson's 1964 victory over Goldwater, Richard Nixon's 1972 win over George McGovern) among the five he studied; in short, he found the largest effects when it made no political difference. It is generally suspected, however, that in lower-level races—for city and county offices and judicial seats—where voters tend not to be well informed about candidates, the effects of endorsements may be somewhat greater, simply because the fact that a newspaper endorsed a candidate may be one of the only things that a voter may know about the candidate.

We earlier cited Michael Schudson's (1984) book, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, noting that when Schudson interviewed advertising researchers, they were unable to give him any clear idea of how much impact advertising has. That applies to political advertising as well as to consumer products. At the aggregate level, there is scanty evidence that the amount of money spent on candidate advertising is itself directly related to whether candidates win or lose, once incumbency is accounted for (that is, incumbents tend to be reelected, and they also tend to be able to raise a lot more money).¹¹ Nonetheless, there is evidence that some advertising, in some contexts, can be effective, and so we will take a brief closer look.

One perhaps unanticipated impact advertising has on elections is information. Political scientists Thomas Patterson and Robert McClure (1976) found in a study of one presidential election that advertising, in fact, contributed more to the public's knowledge of candidates and issues than even the news did, and although subsequent studies have generally found that news is more informative than advertising, the fact remains that advertising's contribution to knowledge is impressive, particularly among less active voters. Political candidate advertising, however, differs from most consumer-product advertising in several respects. What we're being sold is a candidate and/or his or her ideas and promises about what public policy should be, rather than some product we will use and later discard. Moreover, the behavior sought is a vote, not a sale. Finally, political advertising, unlike consumer-product advertising, tends to be *comparative* and frequently *negative*: The candidate tries to persuade people to vote for her or him by finding something to criticize in an opponent's past or record. (When was the last time you saw a product ad that tried to sell you something by pointing out how awful the competition was?)

Despite the fact that polls show large majorities of the public find negative political ads distasteful, politicians use them frequently because they think they work, and historians often point to ads that appear to have had profound impacts on campaigns, such as the "Daisy" ad in the 1964 Goldwater-Johnson election and the Willie Horton commercial in Bush's 1988 victory over Michael Dukakis. (See Box 11.3, "Negative Political Ads.") But negative ads may have several different impacts on individual voters. A voter may believe the ad and form a negative impression of the candidate, which is the ad's intent; at the same time, however, it may also translate into a negative impression of the sponsoring candidate, although usually the negative belief about the target candidate is somewhat more important (which is why negative ads appear to work better in two-candidate general elections than in multicandidate ones; in multicandidate races, if Candidate A attacks Candidate B, they may both "lose" while Candidate C emerges unharmed). In general, however, we can never be quite sure how successful negative advertising really is with individual voters. A secondary effect of negative ads is more easily documentable: They tend to focus political debate, particularly in the news media, on the issues the negative ads have raised.

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BOX 11.3**Negative Political Ads**

Perhaps the most famous television political commercial of all time was the 1964 “Daisy” commercial, created by political consultant Tony Schwartz. Showing a little girl plucking the petals off a daisy and moving to a close-up of her pupils, a voice-over counts down (“10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .”) followed by a quick cut to a view of a nuclear explosion. Then, on a black background, came an appeal to vote for Lyndon Johnson. The ad never even mentioned Johnson’s opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, but the “message” was unambiguous, suggesting that Goldwater was a dangerous warmonger who might lead the country into a nuclear holocaust.

First runner-up would be the 1988 “Willie Horton” commercial, in which the campaign for George H. W. Bush showed a still picture of an African American man who raped a woman while he was on furlough from a Massachusetts prison, during the time Bush’s Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, was governor of Massachusetts. The voice-over blamed the act on Dukakis, although, in fact, the furlough program had become law while Dukakis’s predecessor—a Republican—was governor.

Both ads became controversial—and newsworthy: The ads were replayed many times, not as paid advertising, but in news programs (the “Daisy” commercial, in fact, aired only *once* as a paid commercial on the NBC *Movie of the Week*). Each ad thus helped form the political debate of the respective campaigns.

But can we be sure of the commercial’s impact? No. In the first place, it becomes impossible to separate the impact of the commercial as a commercial from the impact of the news coverage of the political issue. In each case, only minorities of the electorate ever saw the commercials as commercials. Moreover, at a very aggregate level, poll data tend to discount the effect: In both of these cases, the percentages of likely voters expressing a preference for the eventual winners *at the time the commercial first aired* were virtually identical to the fraction of the popular vote the winner received two months later in the presidential election.

We now turn to several related models of communication influence that bear some similarities. Each suggests that major impacts from the media may flow not from intentional efforts to persuade (what we think), but by changing our cognitions (what we think about). These

are the ideas of *agenda setting*, *priming*, *third-person effects*, and the *spiral of silence*.

The Agenda-Setting Model

The news media, by and large, do not set out to persuade, but rather to inform. We are first of all suggesting that the media, in telling us what to think about, *set the public agenda*; that is, they tell us what issues are important for public debate. The idea behind agenda setting is quite simple: The media, over time, by featuring some issues prominently, some issues less prominently, and still other issues not at all, give us a sense of what issues are important or, in the research literature, a sense of the issue's *salience*. By salience, we mean the amount of public or political importance an issue possesses—the “light and heat” it generates.

Media cue us as to the importance of issues in different ways: First, we get a sense of the importance of an issue in media by its prominence: Is it at the top of the front page, or buried somewhere inside? Is it the first item in the evening news, or near the end? Second, media importance is conveyed by both the extensiveness of stories in a given day and the duration of coverage over time: Is there one story, or is there a main story and one or more related *sidebar* stories? How long and detailed are the stories? Does artwork—photos, charts, or graphs—accompany the story? Does the issue receive treatment over many days, weeks, months?

Communication researchers test for agenda-setting impact by obtaining measures of the media agenda and the public agenda and then comparing the two. For example, we might content-analyze a sample of news media to see which issues received how much coverage and then rank-order those issues. The economy might rank first, crime second, drugs and drug abuse third, and so on. We would then look at survey or polling data on what Americans described as important problems. If the two lists looked similar, we might conclude that the media set the agenda for the public, and when researchers have done such analyses, they usually conclude this. (For good reviews, see McCombs & Gilbert, 1986; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

However, we should ask, Who's to say that it doesn't work the other way around—that the *public* sets the *media* agenda? And isn't it

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also quite possible that something else—for example, what’s happening in the real world—sets *both*?

We can design studies that elaborate both questions. To test the relative strength of the public and media agendas on each other, researchers rely on a technique called *cross-lagged correlation*: Measures of the public and media agenda are taken at two points in time, and the impact of the media agenda at the first time point is correlated with the public agenda at the second time point, whereas the impact of the public agenda at the first time point is compared with the media agenda at the second. Researchers have found that the impact of the media on the public agenda is virtually always greater than the opposite: In other words, the media do more to set the public agenda than the public do to set the media agenda (although there is a noticeable effect of the public on the media). Answering the second question—Does something else, the “real world,” set both agendas?—requires a different research strategy. Researchers use not only measures of the media and public agendas, but also some real-world indicators as well, such as unemployment and inflation rates, crime rates, wartime casualty rates, and so on. A number of analyses have found that the closest correlations are between the media and public agendas—closer than between the real-world and media agendas or between the real-world and public agendas, although, as before, each does of course somewhat influence the other (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).

But the relationships between the media and public agendas in research studies are never perfect: The lists are never identically ranked. In other words, the power of the media to set the public agenda is somewhat constrained or limited, and in ways—and by things—that are instructive. Among the limitations are the following:

1. *Individual Differences*: The strongest agenda-setting effects have been found in experimental research studies, which suggests that a major condition for obtaining the effect is attention; that is, in experiments, subjects are expected to pay attention, but under naturalistic conditions, some people do and others don’t (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). And, as we noted in discussing knowledge effects more generally, the sorts of things that lead one to attend to the news are related to levels of education, interest, and the like. Indeed, in the experimental studies, the strongest agenda-setting effects generally were among people who did not usually follow news closely. Moreover, David Weaver (1980)

and others have noted that an individual's "need for orientation" on an issue—one's recognition that an issue may be important, coupled with a belief that one doesn't know enough about it—is a strong predictor of agenda-setting effects.

2. *Media Differences*: It should be fairly obvious that not all media present precisely the same agendas at the same time, and logically people's agendas should correspond to the media to which they do pay attention. On average, however, most major national media do present very similar news and hence news agendas, as we argued earlier in the chapter.

3. *Issue Differences*: Issues differ in two principal ways. The first is content; some issues concern problems facing a society or group, whereas other issues more specifically focus on policy proposals (legislation or executive orders) or solutions to problems. Second is the kind of impact issues may have on the public or society. Some issues are obtrusive ones, affecting nearly everyone and affecting them in pretty much the same way (inflation, when it is high; gasoline shortages); others are selective, affecting some people deeply, while affecting others far less so (noise pollution); still others are remote, directly affecting small numbers of people (U.S. foreign policy toward Malawi; Lang & Lang, 1983). In general, agenda-setting effects are greatest on remote issues and smallest on obtrusive ones.

4. *Salience Differences*: There are different kinds of salience. Social salience is our sense of an issue's impact on the larger society. Interpersonal salience is what we think is important to the people with whom we're in regular contact—what we talk about with others. Individual salience is what we personally think is important. In general, agenda-setting effects are greatest on social salience and least evident on individual salience.

Priming

The *priming* effect is a close cousin of agenda setting, and, in fact, it was described by researchers conducting agenda-setting studies. Like agenda setting, priming is a metaphor. Here, the metaphor is of priming a pump—adding enough liquid to the pump to get it started working on its own. It is described by political psychologist Shanto Iyengar (1991) this way:

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The so-called “priming effect” refers to the ability of news programs to affect the criteria by which individuals judge their political leaders. Specifically, researchers have found that the more prominent an issue is in the national information stream, the greater will be the weight accorded it in making political judgments. While agenda-setting reflects the impact of news coverage on the perceived importance of national issues, priming refers to the impact of news coverage on the weight assigned to specific issues on making political judgments. For instance, after watching news stories on the increased budgetary outlays for the Pentagon under the Reagan administration, viewers were not only more likely to cite the arms race as an important national issue, but were also likely to give more weight to their evaluations of President Reagan’s performance on arms control when rating his performance overall. (p. 133)

Thus priming blurs the line between “what to think” and “what to think about.” In recent years, McCombs and his colleagues (e.g. McCombs & Reynolds, 2002) have come to describe cases in which media emphases on attributes, descriptions, and “frames” of issues and political candidates are transferred to public sentiment as “second-level” agenda setting.

Agenda setting, framing, and priming are largely inside-the-head psychological models; they affect how we behave only to the extent that we *act on what we “know” or believe*. We’ll now turn to two other models that have a bit more to say about behavior.

Third-Person Effects

Public opinion researcher W. Phillips Davison (1983) coined the term *third-person effect* to try to describe how, in some cases, media messages may have an impact on our behavior but little or no impact on our attitudes. He began his classic article on the effect with a historical anecdote about the World War II battle of Iwo Jima in the Pacific. A historian friend of Davison’s had asked him if he could give a good explanation for the fact that Black soldiers did not fight in that battle because they were kept from the battle by superiors who had heard a Japanese propaganda radio broadcast urging them not to fight. Why, the historian asked, did the commanders withdraw the Black troops, when they had no evidence that the Black soldiers had been persuaded by the broadcast? Davison responded by formulating his third-person model.

