

The Media Moguls

Great power derives from the control of information. Media power is the power to decide what Americans will see, hear, and read about their world. Media power lies in creating issues, publicizing them, dramatizing them, getting people to talk about them, and forcing corporate and government officials to confront them. Media inattention creates nondecisions. It allows conditions in society that might otherwise concern people to be ignored. “TV is the Great Legitimater. TV confers reality. Nothing happens in America, practically everyone seems to agree, until it happens on television.”¹

AGENDA SETTING: DECIDING WHAT WILL BE DECIDED

The mass media, particularly television, set the agenda for public discussion. They determine what we think about and talk about. Political journalist Theodore White asserts:

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk about and think about—an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties, and mandarins.²

¹ William A. Henry, “News as Entertainment” in *What’s News*, ed. Elie Abel (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1981), p. 134.

² Theodore White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 327.

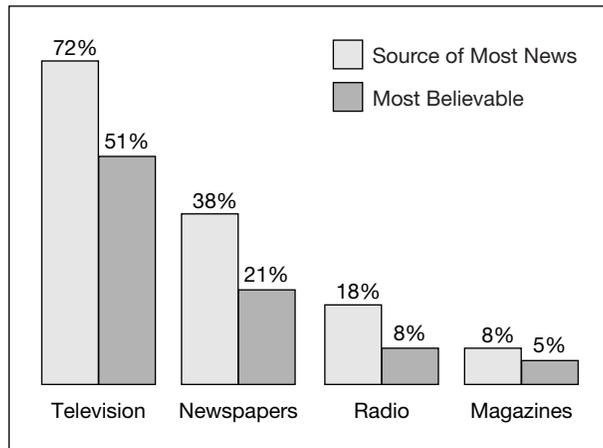
As children, Americans spend more time in front of television sets than in school. As adults, Americans spend half of their leisure time watching television. In the average home, the television set is on seven hours a day. More than two thirds of Americans report that they get all or most of their “news” from television. More important, television is the “most believable” medium of communication (see Figure 5–1).

The power of television derives not only from its large audiences but also from its ability to communicate *emotions* as well as *information*. Television’s power is found in its visuals—angry faces in a rioting mob, police beating an African American motorist, wounded soldiers being unloaded from a helicopter—scenes that convey an emotional message. Moreover, television focuses on the faces of individuals as well as on their words, portraying honesty or deception, humility or arrogance, compassion or indifference, humor or meanness, and a host of other personal characteristics. Media-skilled elites understand that *what* one says may not be as important as *how* one says it. Television tells Americans what to *feel* as well as what to think about.

FIGURE 5–1 Sources and Believability of the News

Questions: First, I’d like to ask you where you usually get most of your news about what’s going on in the world today—from the newspapers, or radio, or television, or magazines, or talking to people, or where?

If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines, and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe—the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?



Note: Percentages (for sources of news) add up to 125 percent due to multiple responses. For trend line on these questions, see Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics, 1999–2000* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press 1999). Between 1962 and 1964, television passed newspapers as the most believable medium.

ISBN: 0-536-70810-X

The media elite—television and newspaper executives, reporters, editors, anchors, and producers—do not see themselves as neutral “observers” of American politics but rather as active “participants.” They not only report events but also discover events to report, assign them political meaning, and predict their consequences. They seek to challenge government officials, debate political candidates, and define the problems of society. They see their profession as a “sacred trust” and themselves as the true voice of the people in public affairs.

Top executives in the news media, the “media moguls,” do not doubt their own power. A generation ago they credited themselves with the success of the civil rights movement. The dramatic televised images of the nonviolent civil rights demonstrators of the early 1960s being attacked by police with night-sticks, cattle prods, and vicious dogs helped to awaken the nation and its political leadership to the injustices of segregation. Later, the television networks credited themselves with “decisively changing America’s opinion of the Vietnam War,” and forcing Lyndon Johnson out of the presidency.

Television news, together with the Washington press corps, also lays claim, of course, to the expulsion of Richard Nixon from the presidency. *The Washington Post* conducted the “investigative reporting” that produced a continuous flow of embarrassing and incriminating information about the President and his chief advisers. But it was the television networks that maintained the continuous nightly attack on the White House for nearly two years and kept Watergate in the public eye. Richard Nixon’s approval rating in public opinion polls dropped from an all-time high of 68 percent in January 1973 following the Vietnam Peace Agreement to a low of 24 percent less than one year later.

