6

How the Media Business Influences Society

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The precise impact of media on society is notoriously difficult to establish. Media are pervasive and diffuse, making them virtually impossible to study using experimental methods. The influence of media on society is most likely to be slow and cumulative in nature, making it difficult to study by traditional social science techniques. Still, few would dispute the observation that a society inundated with media is likely to be affected by that media. In fact, despite the complexities involved in studying the relationship between the media and society, a large body of research has documented various media effects.[192]
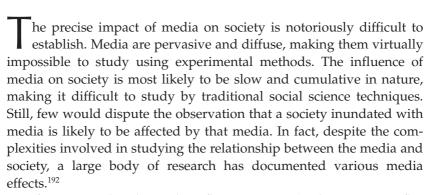
If we accept that the media influence society (and are in turn influenced by it), then we can understand how significant changes in media structure and practices can alter not only media content but also the nature of the media's influence on society. In other words, if the media change, their impact is likely to change as well.

We have already looked at the impact of media industry changes on the content of media. This chapter focuses on the impact of these changes on broader social and political life.

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❖ SOCIAL INFLUENCES

In this section, we briefly note some of the ways that media influence society. We are not concerned here with the specific content of the media but rather with how the media's very presence has influenced how we understand ourselves and our world.

Ubiquity of Commercial Media: All the World's a Sale

It may be that the commercial media's greatest impact on society has been its successful colonization of social space. In a manner unprecedented in human history, our daily lives are saturated with media. Television, radio, magazines, Internet, newspapers, books, and recorded music have taken up an ever-growing amount of our time and attention. In the pursuit of increased profits, the media have expanded dramatically into virtually all arenas of public and private life, bringing with them the commercial imperative that drives the industry.

Commercial media have been the vehicles for the introduction of advertising into virtually every facet of daily life. The media are commercial enterprises in two fundamental ways. First, media content is advertised and sold to consumers as products (e.g., music CDs, magazines, etc.). Second, media are vehicles for more advertising that sells other products (e.g., television commercials, magazine ads, billboards, etc.). Everything, it sometimes seems, is now a product and everything is a potential advertisement.

One of the great myths of mass media is that the media just give the people what they want. Paying attention to audience tastes as measured by ratings and readership is, of course, important for the industry to remain profitable. However, audiences have been remarkably persistent in avoiding one aspect of media content: advertising. In this area, the media are clearly *not* giving audiences what they want. Instead, the industry must find new and ingenious ways to load more and more advertising into the daily media diets of resistant consumers.

More than anywhere else, this is occurring on television. About 17 minutes of every prime-time hour of television broadcasting is devoted to commercials and promotions. During the daytime, it is about 21 minutes. Viewers, however, try to avoid ads whenever possible. The remote control gave viewers unprecedented power to avoid commercials. Digital video recorders have proven to be a huge hit, in part because of the feature that allows viewers to quickly skip commercials.

In response, the media and advertising industries have developed new ways of delivering ads to a resistant public. The result has been an onslaught of commercial advertising and media products that seem to know no limits.

Captive Audiences

One technique media companies use is to feed media and ads to audiences who cannot avoid them. This growth in "captive audience" (or "place-based") media is taking place in public spaces where individuals cannot control the flow of media advertising. One of the early efforts at place-based media appeared in middle and high schools, where students have been forced to watch *Channel One,* a television news service complete with advertising, in their classrooms. In recent years, *Channel One* has beamed news into 350,000 classrooms in more than 12,000 schools in the United States, with an audience of more than eight million students. Participating schools receive the daily news program along with additional educational video material, television sets for each classroom, two VCRs, and a satellite link. In exchange, schools agree to show *Channel One* to students as a required part of each school day. In this trade, schools are delivering a highly sought youth audience to *Channel One,* and the attention of these teens is sold to youth-oriented marketers at premium advertising rates.[193]

In addition, corporate ads are showing up in schools on everything from supplemental reading materials to Web sites designed specifically for use in the classroom.

- ❖ Companies from Calvin Klein to Nike distribute thousands of book covers—complete with corporate logos—to students.
- ❖ Companies sponsor writing contests that extol the virtues of their products. In 1996, Snapple even invited students to write a commercial for the company.
- ❖ Some schools play special music broadcasts—complete with 10 minutes of commercials per hour—in their hallways, courtyards, and cafeterias.
- ❖ Schools across the country are giving exclusive "pouring rights"— and accompanying advertising—to the soda company that is willing to pay the most. Some contracts are written with incentives for the school to sell their kids more soft drinks. Some schools have approved large colorful ads for soft drinks on the sides of school buses. One Texas school actually has a Dr. Pepper billboard on top of the school.

❖ Companies sponsor specific curricula featuring their products. For example, Hershey developed the "Chocolate Dream Machine," which offered lessons in math, science, geography, and (ironically) nutrition. Procter & Gamble's entry, "Planet Patrol," promotes environmental thinking in this way: You can create less waste by using its Pert Plus combination of shampoo and conditioner.