All of us, Davison suggests, go through a little mental calculation when we see or hear media messages. First, we calculate whether we personally believe or are affected by them (first-person effects). We then calculate whether our friends—people like us—are affected (second-person effects). Finally, we calculate whether “other people”—those about whom we are likely to know little or nothing (third persons)—are affected. A usual response, he says, is to believe that we, and others like us, will not be affected, but that other people will be. A simple example: How much does advertising affect *you*? How much does it affect other people? Reams of survey data tell us that most people believe that advertising messages generally don’t have much impact on them, but the same people believe that other people are more affected than they are. As Davison points out, it’s possible that we either underestimate effects on ourselves or overestimate impacts on others, or both, but he and we believe that, more often than not, we overestimate effects on others. We see something of the third-person effect in debates over media effects discussed in the last chapter. It is always the behavior of others we are worried about.

There is likely a fair degree of generality to the third-person model. Each of us finds ourselves in situations in which, before doing or saying something—that is, before we behave—we calculate what others think or believe. Indeed, this is a component—subjective social norms—in the Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) attitude-and-behavior-change model presented in the last chapter. Reporters, for example, in writing a second-day story on new developments in a story since the day before, have to calculate how much the audience is likely to remember (they usually calculate, based on experience, that it won’t remember much). Political operatives must calculate how much impact the speeches and ads of opponents have had on voters and respond accordingly. What the third-person model suggests is that when we must behave, and when that behavior depends on our estimate of how others have been influenced by a message, and lacking information (usually we are) about how much these others have been affected, we are likely to overestimate the influence of media messages.

The Spiral of Silence

The *spiral-of-silence* model introduced by the German social scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1984) is similar to Davison’s

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third-person model. It, too, argues that media messages alter people's, and society's, behavior. But the behavior that interests Noelle-Neumann is how and when people are willing to express their opinions.

She argues that a "fear of isolation" is very important in motivating people; that we dread putting ourselves in a position where other people will shun or make fun of us. So, before we are willing to let other people know what we think on some issue, we perform a mental calculation quite similar to the one Davison suggests; that is, we try to assess what other people think on a topic before we let them know what we think. If we think that they are likely to agree with us, or if we think that more and more people feel the same way, then we go ahead and speak out. If we think, however, that they disagree with us or that the opinion is becoming unpopular, we do not speak out. Moreover, Noelle-Neumann suggests that we are each endowed with a *quasi-statistical* sense that allows us to intuit "public opinion," or the predominant opinion of others. The spiral-of-silence model is a media model only because the media serve as the primary sources of our information about the distribution of public opinion and about trends in that opinion.

As outlined above, the model is an individual-level model, describing what goes on in our heads. But the model is also a social-level model, describing the dynamics of public expression and opinion. If, as Noelle-Neumann suggests, people *do* decide whether to express themselves based on their view of predominant opinion or trends in opinion, then, *over time*, those favoring the majority opinion should express it willingly and those favoring the minority position should prefer to remain quiet. If this occurs, the majority opinion will be expressed loudly and frequently, whereas the minority position will "spiral into silence."

Although there is both historical and research support for the spiral of silence, it, too, does not always occur, which is a good thing, or we would eventually devolve into a society in which there was never any expressed difference of opinion. Why does it sometimes work, and sometimes not?

1. *Individual Differences*: "Willingness to express" is an attribute on which people differ, regardless of topic or predominant opinion; some people are simply more outspoken than others. Willingness to express an opinion is also a function of opinion intensity—how strongly someone

holds an opinion: People who hold strong opinions may well express them regardless of their perceptions of how others feel.

2. *Perception of Predominant Opinion (and Future Trends)*: The model's assumption that people are able to figure out what others think on all issues is almost certainly not always correct. Social psychologists have written extensively on pluralistic ignorance, or uncertainty about the distribution of opinions of others. If we are uncertain about the opinions of others, the model may not apply. If we are uncertain, the theorists say, we generally react in one of two ways: In general, we may have "looking-glass perceptions," believing that others feel the same way we do, or, if we believe the topic to be touchy or controversial, we may exercise a conservative bias, thinking that others are more conservative or restrictive than in fact they are (Taylor, 1982).

3. *Perceptions of "Others'" Opinions*. The model assumes that, in our mental calculation, we have some generalized other or (in Davison's terms) third person, in mind. In fact, most of most people's public or political talk is not to a generalized mass audience. Before a more specialized audience, someone might believe that the opinion expressed will be a majority one, even if it's not a majority opinion in the mass audience. In other words, most of our discussion is among friends or people whose views we think we know pretty well and whom we think are likely to agree with us. When we don't think this, however, the model is more likely to apply.

CHALLENGING THE AGENDA

When people want to challenge the political agenda, to put forth a view not congruent with the norms of mainstream media, it is often difficult to get onto the media's agenda. However, a variety of other media are continually made and remade as ad hoc networks of newsletters, e-mail, videotapes, and Web sites produce alternative messages. We have discussed the notion of radical media earlier in this book (see Chapter 4). Here, we would briefly like to introduce Clemencia Rodriguez's (2001) notion of *citizens' media*. Rodriguez points out that most theories of radical media (or alternative media) are simply oppositional in the political positions espoused by their texts. Or they define their object of study as everything mainstream, corporate-owned media

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is not (in terms of scale, budget, financial backing, distribution, and so on). As a corrective to this work, Rodriguez coins the term *citizens' media*. Citizenship is a form of political identity, something constructed:

“Citizens’ media” implies first that a collectivity is *enacting* its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible. (p. 20)

This sort of media is made not simply by people picking up video cameras or logging on to the Web to represent their opinions; it implies a more active personal investment. She writes,

I could see how producing alternative media messages implies much more than simply challenging the mainstream media with *campesino* correspondents as new communication and information sources. It implies having the opportunity to create one’s own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one’s own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources; it implies becoming one’s own storyteller, regaining one’s own voice; it implies reconstructing the self-portrait of one’s own community and one’s own culture; it implies exploring the infinite possibilities of one’s own body, one’s own face, to create facial expressions (a new codification of the face) and nonverbal languages (a new codification of the body) never seen before; it implies taking one’s own languages out of their usual hiding places and throwing them out there, into the public sphere, and seeing how they do, how they defeat other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages. . . . What matters is that, for the first time, one’s shy languages, languages used to remain within the familiar and the private, take part in the public arena of languages and discourse. (p. 3)

As you can see from the extract, this type of mediamaking is political in a way seldom considered by most media theories in this chapter. We are not discussing the political as the government’s and citizens’ abilities to shape governance, but as the relations of power between individuals and groups; the power to create oneself, to make meaning, and

to influence others. This also serves to bring into question the nature of the public, the topic to which we turn in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

The social reality models we have discussed—agenda setting, priming, third-person effects, and the spiral of silence—have several aspects in common: All of them suggest that behavioral impacts such as how we vote or whether we give money or speak aloud may result from media-induced changes in beliefs or cognitions. Each also suggests that media impact does not result from a single message, but from the cumulative impact of media messages over time. And whereas research to date has confirmed each model, one cannot argue that any one of them works equally effectively all of the time, even at the individual or personal level.

This chapter has focused on two aspects of politics and the news media: how media cover news and how they affect people. We turn next to two other aspects of people and the media: the media and the people as a public, and public considerations of how the media ought to behave—or normative theories of the media.

NOTES

1. Our characterizations here are necessarily general and overly simple; for a more complete characterization of early newspapers, see Nerone (1987). Nerone in particular notes that the degree to which newspapers were partisan before 1840 was highly variable; many papers, particularly in larger cities, were highly partisan, but others were more objective by present-day standards. He also notes that changes in the newspaper were evolutionary, occurring slowly and undramatically, rather than revolutionary.
2. In the United States, however, unlike Europe, the newspaper has remained largely a local phenomenon almost to the present. Among American newspapers, only a handful—the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*—have an appreciable circulation outside the cities in which they are produced. In Europe, however, the principal newspapers are national—produced in the capital and distributed throughout the nation. The “mass” newspaper evolved in Europe at the same time as the national railroad system, enabling

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metropolitan newspapers to be on breakfast tables the next morning throughout the country. The size of the United States, however, did not allow this, and what "national" newspapers we do have emerged as national only in the 1970s and 1980s, when communications satellites and commercial jet aviation made it economically feasible to print national papers in satellite printing facilities across the country.

3. It might be noted that historians disagree over the pace at which, and reasons why, these changes occur, but they tend to concur that they did.

4. Although Telstar was used to televise the funeral of President John Kennedy in 1963, routine TV news usage of satellites did not come into being until the 1970s. The Vietnam War is often called "the first televised war," and writer Michael Arlen (1969) dubbed it "the living-room war." But, for most of that war (from 1960 to 1969), the TV images were on film flown from Vietnam to California and aired two days after the events were filmed.

5. This slogan was a favorite of Lieutenant Joe Friday (Jack Webb, also the show's producer) on the 1950s and 1960s TV show *Dragnet*. The message was that if the witnesses he and his partner were interviewing would stick to the facts, the police could interpret them and more quickly and efficiently catch the criminals.

6. One aspect of news style that is indisputably an AP legacy is the inverted pyramid style of constructing news stories, with the most important facts first and less central ones later in the story—the "who, what, when, where followed by why and how" or "5 Ws and H" formula.

7. Tuchman (1973) has noted that even unpredicted stories, especially when they are obviously big news, are quickly covered in ways that allow reporters and editors to apply routines to them.

8. In their memoirs, many journalists have commented on the second-guessing that their own editors do when the staff journalist's story is different from the other versions: That is, the staff journalist is asked to account for "why your story is different from what the AP [or *The New York Times* or ABC] says." And reporters agree that, over time, this serves as a powerful standardizing influence—not to be too different from what other journalists are writing.

9. Sisella Bok (1978) is the standard work on truth and deception and gray areas in between, and is highly recommended to anyone who is considering any media career.

10. The Gallup Poll, May 1988 and November 1986. The *Gallup Opinion Index* is published monthly and available in most research libraries. See, also, Robert Putnam's (2000) book, *Bowling Alone*.

11. A study of the 1988 elections by political communication researcher Michael Robinson found that in 60 primaries that year, the biggest spender won the primary only 40% of the time (cited in Kolbert, 1992).

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The Media, the Public, and Normative Theories

12

We talk about “the public” throughout this book, for no term in understanding mass media is more vital. This chapter focuses on the public. We will try to delineate what we mean by the public, talk a bit about where contemporary ideas of the public come from, show how different notions of the public lead us to different questions, and raise issues of how the media *ought* to operate.

DEFINING THE PUBLIC

In ordinary language, we think of *public* in a variety of ways. Among the most common are the following:

- Public as the not-private, that which goes on in the open, observable by and accessible to others, as in “open to the public”
- Public as general, pertaining to or emanating from all citizens, as in *public interest* or *public opinion*
- Public as communal, or governmentally owned or regulated, as in *public television* or *public utilities*

Public implies openness, community, citizenship, discussion, debate. And the relationship between media and public can be discussed on several levels by reference to these terms.

The media clearly serve public functions in two essential ways. First, the media have become the key instrument of publicness in our first sense: That is, they bring information and issues out into the open; they constitute *publicity*. When the news media argue that trials (the Kobe Bryant trial, the Oklahoma City bombing trials) and military operations (the Gulf Wars) should be open to media access, they assert “the people’s right to know.” They argue that the public can hold its own institutions accountable only to the degree that public (or governmental—our third sense of *public*) business is conducted “in public” (our first sense). Second, media constitute a key portion of what we sometimes call the *public sphere*, the multiple forums in which issues and controversies can be debated (our first and second senses of *public*), something essential in a democracy, if what we mean by *democracy* is the manifestation of the public will.

For the *public will* to have much meaning, we have to have some sense of how we might know what that will is—what the public wants and needs—and how we might find that out. For now, we will note that the public can be thought of in a variety of ways, ways that are related to how the public is *represented*—as individuals (or as aggregations of individuals), as groups or publics, or through the usual political form of representation, the government (“We, the people . . .” are the opening words of the U.S. Constitution).¹ The very idea of a public is intertwined with the idea of a democracy.