Yet publicly the leadership of the mass media claim that they do no more than “mirror” reality. Although the “mirror” argument contradicts many of their more candid claims to having righted many of America’s wrongs (segregation, Vietnam, Watergate), the leadership of the television networks still claim that television “is a mirror of society.”

Of course, the mirror analogy is nonsense. Newspeople decide what the news will be, how it will be presented, and how it will be interpreted. Newspeople have the power to create some national issues and ignore others, elevate obscure people to national prominence, reward politicians they favor, and punish those they disfavor.

THE CONCENTRATION OF MEDIA POWER

Despite the multiplication of channels of communication in recent years, media power remains concentrated in the leading television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, CNN), the nation’s influential national newspapers (*Wash-*

ington Post, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today), and the broad-circulation news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*). It is true that the national network evening news shows (*NBC Nightly News*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*) have lost viewership in recent years (down from a combined average of 40 million viewers in 1980 to 28 million today). But viewership of cable CNN and its headline companion HNN is rising, and viewership of local television news has remained strong. Moreover, television news magazines, notably CBS's *60 Minutes* and ABC's *20/20*, are regularly listed among the most popular shows on television. And television tabloids, such as *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition*, are also gaining viewers.

The most influential New York and Washington newspapers are not so much instruments of mass communication as they are vehicles for *interelite* communication. It is especially important for top government officials to be familiar with both news stories and opinion columns that appear each day in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. About 1,800 separate newspapers are published daily throughout the nation and read by approximately 70 percent of the adult population. But many of the news stories and virtually all of the opinion columns dealing with national affairs that appear in local newspapers throughout the country are taken from the national press.

News magazines have a somewhat broader readership than the New York and Washington press. *Time* is the nation's leading weekly news magazine, with a circulation of more than 4 million, followed by *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. But the masses are more concerned with human interest stories, television and entertainment "news," travel, and tending their gardens—*Modern Maturity*, *Readers Digest*, *TV Guide*, *National Geographic*, and *Better Homes and Gardens* far exceed all news magazines in circulation.

Media megamergers in recent years have created corporate empires that spread across multiple media—television, film, print, music, and the Internet. These global conglomerates combine television broadcasting and cable programming, movie production and distribution, magazine and book publication, music recording, sports and recreation, and now Internet access and e-commerce. The seven multinational corporations listed in Table 5-1 dominate world media and cultural markets.

General Electric, Sony, and Seagram were originally industrial corporations; they bought into the media world. General Electric (GE appliances, aircraft engines, industrial products) is the largest of these corporations, but its ownership of media brings in only about 5 percent of its corporate revenue. Sony (a Japanese electronics multinational) receives only 30 percent of its corporate revenue from media operations. Seagram (a Canadian distillery) now receives more revenue from media enterprises than from its whiskey sales. Walt Disney, Viacom, and NewsCorp (Fox) are true media conglomerates.