❖ One type of high-tech corporate curriculum is the "virtual field trip" in which corporations sponsor the voyages of real-world adventurers, create related Web sites for use in schools, and get their corporate messages into the classroom.[194]

Other cases of captive audiences abound. Most airports now prominently feature television sets feeding a stream of news, weather, and advertising. Audiences who have paid to attend a movie are often subjected to several advertisements before the film begins. The magazines and television sets of doctors' waiting rooms have been targeted as a place to feed advertising to captive audiences. The elevators of upscale hotels now routinely feature television sets complete with advertising. Gas station pumps, banks, and grocery checkout lines have all been turned into opportunities for advertisers. Even specialty apparel stores catering to young, fashion-conscious consumers are part of the act. In recent years, record companies have been promoting their artists by providing their music free of charge to music-programming companies who, in turn, supply background music played in apparel stores. The result is "stealth advertising"; the customer is not even aware of it. In all of these cases, advertisers are able to reach a particular audience (students, travelers, patients, hotel guests, customers, etc.) under conditions in which it is difficult to avoid the ad.

Saturation

Another way to make an impression on consumers by advertising is to make ads so conspicuous that audiences cannot possibly miss them. Various exclusive sponsorship deals, for example, ensure that one corporation's ads dominate a television program, sporting event, or other venue. Another approach is called "station domination," in which advertisers saturate the public space at transit stations with their advertising. As one news account summarized, "Pure station domination banishes all competing ads, and passersby can't change a channel or flip a page." For example, a campaign at New York's World Trade Center featured 138 simultaneous ads for the same company. In

addition to the usual billboard space, marble walls were covered in ads
and ads were embedded in the floor and escalators. As one salesman of
such space enthused, "Literally anywhere anyone would look, they are
bombarded [by the ads] . . . We call it surround sound for the eyes."[195]

Blurring Advertising With Content

Yet another approach used to advertise to reluctant audiences is to
merge ads with media content. There are many different variations of
this technique. Saturday morning cartoon programs aimed at kids pop-
ularized this approach years ago. Toy manufacturers discovered that
animated programs based on their toy characters served as half-hour
ads for their products. In those days, kids watching *GI Joe, Smurfs, He
Man and the Masters of the Universe,* or other cartoons based on toys
were, in effect, watching a half-hour commercial for the toys and acces-
sories. MTV, the first music video channel, used a similar approach.
Its video programming, featuring popular bands playing their latest
releases, was an endless stream of ads promoting new music releases.
The content was the ad, and the ad was the content.

A different, although related, approach involves placing advertis-
ing or products in the media content so that if a person wants to see the
content, they must also see the ad. Perhaps the best example of this
strategy can be found in sports. Professional sports in this country have
always had a business element, but in recent decades, the merchandis-
ing and selling of sports teams and players has reached new heights.
An enormous and growing sports merchandising industry sells every
conceivable product stamped with team logos. Hats, banners, and
jerseys are just the beginning. Teams license computer mouse pads,
watches, cooking aprons, stuffed animals, wallpaper, CDs, memo boards,
toys, banks, and much more.

More significantly, however, sports themselves have become
opportunities for advertising. Playing surfaces and even players' uni-
forms are routinely plastered with corporate logos and advertising.
Professional auto racing is where this occurs most blatantly. If race fans
want to watch a race—either in person or on TV—they are subjected to
dozens and dozens of ads covering virtually every inch of the cars and
racetrack walls. Hockey, too, has advertising covering most of the
boards and parts of the ice. Even the names of stadiums—which used
to be reserved to honor the community or local figures—now read like
a veritable who's who of corporate advertisers, in the process generat-
ing more revenue for the stadium owners (see Exhibit 6.1).

Exhibit 6.1 Corporate Names of Select Sports Stadiums (2004)

Stadium Corporate Name	Home Team (League)	Avg. $/Year	Expires
Air Canada Centre	Toronto Maple Leafs (NHL) Toronto Raptors (NBA)	1.5 million	2019
Alltel Stadium	Jacksonville Jaguars (NFL)	620,000	2007
American Airlines Arena	Miami Heat (NBA)	2.1 million	2019
American Airlines Center	Dallas Mavericks (NBA) Dallas Stars (NHL)	6.5 million	2031
America West Arena	Phoenix Suns (NBA) Phoenix Coyotes (NHL) Phoenix Mercury (WNBA)	866,667	2019
Ameriquest Field	Texas Rangers (MLB)	2.5 million	2034
Arco Arena	Sacramento Kings (NBA) Sacramento Monarchs (WNBA)	750,000	2007
Bank of America Stadium	Carolina Panthers (NFL)	7 million	2024
Bank One Ballpark	Arizona Diamondbacks (MLB)	2.2 million	2028
Citizens Bank Park	Philadelphia Phillies (MLB)	2.3 million	2028