CREATING THE PUBLIC

The first thing we need to say is that there is no such thing as “the public.” It is not a natural category somehow discovered by the Greeks. It is an idea, a concept, about how people act together as a whole. Publics have to be created, they do not just arise, and what it means to be a public will change as historical circumstances change. In addition, we always need to ask, Who speaks on behalf of the public?

The notion of democracy is an ancient one, dating from the golden age of Greece; its modern manifestation, however, dates from the Enlightenment, roughly dating from the 1700s, and especially in Britain and Holland, and slightly later in France.² Prior to this period, the notion of the public—in the sense of a body of citizens capable of expressing public opinion—is virtually absent, and for good reason: As

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we discuss later in this chapter, Europe was ruled by coalitions of kings, feudal lords, and the hierarchy of the church. Real power and authority rested in very few hands, and the opinions of anyone else (if they had them and dared express them) mattered for little. Such dissent as existed was usually ruthlessly suppressed.

The Rise of the Public

From the mid-1700s to the present, there has been a gradual shift toward greater democracy. It arises first with the gradual empowerment of the bourgeoisie, an urban upper-middle class whose claim to political voice and power was based on its accumulating wealth and knowledge, not on the traditional claims to power of title and land held by the nobility. As the bourgeoisie gradually gained political stature, they begin the development and transformation of the public sphere. Public debates over justice, equality, and a hundred other questions spring up in the coffeehouses of London and Amsterdam, and in the salons of Paris, meetings of intellectuals in the mansions of the recently rich. And even at this early juncture, the media—newspapers, journals, and books—are important carriers of the information and opinion that formed the bases of debate.

We must emphasize, however, that in the middle to late 1700s, the public was still a rather small segment of the whole population. If we take citizenship—the right to vote—as a rough indicator of membership in the public, as an index of publicness, we may remind ourselves that at the founding of the United States, the first modern republican democracy, its 1789 Constitution extended the right to vote only to property-owning (and, in most states, White) males. In the United States, as in Europe, the next 150 years would see the expansion of the voting franchise to include almost everyone as a citizen—as part of the public. Sometimes, this extension was accomplished peacefully, sometimes only after bloody conflict.

The Decline of the Public

As this story is frequently told, especially by those familiar with the important work of Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), a scholar of the German critical theory Frankfurt School, the “transformation of the public sphere” divides roughly into a classical and a modern period.

In the classical period, the expansion of the public sphere was an ideal time, when public debate was robust, eloquent, well reasoned, and vigorous: Competing viewpoints found public forums—the pulpits, stump-speaking political debates such as the classic Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, well-attended town meetings, a flourishing newspaper press. Recall from the previous chapter that newspapers were individually partisan and partial but, in the larger cities at least, collectively represented wide ranges of viewpoints (Habermas, 1962/1989; Postman, 1985). In this formulation, however, there is what media scholar Peter Dahlgren (1995) calls a “second act,” a modern period characterized by decline:

The second act traces the decline of the bourgeois public sphere in the context of advanced industrial capitalism and the social welfare state of advanced democracy. With mass democracy, the public loses its exclusivity; its socio-discursive coherence comes apart as many less educated citizens enter the scene. The state, to handle the growing contradictions of capitalism, becomes more interventionist; the boundaries between public and private, both in political economic terms and in cultural terms, begin to dissipate. Large organizations and interest groups become key political partners with the state, resulting in a “refeudalization” of politics which greatly displaces the role of the public. The increasing prevalence of the mass media, especially where the commercial logic transforms much of public communication into PR, advertising and entertainment, erodes the critical functions of the public. The public becomes fragmented, losing its social coherence. It becomes reduced to a group of spectators whose acclaim is to be periodically mobilized, but whose intrusion in fundamental political questions is to be minimized. (p. 8)

In other words, this criticism suggests that, in the present day, the public itself has become disenfranchised: Although citizens may still vote, fewer see a reason to do so, and fewer actually do so. Christopher Lasch laments “the transformation of politics from a central component of popular culture into a spectator sport” (cited in Schudson, 1995, p. 189)—and at that, a spectator sport with declining attendance, as networks prune their coverage of the presidential nominating conventions further and further back and as news media rely on “lite” coverage and attention-grabbing graphics rather than substantial political coverage. The American political system, suggest

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distinguished journalists Haynes Johnson and David Broder (1996), echoing an argument made by Walter Lippmann (1922) almost 75 years earlier, has gotten so large, cumbersome, and dominated by organized special interests that it is unable to come to terms with fundamental social problems, such as health care, and its journalism is unable to explain those problems and policy questions to citizens. Television coverage of politics devolves into 10- to 15-second sound bites, and pundits trying harder to score points on each other than to broaden public debate. At the same time, Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) strikes a responsive chord with an argument that America's "social capital" is eroding, largely because people are staying home to watch TV, rather than joining organizations, talking with each other, and participating in politics.

Such scholars argue that the classical unity of *audience* and *public* has dissolved. Whereas once the public constituted the audience for serious political media, today, the public is eroding, as audiences have become no more than markets, commodities, "eyeballs" to be bought and sold and traded. Some argue that publics now act more like audiences (more passive observers seeking entertainment than active participants in civic affairs) and that while broadcasters and politicians may refer to "the public," they actually mean "the audience."

Is There a Problem of the Public?

The story told by Habermas, Dahlgren, Lasch, Putnam, and many others has not gone unchallenged. There are two strong arguments against it. First is that the classical public sphere cannot be painted in such rosy hues as its proponents suggest. Second is that the public is a flexible concept, one that is constantly being reinvented.

Media scholar Michael Schudson (1995) points out that the American public of the 1800s may have turned out for political debates and lengthy speeches, but we have scant evidence that the majority of attendees spent all that time carefully weighing the speakers' arguments.

The longing of contemporary critics of our political culture to stand in the sun for three hours to listen to political speeches is selective. If there is nostalgia for the Lincoln-Douglas debates (not that they left any words, phrases, or ideas that anyone can recall), there is no hankering for dramatic readings of Edward Everett's hours-long address at

Gettysburg. Instead, it is Abraham Lincoln's sound bite-length address that has left a lasting impression. As it happens, not long ago, people did listen to literally hours of political addresses, interspersed with music, at antiwar rallies in the 1960s. If it is any measure, we can say from personal experience that there is a big difference between attending a rally and actually listening to the speeches.

Schudson (1995) notes further that the percentage of eligible voters who actually vote is an unreliable index of public participation. Across the course of American history, voter turnout has cycled up and down, with downward cycles occurring regularly when different groups are newly enfranchised—immigrants before World War I, women between the world wars, African Americans in the South, and 18- to 21-year-olds since the 1960s. As he notes, if one's standard for a democratic public is that it incorporates all individuals, then contemporary America is far more "democratic" than at any other period (see also Calhoun, 1992). Finally, he notes, critics who argue that the level and quality of public and political discourse was higher at some past point are likewise being selective: As many critics have pointed out, political discourse in the preceding two centuries, although it indeed featured strong and well-crafted arguments, also contained slanders, mudslinging, and sloganeering that we would find familiar today. Moreover, critics have seen the public in decline for a long time. Walter Lippmann, for example, in *Public Opinion* in 1922 and in *The Phantom Public* in 1925, French sociologists Gustav LeBon (1977) and Gabriel Tarde (1901/1969) in books at the turn of the century, and Alexis de Tocqueville (1835, 1840) in *Democracy in America* in 1835 all expressed reservations about the ability of mass or general publics to govern themselves rationally (see also Peters, 1995).³

A second challenge suggests that classical understandings of the public must change with the times; that traditional ways—both structures and narrative forms—of political expression are changing. This is especially true in online environments such as the Internet. In the 1990s, the Internet was hailed as creating cybercitizens who could participate more directly in matters of government and society. Online, it was argued, one could participate in "town hall" discussions, which could include thousands of people scattered across the country or world. More recently, the Internet has been used for political organization in new ways. MoveOn.org, an online group set up in 1998, maintains an e-mail list of over two million persons

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to whom they will send petitions and campaign information. List members can then donate to particular campaigns (for example, contributing to particular television ads) or sign particular petitions depending on their political preferences. And by collecting small donations (made online) from thousands of people, MoveOn.org has been able to rapidly collect large sums of money for these causes. MoveOn.org refers to these as *electronic advocacy groups*. This aspect of the Internet was not lost on the 2003–2004 presidential campaign of Dr. Howard Dean, whose organization used the Internet to collect small donations from thousands of supporters. His campaign also used a particular software program, which allowed Dean supporters to locate and communicate with other Dean supporters in their town or neighborhood, allowing them to coordinate meetings (called *meetups*) and rallies more efficiently.

Arguments about the decline of the public are inherently moral and political. As such, they are contests over readings of history and weighing of evidence and thus incapable of settlement (see, for example, Whitney & Wartella, 1988). There is no denying, however, that in these times, the very notion of publicness is strongly tied to the mass media, and the public has a strong stake in what the media say and do. We now explore two further issues: the relationship of the contemporary public to the media and the question of how the media should relate to the public.

REPRESENTING THE PUBLIC

In understanding the ways the media and the public interact, we return to our levels-of-analysis argument. We are the public, and we have relationships with the media, in four ways: as individuals, as aggregates, as members of organized groups, and as citizens (“We, the people”). For each level, we will discuss not only what constitutes that level of the public but how each level judges or responds to the mass media.

The Public as Individuals

We relate to the mass media as individuals every time we make a choice about what to watch, which magazines or audio tapes or books

we buy, which movies we pay to go to, and so on. In this, we either are or are not the audience. But audience and public are distinct concepts: The *audience* is a market or commodity, but as part of the public, our range of concerns is wider. When we're part of the *public*, we put on a different hat: We think not only of ourselves and our own interests, but of a public interest—what we think is good and right and fair not just for ourselves but for our fellows. In other words, our public selves are social selves, and our public opinions are expressions of what content and conduct we think is good or bad, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical, tolerable or intolerable.

Clearly, most of our judgments about media are private or shared only among close friends (“Did you see *Six Feet Under* last night?” “What do you think of the new U2?”). But, occasionally, we may be moved by a social judgment to want to weigh in using some more public form—a fan letter or call, a congratulatory letter, or complaining call. The best estimates are that fewer than one in five Americans have ever written or called any mass medium to express an opinion (about one in four have communicated to an elected official). Moreover, workers in the news media inherently distrust the feedback they get from individuals, especially if it's critical—and most of it is (Gans, 1979). Why? First, they believe that such feedback is unrepresentative—that people who react strongly are somewhat different from those who do not (and, after a while, they begin to recognize “repeat offenders,” people who repeatedly write and call in). Second, most know from experience that many calls and letters arise not spontaneously from individual sentiment but from organized campaigns by interest groups. Their judgments about “what the public thinks” are in most cases much more shaped by organized *aggregate* measures of feedback—polls, surveys, ratings, and sales data—which rarely show the same patterns of public reaction as do individual responses.

The Public as Aggregate

When a producer or editor responds that a letter writer is “not representative,” essentially he or she is arguing that an individual's expressed opinion is different from what the editor takes public opinion to be. More often than not, that judgment of public opinion

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is based on some *aggregated* or accumulated evidence: *How many* individuals have responded or behaved in a countable way—how many have bought a magazine? News magazine editors usually judge the popularity of an individual issue as some mixture of the newsworthiness of the news in a given week and the presumed appeal of the cover subject and cover story. How many calls or letters, pro or con, does an issue generate? (We'll give an example in a moment.) Most especially, what do polls, surveys, ratings, and other interview-based research tell them? There's a subtle but essential difference between the individual response (what one letter writer says, specifically) and aggregated individual responses (how many individuals, counted up, respond in roughly the same way), and that difference is that the individual voice and inflection is lost, while some sense of representativeness is gained. "What the public thinks," then, is based on the judgment of some people and the measures of others (surveys and polls). "What the public thinks" is also shaped by what individual survey participants are actually asked (phrasing questions differently can result in different answers) and by the particular media texts they consume.