The largest empire of all, AOL-Time Warner Inc., spreads itself beyond

TABLE 5-1 The Media Empires

1	<p>AOL-Time Warner</p> <p><i>Television:</i> HBO, TNT, TBS, CNN, CNN-News, CNN-FN, Cinemax, Time Warner Cable</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> Warner Brothers, New Line Cinema, Castle Rock, Looney Tunes</p> <p><i>Magazines:</i> Time, People, Sports Illustrated, Fortune, plus twenty-eight other speciality magazines</p> <p><i>Books:</i> Warner Books, Little, Brown Publishing, Book-of-the-Month Club</p> <p><i>Music:</i> Warner Brothers Records, Atlantic Records, Elektra</p> <p><i>Sports and Entertainment:</i> Atlanta Braves, Atlanta Hawks, World Championship Wrestling</p> <p><i>Internet:</i> AOL, Netscape, CompuServe</p>
2	<p>Walt Disney</p> <p><i>Television:</i> ABC-TV, plus ten stations; ESPN, ESPN-2, Disney Channel, A&E, E!, Life-time</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> Walt Disney Pictures, Miramax, Touchstone</p> <p><i>Music:</i> Walt Disney Records, Mammoth</p> <p><i>Sports and Recreation:</i> Disney theme parks in Florida, California, France, Japan; cruise line; Anaheim Angels, Mighty Ducks</p>
3	<p>Viacom</p> <p><i>Television:</i> CBS, plus thirty-four TV stations: MTV, TNN, Nickelodeon, Showtime, VH1, Nick-At-Nite</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> Paramount Pictures, Spelling, Viacom</p> <p><i>Books:</i> Simon & Schuster, Scribner, Free Press</p> <p><i>Music:</i> Famous Music Publishing</p> <p><i>Sports and Recreation:</i> Blockbuster Video, SportsLine, plus five Paramount parks</p>
4	<p>NewsCorp (Fox)</p> <p><i>Television:</i> Fox Network plus fifteen TV stations; Fox News, Fox Sports, Fox Family Channel</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> 20th Century Fox, Searlight</p> <p><i>Books:</i> HarperCollins</p> <p><i>Music:</i> Mushroom Records</p> <p><i>Sports and Recreation:</i> Los Angeles Dodgers</p>
5	<p>Seagram</p> <p><i>Television:</i> USA Network</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> Universal Pictures</p> <p><i>Music:</i> MCA, Geffen, Def Jam, Motown</p> <p><i>Sports and Recreation:</i> Universal Studios theme parks in California and Florida</p>
6	<p>Sony</p> <p><i>Television:</i> Game Show Network</p> <p><i>Motion Pictures:</i> Columbia Pictures, Sony Pictures, Tri Star</p> <p><i>Music:</i> Columbia Records, Epic Records, Nashville Records</p> <p><i>Sports and Recreation:</i> Sony Theaters</p>
7	<p>General Electric</p> <p><i>Television:</i> NBC Network plus thirteen TV stations; CNBC, MSNBC</p>

television, cable, motion pictures, magazines, books, sports, and entertainment, into cyberspace. Time Warner was already a merged corporate conglomerate, the largest true media empire, *before* its merger with the nation's largest Internet provider, America Online. Time, Inc., originally a news magazine publisher (*Time*, *People*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Fortune*, etc) had merged with Warner Communications, originally a motion picture production company, in 1989. Then Time Warner merged with Ted Turner-owned CNN, Turner Broadcasting, and the Atlanta Braves, in 1996. One of the biggest mergers in American corporate history was announced in early 2000: the two giants of their respective industries—Time Warner, the media conglomerate, and America Online, with 22 million Internet subscribers—combined to form a new colossus. The combined stock market value of AOL and Time Warner is greater than that of any other corporation in America.

AOL is one of the few profit-making firms on the Internet. With over 20 million subscribers, it has the largest customer base. Its energetic young CEO, Stephen Case, had served short terms in the corporate ranks of Procter & Gamble, Pizza Hut, and Pepsico before jumping into a start-up computer firm, Quantum Control. Case quickly became “a serious geek,” and in 1992 founded his own America OnLine and rocketed into cyberspace. In contrast, Time Warner was a well-established, prestigious media giant when it agreed to the merger with AOL-Time Warner's chairman, Gerald M. Levin, was once a partner in the prestigious New York law firm of Simpson Thacher and Bartlett (see Chapter 7) who specialized in media affairs, becoming CEO of HBO and eventually its parent, Time Warner. He was well connected politically as a member of the Business roundtable, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Tri-lateral Commission. But both Case and Levin must deal with the unpredictable Ted Turner, who retains vice-chairmanship of AOL Time Warner as a result of the earlier merger between Turner Broadcasting and Time Warner.

Walt Disney has a large and prestigious Board of Directors (including actor Sidney Poitier) but the charismatic Michael Eisner dominates this vast media empire. Eisner came up through the rough and tumble ranks of programming at CBS, then went to Hollywood as CEO of Paramount Pictures and made a surprise switch to Walt Disney in 1984.

Viacom is closely held by the Redstone family and its patriarch, Sumner M. Redstone. Redstone served in the Army in World War II, received his bachelor's and law degrees from Harvard, and was a partner in a Washington law firm before getting into the entertainment industry. He took over Viacom in 1986 and began a series of corporate acquisitions in motion pictures (Paramount), publishing (Simon & Schuster), and finally in a surprise coup, CBS television. His son and daughter serve on the relatively small Board of Directors, apparently keeping Viacom decisions largely within the family.

