

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

POSC 105

THE MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS

I. THIS MORNING:

- A. How the media presents the news
- B. The consequences for the electorate
- C. Important: since you yourselves “consume” the mass media, you are in a position to evaluate my claims. If you don’t think they hold water or are overstated, why not let me know.

II. THE MASS MEDIA - MAIN ARGUMENTS:

- A. The elite versus mass press: what the person in the street reads and sees is not what leaders read and see.
- B. The media do **not** have a meaningful liberal bias.
 - 1. If anything they are conservative, conservative in the older sense of the term.
- C. The media inadvertently discourage enlightened understanding, political participation, and hence democracy through accountability.
 - 1. These are the really serious effects of news presentation

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWS PRESENTATION:

- A. Reprinted from the last set of notes.
- B. The media do no supply a direct, unadulterated photo of “reality.”
 - 1. The “mirror analogy”
 - 2. Instead they must **choose what** stories they will tell and **how** they will tell them.
- C. In this sense, the media inevitably “create realities” (note the plural) as well as describe it.
- D. Here are some generalizations. Check them by looking at the “popular” press (network news and local newspapers) to see if they are accurate. Also, compare them with the network and local news stories.
 - 1. **Government point of view:** official interpretations of events and issues are the primary source and topic of most news stories. One seldom finds **independent** accounts or analysis.
 - a. Example: most (not all) of what is reported about Iraq is based on what government officials say, not independent investigation.
 - b. Example: the war in Vietnam was in the beginning reported from the government’s point of view. Only after it was plain that the conflict would be protracted and bloody and that many Americans opposed it did the press become critical.

2. **Personalization:** news stories are most frequently reported in personal terms. How individuals are affected by an event. Who won, who lost, who was hurt or helped, etc. Compare the number of statements about or by individuals with the number about policy content.
 - a. Example: consider how Saddam Hussein is demonized.
 - b. When reading about Congress note how many stories' main line is who won, who lost.
 3. **Fragmentation:** stories are usually short, superficial, devoid of contextual explanation (i.e, they do not show how on issue relates to another or how it depends on prior history, etc.).
 - a. Note that the coverage of many events is episodic; that is, you learn only bits and pieces at any one time.
 4. **Drama:** Wherever possible the story's dramatic and emotional elements are emphasized. As the narrator talks what visual images are portrayed. What feelings does the story arouse? Are you angered, saddened, gladdened, etc. or are you "informed." Is coverage dispassionate or does it arouse your feelings?
 - a. Example: consider the music and form of presentation of national and local television news.
 - b. Example: what parts of violent events are reported, actions or underlying causes?
 - c. Example: television news loves to show heated arguments in Congress but usually doesn't explain what the participants are debating.
 5. **Politics over substance:** the "political" aspects of news (who did what to whom) frequently overshadow the "why" parts of the matter.
 - a. Reporters know a lot about personal conflict and politics but not so much about the substance of politics. Hence, they sometimes prefer to describe scandal rather than economics or policy or law.
 6. **Remoteness:** there is usually little effort to show the individual how a controversy relates to his or her personal life or interests.
 7. **Mystification:** reports usually do not explain issues or policies or controversies to the reader or viewer. Because emphasis is on personalities and drama, the substance is often left out.
 - a. If one has to rely on the mass media, one can easily become confused about underlying causes, the pros and cons of issues, and so forth.
- E. The coverage of elections
1. Horse races and handicapping.
 2. Political debates
 3. See the essay on the web site.
- F. The consequences:
1. Confusion, cynicism, misperceptions

2. By making political news relatively “costly” the media contribute to mass apathy and cynicism.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SOCIETY:

- A. We like to believe that the media are democracy’s guardians. But many scholars, such as Patterson, feel they perform that role imperfectly.
 1. Example (if time): Watergate and “All the President’s Men” legend.

V. NEXT TIME:

- A. Reading:
 1. “Two Views of Public Opinion,” “The Mass Media and Enlightened Understanding” (Two essays.)
 2. Read the articles in the electronic reserve room pertaining to the mass media; they clarify and extend the class discussion.
 3. Patterson, *We the People*, Chapter 10. Pay attention to
 - a. “From Partisanship to Objective Journalism” (Is the press “objective”?)
 - b. Reading 10 (pages 328 to 331): I think this is an important argument. Patterson claims that the media cannot do the job of political parties. Amen! Make sure you at least understand.
 - c. Generally understand the “media roles” but do not try to memorize.
 4. You can use the course web page to look at some important examples of the “elite” press such as the *Washington Post* and various opinion magazines.
 - a. Also, why not spend a minute looking at the foreign press.

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