Furthermore, as previously noted, different modes of aggregation may produce different representations of public opinion. One such example comes from the October 1983 invasion of Grenada, when President Reagan decided that the news media would not be present when U.S. troops landed on the island. The press raised a furor, citing the people's right to know, but as *Time* magazine reported, the news media found their calls and mail running from 3 to 1, up to 99 to 1, in favor of the Reagan administration, against the news media (Henry, 1993). "It may well be," *Time* quotes former *Washington Post* ombudsman Robert McClosky, "that the public reacted cumulatively with a judgment that the press had it coming" (p. 76). Over the next 18 months, however, a number of polls and surveys, many of them commissioned by the media, found that, in fact, the public, at least as measured by polls and surveys, was reasonably supportive of the news media (Whitney, 1987).

So, what *do* polls and surveys, as measures of aggregate public opinion, tell us about what and how the public thinks about the media? There's no quick and easy answer to that question, but several dimensions of public attitudes and beliefs are notable.⁴ (See Box 12.1, "Public Opinion About the Media.")

BOX 12.1**Public Opinion About the Media**

The following are selected results from opinion surveys about the news media. All results are from national polls of Americans age 18 and older, with sample sizes of 1,000 or greater and sampling errors of $\pm 3\%$ or less.

1. From 1939: *Do you feel that the news story (in newspapers) itself is almost always accurate as to its facts, is usually accurate as to its facts, or is not accurate in most instances?*^a

Always accurate:	23.3%
Usually accurate:	45.1%
Not accurate:	24.7%
No opinion:	6.9%

2. From 1985: *In general, do you think news organizations get the facts straight, or do you think that they are often inaccurate?*^b

Accurate:	55%
Inaccurate:	34%
No opinion:	11%

3. From 1991: *How would you rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields—very high, high, average, low, or very low? (percentage saying high or very high)*^c

Pharmacists	60	Business executives	21
Medical doctors	54	Building contractors	20
Dentists	50	Senators	19
College teachers	45	Local political officeholders	19
Engineers	45	Congressmen	19
Police officers	43	Real estate agents	17
Funeral directors	35	State political officeholders	14
Bankers	30	Stockbrokers	14
TV reporters, commentators	29	Insurance salesmen	14
Journalists	26	Labor union leaders	13
Newspaper reporters	24	Advertising practitioners	12
Lawyers	22	Car salesmen	8

(Continued)

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(Continued)

4. From 2003: ^d (Note how attitudes shifted briefly in November of 2001, the month after the events of September 11.)

Press Ratings Consistently Negative

	<i>Feb</i> <i>1999</i>	<i>Early</i> <i>September</i> <i>2001</i>	<i>November</i> <i>2001</i>	<i>July</i> <i>2002</i>	<i>July</i> <i>2003</i>
<i>News organizations . . .</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Usually get facts straight	37	35	46	35	36
Often report inaccurately	58	57	45	56	56
Don't know	5	8	9	9	8
	100	100	100	100	100
Willing to admit mistakes	26	24	35	23	27
Try to cover up mistakes	66	67	52	67	62
Neither/Don't know	8	9	13	10	11
	100	100	100	100	100
Are politically biased	56	59	47	59	53
Are careful to not be biased	31	26	35	26	29
Neither/Don't know	13	15	18	15	18
	100	100	100	100	100

Press Professionalism and Patriotism

<i>News organizations . . .</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Are highly professional	52	54	73	49	62
Are not professional	32	27	12	31	24
Neither/Don't know	16	19	15	20	14
	100	100	100	100	100
Care about how good a job they do	69	69	78	65	68
Don't care about the job	22	22	14	23	22
Neither/Don't know	9	9	8	12	10
	100	100	100	100	100
Stand up for America	41	43	69	49	51
Too critical of America	42	36	17	35	33
Neither/Don't know	17	21	14	16	16
	100	100	100	100	100
Protect democracy	45	46	60	50	52
Hurt democracy	38	32	19	29	28
Neither/Don't know	17	22	21	21	20
	100	100	100	100	100

*The Media, the Public, and Normative Theories***Perceptions of Press Bias Go Beyond Ideology**

	July 1985	Jan 1988	Jan 1992	Jan 1994	Feb 1997	Early Sept 2001	July 2003
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Deal fairly with all sides	34	30	31	—	27	26	26
Tend to favor one side	53	59	63	—	67	67	66
Don't know	13	11	6	—	6	7	8
	100	100	100		100	100	100
Pretty independent	37	40	35	28	—	23	23
Influenced by the powerful	53	49	58	63	—	71	70
Don't know	10	11	7	9	—	6	7
	100	100	100		100	100	100

Notes:

- a. A *Fortune* magazine poll reported in Erskine (1970, p. 641)
- b. A Gallup poll reported in Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press (1985, p. 20)
- c. *The Gallup Poll* (1988, p. 115)
- d. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2003, pp. 5–7).

In general, the public is inclined to be favorable toward the media; a variety of opinion polls have found that, on average, a majority of the public finds the media reasonably fair, reasonably accurate, and reasonably believable. When it comes to the news media, people to a great extent value the press's performing a "watchdog" function, scrutinizing the performance of other institutions, especially government.

When it comes to specifics, however, the public is critical of the media. Majorities fault the media for invading people's privacy, believe the media should not report the results of election-day exit polls before polling places close, find the media sensationalistic, believe that the news media focus too heavily on bad news, and find the media *biased*. Extensive research on how people think the media are biased shows, however, that somewhat fewer than half of them see this bias in political or ideological terms (among those who do, two thirds are likely to say the media have a liberal bias, but a third see them as conservatively biased). *More* people say that the bias is toward special interests, big business, government, and especially advertisers. And

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when people are questioned about the accuracy of stories they say they know something about firsthand, they give the media lower marks than they do in general.

The public both does and does not make distinctions between and among media; their expectations of how media *should* perform, that they should be truthful and impartial, are similar, but they do not believe all media meet these standards equally well. The public has a slightly higher opinion of their own media (the newspapers they usually read and local TV and radio) than of national media or “the media” in general and a slightly higher opinion of television and radio than of print media. Abundant survey evidence suggests that most do not find either supermarket tabloids or “tabloid TV” credible—at least this is what they tell pollsters.

Public assessment of the relationship between media and government shows some paradoxes. Although the public usually finds the media more believable than government officials and has a slightly higher general opinion of the media than of government, at the same time, a majority always sides with the government on questions of executive secrecy and particularly national security matters.

The public makes distinctions between kinds of media it would restrict, giving widest leeway to news and political content (except for national security matters) and least to entertainment content, particularly that which offends some people’s sensibilities—materials containing profanity, sexual themes, and the like. In almost all cases, however, a significant fraction of the public would allow more censorship than the law currently allows, making the media less free to say and print what they now can.

The Public as “Publics”

John Dewey (1927) has argued that to think of *the public* as some mass or aggregate—as everybody—is not useful in understanding how a society works; he preferred to think of *publics* of like-minded individuals, concerned with and communicating with each other about a common interest or problem. Looking at the contemporary media landscape, we can say that these publics come in many forms. The most prominent are special interest groups like voluntary organizations. A more recent form is that of the virtual community. We will consider these in turn.

Special Interest Groups

As early as 1835, Tocqueville was able to note in his classic *Democracy in America* that Americans were, far more than contemporary Europeans, joiners of voluntary associations to promote all manner of interests. Tocqueville also took note of the fact that newspapers furnished the means of communication between members of such groups, that "hardly any association can do without newspapers" (1981, p. 69). The newspapers of that day were less mass media and were more specialized publications issued by what were then called *factions* to allow publics both to speak among themselves and to recruit others to their point of view. Today in the United States, there are an estimated 35,000 voluntary associations, from the National Rifle Association (NRA) to almost every school's Parent-Teacher Association, and 40,000 private charitable foundations giving up to \$30 billion per year.⁵ Most of the time, these voluntary groups go their own way, doing their own business. But, at every level, from the local to the national, public associations interact with the media, either to further their own ends, as when the NRA and Handgun Control, Inc., purchase ads to further their conflicting positions on gun control, or when they attempt to influence the media and the government to take positions consistent with their own. This influence can take several forms.

First, mentioned earlier, is what communications researcher Oscar Gandy (1982) calls *information subsidy*, as groups (interest groups, businesses, and the government itself) feed information via news releases, videotapes, reports, and press conferences to the news media and to talk shows, information supporting that group's point of view.

Second is *lobbying and persuasion*, both directly to the media and indirectly, through attempts to influence public policy. A variety of civil rights groups, for example, successfully lobbied the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and especially the FCC to insist that they provide better employment opportunities to ethnic minorities in the 1960s and 1970s. And the efforts of Action for Children's Television, a social action group active in the 1970s and 1980s, were instrumental in the 1990 Children's Television Act, which restricted the amount of commercial time broadcasters could air during children's programs. Recently, interest groups have employed the Internet and e-mail with organized campaigns to reach political leaders

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so successfully that some complain that “Astroturf” lobbying has replaced traditional grassroots lobbying.

Third is *confrontation* with the media to influence their content, as when the National Council of Catholic Bishops and other Catholic groups vehemently protested TV producer Norman Lear’s 1972 script for the CBS program *Maude*, in which the 47-year-old character accidentally became pregnant and had an abortion. That protest eventually led virtually all the program’s sponsors to pull their advertising and 21 of 198 local affiliates to drop the program for the episodes dealing with the abortion.⁶ On the other hand, the 1997 Southern Baptist Convention boycott of Disney appeared to have few immediate consequences for the company. Whether one views such efforts as good—democratic free expression aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the wider public—or bad—blue-nosed attempts at censorship of ideas—usually depends on where one stands on the issue at hand.

Three points stand out in this quintessentially American exercise: First, social action, through protest, boycotts, and lobbying, can have profound consequences; it is almost indisputable that interest groups have been instrumental, particularly since the 1960s, in toning down if not eliminating stereotypical portrayals, especially on television, of African Americans, women, gays, and other social groups. One consequence, however, is that television executives, as we noted in Chapter 4, have increasingly followed the LOP—least objectionable programming—dictate, preferring bland content to controversy.⁷ Second, however, the elevating of offensive depictions to the status of controversy not infrequently leads to *celebrity* for the offenders: It’s likely that attempts to stifle the Martin Scorsese film *The Last Temptation of Christ* and 2 Live Crew’s recording “As Nasty as I Wanna Be” in fact increased interest in and sales of these media products. Third, it’s easy to argue that suffering the discomfort of having to defend oneself from would-be censors is a fair price for media to pay for their freedom of speech and press.

Virtual Communities

The second form of public utilizes the Internet to bring people with similar interests but in diverse locales together to interact in a virtual environment (Jones, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). These groups may end up acting much like the other public interest groups discussed above.

But new forms of publicness are forming through technologies such as text-pagers and cell phones. Loosely affiliated groups of individuals, which Howard Rheingold (2002) refers to as *smart mobs*, can keep in almost constant contact throughout the day by sending each other short text messages. This technology tends to be especially popular with youth in places such as Finland and Japan where friends keep in contact throughout their day. But this same technology can also be used to quickly organize rallies and protests. For example, in 2001 in the Philippines, opposition groups used text messaging to gather massive crowds hoping to bring about the resignation of their president. Such publics do not have rigid hierarchies and are decentered. A simple text message (for example, what to wear and when and where to gather) is sent to a small group and each member sends it off to others that they know and so on.