Stadium Corporate Name	Home Team (League)	Avg. $/Year	Expires
Comerica Park	Detroit Tigers (MLB)	2.2 million	2030
Conseco Fieldhouse	Indiana Pacers (NBA) Indiana Fever	2 million	2019
Continental Airlines Arena	New Jersey Nets (NBA) New Jersey Devils (NHL)	1.4 million	2011
Coors Field	Colorado Rockies (MLB)	N/A	Indefinite
Corel Center	Ottawa Senators (NHL)	878,142	2016
Delta Center	Utah Jazz (NBA) Utah Starzz	1.3 million	2011
FedEx Field	Washington Redskins (NFL)	7.6 million	2025
FedEx Forum	Memphis Grizzlies (NBA)	4.5 million	2023
Wachovia Center	Philadelphia 76ers (NBA) Philadelphia Flyers (NHL)	1.4 million	2023
Fleetcenter	Boston Celtics (NBA) Boston Bruins (NHL)	2 million	2010

(Continued)

Exhibit 6.1 (Continued)

Stadium Corporate Name	Home Team (League)	Avg. $/Year	Expires
Ford Field	Detroit Lions (NFL)	1 million	2042
General Motors Place	Vancouver Canucks (NHL)	844,366	2015
Gillette Stadium	New England Patriots (NFL)	N/A	2017
Heinz Field	Pittsburgh Steelers (NFL)	2.9 million	2021
Invesco Field at Mile High	Denver Broncos (NFL)	6 million	2021
KeyArena	Seattle Supersonics (NBA) Seattle Storm (WNBA)	1 million	2010
Lincoln Financial Field	Philadelphia Eagles (NFL)	6.7 million	2022
M & T Bank Stadium	Baltimore Ravens (NFL)	5 million	2018
MCI Center	Washington Wizards (NBA) Washington Capitals (NHL) Washington Mystics (WNBA)	2.2 million	2017
Mellon Arena	Pittsburgh Penguins (NHL)	1.8 million	2009
Miller Park	Milwaukee Brewers (MLB)	2.1 million	2020

Stadium Corporate Name	Home Team (League)	Avg. $/Year	Expires
Minute Maid Park	Houston Astros (MLB)	6 million	2030
Nationwide Arena	Columbus BlueJackets (NHL)	N/A	Indefinite
Office Depot Center	Florida Panthers (NHL)	1.4 million	2013
Pepsi Center	Denver Nuggets (NBA) Colorado Avalanche (NHL)	3.4 million	2019
Petco Park	San Diego Padres (MLB)	2.7 million	2026
Phillips Arena	Atlanta Hawks (NBA) Atlanta Thrashers (NHL)	9.3 million	2019
PNC Park (PNC Bank)	Pittsburgh Pirates (MLB)	2 million	2020
Qualcomm Stadium	San Diego Chargers (NFL)	900,000	2017
Safeco Field	Seattle Mariners (MLB)	2 million	2019
SBC Center	San Antonio Spurs (NBA)	2.1 million	2022
SBC Park	San Francisco Giants (MLB)	2.1 million	2024

(Continued)

Exhibit 6.1 (Continued)

Stadium Corporate Name	Home Team (League)	Avg. $/Year	Expires
Staples Center	Los Angeles Lakers (NBA) Los Angeles Kings (NHL) Los Angeles Clippers (NBA) Los Angeles Sparks (WNBA)	5.8 million	2019
St. Pete Times Forum	Tampa Bay Lightning (NHL)	2.1 million	2014
Toyota Center	Houston Rockets (NBA)	N/A	N/A
Tropicana Field	Tampa Bay Devil Rays (MLB)	1.5 million	2026
United Center	Chicago Blackhawks (NHL) Chicago Bulls (NBA)	1.8 million	2014
U.S. Cellular Field	Chicago White Sox (MLB)	3.4 million	2025
Xcel Energy Center	Minnesota Wild (NHL)	3 million	2024

Source: ESPN (http://espn.go.com/sportsbusiness/s/stadiumnames.html).

College sports arenas and stadiums have followed suit and are taking on corporate names, as well as making millions annually selling corporate retailers the merchandising rights to their teams. More recently, cash-strapped public schools have begun selling naming rights to corporate sponsors for everything from gymnasiums to football fields.

With digital technology, broadcasters now can maximize advertising revenue by showing television viewers virtual ads during sporting events. These ads appear to be on soccer fields or the walls of baseball fields but are, in fact, electronically generated and visible only to television viewers. The same technology has been used to show a virtual first-down line in football telecasts.

Most sports broadcasting is a seamless web of advertising with the name of a corporate sponsor attached to replays, highlights, pregame shows, halftime reports, stars of the game, and even college football bowl names—and that's not counting the "real" commercials. When FOX broadcast the World Series, it even sprinkled stars from its most popular programs in the stands. During lulls in the game, viewers were treated to more stealth advertising when cameras zoomed in on the stars of shows that just happen to be on FOX.

