

Assignment: use news accounts from generally available television programs or newspapers to verify one or more of these propositions. See the guidelines for presentation below.

Propositions regarding the media and political power:

1. The media are essential for enlightened understanding. We live in large industrial societies and cannot experience events directly. Thus, we have to rely mainly on what others tell us for information about government and politics. And, the media play a key role in supplying that information. How well they do so determines in large measure what we as citizens can and do know about issues and those who decide the outcomes of them.
2. The way the media covers the “news” adversely affects enlightened understanding. Characteristics of news gathering and reporting limit people’s ability to comprehend the political world by among other things:
 - a. Stressing drama and emotion over intellectual content;
 - b. Personalizing conflicts rather than showing substantive causes and alternative positions;
 - c. Fragmenting news by using episodic coverage and ignoring contextual and historical factors;
 - d. Relying on “official” positions such as what people in authority with vested interests in certain points of view say and largely ignoring what “dissenters,” “pariahs,” and other non-officials.
3. Since news media are caught on the horns of a dilemma, their objectivity and usefulness as guardians of democracy is compromised. On the one hand, they need to critique frequently individuals and institutions in power; on the other hand, they rely heavily on these same people and organizations for their livelihood. Television, magazines, and newspapers are of course part of profit making entities, and their operation must contribute to the company’s profitability (or at most, not detract from it). Less obvious but no less true, news organizations and journalists depend to a huge extent on the “good will” of politicians and elected officials. The result is that the media have a “conservative” or status quo bias. (“Conservative” in this context means “not critical of powerful economic and political actors and institutions.” It doesn’t pertain the usual Democratic versus Republican split.)
4. Both the entertainment and news media help to create a mass society as opposed to a public. As Mills suggests in the Power Elite, mass society consists of people who are largely misinformed or uninformed about government, apathetic, cynical, conformist, self-centered and self-seeking, and not especially motivated to protect the common good. Needless to say, not every American fits this description, but lots do. Why? Well, the media inadvertently and even openly encourage such attitudes and behavior.
5. Owners and managers of news organizations are part and parcel of the power elite as described by Mills, Dye, and others. As such they greatly affect the policy agenda (that is, what will and will not be the subject of discussion) and limit discussion of alternative solutions to problems to those deemed acceptable by the elite.

Guidelines

1. We are interested in the mass media, the source of information that the common person uses for knowledge about government and politics. There are of course specialized sources and an rich store of alternatives presses available throughout society, but in point of fact these are not, and I argue cannot be, used by the average person. So investigate only a news outlet that you can demonstrate has popular audience.

2. Make a case for or against one (or more) of these propositions. To do so state the argument, describe your “method,” present your evidence, and draw a conclusion. I would, for example, claim that news organizations present the news the way candidates want it presented and then show how network news covered, say, Gore’s latest trip to New Hampshire or the News Journal’s report of Bush’s Delaware trip. I would then return to my original general statement in a brief conclusion.
3. Length? The paper needs to be as long as necessary to make your case. Assume that you are submitting it to a jury. Your job is to convince the members that your analysis holds water. Naturally, you cannot write a definitive analysis. But if you say the media are informative and present just one example, make sure that it is well chosen and that you have fully explained terms, assumptions, and so forth.
4. It goes without saying that you are welcome—indeed encouraged—to cite or quote the authors we have read during the semester. As an example, Bachrach and Baratz explained the concept of “non-decisions,” a point that the sixth proposition raises. Or, Cook’s book pertains to the question of just how distant reporters really are from the people they are supposedly objectively covering.
5. Cite fully and clearly your sources. I need to know the day, time, page, author, and so on of every news item that is part of your case. Use proper citation methods. (See the 302 web page under “Sources of Information” for guidelines to citing web and standard sources.)
6. Outline!
7. Write a draft. Let it sit for a day or two. Rewrite and in so doing cut about 20 percent of the words. Next, read the revision out loud to yourself or someone else, correct mistakes, clarify sentences, and check for typos. Only then submit the final draft. Note: for this assignment a rough draft won’t bring much if any credit.
8. If you work with some one, the final product has to be twice or three times as good as papers done by individuals, depending on how many people are in your group. Notice that I wrote twice as “good,” not twice as long. Among other things this requirement means that “group” papers are allowed only half as many errors (e.g., sentence splices, typos, incorrectly used words) as individual efforts.
9. Due November 30, 1999 in class, not afterward or the next day.