This technique has more recently been used as a form of performance art (or prank, depending on whom you ask) called *flash mobs*, where the message disseminated isn't political in nature, but almost random ("7th Avenue and Pine; 3:00 pm; wear roller skates"). As a result, groups of hundreds if not thousands suddenly appear in urban centers, perform some random act, and then disperse. Flash mobs have appeared in the United States, Europe, India, and elsewhere. Such networks of affiliation revealed by both the political and nonpolitical uses of the smart mob highlight the ways that we are interconnected with others into aggregates which are a new form of the public.

The Public as Citizens

We've noted that democratic theory presupposes that government is the creature of the public. In essence, this means that majority public opinion *should* translate into public policy and law, including policy and law about the media. However, a recurrent theme in recent political campaigns is that government, especially in league with other powerful institutions, frustrates rather than enacts the public will. This assertion requires several qualifications. First, there is in fact some empirical evidence that much more often than not—although clearly not always—policy changes *can* be attributed to changes in public opinion, at least as measured by opinion polls.⁸ Second, the Constitution provides the government, the media, and the public some insulation from the whims of the public. On the government side, the

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Constitution requires extraordinary majorities for amending the Constitution itself and makes the election of the president indirect, through the Electoral College, rather than direct, through popular election. Also, the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, enumerates the rights of the people that are to be off limits to government.

Sometimes, the public needs protection from public opinion, especially to protect the rights of minorities, be they racial, ethnic, or opinion minorities. U.S. history, unfortunately, is replete with examples of violence against the media, much of it waged by opinion majorities and aimed at suppressing unpopular minority sentiments (Nerone, 1990). Although not all violence against the press is conducted by local majorities, and although not all opinion majorities resort to violence to suppress unpopular opinion, the government, largely through the courts, has the obligation to protect individuals' (and the media's) First Amendment rights. However, when majority opinion becomes strongly dominant and deeply held—as occurred in the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, in “Red scares” in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s, and during most U.S. wars including, most recently, the so-called War on Terrorism—the courts have on occasion yielded to the dominant opinion and curtailed freedom of expression.

Episodes of violence are extreme forms of the urge to censor. We are all free to choose what we will read and listen to, and we all have the right to attempt to persuade others of the correctness of our own opinions and taste. The trick is to balance our rights, whether we are in the majority or minority, against the rights of others.

Media Response to the Public

We've seen how the public respond to the media, but we also have to consider how the media respond to the public. The media respond to pressure from a number of groups. Always present is the possibility of government regulation, so media companies try to voluntarily respond to public criticism so as to avoid more regulations. So, in responding to periodic outcries about media violence, the industry self-regulates by rating television programs, films, and videogames, and labeling music CDs for adult content. Pressure is often brought to bear on media industries through the advertisers that support them, and so special interest groups may threaten to boycott a sponsor's products if they continue to

advertise during a controversial program (such as the episode of Ellen DeGeneres's 1990s television program when she came out as a lesbian); the sponsors do not wish to lose customers and so pull their ads. In the fall of 2003, politically conservative interest groups protested against a television dramatization of the life of President Ronald Reagan; bowing to the controversy, CBS ended up not airing it (it aired later on the pay cable television channel Showtime).

The examples of all media types responding to public pressure are numerous. But what these examples bring up is that the relation of media and public depends upon how we conceive of the role of each of these; that is, how we feel the media and the public *ought* to be and act. "The public" has a variety of meanings, meanings that have evolved over time, and meanings that have real-world consequences for the way that media operate. The public view of the media as reflected by public opinion and public action suggests a recognition both of the power and importance of the media and of their shortcomings, and recent events suggest some media recognition of the need to address these shortcomings. The public view of the media also reveals our assumptions as a society about how the media ought to act. Though we may take for granted that the way the media are is the only way they could be, there are alternative norms; that is, alternative ways of conceiving of the public, the media, and the relation between them. For example, the media can be conceived as the means for educating, shaping, and controlling the public. In the most extreme version of this, the media simply acts as an instrument of the state. Or the media can be conceived as the means for the public to better itself, to become part of a community and not simply a force upon it. We see this notion in social responsibility theories of the media, especially around what is called *public journalism* or *civic journalism*. We discuss these different models of how the media *ought* to perform, called *normative theories* in the next half of the chapter.

NORMATIVE THEORIES OF THE MEDIA

Discussions of normative theories of the media usually focus on a small handful of models: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and what was the Soviet communist model (see Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). These theories are usually described from the perspective of Western scholars working within the assumptions of the

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libertarian viewpoint (Nerone, 1995). In doing so, they often overemphasize the problems of more authoritarian systems (like limiting the range of opinions and ideas) and underemphasize the problems of more libertarian systems (like private monopolies, which can also limit the range of opinions and ideas). These theories also are usually constructed around the media's relation with the state (Are media state or privately owned? Is state regulation heavy or light?), which tends to ignore variations in cultural value that can also sit at the heart of a media system. For example, regardless of who owns it, do the media have a greater responsibility to better the public and society, to better particular groups within a society, or to return a profit? Some cultures may place the needs of the community, nation, or state above those of any individual, and so would favor a media system more focused on the former than the latter. In our discussion below, we do not try to list or map out every variation on how the media should operate (that is, we won't list every norm). Instead, our purpose here is to sketch out the principles of what is arguably the dominant model of media, especially in the West, libertarianism, and the particular responses, critiques, and alternatives that have been made to that model.

Classical Liberalism

The media, beginning with the printing press, were born into Western society in a system we have earlier described and that we can characterize as an authoritarian normative approach. But for most of their existence, questions about how they ought to perform have been answered by resort to other, newer, theories, first the libertarian, and later the social responsibility, development communication, and materialist models.

The beginnings of the modern Western press, and later all Western mass media, are tied to the political ferment of the late 1700s and the philosophy of the Enlightenment—and the foundations of the American Revolution. The Enlightenment brought forth a view of human freedom and human nature that characterizes modern Western history, including key concepts that relate directly to how media should operate.

First and foremost is the assumption that humans are rational creatures, capable of setting aside base emotions and choosing between right and wrong, between what is false and what is true.

Second is the concept of liberty, reflected in the first few words of the American Declaration of Independence—"All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," including liberty. *Liberty* in this context is freedom *from* intrusion by government.

Third, that there is such a thing as truth, that it *is* discoverable by people through a process of reasoning, rather than being handed down by God. English poet and philosopher John Milton put it this way in a 1644 essay called *Areopagitica*: "Let [Truth] and Falsehood grapple. Whoever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" In more modern terms, truth emerges from the competition between ideas. Rational people will be able to discriminate between the true and the false.

This overall philosophy of society comes to be called *classical liberalism* in economics or *libertarianism* in theories of freedom of expression. One should not, however, confuse this form of liberalism with its current everyday usage: A classical liberal philosophy is closer to modern conservatism or libertarianism, which emphasizes individualism and minimal government roles in society. Classical liberalism was, however, quite consistent with the then-developing theory and practice of economics we know today as capitalism (epitomized by the 1776 publication in England of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*). We see the two merge in a familiar metaphor, "the free marketplace of ideas."

The idea of a free marketplace of ideas assumes equivalence between the world of commerce and the world of ideas: As products compete, ideas do, too. In free competition, it is assumed that the good and useful drive out the bad and worthless. Thus the driving spirit of liberal capitalism suggests that free people, left to their own initiative, will make economically and intellectually profitable choices. And "left to their own" largely means that the state, the government, will not interfere. In the realm of expression, this idea is embodied in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of speech, or of the press. . . ." If the government does not interfere in expression, the free marketplace will assure that good ideas will drive out bad ones, and truth will prevail.

According to common wisdom, this philosophy has prevailed, at least in England and the United States, from the late 1700s to today. The history of *formal* or *government* control of media (remember that, until the twentieth century, mass media were exclusively print media)

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is largely one of decreasing state or government control. Moreover, media became more abundant in the same period, with rising literacy, rising wealth, and increasing technological sophistication. In 1900, there were 2,226 daily newspapers in America, with every major city having more than one and the largest cities having half a dozen or more. And these newspapers competed with each other not only for news, but also in the realm of ideas, staking out different positions on the political spectrum. Although we have substantially fewer (about 1,500 daily newspapers) today, we also have other kinds of news media: radio, television, and online news services such as MSNBC (Microsoft Network with the National Broadcasting Corporation), CNN, and so forth.

Nonetheless, between the 1880s and 1940s, cracks began to appear in the conceptual foundation of classical liberal capitalism, both in its notions of rationalism and in the assumption that the marketplace is free.

The popularization of Darwinian theories of evolution and Freudian ideas in psychology and psychoanalysis gradually led to a widespread questioning of the nature of human nature. If the theory of evolution is substantially correct, humans are animals, not, as biblical authority would have it, direct descendants from God. Freudian psychoanalysis emphasizes the degree to which human behavior is motivated not by rational but by irrational impulses. The work of Karl Marx similarly challenged the concept that human thought is rational and logical. For Marx, human thought is determined by the material and economic relations of social life.

Events of the first half of the twentieth century seemed to validate this revised, negative view of human rationality. The incredible carnage of World War I (in which more soldiers died than in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf War combined) seemed wholly senseless. Fifteen years later, there seemed no accounting for how a cultivated and civilized nation such as Germany could democratically vote into power an Adolf Hitler. And another 10 years later, the world was staggered by the horror of the Holocaust.

Substantial cracks also appeared in the idea of a free marketplace. In the commercial and industrial arena, the same time period, roughly the 1880s to 1930, saw not a free marketplace but its opposite—the formation of trusts, combines, and cartels. Oil, railroads, meatpacking, and steel were consolidated into *monopolies*, in which one firm controls all or almost all of the trade, or *oligopolies*, in which a small number of

firms control a commercial sector. A monopoly becomes almost wholly free to charge what it will and to treat workers as it will. There is no competition, and any effort by outsiders to establish competition can be suppressed by the monopoly, which can control necessary resources and make the cost of attempting to compete prohibitively expensive.

An oligopoly can operate in much the same way if the companies agree to charge the same prices and otherwise limit competition. And, as noted, oligopoly characterized a number of key American industries until the government began to intervene with antitrust legislation in the first two decades of the twentieth century. For such legislation to pass, however, required a widespread public recognition that in the commercial arena, the possibility of competition did not guarantee a free marketplace. It also required a recognition that the government might have to intervene to promote competition in some instances, whereas in others, the government might actually promote monopoly, as in the telephone industry and other utilities. Government grants of monopoly, however, were always accompanied by government regulation of the prices such monopolies could charge.

Changes in the media landscape also challenged the idea of a free marketplace of ideas. The early part of the century saw the development of motion pictures and radio. Movies were virtually born as a monopoly, or rather as a cartel. A small number of people, of whom the inventor Thomas Edison is the most notable, held the patents on motion picture cameras and projectors and thus could control who could make motion pictures. (A major reason Hollywood became the American movie industry center was that “outlaw” moviemakers moved there to be beyond the reach of the agents of the New York–based movie trust. When the trust was broken up, Hollywood remained the center because the weather and scenery were more conducive to outdoor filming year-round.)

Radio was different. Even in the 1910s and 1920s, the technology for rudimentary radio transmission and reception was fairly widely available, so much so that hundreds of radio stations began operating.⁹ But radio transmission (and the same, later, is true of television) relied on peculiarities of the electromagnetic spectrum: Only on a finite number of spaces on this spectrum can clear signals be transmitted and received. As more stations came on the air in the 1920s, their signals began to interfere with each other, and reception became difficult—the airwaves became the biblical Tower of Babel. The solution for individual radio

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operators was either to increase the power of the transmission, to tell listeners that a station was moving its broadcast to a different place on the dial, or to go off the air. But this was only a temporary solution for any one operator, and these strategies compounded the problem for the operators and the audience. By the mid-1920s, radio operators appealed to the federal government to clean up the mess—to regulate the airwaves so that some voices, at least, could be heard. In 1927, Congress passed the Federal Radio Act to regulate radio broadcasting, and it was refined with further regulation in 1934 as the Federal Communications Act. This regulation (remember that classical liberal capitalism presupposes little or no government interference) assigned particular frequencies and power levels to individual license holders and, significantly, *limited* the number of stations on the air. This control of broadcasting was additionally justified by the idea that the airwaves were public property.

