Politics and the Media

Does the media enhance or diminish our democracy?
Politics and the Media

Two Aspects
1. News
2. Paid Political Advertising

We will look at the media both in terms as our news source and as a medium use by politicians to get our votes.
Roles of the News Media

- Informing the Public as to what is important and what is happening.
  - Aka: Agenda Setting

- Government Watchdog

- Profit Making Businesses

We will begin by examining the news media.

Even 24 hour news channels have to chose what to show us, but do they we really see what is most important or do networks prefer to show simply what is most entertaining. Is there political bias in their choices? Can we count on the media to make sure our elected officials are transparent in their actions, honest, and do what they promise? Finally, does the fact that the most media sources are profit making businesses in any way compromise their public service role?

This lecture will examine these issues.
Rating the Various Sources

press  radio  tv  internet
(papers/journals)  (network/cable)

1. Startup Costs:
2. Range of opinion:
3. Detail:
4. Visual:
5. Objectivity: Especially
6. Speed:

Consider how you would rate the relative advantages and disadvantages of each medium along these dimensions. Some things to take note of:

1. Major media (radio/TV) is mostly owned by major corporations, as are major newspapers. But small papers or journals are much easier and less costly to start allowing for a broader range of ownership. Any idiot (except me) can create a web page and put stuff on the internet - when getting news off the internet it is most important to check where it is coming from - otherwise you may fall for totally BS. (For example, I still have students who think Barak Obama is a Muslim - the result of an internet campaign to smear him.)

2. Major T.V. and major newspapers keep within a fairly narrow range, steering towards the ideological center in order to attract a large audience. Radio offers a far wider range of options from right wing to a smaller to left wing talk radio. Just compare Amy Goodman’s Democracy Now(liberal) to Rush Limbaugh (conservative).

3. The entire transcript for a 30 minute national news broadcast would fill less than half the front page of the N.Y. Times.
Rating the Various Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>press</th>
<th>radio</th>
<th>tv</th>
<th>internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(papers/journals)</td>
<td>(network/cable)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Startup Costs:
2. Range of opinion:
3. Detail:
4. Visual:
5. Objectivity:
6. Speed:

4. Visuals add, but they can also distract and distort. Visuals often stop us from listening to what is being said - When we see a pretty picture of the president walking off Airforce One (his plane), the positive image is likely to stick with us longer than the voice over which may be telling us how he vetoed a jobs bill.

5. Just be aware whether you are reading or watching an opinion piece vs. something purported to be objective reporting. Se #1 regarding the internet.

6. The internet, and 24 hour cable news both can report information almost instantly, but remember this comes at the cost of thoroughness and reflection. A weekly journal is more likely to have more complete information and the time for more thoughtful analysis.
Is There Bias in the Media?

Major Media Ownership

vs.

Journalists
The point here is that owners must balance their ideology against profits - if their news shows are too far to the right or the left they will lose viewers as most American are somewhat in the middle and will turn off to news that they perceive as having an obvious slant.

Journalists on the other hand must check the liberal tendencies or be perceived as unprofessional hacks in a profession that teaches, honors and respects “objectivity”. Peer acceptance can be a key.

Thus, major networks steer towards the middle- liberals are likely to see it as too conservative and conservatives tend to see it as overly liberal. Of course talk radio and some cable channels such as Fox news had chosen to carve out a niche market and sell themselves to one side of the ideological spectrum, (Conservatives, in the case of Fox.)
In recent years much of what I described in the previous slide now exists side by side with media sources that steer to the left or right. With the plethora of news options, backyard bloggers and even major corporate media have begun to cut out niche markets with news designed to appeal to their audiences that share a particularly political leaning. It is now possible to seek news that appeals to your sensibilities whether you are a raving left winger or a cold hearted conservative. While talk radio seems to be dominated by the right, with the likes of Rush Limbaugh and John Hanadee, the left can be found most prominently throughout the blogoshere.
Does Bias Matter?

• Most don’t pay attention.
• Most who pay attention, don’t understand.
• Most who understand, don’t remember.
• Most who remember, don’t yield.
• Most who yield, don’t act

Even if the news is biased, some political scientists suggest it is unlikely to sway overall public opinion. Fox may increase the outrage that conservatives feel over what Democrats may be doing, but few liberals are going to take the show seriously. Likewise, not many conservatives are going to watch John Stewart or take him seriously (is anyone supposed to?).
Is There Bias in the Media?