TED TURNER: MAVERICK MEDIA MOGUL

Media power is *less* concentrated today than a decade ago, owing to the development of satellite and cable technology that adds greater variety of communication channels. Today over 65 percent of TV households are connected to cable, diluting the power of the older established networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—and providing diverse news and entertainment broadcasting, from C-SPAN coverage of Congress to MTV and the Cartoon Network. Perhaps no single individual is more responsible for the development of diversity in television communication than the flamboyant tycoon Ted Turner. Once ridiculed by established media elites as “the Mouth of the South,” Turner changed the course of television news broadcasting with the creation of his twenty-four-hour news network, CNN.

Reportedly a mischievous child with a difficult upbringing, Turner was sent to the Georgia Military Academy before entering Brown University. He was expelled for various infractions and served a brief tour with the U.S. Coast Guard before entering the family’s billboard advertising company in Atlanta. When the business floundered and his father committed suicide, young Ted took over and began building his empire. He used the restored profits from the billboard company to buy television stations and invest in the new satellite technology. With FCC deregulation of satellite broadcasting in 1975, Turner was well positioned to challenge the major networks. Turner’s Atlanta-based WTBS was the first “superstation” beaming its programs via satellite throughout the nation. He purchased the Atlanta Braves and the Atlanta Hawks to help feed his programming as well as his mountainous ego. In 1988 Turner purchased the MGM film library, including the classic *Gone with the Wind*, to add to offerings shown on WTBS and his entertainment network, TNT.

But Turner’s greatest achievement was the creation of CNN in 1981, despite near-unanimous predictions of financial disaster. Turner borrowed heavily to establish CNN and nursed it financially for many years before it became profitable. The requirement to fill twenty-four hours with news, interviews, and commentary means that CNN offers more “raw” news than any other network. News on CNN is less burdened with editing, “interpretation,” and context than on ABC, CBS, or NBC. And CNN recruits some conservative commentators (for example, on *Crossfire*) in order to spark controversy. The Gulf War cemented CNN as the nation’s leading source of fast-breaking news. Only CNN had live satellite coverage as bombs began to fall on Baghdad on the night of January 16, 1991. CNN would later come under criticism for broadcasts of enemy propaganda by its correspondent, Peter Arnett, but CNN established itself as a serious rival to the established news organizations. Today CNN International is shown in hotels around the world.

As Turner transformed his empire, Turner Broadcasting, Inc., into a

major media corporation, he increasingly recruited professional executives and producers to manage affairs. In order to finance his purchase of MGM in 1986, he diluted some of this authority by giving some cable systems operators seats on his board of directors. Despite his success in capitalism, Turner's personal politics are decidedly left of center; his marriage to "progressive activist" Jane Fonda (now estranged from Turner) no doubt reinforced his often expressed cynicism toward American institutions. But Turner wisely refrained from direct interference in programming.

The merger of Time Warner and AOL further diluted Turner's media power, reportedly to his dissatisfaction. He remains Vice-Chairman of the AOL-Time Warner Board of Directors and the largest individual shareholder in the corporation. Over the last twenty years he has amused himself by acquiring huge tracts of land throughout the United States. He is today the nation's single largest private landowner.

KATHERINE GRAHAM: THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN AMERICA

For many years, Katherine Graham, the owner and publisher of the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* magazine, was once recognized as the most powerful woman in America. Her leadership of the *Post*, which did more than any other publication to expose the Watergate scandal and force the resignation of President Richard Nixon, established Graham as one of the most powerful figures in Washington. The *Washington Post* is the capital's most influential newspaper, and it vies with the *New York Times* as the world's most influential newspaper. These are the papers read by all segments of the nation's elite, and both papers feed stories to the television networks and wire services.

Graham inherited her position from her father and husband, but when she became president of the Washington Post Company in 1963, she demonstrated her own capacity to manage great institutional power. She was the daughter of a wealthy New York banker, Eugene Meyer. Like many elites, her education was in the fashionable private preparatory schools; she also attended Vassar College and the University of Chicago. In 1933 her father bought the *Washington Post* for less than \$1 million. Katherine Meyer worked summers on her father's paper, and then took a job as a reporter with the *San Francisco News*. After one year as a reporter, she joined the editorial staff of the *Washington Post*.