The Internet has followed suit in interspersing ads directly with content. Most commercial Web sites include "banner ads" and other promotional material that cannot be avoided by visitors to the site. Often, online articles are laid out in sections, so that the reader is forced to click to numerous pages—each with paid advertising—to finish the story, even if it would otherwise fit in one or two pages. "Pop-up" ads that appear in separate windows are even more intrusive, because they require users to click on these windows to close them. Free online gaming also comes with strings attached—ads that must be viewed before the game will start.

The introduction of no-cost access to the Internet continues this trend. To access the Internet "for free," users subject themselves to advertising that they cannot turn off. Similarly, offers of "free" e-mail or home pages on the Web come with a catch; most have advertising that pops up unsolicited on the screen, and users must provide personal information valuable to advertisers. Every e-mail message also carries an ad for the company providing the "free" service.[196]

Sneak Attack Ads

Another way to reach ad-adverse consumers with corporate logos and advertising is to use unexpected places where ads are not usually

found. This "sneak attack" approach has included advertising messages on stickers stuck to fruit in the grocery store, popcorn bags in movie theaters, the walls of toilet stalls, gas pumps, the arms that sweep away toppled pins in bowling alleys, sidewalks, the backs of store receipts, the bottom of golf cups, tickets to theaters and sporting events, and church bulletins. However, this technique may soon lose popularity. With the proliferation of advertising, there are fewer and fewer places where ads are unexpected, so such ads are not as effective.

Product Placement

A more subtle way of integrating advertising with content has been product placement, especially in television and movies. The next time your favorite actor is shown driving off in a Ford automobile, drinking a can of Coca-Cola, or using a Macintosh computer, you can be fairly sure that the item's appearance is a paid product placement. When a recognizable product is part of the story line of your favorite "reality" show, it's almost certainly a product placement. To reduce costs, production studios like to use free and authentic props provided by manufacturers. In return for these props and sometimes a substantial advertising fee, manufacturers can display their products and associate them with popular film and television stars. The audience is usually unaware that the movie or television program has become an ad for the featured products. Snapple did it with *Seinfeld;* the Pottery Barn did it with *Friends;* Visa, Doritos, and Mountain Dew did it with *Survivor.* Now almost all programs have built-in stealth advertising.

Variations on such deals abound. For example, GM obtained first rights to place its vehicles in Warner Bros. films. In exchange, Warner Bros. gave GM the right to use logos of Bugs Bunny on a limited edition "Chevy Venture Warner Bros." minivan. One episode of the popular reality show *The Apprentice* featured contestants competing to develop a new ad campaign for a Pepsi product. Of course, the story line was itself part of a new ad campaign for Pepsi. In one of the most hyped product placements ever, Oprah Winfrey gave away a Pontiac automobile to each of her 276 studio audience members. The cars were donated as part of a publicity campaign by Pontiac. Everyone from candy companies to clothiers pays to have products inserted into popular video games (see Exhibit 6.2). Even DVD "Easter eggs"—hidden features that were once whimsical additions—have become places to hawk products. Excessive product placement can backfire, however. James Bond movies have become so notorious for their numerous and

Exhibit 6.2   Selected Examples of Video Game Product Placement
("In-Game Advertising"), 2004

Advertiser	Game
7 UP	SSX3
Best Buy	Need for Speed Underground 2
Burger King	Need for Speed Underground 2
Cingular Wireless	Need for Speed Underground 2
element skateboards	Tony Hawk Underground 2
Home Depot	Nascar Thunder 2004
Honda	SSX3
Intel	The Sims Online
Jeep	Tony Hawk Underground 2
McDonald's	The Sims Online
NAPA Auto Parts	Nascar Thunder 2004
Old Spice	NCAA Football
Oreo	Nascar Thunder 2004
Palm PDAs	Splinter Cell
Pepsi	Nascar Thunder 2004
Puma	Truc Crime: Streets of LA
Quiksilver	Tony Hawk Underground 2
Samsung	Enter the Matrix
SoBe	Tony Hawk Underground 2
Sony Ericsson Smart Phones	Splinter Cell

Sources: Wong (2004), Loftus (2004), Duncan (2005).

flagrant product placements that some critics began referring to the Bond franchise as having a "License to Shill."[197]

New technological convergence promises only to exacerbate the stealth advertising trend. Someone watching a television drama on digital TV, for example, will simultaneously be watching a commercial for everything on the program. Do you like the sunglasses the police officer is wearing? Find out more about them—and how to buy them—with a quick click. Are you impressed by the car the villain is driving? Click for specs and information. Do you enjoy the music playing in the background? Download the soundtrack song with a couple of clicks. That appears to be the future of commercial media: an endless shopping spree with no boundaries between ads and content.

Another technological development marshaled in the service of stealth advertising is computer-generated product placement. Unlike regular product placement, this variation features only virtual products or ads inserted in a television program or film after production is complete. Similar to virtual ads in sports, this allows advertisers to alter the virtual ad depending on the markets. Audiences in different parts of the country watching the same popular television series could see different product placements, depending on which advertisers in their regions paid for the placement.