Thus the regulation explicitly—and for the first time with regard to a U.S. medium—recognized limits on numbers of voices. In theory, then and now, anyone can publish a newspaper, a magazine, or a book. But in regulating broadcast media, the government was left with the question of who should be allowed to have a broadcast license and who should not. The early Federal Radio Commission emphasized three criteria: adequate financial means to put and keep a station on the air, the technical ability to reproduce an adequate broadcast signal, and operation of the station in the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” This last criterion was meant to assure that, because not everyone could have a station, those who did would operate for the public benefit. To assure that, once on the air, broadcasters would continue to serve the public interest, licenses were to be renewed every six years. Renewal required demonstrating that the licensee had lived up to his or her public interest obligations. Thus, for the first time, the government found itself—and at the invitation of those to be regulated—applying a very different formula for how media ought to operate. Classical liberalism urges a negative conception of regulation—that the government should take no role, make no law: Broadcasting requires a positive or affirmative role—that the government must intervene, as a referee to decide who can use a medium.

In Britain, this positive role is described as a public service imperative. This imperative informs the content broadcast as well as the model of ownership. The BBC is an independent body funded by the British government from annual license fees on television sets.

The excerpt from the most recent Royal Charter (Box 12.2) states the programming mission of the BBC. The tone of program content was set by its first Director, Sir John Reith, in 1927, who saw broadcasting's purpose not to cater to the lowest common denominator but to program things that would enrich society (as he saw it). Reith saw broadcasting as a democratic medium in that it could help inform all parts of society; potentially no one was out of the reach of the signal. This approach has been criticized for being paternalistic; that is, for giving the audience not what they wanted but what he felt they needed. This philosophy of public service underlies all aspects of broadcasting in Britain, whether they are publicly or privately owned. The commercial television and radio stations are heavily regulated in keeping with this philosophy. Within the last decade, the rise in the number and availability of cable television and satellite channels has fueled arguments against the heavy regulation on broadcasting in Britain (Sparks, 1995). It was argued that, with potentially hundreds of channels available, all constituencies would be catered to; the BBC would no longer have to program for all interests. However, the Royal Charter was renewed in 1996 and the system will continue at least until it is up for renewal in 2006. (See Box 12.2, "The Royal Charter.")

BOX 12.2**The Royal Charter**

The following is an excerpt from the current Royal Charter, which delineates the mission of the BBC. "Home Services" refers to broadcasting within Britain itself, in distinction with the BBC's "World Service."

Copy of Agreement

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL HERITAGE BROADCASTING

Copy of the Agreement Dated the 25th Day of January 1996 Between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for National Heritage and the British Broadcasting Corporation

TREASURY MINUTE DATED THE 25th January 1996

[. . .]

(Continued)

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(Continued)

3. PROGRAMME CONTENT

3.1 Without prejudice to the generality of clause 5, the Corporation undertakes to provide and keep under review the Home Services with a view to the maintenance of high general standards in all respects (and in particular in respect of their content, quality and editorial integrity) and to their offering a wide range of subject matter (having regard both to the programmes as a whole and also to the days of the week on which, and the times of the day at which, the programmes are shown) meeting the needs and interests of audiences, in accordance with the requirements specified in subclause 3.2.

3.2 The requirements referred to in subclause 3.1 are that the Home Services—

- (a) are provided as a public service for disseminating information, education and entertainment;
- (b) stimulate, support and reflect, in drama, comedy, music and the visual and performing arts, the diversity of cultural activity in the United Kingdom;
- (c) contain comprehensive, authoritative and impartial coverage of news and current affairs in the United Kingdom and throughout the world to support fair and informed debate at local, regional and national levels;
- (d) provide wide-ranging coverage of sporting and other leisure interests;
- (e) contain programmes of an educational nature (including specialist factual, religious and social issues programmes as well as formal education and vocational training programmes);
- (f) include a high standard of original programmes for children and young people;
- (g) contain programmes which reflect the lives and concerns of both local and national audiences;
- (h) contain a reasonable proportion and range of programmes for national audiences made in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and in the English regions outside London and the South East.

At the same time as broadcasting was changing in the United States, the print media were changing too. Improved technology had led to lower production costs and a special postage rate available since 1879 for mailing periodicals helped increase distribution. Two phenomena served to nationalize media: the rise of modern marketing and advertising of national brands and the development of transcontinental communication systems, first the telegraph, later the telephone.

The telegraph gave rise to national news or wire (as in telegraph wire) services, of which the largest and most important is the AP. The AP is a cooperative service owned by newspaper publishers, which

gave a local monopoly to its members: Only one daily newspaper in a city could belong to it, and thus one newspaper would have a substantial advantage over its competitors in the gathering of national and international news. The one-paper-per-city rule ended in the 1940s after the Supreme Court ruled that it violated antitrust law.

Advertising had come to play a more important role in newspapers and magazines, and circulation—the price the customer pays for the product—a less important one. As this happened, the advertiser became a more important influence on what appeared in the newspaper and the reader or subscriber became less important. Newspapers had to pay more attention to the demands of advertisers.

All together, the strategies publishers learned from their counterparts in other industries, and technological and economic changes within the publishing industry, created an important trend that continues to this day: the consolidation and concentration of print media into smaller numbers of companies, with, in newspapers particularly, smaller numbers of newspapers. We earlier noted that in 1900, there were 2,226 daily newspapers. By 1950, U.S. population had doubled, but the number of daily papers had shrunk to 1,900; by 1990, population had gone up another 30%, but the number of daily newspapers declined to under 1,750 (Bogart, 1989), and today there are 1,500 daily newspapers (U.S. Census, 2004). In other words, whereas broadcasting has a physical limit on the number of operators or possible channels, economic and technological constraints began in the early decades of the twentieth century to limit the number of voices the public could hear, especially in the print media.

By the mid 1990s, the case of online communication via the Internet and World Wide Web and the spectacular growth of this form of communication raised anew questions of media regulation. Anyone can set up a Web page, anyone can use (for minimal cost) electronic mail, and anyone can access information that may or may not be appropriate to all users, especially children. This new form of communication, without national boundaries, clear ownership, or standards for conduct, has posed a challenge regarding how to think about a free marketplace of ideas. This medium offers an unprecedented opportunity to increase the number of voices in the marketplace. Indeed, the libertarian nature of the Internet is often asserted in that anyone (given access, money, and know-how) can set up a Web page and have his or her voice heard. But, at the same time, Internet users tend to access a smaller range of

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well-known Web sites rather than availing themselves of every Web page on offer, leading to concentration rather than diversification, a trend many experts believe will continue and perhaps accelerate (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 1999). In a key ruling—*Reno v. ACLU*, which struck down the Communication Decency Act—the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the Internet was to be regulated like a print medium (such as a newspaper) rather than as a broadcast medium, meaning that the Internet would be less regulated.

What does this media history and media economics have to do with normative theories of media performance? Everything. The historical challenge makes us question how the media are organized economically as well as what they say to us. The basic argument between supporters and challengers of classical liberalism's conception of media performance has to do with how well the media serve the public. Liberalism as a theory of media performance is predicated upon classical liberal economic theory. Does a capitalist system of media organization allow for the widest variety and diversity of viewpoints, or does it limit cultural and informational products along particular lines?

This thinking suggests several subquestions, as well: First, as consumers of media, do we have access to the widest possible variety of ideas and to truthful, intelligent, and comprehensive accounts of society? Second, to what extent do we and others have access to media to express our own ideas, to promote points of view about which we may care deeply? In other words, are we free and able to be producers of ideas as well as consumers? These questions of consumption and production are pivotal in a debate about how well a liberal capitalist system performs.

The strongest argument on the liberal side is the sheer volume of the media. In the United States, there are 1,500 daily newspapers, 7,400 weekly newspapers, 13,800 magazines, almost 6,900 radio stations, almost 1,900 television stations, 2,600 book publishers annually issuing almost 120,000 book titles and selling 2.43 billion books per year (U.S. Census, 2003b, 2004), and seven major motion picture studios. There are four major broadcast television networks (and two smaller networks, UPN and the WB), two major U.S. news wire services, and dozens of other newspaper-affiliated news services, five major recording companies (and numerous independent companies), and countless other media and ancillary services—newsletters, film processors, shoppers (free circulation newspapers), computer networks, syndication

services, cable television systems in virtually every community, and on and on. The output of this system—millions of words, sounds, and images every day—is literally incalculable.

This media system, by accident or design, produces an astounding variety of material. On the consumption side, its beauty, the libertarian argument goes, is that of the free marketplace of ideas. These media compete with one another in a very direct sort of way. As consumers, we are wholly free to buy what we want, not to buy what we don't want; to "vote" with our TV remote controls and our radio dials, with the videocassettes or DVDs we choose to rent; to buy products and vote for politicians if we like their ads or to boycott them if we do not. Moreover, the system is democratic and, even better, pluralistic—if you or I don't like and don't buy something like the *National Enquirer*, that's fine. If the product can't find a market, can't find an audience, it will cease to exist. But if other people do like it and buy it, then they're free to do so, and if enough others do so, then it will remain available.

On the production side, the argument for the libertarian model is that the producer is remarkably free to produce whatever he, she, or it wants. If a media product can find an audience, the product will be produced. To be profitable, the producer must "give the audience what it wants," and if he, she, or it does so, then all obligations have been met, save one: As with any other product, no media producer may knowingly produce anything that is dangerous to the audience. On the production as well as on the consumption side, this process is viewed as both democratic and pluralistic. If there is too much competition in some media sector, the producer is free to shift to another one, to try to find an audience. If the producer fails, it is only because the audience won't buy—the audience is supreme.

However, we have already suggested that as an overall theoretical model and for practical and economic reasons, this rosy picture cannot go unanswered.

Challenges to Classical Liberalism

Social Responsibility Theory

A social responsibility position is the mainstream counterpoint to the liberal capitalism viewpoint. Shortly after World War II, a blue-ribbon Commission on the Freedom of the Press (1947), largely funded

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by *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce and chaired by the very respected president of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins, was convened to discuss the state of American media. The panel was frankly worried that economic, cultural, and technological trends, and particularly the decreasing number of editorial voices in the nation's press, were leaving the nation less well served by its media than it should be. In its 1947 report, the Commission observed, among other things, that the media spent too much effort on the trivial and sensational, that the press was not meeting its responsibility to provide "a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning" (p. 20). The press should be providing a forum for the exchange of ideas, presenting the widest variety of views. The press should avoid stereotyping and provide a representative view of the society. This could be accomplished, the Commission said, if the press were more responsible, if its practitioners were better trained, and if it effectively regulated itself. If it could not, the Commission suggested, then the government might have to establish its own media and more directly intervene to assure that the press was responsible—a departure from the libertarian notion.

In another departure from libertarianism, the Commission suggested that the media should be a "common carrier" of ideas. The press had obligations to present different ideas. This departed significantly from the libertarian idea that the media are wholly free—free, if they wish, to promote only those ideas of their own choosing.

Note that the intellectual seeds for such a social responsibility position are planted by the case of broadcasting, where government intervention was necessary to allocate channels. The very idea that government had a role in assuring a free and responsible press—at least in the United States—was born of the necessity of assuring an open marketplace.¹⁰

As might be expected, the print press greeted the Commission report with hostility and derision, but its ideas over time have gained ground. Since 1947, the American press has professionalized itself considerably, with far larger proportions of media producers having received university and college training in communications or journalism and more of them subscribing to some social responsibility notions, especially that they have obligations to be fair, truthful, and objective and to provide balanced representations of the society and its varying opinions. (See Box 12.3, "The Fairness Doctrine," and Box 12.4,

“Codes of Ethics.”) At the same time, virtually none of them would subscribe to a notion that government control or ownership of media would enhance free expression.