In 1940, she married Philip L. Graham, a Harvard Law School graduate with a clerkship under Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. After service in World War II, Philip Graham was made publisher of the *Washington Post* by his father-in-law. Meyer later sold the paper to the Grahams for one dollar. The Washington Post Company proceeded to purchase other competitive

papers in the nation's capital; it also bought *Newsweek* magazine from the Vincent Astor Foundation, as well as five television stations and several pulp and paper companies.

In 1963, Philip Graham committed suicide, and Katherine Graham took control of the *Washington Post-Newsweek* enterprises. By the early 1970s the *Washington Post* was challenging the *New York Times* as the nation's most powerful newspaper. Graham relied heavily on her executive editor, Benjamin Bradlee, who was directly responsible for the Watergate "investigative reporting" of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that led to President Nixon's downfall. But reportedly Graham herself made the key decisions.

Indeed, the Washington Post Company's domination of the Washington scene gives it great power over federal officials and agencies. As columnist Kevin Phillips observes:

We might note the quasi-governmental role played by the Washington Post Company. The Post Company has a five-level presence in Washington—a newspaper (the *Washington Post*), a radio station (WTOP), a television station (WTOP-TV), a news magazine (*Newsweek*), and a major news service (L.A. Times–Washington Post). Not only does the Washington Post Company play an unmatched role as a federal government information system—from the White House to Congress to the bureaucracy and back—it serves as a cue card for the network news, and it plays a huge role in determining how the American government communicates to the American people.³

Graham was also a trustee of the John F. Kennedy School of Government of Harvard University, George Washington University, the University of Chicago, and the Urban Institute. She was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

In 1991 Katherine Graham turned over operating responsibility for the Washington Post Company to her son, Donald E. Graham. Donald graduated from Harvard in 1966, served in the Army for two years, and then spent over twenty years in various Washington Post management positions before his mother named him president and chief executive officer and later chairman of the board.

The current board includes corporate and banking ties (e.g., J.P. Morgan, Coca-Cola, Johnson & Johnson), a tie to the top law firm Cravath, Swaine & Moore (see Chapter 6), and the presence of Wall Street's most feared and admired investor, Warren Buffett (see Table 5–2).

Katherine Graham died following an accidental fall in 2001 at age 84. Her Washington funeral, broadcast on all major media outlets, brought together elites from virtually every sector of American society.

³ Kevin Phillips, "Busting the Media Trusts," *Harpers* (July, 1977), p. 30.

TABLE 5-2 Inside the Washington Post Boardroom

<i>Inside Directors</i>
Donald E. Graham, Chairman & CEO Katherine Graham,* Chairman Ex Com Diana M. Daniels, Vice-President Beverly R. Keil, Vice-President John B. Morse, Vice-President
<i>Outside (Public Interest) Directors</i>
Ralph E. Gomory President, Sloan Foundation; Director of Ashland Oil, Bank of New York William J. Ruane Chairman, West Philadelphia Corp. (inner city development); Roman Catholic priest
<i>Outside (Corporate) Directors</i>
Richard D. Simmons President, International Herald Tribune; Director of J.P. Morgan, Union Pacific George J. Gillespie III Senior Partner, Cravath, Swaine & Moore Donald E. Keogh President & CEO, Coca-Cola Co. George W. Wilson President, Newspapers of New England James E. Burke Former Chairman, Johnson & Johnson Warren E. Buffett Chairman, Berkshire Hathaway (investments); Director of Saloman, Inc., Coca-Cola, Gillette

*Died 2001.

THE CELEBRITY NEWSMAKERS

Each night about 28 million Americans watch one of three men: Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, or Tom Brokaw. No other individuals—not presidents, movie stars, or popes—have had such extensive contact with so many people. These network celebrities are recognized and heard by more people than anyone else on the planet. The networks demand that an anchor be the network's premier journalist, principal showman, top editor, star, symbol of news excellence, and single most important living logo.

Anchors, then, are both celebrities and newspeople. They are chosen for their mass appeal, but they must also bring journalistic expertise to their jobs. The anchors help select from thousands of hours of videotapes and hundreds

of separate stories that will be squeezed into the twenty-two minutes of nightly network news (eight minutes are reserved for commercials). Each minute represents approximately 160 spoken words; the total number of words on the entire newscast is less than found on a single newspaper page. These inherent restrictions of the medium give great power to the anchors and their executive producers through their selection of what Americans will see and hear about the world each night.