Promos and Brand Names and Ads, Oh My!

It is difficult to overestimate the potential impact of this incessant commercialization. Children's entertainment is one example. Children learn about their world, in part, through play and entertainment. For centuries, children read or heard folktales that simultaneously entertained and taught life's basic lessons. Now, however, for the first time, children's entertainment is primarily—and almost exclusively—aimed at selling them products. Disney characters have replaced folktales. The stories told to children are chosen by corporate executives in part because of those tales' effectiveness in selling related products. From *The Lion King* to *SpongeBob SquarePants* to *Harry Potter,* children's entertainment is about selling. Even when there may be educational stories inherent in the products, the metalesson is one about consumption.

And the lesson starts early. The average American child now recognizes corporate logos by 18 months. By the first grade, children can identify about 200 brands. In 2004, American children were the target of $15 billion of advertising, a stunning 150 times the amount of

a decade earlier.[198] As Norma Odom Pecora notes of children's entertainment,

> The material culture represented by the media cultivates a way of thinking, consumption and the acquisition of "things" is encouraged, and particular assumptions about the world are promoted. Our children learn to equate happiness with trips to McDonald's. Attending the movies is not a simple experience but an event re-lived through an array of coloring books, computer games, and pajamas. Toys demand less imagination when the generic teddy bear is replaced by a *Lion King* who comes with a history by Disney. . . . The shopping mall is the playground, and the video is the storyteller.[199]

Pecora notes that while marketing to children dates back to the early part of the 20th century, "what has happened more recently is the acceleration of the process and the takeover of all aspects of children's play and imagination. . . . Borders between storytelling and advertising and worldly possessions blur."[200] With a loss of emphasis on public service, and a corresponding growth in appealing to children as consumers, media conglomerates now treat children as just another target demographic for advertisers.

The ubiquity of advertising has cumulatively produced a society in which the commercial imperatives of buying and selling pervade both public and private life. Everything is for sale. Everything is a pitch. Nothing in a society saturated with advertising seems particularly real or authentic. The spokesperson selling perfume, the athlete selling a brand of sneakers, and the politician promoting a social policy all begin to blur in our hypercommercialized world. Everything takes on the trappings of the marketplace. It becomes difficult for anyone to operate outside of this commercial space.

The problem is not that we are gullible believers in advertising—just the opposite. Advertising fosters a skeptical, or even cynical, "buyer beware" view of the world in media-savvy consumers. Advertising engages us with humor, music, sex, and flashy visuals. At the same time, we know it is not to be believed, because, ultimately, advertising has an ulterior motive. Thus we are likely to develop a skeptical or cynical view of these messages. As a result, in our society, saturated as it is with commercial media, speaking of values or beliefs that are not tied to products and profits can seem quaint and out of date.

Still, societies do not function by products alone. They depend on a shared collective vision that articulates the values and beliefs underlying the ideas of a good society. Notions such as justice, responsibility, community, and compassion must be articulated and promoted in society. These crucial ideas have nothing to do with promoting and selling products. As our public spaces and our private lives become more and more places for commercial advertising, we are left with a much narrower public sphere for ongoing and serious discussions and debates about ideas and issues, challenges and goals—the kind of deliberation that is a foundation for a just and productive society.

Audience Fragmentation

As commercial media have proliferated and new technologies have evolved, advertisers have developed new techniques for reaching particular demographic groups. For most of human history, media were marked by scarcity. Books were expensive and difficult to acquire. Radio was limited to a handful of stations. Television emerged in the United States with three major networks dominating the airwaves. The result was that people who read, listened to, or watched media often shared a similar cultural experience.

In recent decades, however, industrialized nations have experienced a rapid increase in the number of media outlets. People now have more choices in radio, television, publications, the Internet, and music than ever before. Much about this expansion has been positive.

However, this cornucopia is somewhat illusory, in that it is built on the commonality of commercial media. Despite the proliferation of channels, nearly all of them ultimately do one thing: make money for their owners and advertisers. Indeed, advertisers have driven much media growth in specific directions. The expansion of media outlets, coupled with the advertising emphasis on targeted demographics, has produced an increased specialization in media content. For example, unlike the old television networks that tried to reach a vast, broad audience, today's cable channels are usually "narrowcasting" instead of broadcasting. They are trying to attract very specific audience segments (golfers, young black professionals, investors, etc.) that can then be delivered efficiently to advertisers. The audiences for these specialized cable channels are tiny compared with audiences who watched network programming in its heyday. Audiences, therefore, have become more fragmented. They share less and less of their media

experiences. Instead, characteristics such as income, race, age, and gender determine what they are exposed to.

One study found that in an average week, typical American viewers watch only about one quarter of the television channels available in their homes. Also, the amount of time spent watching each channel has declined over the years. In 1950, a typical U.S. household watched television for an average of 32.5 hours per week and spent an average of 11.6 hours with each of the available channels. By 1996, total viewing time had jumped to 50 hours per week, but on average only 4.9 hours were spent on each channel.[201] Such trends towards fragmentation have continued.

