

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
Posc 150**

**THE MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS
(Part II)**

- I. CONTENTS:
- A. Public opinion and enlightened understanding.
 - B. How the media affect the public's understanding of current events.
- II. A PROBLEM—THE PUBLIC AND DEMOCRACY:
- A. Citizens' civic behavior seems to leave a lot to be desired.
 - 1. ✓Apathy
 - 2. ✓Lack of participation, involvement
 - 3. ✓Cynicism
 - B. And yet democracy requires enlightened understanding.
 - C. What is the explanation?
 - 1. ○Hamilton school
 - i. Behavior and interests reflect natural state: people are not “political animals” by nature.
 - ii. People are content with minimal participation and knowledge.
 - 1) The media, including the news, give people what they want, namely excitement, drama, and entertainment.
 - 2. ○Jefferson school:
 - i. People are not especially civic minded—at least not to the degree suggested by democratic theory—but institutions like the media (inadvertently?) discourage participation and interest.
 - ii. We have to see how and why the media present news as they do in order to understand the public's response.
 - 1) The “viscous circle” problem.
- III. THE MEDIA AS THE GUARDIANS OF DEMOCRACY:
- A. ○A reassuring belief is that our “free and independent” press guards us against official misconduct.
 - 1. ✓Numerous images and symbols support this feeling, which is also reinforced by, say, books and films such as “All the President's Men,” starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman.
 - B. Yet our faith may be misplaced.
 - 1. It can be argued that the media do not necessarily play the role we think they could and should.
 - C. Problems:
 - 1. Concentration of ownership.
 - i. See the required reading.

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- ii. This issue is very much in the news. Have you been following the AOL story?
2. Conflict between profit making and public service.

IV. ELITE VERSUS MASS MEDIA:

- A. ○ We need to make an important distinction:
1. Elite press: what politically active and vibrant and influential members of society use.
 - i. ✓ Examples: New York *Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, PBS (e.g., "News Hour," "Frontline," National Public Radio).

V. THE MEDIA AND REALITY CREATION:

- A. ✱ Americans do not experience politics directly.
1. ○ What they "know" comes directly and indirectly from the media.
 - i. Transmission of information model.
 - ii. "Opinion leaders"
- B. ✱ The media as a filter.

VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWS PRESENTATION:

- A. ✱ General proposition: the media are not politically biased nearly as much as they are biased against citizenship.
1. This bias creates mass cynicism and apathy, which in turn favors some interest and groups.
- B. How the media package the news and present it to the public.
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.
 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.
 - i. Check this on your own by looking at a news paper account of some congressional activity.
 - 1) Does it talk about the merits of the issue or who wins and who loses.
 3. ○ **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?
 - i. Listen to theme music on news casts.
 - ii. What kinds of pictures dominate a typical night on the networks news broadcasts.
 4. ○ **Hostility to institutions and government:**

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- i. The media frequently dwell on corruption, waste, ineptitude, silliness, and the like when describing government and public officials.
 - 1) Stories of scandals, corruption, waste, ineptitude
 - 5. ○**Fragmentation**: stories are usually short, superficial, devoid of contextual explanation. They don't show how events are interconnected and skim on background information.
 - 6. ○**Politics over substance**: the "political" aspects of news (who did what to whom) frequently overshadow the "why" parts of the matter.
 - i. ○**Horse racing and campaigns**: Look at the coverage of election campaigns. What is stressed, who's ahead, who's behind or stands on issues? Who has raised the most money or what the candidates proposal really entail? Who endorsed whom or what the advantages and disadvantages of various platforms are?
 - 1) Usually, it's the first.

VII. HOW THE MEDIA AFFECT THE PUBLIC:

- A. The consequences:
 - 1. ○**Remoteness**: there is usually little effort to show the individual how a controversy relates to his or her personal life or interests.
 - 2. ○**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.
 - 3. ○**Disinterest and apathy**.
 - i. People are confused and frustrated so they become cynical and less inclined to care seriously enough to take politics as seriously as other activities.

VIII. NEXT TIME:

- A. First test
- B. Reading:
 - 1. Start Tucker, *May God Have Mercy*. If ever there was a timely book, this is it.
 - i. This work should give you few problems. Think about some of the main ideas: what was the nature of the evidence against Coleman? Did he *initially* have adequate defense? Etc.
 - 2. Required: "The Mass Media And Enlightened Understanding," in the Cyber Reserve Room.
 - 3. Required: "The Global Media Giants," available in the Cyber reserve Room. Important.
 - 4. Suggested: "Off The Record: What Media Corporations Don't Tell You About Their Legislative Agendas" available via the Cyber Reserve Room.
 - i. This study explores media corporations political power.
 - ii. The document is in Portable Document Format, and can easily be retrieved.

- iii. It was prepared by the Center for Public Integrity.
- 5. Suggested: look at “Who Owns What” at Columbia Journalism Review (<http://www.cjr.org/owners/>).