All three network anchors share liberal and reformist social values and political beliefs.

Dan Rather, who deliberately projects an image of emotional intensity, has created both strong attachments and heated animosities among his audiences. He is most despised by conservatives because of his undisguised and passionate liberal views. Rather worked his way up through the ranks of CBS news following graduation from Sam Houston State College. He was a reporter and news director for the CBS affiliate station in Houston, then chief of the CBS London Bureau, and later Vietnam correspondent. He came to national prominence in 1966 as a CBS White House correspondent and took over the anchor position from Walter Cronkite in 1981.

The Canadian-born Peter Jennings projects an image of thoughtful, urbane sophistication. He is widely traveled (his father was a journalist), but his formal education ended in the tenth grade. ABC's *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* devotes slightly more time to international news than do its rival news shows.

Tom Brokaw offers a calm, unemotional delivery with occasional touches of wry humor. Brokaw graduated from the University of South Dakota and started his career at an Omaha television station. He anchored local news in Atlanta and Los Angeles before moving up to the post of NBC White House correspondent in 1973. He hosted the NBC *Today* show from 1976 to 1982, and his show biz and talk-show-host experience has served him well as anchor of the *NBC Nightly News* since then. He is less ideological than Rather or Jennings and can appear relaxed and friendly with Republicans as well as Democrats.

The ratings race among the anchors is very close. Indeed, the closeness of those ratings may be driving the shows toward even more sensational themes, violent confrontations, and dramatic hype. Although all current shows have expert commentators, they are used less often; and it is now almost mandatory to end the show with a crowd-pleasing human interest story.

BAD NEWS AND GOOD PROFITS

The economic interests of the media elite—the need to capture and hold audience attention—creates a bias toward “hype” in the selection, presentation, and interpretation of news. The media must attract and hold large

audiences so that they may be sold to advertisers. On an average night, nearly 100 million people will watch television. Advertisers must pay \$100,000 to \$500,000 for a single fifteen- or thirty-second prime-time spot on any of the major networks. Advertisers pay the networks on the basis of ratings, compiled by independent services, the most popular of which is the A.C. Nielson Company. By placing electronic boxes in a national sample of television homes, Nielson calculates the proportion of all “TV households” that watch a program (the “rating”), as well as the proportion of TV households with their sets turned on that watch a specific program (the “share”).

Bad news makes good profits. Bad news attracts larger audiences than good news. So television news displays a pervasive bias toward the negative in American life—in politics, government, business, the military, schools, and everywhere else. Bad news stories on television outnumber good news stories by at least three to one.⁴ All presidential candidates receive more bad coverage than good.

The network’s concentration on scandal, abuse, and corruption in government has not always produced the desired liberal, reformist notions in the minds of the masses of viewers. Contrary to the expectations of the media elite, their focus on political wrongdoing has produced feelings of general distrust and cynicism toward government and “the system.” These feelings have been labeled “television malaise”—a combination of social distrust, political cynicism, feelings of powerlessness, and disaffection from parties and politics which seems to stem from television’s emphasis on the negative aspects of American life.⁵ The long-run effects of this elite behavior may be self-defeating in terms of elite interest in maintaining a stable political system.

LIBERAL BIAS IN THE NEWS

When TV newscasters insist that they are impartial, objective, and unbiased, they may sincerely believe that they are, because in the world in which they live—the New York and Washington world of newspeople, writers, intellectuals, artists—the established liberal point of view is so uniformly voiced. TV news executives can be genuinely shocked and affronted when they are charged with slanting their coverage toward liberal concerns. But the media elite—the executives, producers, reporters, editors, and anchors—are

⁴ See Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

⁵ Michael Robinson, “Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise,” *American Political Science Review*, 70 (June 1976), 409–32; and “Television and American Politics,” *The Public Interest* (Summer 1977), pp. 3–39.

decidedly “liberal” and “left-leaning” in their political views. Political scientist Doris A. Graber writes about the politics of the media: “economic and social liberalism prevails, as does a preference for an internationalist foreign policy, caution about military intervention, and suspicion about the ethics of established large institutions, particularly government.”⁶ One study of news executives reported that 63 percent described themselves as “left-leaning,” only 27 percent as “middle-of-the-road,” and 10 percent as “right-leaning.” Newsmakers describe themselves as either “independent” (45 percent) or Democratic (44 percent); very few (9 percent) admit to being Republican.⁷