BOX 12.3

The Fairness Doctrine

As we noted in earlier chapters, the histories of the print media and of the broadcast media travel along different tracks, and the regulatory environment of each differs. At about the same time as the Hutchins-led Freedom of the Press Commission was writing its report, the FCC, which regulates broadcasting and telecommunications, was writing a policy that came to be known as the Fairness Doctrine. When the FCC issued it in 1949 as an advisory to broadcasters, the set of regulations was to guide radio and television station operators in dealing with issues of controversy: After all, the “scarce-channel” logic goes, if not everyone can have a radio or TV station of their own, then broadcasters have an affirmative obligation to see that all views are represented. This is a prototypical example of social responsibility theory in action.

Basically, the Fairness Doctrine required some degree of balance in the presentation of controversial issues. If a broadcaster supported one side in a controversial issue (say, in a prolife editorial during a newscast, or in giving or selling air time to a group), then the broadcaster was obligated to make time available to others to present other sides of the issue. Later, the FCC extended the doctrine to require that if a personal attack were made on an individual, a station was required to inform the individual and offer air time for a reply.

From its earliest days, the Fairness Doctrine was vigorously criticized by the broadcast industry. The argument was the libertarian one, that as far as possible, government should keep its hands off the free marketplace: Let the broadcasters, in a competitive environment, be the ones to decide what should be seen and heard. The effect of government regulation in this area would be, they argued, not that “all sides” would be heard on controversial matters, but that broadcasters would be discouraged from allowing *any* sides to be heard, that broadcasting would steer away from any matters of controversy. Moreover, they argued, channels are not that scarce, and new technologies are making more and more channels available to the audience.

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In the deregulatory political climate of the 1980s, the anti-Fairness Doctrine arguments won out at the FCC. In August 1987, the FCC voted unanimously to suspend—but not repeal—the Fairness Doctrine, effectively relieving broadcasters of direct legal requirements to be fair, although they are still bound, broadcasters argue, by moral and ethical social responsibility requirements to be so. (It should be noted, too, that the *equal time* rule, requiring broadcasters to provide equal amounts of time in comparable parts of the day to all legally qualified candidates for political office, remains in effect.)

BOX 12.4

Codes of Ethics

A number of media organizations have adopted codes of professional ethics. Below is a list of links to a sampling of these.

Society of Professional Journalists	spj.org/ethics/
Associated Press Managing Editors	www.apme.com/about/code_ethics.shtml
American Society of Newspaper Editors	www.asne.org/kiosk/archive/principl.htm
Radio-Television News Directors Association	www.rtnda.org/ethics/coe.shtml
National Press Photographer's Association	www.asne.org/ideas/codes/nppa.htm
Public Relations Society of America	prsa.org/profstd.html

In fact, the social responsibility school of thought is not that far from libertarianism. The two viewpoints share, to some degree, two key assumptions that more radical critics will question: the general rationality of the audience, its ability to separate truth from falsehood, and the assumption underlying *this* assumption, that of an independent, discoverable truth in the first place. The main point of divergence is over the matter of the role of government, with libertarians insistent that the government have no role and social responsibility advocates maintaining

that government should remain in the background, prodding media to be responsible through self-regulation.

There are two variations on social responsibility that we need to consider briefly here: *public* (or *civic*) *journalism* and *development journalism*. The 1990s saw the beginning of a more grassroots movement dubbed civic or public journalism, which, through a variety of approaches, is attempting to reconnect media to the communities that they serve (see Glasser, 1999). It varies from the social responsibility school by advocating that journalists become active in their communities and their issues (Shafer, 1998). The Pew Center for Public Journalism, a major supporter of this movement, describes the development of public journalism as first being interested in election issues (that is, how the press can be more responsive to local constituents and their issues during an election) but then broadening to include other issues of concern to a community, including diversity issues (Friedland & Nichols, 2002). In one experiment, the Columbus, Georgia, *Ledger-Enquirer* organized community discussion groups that led to a civic association; in others, newspapers have used focus groups and surveys to determine what issues local citizens think are most important and have then crafted their election coverage around those issues rather than the more traditional approaches of deciding for themselves or focusing on issues nominated by the candidates themselves. Still others have formed community boards to discuss newspaper play and coverage with editors (Charity, 1995; Merritt, 1995). Some view public journalism as a return to the spirit of muckraking (in which journalism's role was to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable"). What the movement does represent is one effort to recognize—and to remind their publics—that the media do have a stake in public life.

The second variation is something more of a departure from social responsibility theory. Development journalism was a form of journalism initially created in Southeast Asia in the 1960s. The idea was that the press should be a positive advocate for the development of a society, especially if the country was economically less developed. One of the pioneers of development journalism, Nora Quebral, defines it as follows:

Development communication is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfillment of human potential. (quoted in Shafer, 1998, p. 42)

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Like public journalism, development journalism promotes an active, social advocate role for the press. But unlike the more recent model, development journalism seeks change on the scale of the nation and not the local community (Shafer, 1998).

These two variations share similar problems. First, neither is clearly defined at all, so there is no consistency or even core set of criteria for either. Second, both are theories of journalism that tend not to work as well in practice. Though the Pew Center report concludes that "civic journalism has been a success in the communities where it has been practiced with any consistency, even over relatively short periods of time" (Friedland & Nichols, 2002, p. 20), it has also been accused of being a marketing gimmick and can become simply another way of targeting news coverage to issues relevant to prominent (and wealthy) demographics. Development journalism, on the other hand, is too easily turned into an instrument for state propaganda (see, for example, Kariithi, 1994). Third, neither is much liked by journalists, who see them either as unduly restrictive on journalistic practice (as they understand it) or antithetical to the classical liberal idea of journalistic objectivity (Shafer, 1998). In the face of these criticisms, one might point out that there does not have to be only one model of the press working in any single nation or community, and that a nation or community might be better off with both an objective and an interventionist press.

There are other approaches to the question of how media should operate, however, that diverge more fundamentally from the liberal tradition than the social responsibility doctrine does.

Marxist Critique

In 1846, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote, in *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1970), that "in every epoch, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class" (p. 64). In this century, much of the criticism of the media economy has been shaped to some degree by Marx and his followers. On examination, the Marx quotation goes to the heart of the assumption of the discoverability of truth by asking the degree to which, as both consumers or producers, the average person has a chance to see the truth.

Marxism is based on two major sets of arguments. First, Marxism offers an interpretation of the principles of the capitalist economy.

Second, it emphasizes the relations between the economy, politics, and the various forms of communication and culture.

According to contemporary Marxists, it is important to recognize that the mass media are implicated in the various structures of capitalism at a number of different levels. The media involve the production of goods, hardware as well as programming. The media are a major source of advertising and the promotion of other goods. Moreover, we have to remember that the media play a very central role in contemporary society: They shape our desires for goods, they control the information we receive around the world, they organize our leisure activities, and they provide many of the interpretations of reality we use in our everyday lives.

The nub of the critical argument is that some sectors of the society and economy have so much access to the resources to put forward their ideas that others essentially have none. On the production side, the critical argument is that those who have access to the means of production will use those means to promote points of view that either forward their own interests or at least bolster the status quo. Moreover, the critical counterpoint argues that, on the consumption side, we are thwarted from receiving ideas that seriously challenge the existing order. Although the libertarians, this argument goes, may be quite right that we have available a great *variety* of media fare, there's not much diversity there (Glasser, 1985). (See Box 12.5, "Variety and Diversity in Children's Television.") What's the difference?

BOX 12.5

Variety and Diversity in Children's Television

How much variety and diversity of programming is there in the media? This question was addressed in a study of children's programming in a Midwestern community (Wartella, Heintz, Aidman, & Mazzarella, 1990). The study was prompted by arguments made at the FCC throughout the 1980s: that the growth of new technologies, such as cable television, video, pay television, and satellites was increasing the diversity of programming available to children and therefore no single broadcaster in a community had a responsibility to program for child audiences. The study asked,

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Beyond over-the-air broadcast television, what sorts of programming are available for children in one media marketplace, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois? A survey of all audio-video programming available to children in this one community was conducted to test the proposition that there indeed is both variety and diversity.

Program variety in children's programming refers to the amount of broadcast, cable, and videocassette rentals of children's product in this one community. Program diversity, on the other hand, is measured by the number of different genres or types of programs that could be delivered through any of the different media delivery systems, such as over-the-air broadcast television stations, cable channels, or videocassette rentals. In particular, two genres of program have been the focus of much public debate about children's television: animated, toy-related programs (such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *Ghostbusters*) and educational/informational programming, or those programs designed to educate children and provide them with information about science, history, culture, and so on (the best example here is *Sesame Street*).

So, how much variety did the researchers find in this one community? First, children's programming was available on all television, cable, and pay cable services during weekdays and weekends, and in fairly large amounts. On broadcast television, researchers found 52 hours on weekdays and 21 hours on weekends (even though Saturday morning is thought to be children's time). And basic cable services in the community aired 149 hours of children's shows during weekdays and 36 hours on weekends (thanks to the inclusion of Nickelodeon, the children's channel on cable). However, there were relatively few children's videos available for rental: Only 9% of all videotapes available in the community's 17 video rental stores could be classified as children's video.

Aside from variety, which the children do seem to have, do they have diversity of programming? Only if their families could afford cable (\$18 a month—\$216 a year—at the time):

The most striking characteristic of these data is their clear indication that there is no diversity of children's programming on commercial television. All the weekday commercial children's programs are cartoons; two thirds of these are toy related. Public television provides the only alternative genres: educational and variety children's programming such as *Sesame Street* and *Captain Kangaroo*. Weekend commercial television provides minimal diversity: Only 3 of the 28 commercial children's programs over the weekend are not cartoons. A very different picture emerges, however, in the analysis of children's

program offerings on cable television. Although cartoon programming still predominates, composing more than one half of all basic cable children's offerings, there is much more diversity. Nearly all of the seven categories of genres (including: animated toy, animated non-toy, live action comedy or drama, quiz, variety, exercise, instructional, or other) are represented on cable services. It appears that Champaign-Urbana children with access to basic cable and pay cable services are able to receive both a variety and a diversity of children's programming that far exceed that provided by the broadcast television stations in the community. . . . And unlike adult tapes, which tend to represent Hollywood film product, children's video tapes (with the exception of Disney movies and old cartoons) represent television-originated product. . . . Dominating this television product on videotape is toy-related programming. . . . Videotape rentals in Champaign-Urbana simply provide more of what is available on television and cable. Little educational programming is available for rent or purchase, and few stores carry a majority of non-toy related animated tapes. (pp. 51–54)

This study confirms what critics of children's television argued throughout the 1980s: that there was too little diversity in children's television provided by the traditional broadcasters. Such evidence helped to bring about the passage of the Children's Television Act of 1990, which, among other provisions, requires all broadcasters to identify their information/educational children's programming and which establishes a National Endowment for Children's Television to encourage and fund the production of more educational television. As of fall 1997, it is too early to tell whether, in this one community or nationwide, the act's requirement that broadcasters air and label educational and informational programming for children has had much of an impact on variety and diversity.