The result of these developments, according to some observers, is that commercial media are contributing to the fragmentation of society. Joseph Turow, in his book *Breaking Up America,* argues that advertisers and media are creating "the electronic equivalents of gated communities," within which small segments of society essentially talk only among themselves.[202] He notes that there always have been various forms of specialized media that have helped define and affirm the identity of particular segments of society, but at the same time, there also have been what Turow calls "society-making" media that can provide communication bridging various elements of society. Recent trends in advertising, media, and technology, however, have dramatically weakened the status of society-making media, leaving us with more specialized media and a more fragmented society. This, too, is a disquieting development for the future of our multicultural society.

In an extreme version of pandering to niche audiences, the different international versions of Microsoft's *Encarta* multimedia encyclopedia have had different—and contradictory—information on many issues. For example, the U.S., U.K., and German editions listed the inventor of the telephone as Alexander Graham Bell. But the Italian edition of the software gave credit to Antonio Meucci, a poor Italian-American candlemaker who—according to this version of history— beat Bell by 5 years.[203] If companies producing supposedly authoritative information such as encyclopedias are comfortable generating multiple versions of history to appeal to different markets, then what is to prevent them from doing the same to court domestic audiences? Will corporations in the future produce different versions of history or current events for different advertising demographics?

Media audiences are not only fragmented by advertisers but also stratified. Newspapers, for example, try to attract affluent readers and

sometimes intentionally discourage low-income readers to generate demographics that are more appealing to advertisers. One report by the Newspaper Association of America made this point clear. "Good business decisions are not always volume driven," it noted. "More is not necessarily better; better is better."[204] That is, the goal of newspapers, according to the report, is not to reach more people, but rather to reach "better" people—those who are of greatest interest to advertisers. The report recommended that papers target readers who do not need a discount to subscribe (i.e., more affluent readers) and suggested eliminating "fringe circulation." The latter term sometimes refers to people who live too far away to be of interest to local advertisers. It also includes those with low incomes, who are unlikely to purchase advertised products.[205]

A Media-Saturated Society: Fish in Water

The changes in the media industry in recent decades have resulted in the colonization of public spaces by commercial media and advertising. Although some dimensions of this expansion still seem unusual to us, younger people raised in such a hypercommercial world are likely to take the presence of such media and advertising for granted. Like fish in water, we tend to ignore what makes our environment distinctive. In the 21st century, commercial media have come to saturate our social environment. At this rate, it will not be long before the everything-for-sale approach epitomized by commercial media becomes so commonplace that we no longer even take note of it.

❖ POLITICAL INFLUENCE

In addition to the cultural influences on content and the broader social influences (described earlier), media giants have developed considerable political influence. This influence results from both the impact of the media properties owned by these conglomerates and from industry lobbyists and campaign contributions; that is, behind-the-scenes activities.

Media Corporations and the Political System

Like other corporations (and other interest groups), the media industry relies on lobbying efforts and campaign contributions to

promote its agenda. Every segment of the media industry has its own lobbying arm—such as the National Association of Broadcasters and the Motion Picture Association of America—which promotes the interests of particular parts of the industry. With the growing integration of media, telecommunications, and computers, it is increasingly difficult to discuss the "media industry" as a distinct entity. A few years back, the National Cable Television Association changed its name to reflect this new reality: It is now the National Cable and Telecommunications Association. Therefore, if we are to consider the political clout of the media industry, we need to include such players as software giant Microsoft (video game consoles, interactive TV, and Internet access), local phone giant SBC Communications (DSL and Internet access), and Comcast (cable television). The lobbying and electoral efforts of such firms are impressive (see Exhibit 6.3). Time Warner, for example, spent $3 million dollars in lobbying expenditures in 2000 and donated nearly $2.7 million during the 2004 election cycle.

In addition to the direct lobbying and campaign contributions, the media industry holds fundraisers for friendly politicians, hosts receptions at both parties' political conventions, and hires well-connected lobbyists—often fresh out of government. For example, two recent Senate majority leaders, Republican Bob Dole and Democrat George Mitchell, both went to work for the lobbying firm that represents NBC and other media companies. At one point, the Newspaper Association of America, the National Association of Broadcasters, and CBS all had Anthony Podesta on their payrolls representing their interests. Podesta was a major Democratic Party fundraiser and campaign strategist whose brother was Bill Clinton's deputy chief of staff.[206] When it became a radio giant, Clear Channel Communications made a splash by hiring Andrew Levin as its senior vice president of government relations. Levin had been Minority Counsel of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, the body that hears almost all broadcast legislation. Perhaps the poster child for this revolving door between government and industry has been Marsha MacBride, who went from being a communications lawyer with industry clients to serving as an attorney for the FCC, then left to take a job with the Walt Disney Company, only to return to the FCC as Chief of Staff, only to leave again to serve the National Association of Broadcasters.[207]