The Real Story:
“Newsak/Infotainment”

1. Towards the Middle.
2. Towards the interesting. (vs the important)
3. Towards the visual (vs substantive)
4. Towards the Negative. (scandal)
5. Towards conflict/the horserace.
6. Towards the bottom line. ($$$)

Interesting news beats important news in terms of getting covered. On TV, a story with a good visual will always trump a story that is difficult to cover visually. Presidents know that if something bad is has happened, they should release some pictures of some missile tests or the like to bury the bad news.

The key thing is from the broadcasters perspective is keep it like, relatively simple and interesting - DON’T LOSE VIEWERS
“Newsak/Infotainment

News sandwiched in between quiz shows and commercials - background stuff.

News not to be analyzed - rather to be watched passively

Newsak is a play on the word muzak - or “elevator music” played in shopping malls, which is designed to make us feel nice and relaxed and in a “buying” mood.
Consider how each of these groups need and use each other. Politicians need the press to get their name out, and the press needs access to political figures to get the big scoop. Thus they are likely to work together; yet, the press may turn on politicians to report a great scandal or simply to seem serious as reporters. Also, politicians may use the press by staging pointless photo ops that get them coverage, but this leaves the press feeling they have been used like on a bad date. Of course the press needs viewers and politicians need vote so both find it essential to get air time that serves their purposes. You can begin to see how the tug and pull takes place - sort of a three way tango.
News Coverage and Democracy

Media Powers
1. Agenda Setting
2. Framing
Agenda Setting

Telling us not necessarily what to think, but what to think about.

If it not on the news - it not important (or so we are led to believe).

Of course in the Fall of 2008, the financial crisis is dominating the airwaves; however while almost all economists say we should have seen this coming networks generally did not think it worth covering until things began to collapse.

Of course stories on Iraq dropped off dramatically over the course of 2008, not necessarily because the war became less important to U.S. security, but in part to growing public disinterest in hearing about it. Who hard much about Afghanistan in recent years.

Go to Project Censored (www.projectcensored.org) to see their list of the 25 top stories of 2008 not covered by the mainstream media. These include the air war in Iraq, the crisis of our oceans, the growth of hunger in the U.S. and a Pentagon program to build new landmines.
Agenda Setting

With oil bouncing up to $100 a barrel in the fourth quarter of 2007, Exxon Mobil Corp. recorded the highest corporate quarterly profit ever. Chevron, the country’s second biggest oil company, saw net income rise 29 percent that quarter, contributing to an enviable profit of $18.7 billion for 2007. Clearly, what is good for Big Oil is not good for most Americans, few of whom would look back on 2007 with favor. It is easy for the Bush administration big shots to equate the fortunes of Big Oil with that of the nation. After all George W. Bush only got to be president because his failed career in the Texas oil industry nonetheless exposed his charms to the big energy guys who then bankrolled his political career. Vice President Dick Cheney was an out-of-work defense secretary when he was picked to be CEO of Halliburton Energy Services, which has profited mightily from its dealings with Exxon, not to mention running the Iraq franchise. And the image we should all recall is of the Chevron tanker named Condoleeza Rice. Only in America would we think it not a conflict of interest that Rice was paid handsomely for being on the board of Chevron Corp. from 1991 until she resigned to go work in the Bush White House, first as national security adviser and then as secretary of state. How worried can she be about the deteriorating position of the United States in the world when her oil company buddies are doing so well?

(cont on next slide)

The above column by Robert Scheer provides a good case study for of an important story that finds a difficult time getting covered.
Agenda Setting

We are conned since early childhood to look with dark suspicion upon anyone who points a finger of accountability at the robber barons of the corporate world. It is for that reason that Exxon’s outrageous profits, derived from exploiting an energy crisis that has hurt so many ordinary Americans, barely elicits media outrage of any sort. Nor does such profiteering get much play in the presidential race. To her credit, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton took umbrage over Exxon’s record-setting annual profit of $39.5 billion for 2006, stating last year: “I want to take those profits and put them into an alternative energy fund ... that will actually begin to move us toward the direction of independence.” From the hysterically negative response of the media, you would have thought she had hailed the second coming of Karl Marx. No wonder this year, with even higher profits reported, there was no similar outcry from any of the leading presidential candidates. They should be outraged because the taxpayers they are supposed to represent are forking over a lot of money for the military in order to make the world safe for Exxon.