The older, established television networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—present nearly identical liberal “packages” of news each evening. They have been described as “rivals in conformity.”⁸ Liberal views also dominate at CNN (once described by Republicans as “Clinton’s News Network”), although the need to broadcast 24 hours of news each day often leads to the presentation of “raw” (unadulterated) news on this network. And the need to fill so much time obliges CNN to broadcast many debate and commentary shows—shows that often present an adversarial format with both liberal and conservative voices. Only recently have moderate to conservative views been expressed on cable MSNBC and Fox news. The nation’s prestigious press—the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—are decidedly liberal. However, the equally prestigious *Wall Street Journal* is moderate to conservative. In the nation’s capital, the conservative newspaper the *Washington Times* is trying to challenge the *Washington Post*.

The liberal bias of the media elite contrasts with the moderately conservative views of business leaders (see Table 5–3). Most of the media elite enjoyed socially privileged upbringings. Fewer than one in five came from working-class families. Few of them are outright socialists; they overwhelmingly reject the idea that major corporations should be taken over by the government. Most reject rigid egalitarianism and support the idea that people with more ability should be paid more money. Most believe that free enterprise is fair. However, the media elite is strongly committed to the welfare state. They believe the government should reduce income differences between the rich and the poor, and nearly half believe that the government should guarantee jobs. They favor affirmative action and believe environmental problems are serious. They are liberals on social issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

⁶ Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), p. 49.

⁷ S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (New York: Hastings House, 1990), p. 47.

⁸ Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, p. 68.

TABLE 5-3 Liberal Values among Business, News, and Entertainment Leaders

	Percent of Leaders in Agreement		
	Business	News	Entertainment
Economic liberalism			
Government should redistribute income.	23	68	69
Government should guarantee jobs.	29	48	45
Big corporations should be publicly owned.	6	13	19
Private enterprise is fair.	89	70	69
People with more ability should earn more.	90	86	94
Reformism			
Structure of society causes alienation.	30	49	62
Institutions need overhaul.	28	32	48
Social liberalism			
Strong affirmative action for blacks is needed.	71	80	83
Women have the right to abortions.	80	90	97
Homosexuals should not teach in schools.	51	15	15
Homosexuality is wrong.	60	25	20
Adultery is wrong.	76	47	49

Sources: Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman, "Media and Business Elites," *Public Opinion* (October–November 1981), pp. 42–46; Linda S. Lichter, S. Robert Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, "Hollywood and America: The Odd Couple," *Public Opinion* (December–January 1983), pp. 54–58; David Prindle, "Hollywood Liberalism," *Social Science Quarterly* (March, 1993), p. 121.

PRIME TIME: SOCIALIZING THE MASSES

Prime-time entertainment programming suggests to Americans how they ought to live and what values they ought to hold. Socialization—the learning, accepting, and approving of customs, values, and life styles—is an important function of the mass media. Network television entertainment is the most widely shared experience in the country. America's favorite TV shows are shown to over 50 million individual viewers in 20 million households. This is two-and-one-half times the average audience for network news. The network executives who decide what will be shown as entertainment have a tremendous impact on the values, aspirations, and life styles of Americans.

Top network executives and Hollywood producers are generally "coast oriented" in their values and life styles; that is, they reflect popular culture in New York and California. Almost all are from the big cities of the East and West coasts. Almost all are white males. A majority are Jewish. They are well-educated, extraordinarily well-paid, and independent or Democratic in their politics. They are *not* radicals or socialists. Almost all believe that "people with ability should earn more," and most support free enterprise and oppose government ownership of the economy. However, these television programmers

are very critical of government and business; they believe strongly that society is unfair to women, blacks, and minorities; and they are socially very liberal in terms of their views on abortion, homosexuality, and adultery.