The industry's ongoing efforts to influence government got some rare attention in 2003 when the Center for Public Integrity released a report showing that, over an 8-year period, FCC officials had taken

Exhibit 6.3 Lobbying and Campaign Activity of Selected Media-Related Organizations

Organization	2000 Lobbying Expenditures	2004 Campaign Contributions[a]	Percentage to Democrats	Percentage to Republicans
Microsoft Corporation	$6,360,000	$2,695,889	60	40
Time Warner	$3,000,000	$2,462,902	76	23
SBC Communications	$7,208,000	$2,284,771	33	66
Viacom Inc.	$1,000,000	$1,160,598	78	22
Comcast Corporation	$620,000	$953,396	49	51
Walt Disney Company	$3,860,000	$872,385	71	29
News Corporation	$380,000	$832,766	62	38
National Cable & Telecommunications Association[b]	$5,920,000[b]	$795,994	49	51
Clear Channel Communications	N/A	$764,318	33	67
National Association of Broadcasters	$5,700,000	$519,873	38	62

Source: Campaign for Responsive Politics (http://www.opensecrets.org).

a. Includes contributions from political action committees, soft money donors, and individuals giving $200 or more to federal candidates and parties during the 2003-2004 election cycle, as released by the Federal Election Commission on October 25, 2004.

b. In 2000, known as the National Cable Television Association.

2500 business trips across the globe, most of which were paid for by media and telecommunications companies that the agency is supposed to regulate. In light of harsh public criticism that followed the report, the FCC later announced that it would try to dramatically reduce its reliance on industry for travel.[208]

The issues on which media lobbyists work may not be front-page news, but they can translate into millions of dollars for corporate media giants. During the 6-year period between 1998 and 2004, when the FCC was reviewing broadcast ownership regulations, the industry spent $222 million in its lobbying efforts. In 2004, when a conservative congressman suggested that cable subscribers should be able to get "a la carte" programming—paying just for the channels they actually want instead of being forced to buy a bundle of channels they may not want—the industry sprang into action and had the measure defeated.[209] In 1998, when Walt Disney Co. faced the expiration of its copyright on its Mickey Mouse character, it went to Washington and got the law changed, getting a 20-year extension on all copyrighted works. Even the music industry has used its political clout in unexpected ways. The Recording Industry Association of America lobbied for new limitations on who could file for bankruptcy. This association complained that too many performers were using bankruptcy as a way to get out of long-term contracts they had signed before they became famous.[210]

Sometimes, as with the 1996 broadcast spectrum giveaway, a successful lobbying effort can literally mean *billions* of dollars for the media industry. When the prospect of digital television first emerged, the FCC set aside spectrum space to allow broadcasters to simultaneously broadcast in both traditional analog and the newer digital signals during a transition period from the old standard to the new digital format. This would avoid making all existing TV sets immediately obsolete once the new digital signals were used. However, as the digital technology was further developed, engineers discovered that digital signals needed only about one sixth the amount of spectrum space as the old analog signals. Because the airwaves are a limited public resource, not unlike water, many believed that licenses to use the additional spectrum space would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Older, less desirable, spectrum space had already sold for more than $10 billion, and the FCC estimated that this newly available spectrum space would generate upward of *$70 billion.*

The broadcast industry had other plans. They wanted to keep the additional space—for free. Media corporations lobbied successfully to

keep *all* the additional spectrum space it had originally been allocated—even though five sixths of it was no longer needed for its original purpose. Instead, the industry wanted to put six different digital channels into this new space, filling it with multiplexed television and other lucrative commercial content.

Despite limited media coverage about this issue by broadcasters, the spectrum giveaway was an event of stunning proportions. *New York Times* columnist William Safire wrote,

> The rip-off is on a scale vaster than dreamed of by yesteryear's robber barons. It's as if each American family is to be taxed $1,000 to enrich the stockholders of Disney, G.E. and Westinghouse. . . . Network news shows that delight in showing waste of thousands of taxpayer dollars fall silent before the giveaway of the spectrum on which they will digitize their shows.

Even conservative Republican Senator Bob Dole thought Congress had gone too far, calling it "a big, big corporate welfare project."[211] One broadcast law scholar, Thomas Krattenmaker, called it "the greatest land grab since they lined the wagons up in Oklahoma. At least there, everyone had a chance."[212]

Sometimes the political efforts of media corporations run directly into issues of journalistic ethics. Shortly after General Electric bought NBC, a GE executive announced the company's plans to raise money via a political action committee to promote the company's agenda in Washington. In a memo, the executive noted that "employees who elect not to participate in a giving program of this type should question their own dedication to the company." Some employees saw this as a thinly veiled threat. Only after other media outlets reported on this effort did the president of NBC News announce that news employees would be exempt from contributing.[213]