Robert Scheer 2/13/08
If you watch the news at all, you know this famous line was uttered by Barak Obama in the mid-September during the election campaign. For the next week (just as our financial markets were preparing to collapse), the networks devoted most of their space debating whether he was referring to McCain’s economic plan or to Sarah Palin. CNN’s show 360 even did an analysis of how ridiculous it was that they were spending so much air time talking about it. On Sept. 9th they said Obama was going to give a speech on education policy, “but got ended up talking about lipstick”. They then showed his answer to a reporter’s question on the lipstick issue and nothing on his educational policy. On the same night, PBS’s Newshour showed a 10 minute segment of Obama’s speech where he did indeed outline his educational plan.
Framing

Telling us not what to think about, but how to think about issues.

Examples of framing a question:
Do you think killing unborn babies is okay?
Do you support a woman’s right to chose?

Or
Is it okay to suspend civil rights of terrorist to protect the country?
Is it okay to torture of suspected of being terrorists?

Or
Do you support providing illegal immigrants free social services?
Do you believe undocumented workers deserved equal protection of the law?

How reporters frame news effects hugely affects how we think about issues.
Framing

Joe Biden runs his mouth off.
Joe Biden is condescending towards women.
John Kerry is a flip flopper.
John McCain is too old.
George Bush lacks competence.
Obama lacks experience.
McCain doesn’t get the economy.

The media likes to create an angle or story line that it can run through time and link stories together. This creation of plot weaves stories together which helps hold viewer’s attention and provides viewers with a ready made frame for interpreting the story. While there may be truth to some or all of the above statements, the media zeroes in on them and amplifies beyond reality. If McCain answers too slowly the media will pick up on it and question his mind. If Barak does the same thing, it would probably just look thoughtful; however, if Obama were to not know the name of a world leader it would become a big story while for McCain it could be quickly forgiven. Of course Palin is on even shakier ground if she appears to not know something.

Of course, politicians and the media struggle over control of the frames within which their story will be seen. Thus, we also have Barak represents change and McCain represents experience and judgment.

Biden: No problem saying FRD went on TV when the market crashed.
McCain: No problem flip-flopping on immigration -"I wouldn't support my own plan.”
Paid Political Advertising

Media Savvy (literacy) - Some Guidelines

1. Beware Loaded Words
2. Watch out for Generalizations
3. Statistics Can Lie
4. Know your sources and vary them
5. Go beyond the Sound-bite
6. Beware of Images
7. Analyze campaign slogans
8. Be aware of “Swift Boating”
9. Watch out for “Willie Horton Ads”

(Loaded Word’s+ word that carry an emotional punch (family values, un-American, reform, terrorism

Generalities= things everyone is for, but are too vague to mean much policy wise) - reduce crime, create jobs, make America safe

Images: warm and fuzzy, planes, flags,
Does the media enhance our democracy?

“We now how have a kind of representative government which is quite beyond even what our Framers had in mind. In addition to all of our other representatives, we are now represented by television intermediaries. Television news/stars/reporters have now taken the part of citizens of the political process. First we elect representatives. Then we watch as the media people ask questions. Politics is now twice removed from us. It is a spectator sport.”

David Shuman: Rules of the Game

His main point is that the the media does not serve our democracy well as it has turned politics into a spectator sport. We no long speak out and take it upon ourselves to hold our representatives responsible. We expect the media to do it for us.

Think back to what Aristotle said about being political free. It was about being heard and actively shaping your country, not watching while others do it.
Does the media enhance our democracy?

“The public virtues - being seen, speaking, being heard, and taking action - are all being lost. What we have failed to appreciate is that a free press does not necessarily mean free citizens.”

David Shuman: Rules of the Game

For many political theorists, political freedom is not just about having right; it is something that requires action. It is the process of speaking out and being heard and thus not taken for granted.
Does the media enhance our democracy?

The positive view:
- The media is valuable “watch dog” and holds politician accountable.
- The effect of bias is minimal.
- People are as informed as they want and need to be.

The negative view:
- The media is too often manipulated by politicians
- News is driven by what is profitable.
- Most Americans are under-informed.
- We are turned into passive observers.

This is my own version of “he said /she said”. You’ll have to decide which side you are on.

Minimalists view on the affect of media bias: The people who are the most easily influenced (those without strong political views) are the most difficult o to reach (because they do not turn on the news or pay attention). Those who watch, will watch sources they already agree with. Thus, it is likely that the media has only a limited ability to sway public opinion.

A defense of the lack of depth in most coverage: If the media was more substantive (like a college lecture) fewer people would tune in and thus more people would know even less. Polls show that even with a low level awareness, most voters votes rationally, that is they vote for the candidate or party that most captures their views and wishes.

But then again the s----t that goes on that we the public don’t pay attention to can be pretty disturbing - whether it is the perpetuation of racism, the degradation of the environment, the proliferation of money in politics, or the growing poverty in our country, perhaps the media could serve us better.