Source: From Wartella, E., Heintz, K., Aidman, A., & Mazzarella, S. (1990). Television and beyond: Children's video in one community. *Communication Research*, 17(1), 45–64. Reprinted with permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

Variety suggests lots of material that is superficially, but not basically, different. Suppose all car manufacturers built basically the same car—say a four-door, five-passenger, four-cylinder, automatic transmission model—but allowed us to choose among 500 different colors of paint. That would be a lot of variety. Diversity suggests fundamental difference. Diversity in motor vehicles would include motorcycles, minivans, vans, pickups, two-door sports models, convertibles, sedans, station wagons, and so on. And real diversity would

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not only offer us private transportation but comfortable and efficient public transportation. So what if we have 75 channels on our cable television if all we can see during prime time are situation comedies, cop shows, and bland old movies? So what if we have competing television news, but we can't tell the difference between one station or network and another? So what if we have competing newspapers if all the competitors ignore or trivialize the same groups—African Americans, women, the young—and keep their politics close to the political center?

The critical counterpoint argues that economic structures foreclose true diversity of ideas. The critical argument comes in two main forms, the political economic and the cultural. Political economic criticism focuses on the ownership of the means of production as the mode of control of the social order. "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one" is a quotation variously attributed to Mohandas Gandhi and to the American press critic A. J. Liebling. Cultural criticism focuses on the processes by which dominant forms of thought—ideologies—support the existing social order and suppress social change.

The Political Economic Argument

We have noted the great number of different media in the United States. Press critic Ben Bagdikian (1997) has pointed out that if American daily newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and book publishers were owned by separate individuals, there would be 25,000 different owners (a large number, yes, but still only one out of every 10,000 Americans). But there are not 25,000 different owners. Today, Bagdikian (2004) says, just five corporations dominate the output of daily newspapers and most of the sales and audience in magazines, broadcasting and cable, books, and movies (see our discussion in Chapter 4). Bagdikian (2000) notes that,

as the United States enters the twenty-first century, power over the American mass media is flowing to the top with such devouring speed that it exceeds even the accelerated consolidations of the last twenty years. . . . Even with the dramatic entry of the Internet and the cyber world with their uncounted hundreds of new firms, the controlling handful of American and foreign corporations now exceed in their size and communication power anything the world has seen before. Their intricate global interlocks create the force of an international cartel. (p. vii)

Not only do a relatively small number of people head these corporations, a very small number effectively control them. Although the directors of these corporations constitute a larger number than the chief officers of the companies, there are interlocks between these boards; that is, the same people tend to sit on boards of a number of corporations, both within media and in other pivotal sectors of the economy, and they are the same *types* of people, drawn from a very small upper stratum of the society.

Many of the dominant media firms are not *just* media firms but part of larger multinational corporations with diverse interests. To what extent can the media perform other functions—information and entertainment—adequately if their major role is to make money? A corollary question is the extent to which a media enterprise will be subject to the corporate goals and interests of a parent company. For example, questions have been raised about whether network news programs adequately cover stories that negatively portray their corporate owners, and there have been numerous suggestions of the possibility of both corporate and self-censorship. Can NBC and CBS, whose parent companies have strong financial interests in power generation, including nuclear power, be counted on to report fairly and in depth about utilities and their regulation? Can a news unit whose parent company has extensive contracts to manufacture military hardware fairly report on a war in which such equipment is in use?¹¹ Perhaps the news divisions are sufficiently insulated from corporate influence, but the appearance of a conflict of interest may erode the confidence of the public in their credibility.

Media economics in general, the political economic argument goes, are driven by a *logic of capitalism*, a pursuit of maximal profit, in which advertising plays a primary role. We noted in Chapter 4 that the *Saturday Evening Post* was driven out of business, not because it failed to attract readers, but because it was deserted by advertisers. The liberal point argued for the supremacy and democracy of the audience as voter. The death of mass magazines, entertaining and informing large audiences, is a counterpoint. But, you may argue, the vitality of specialized magazines supports the libertarian argument. Yes, but only to a point, that point being where some profit exists. It is worth observing that, among the thousands of magazines in this nation, there is none called *Old and Poor* or *South Central Los Angeles*.¹²

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And it is worth remembering that there are millions of people, even in America, who simply cannot afford to purchase any media products. If a medium cannot attract advertisers, and its potential audience cannot afford to buy it, it probably does not exist. As the short essay "Variety and Diversity in Children's Television" (Box 12.5) points out, variety and diversity exists only for kids whose parents can afford cable TV, premium cable channels, VCRs, and DVD rentals.

Thus the political economic argument against liberal capitalism focuses on ownership of media production and the power that ownership and control exercises over both individuals' ability to produce messages they would like others to see and hear and individuals' abilities to receive or consume messages as well. Where the liberal point emphasizes openness and variety, the political economic counterpoint answers, "Only if there's a profit in it." And, increasingly, the number of independent voices through which ideas can be expressed with any real hope of reaching more than a few eyes and ears is declining.

The Cultural Argument

The cultural argument points to the logic-of-capitalism argument, as well. But, instead of focusing on the ownership of the means of production, it looks at the programs—the messages—that are produced. The cultural response builds on our discussions in Chapter 5 on the cultural approach to meaning. The cultural argument suggests that a media system such as America's is a site of ideological struggle.

Ideologies are not merely particular systems of representation or ways of seeing. They are also ways of excluding and limiting, for they set the boundaries on what we are able to understand and accept into the realm of the possible. Finally, ideologies are not neutral. Obviously, they are connected to the struggle of one group or another to maintain or challenge particular social organizations, particular relations of power. On this view, culture involves constant struggles between competing ideological codes, each attempting to gain the upper hand, to somehow win people into seeing the world in terms of its particular meanings, to experience the world on its terms. Obviously, although some ideological codes are explicitly linked to

political positions and philosophies (we can think of the ideologies of communism and capitalism, or of the Democrats and the Republicans), the cultural argument makes ideology into a much more pervasive and common feature of our lives.

This cultural or ideological argument does not suggest that no space is left for alternative views. What it does suggest is that, when they appear in the mainstream media, such views are likely to be clearly identified as “controversial,” and hence suspect; moreover, consistent with the more materialist critics’ thinking, the view argues that they likely will be crowded out by profit-seeking producers who would rather avoid controversy in the first place. Another common strategy is to rewrite controversial events or positions so that their content is transformed from a challenge to the dominant values into a reaffirmation. For example, during the protests of the 1960s, news media reporting on demonstrations would often emphasize that the very fact of such protests confirmed that our society was free and equal (in Chapter 7, we referred to this process as *recuperation*). In the process, the actual object of the protest—for example, the war in Vietnam or the disproportionate number of Blacks serving in the armed forces—was forgotten or ignored (Gitlin, 1980).

Thus our ability to produce messages is constrained by the taken-for-granted assumptions of normality by those who operate the media system, at the same time that the fare we have available to consume is caught up in the same assumptions. The job of cultural critics is to unmask the ideologies inherent in various media products: the news, advertising, films, the Internet, and so forth.

Normative Solutions: What Should Be Done?

What do such normative theories ultimately have to say about the context in which media should operate?

A strict, radical libertarian would argue that the media should be free to publish and broadcast what they wish, that sovereign, rational consumers should determine their fate. The government should have no role in the media, except perhaps to foster and encourage their economic success and to referee frequency allocations, as it does in broadcasting and cellular communications.

A strict, radical Marxist, either of a cultural or a political-economic stripe, would argue the opposite: that media should be created by and

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owned by the public, with the state or government serving the necessary function of allocating the means to produce media to the people.

There is, however, a lot of territory in between. Social responsibility theorists argue for a tripartite division of responsibility for media performance. Ownership of media would remain private, with both owners and the professionals who actually create and distribute media messages invested in a set of values emphasizing their responsibility for fair, accurate, and complete presentations to and about all constituent groups of a society. The role of the state and the government is in three areas: It should prevent flagrant abuses by the media—in false advertising, libel, and profoundly harmful communications; it should correct the marketplace's tendency toward ownership concentration and foster competition; and it should assure that where the marketplace cannot adequately serve underrepresented groups and points of view, publicly owned media will do so. Furthermore, the position usually argues that educational institutions have an obligation at all levels, and particularly in primary and secondary education, to teach media literacy. The social responsibility position emphasizes, too, that the public has a role, through citizens' groups and through personal feedback to media outlets, to assure that the media know what the public thinks of them and the jobs they are doing.

NOTES

1. A good general discussion of how public opinion is represented is in Herbst (1993).
2. Important sources for this historical discussion are Eisenstein (1978), Ginsberg (1986), Calhoun (1992), and especially Habermas (1962/1989).
3. It might be noted that Tocqueville and Lippmann were both writing in periods in which the composition and definition of the public was being transformed—in Tocqueville's case, by the opening of what was then the West (west of the Atlantic states but east of the Mississippi) and the increasing political empowerment of tradesmen, small merchants, and yeoman farmers, and in Lippmann's case, by immigrants from central and southern Europe.
4. The discussion that follows draws from the following: Alter (1984); Erskine (1970); *Gallup Poll* (1988); Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press

(1985); and Wyatt (1991). A very valuable (and constantly updated) source of information on public attitudes about the media is the Web site of the Pew Research Center on the People and the Press (people-press.org).

5. Foundation estimate from National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, July 28, 1997. We should note that total charitable contributions from all sources in the United States, including individuals and corporations as well as foundations, is just over \$240 billion (Brunner, 2003, p. 174).

6. Montgomery (1989) has a good account of the *Maude* controversy and other episodes of protests against television through the 1980s.

7. The coming out of Ellen DeGeneres on ABC's *Ellen* is an exception, but it ignited its own controversy when the network inserted, in the fall 1997 premiere episode, a parental advisory. DeGeneres protested the advisory and the TV-14 rating as evidence of the network's acquiescence to a view of homosexuality as a deviant lifestyle.

8. See Page and Shapiro (1983, 1992). In the earlier work, the authors argue that, in two thirds to three quarters of all cases they examined from the 1930s to the 1970s, changes in public opinion led to changes in public policy; such changes were most likely on large-scale domestic issues and most likely in the later time periods (i.e., the 1960s and 1970s) and least likely for low-salience issues—ones less likely to get extensive media coverage. On such issues, they argue, special interests rather than the mass public probably dominate policy.

9. A "patents trust" involving the British Marconi Company, GE, the Radio Corporation of America, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), Westinghouse, and others, also operated, allowing for these companies to gain an upper hand both in making radios and in radio broadcasting, once the commercial potential of the medium was assured by the late 1920s.

10. In almost all of the rest of the industrialized world, radio broadcasting began as a public—that is, government-owned—monopoly system and would remain so until well after the institution of television, which likewise emerged as a public system.

11. Media critic Doug Kellner (1992) cites the following quotation that, during the first Iraq war, "when correspondents and paid consultants on NBC television praised the performance of U.S. weapons, they were extolling equipment made by GE, the corporation that pays their salary" (Lee & Solomon, quoted in Kellner, 1992, pp. 59–60).

12. Our thanks to Professor Robert Reid of the University of Illinois for this example.

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Media Globalization

13

One of the strangest stories of media globalization occurred in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. News reports of a pro-Osama bin Laden protest in Bangladesh showed a protestor holding a large sign with many pictures of bin Laden. One of these pictures showed bin Laden apparently standing next to the Muppet Bert of the U.S. children's television program *Sesame Street*. The juxtaposition came as a shock to many (and Children's Television Workshop, the producers of *Sesame Street*, were understandably upset). The tale of that image is one of mediamaking in a global age.

It began with an award-winning Web site by San Francisco student Dino Ignacio. The Web site was www.bertisevil.com and the high concept behind it was that the Muppet Bert was evil; this site was a forum for its creator to show his skill at digital image manipulation by inserting Bert into various photos with infamous evil people (standing with Hitler, for example). The site, an attempt at ironic, postmodern humor, became popular, and others began establishing their own "tribute" Web sites showing even more images of Bert with evil people. The image of bin Laden and Bert came from a Dutch tribute site and not from Ignacio's site (though it was mistakenly attributed to him). When the story broke, Ignacio took down the Bert is Evil site, arguing that he had never wished to harm children's views of the Muppet, that the site was meant for a relatively limited group of people, and that all the