More important, perhaps, the programmers believe that they have a responsibility to change America's views to fit their own. They believe that television should "promote social reform." (Fully two thirds of the programmers interviewed agreed with this definition of their role in society.) "This is perhaps the single most striking finding in our study. According to television's creators, they are not in it just for the money. They also seek to move their audience toward their own vision of the good society."⁹

Much of our learning is subconscious. If these televised images are inaccurate, we end up with wrong impressions of American life. If television shows emphasize sex and violence, we come to believe that there is more sex and violence in America than is actually the case. For millions of Americans, television is a way of keeping in touch with their environment. Both entertainment and advertising provide model ways of life. People are shown products, services, and life styles that they are expected to desire and imitate.

Hollywood produces relatively few uplifting movies (e.g., *Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, the *Little Princess*) compared to the number of sex-obsessed, profanity-ridden, and excessively violent films (e.g., *Natural Born Killers*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*). Television shows have become increasingly controversial; they glamorize unmarried motherhood and celebrate homosexual life styles. Records are released with lyrics that encourage cop-killing, rape, and suicide.

Media elites claim that their shows simply reflect the sex, vulgarity, and violence already present in our culture, that restraints on moviemakers would inhibit "creative oratory," and that censorship would violate "freedom of expression." They argue that politicians from Dan Quayle (who attacked *Murphy Brown* for glamorizing unmarried motherhood) to Bob Dole (who attacked Time-Warner for promoting "gangsta rap") and Tipper Gore (for advocating warning labels on records) are merely pandering for the votes of religious conservatives. And they contend that the popularity of their movies, television shows, and records (judged in terms of money received from million's of movie-goers, viewers, and listeners) prove that Americans are entertained by the current Hollywood output, regardless of what socially approved responses they give to pollsters. "Movies drenched in gore, gangsta rap, even outright pornography are not some sort of alien interstellar dust malevolently drifting down on us, but products actively sought out and beloved by millions."¹⁰

⁹ Linda S. Lichter, S. Robert Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, "Hollywood and America: The Odd Couple," *Public Opinion* (December-January, 1983), p. 58.

¹⁰ Quoting Katha Pollitt, *Time* June 12, 1995, pp. 33-36.

SUMMARY

The people who control the flow of information in America are among the most powerful in the nation. Television network broadcasting is the first form of truly *mass* communication; it carries a visual image with emotional content as well as information. Television news reaches virtually everyone, and for most Americans it is the major source of information about the world.

The power of mass media is primarily in agenda-setting—deciding what will be decided. The media determine what the masses talk about and what the elite must decide about. Political issues do not just “happen.” The media decide what are issues, problems, even crises, which must be acted upon.

Control of the nation’s news and entertainment is concentrated in a small number of media empires. These empires now combine television, motion pictures, magazines, books, music, sports and recreation, and the Internet—virtually all forms of mass communication. AOL-Time Warner is the nation’s largest megamerged media conglomerate. Others include Walt Disney, Viacom, NewsCorp, Seagram, Sony, and General Electric. As in other sectors of the nation’s elite, one finds both inheritors (Katherine Graham) and climbers (Ted Turner).

Despite multiplication of media channels, great power remains lodged in leading television networks—ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN—together with the influential national press—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*—and the broad-circulation news magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Their power arises from their ability to set the agenda for both public discussion, and perhaps more importantly, inter-elite communication. It is especially important for Washington decision-makers to be familiar with news stories and opinion columns that appear each day in the nation’s leading newspapers.

The mass media must attract large audiences to sell to advertisers. The principal source of bias in the news originates from the need to capture large audiences with drama, action, and confrontation. The result is an emphasis on *unfavorable* stories about prominent people and business and government. However, media attention to scandal, abuse, violence, and corruption has not always produced liberal reformist values. Many scholars believe it has produced “television malaise”—distrust, cynicism, and disaffection from public affairs caused by negative reporting on American life. This reporting may also be contributing to the public’s decline in confidence in the media.

The media elite is the most liberal segment of the nation’s elite. While this elite supports the free enterprise system and reward based on merit, it favors government intervention to reduce income differences and to aid women, blacks, and minorities. News executives claim only to “mirror” reality, yet at the same time they take credit for civil rights laws, ending the Vietnam War, and expelling Richard Nixon from the White House. Prime-time

programming executives are even more liberal in their views, and they acknowledge that their role is to “reform” society.

The entertainment industry plays an important role in socializing the masses of Americans as to how they should live and what values they ought to hold. Prime-time television entertainment as well as the motion picture industry generally reflect liberal values, but their messages are often obscured by their need to attract audiences with sex and violence.