Media giants use the political system in ways similar to other industries. However, the media industry can influence politics in unique ways as well. At the heart of this media power is the fact that the media have control of the information about public figures. As far back as 1927, people have been concerned about this aspect of the media's power. As one congressman put it at the time, "Publicity is the most powerful weapon that can be wielded in a republic." He warned that if control of the media was concentrated in a few hands, then "woe be to those who dare to differ with them."[214] Seventy years later, former

FCC Chair Reed Hundt made essentially the same observation. "TV and newspapers are the gatekeepers of public perception and can make a politician popular or unpopular. . . . Politicians know that in their bones; the only ones who don't are the ones who didn't get elected."[215]

Abuse of this media power is always a potential problem. This is most likely to happen in cases in which the financial interests of the industry are at stake. The woefully inadequate coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Bill and later ownership deregulation efforts is a now-classic example of media influence by omission. By simply marginalizing a potentially explosive story, the media industry helped pave the way for legislation that was lucrative for the industry. Much of the public was none the wiser.

However, with the growth of media empires, there is an opportunity for even more flagrant abuse of media power to influence the political process. Such blatant interference has occurred only in relatively isolated incidents, but in many circles, Rupert Murdoch has come to symbolize this potential threat. As one profile said,

> He wields his media as instruments of influence with politicians who can aid him, and savages his competitors in his news columns. If ever someone demonstrated the dangers of mass power being concentrated in few hands, it would be Murdoch.[216]

Murdoch is the Australian-born head of News Corp., the largest television network operator in the world. He counts among his holdings dozens of major U.S. media outlets (including the FOX network, HarperCollins publishers, more than 20 television stations, and the *New York Post*), several British Sunday and daily newspapers (including the prestigious *Times* of London), and the biggest network of broadcast satellites in the world. He has gained a reputation as a take-no-prisoners businessman willing to gamble big to expand his empire.

Along the way, Murdoch has also repeatedly used his media holdings to advocate his conservative views and to promote or punish politicians. In 1975, he had his Australian newspapers slant the news so blatantly in favor of his conservative choice for prime minister that Murdoch's own journalists went on strike in protest. His British newspapers played a crucial role in the 1979 election of British conservative Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. One of his papers even used its front page to tout the role it had played in getting Thatcher elected. Later, Thatcher supported Murdoch with troops as he fought to break the

labor unions in his paper's printing plants. Murdoch's HarperCollins book publishers later reportedly paid Thatcher more than $5 million for her memoirs.

In the United States, Murdoch's *New York Post* successfully threw its support behind Republican Mayors Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani (whose wife, Donna Hanover, worked as a correspondent for the local FOX TV station). Murdoch also bankrolled new conservative media efforts, including *The Weekly Standard*, a high-profile conservative magazine whose editors are often featured on television public affairs programs. Murdoch's HarperCollins offered sitting U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich a $4.5 million book deal. (Gingrich returned the money in response to scathing criticism.) In his largest such effort, Murdoch started a 24-hour news channel, FOXNews, and put political conservative Roger Ailes in charge. Ailes, a former media advisor for Ronald Reagan, was also the executive producer of ultraconservative Rush Limbaugh's radio talk show. FOXNews has gone on to become the unabashed voice of conservatism in American television news.

The Politics of Content: Antidrug and Promilitary

Another type of political influence occurs when corporate media team up with government to insert certain messages into media content. From the corporate side, this is done primarily for economic reasons; from government's perspective, the commercial media offer a new avenue through which to distribute its messages to the public. Although government and corporate media do not team up often, there are some notable cases.

For example, early in 2000, it was revealed that major television networks had been working with the White House to insert antidrug messages into some prime-time programs.[217] The arrangement stemmed from a 1997 deal between the White House and the networks. Because the networks' donations of free public service announcement time had been significantly reduced, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy committed to buying $1 billion worth of antidrug advertising time over 5 years. In return, the networks agreed to sell the time to the government for half the regular price. However, as the economy boomed in subsequent years and dot.com companies began buying up more network advertising, the networks were looking for ways to get out of their deal with the White House and sell their ad time at higher rates. White House officials gave the networks the option of putting

antidrug messages in their prime-time programming as a substitute for their half-price ad deal.

In the agreed-to system, officials in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy reviewed scripts and advance footage of more than 100 episodes of programs such as *ER, Beverly Hills 90210, The Drew Carey Show, Chicago Hope, 7th Heaven, The Wayans Bros., The Practice,* and *Sports Night.* If the programs were deemed to have sufficient antidrug messages in their plots—or could be altered to conform to government antidrug messages—networks were awarded credit based on a complicated formula that reduced the number of ads the network owed the government. Airtime that would have otherwise been devoted to the government's half-price antidrug ads could then be sold by the networks to regular advertisers at full price. In the 2 years the program existed, the networks earned approximately $25 million in additional advertising revenue from the arrangement. The deal meant more money for networks, more access for government, and serious questions for viewers left wondering about this new form of collusion. The article that originally reported on the arrangement said it all in its title; it was called "Prime-Time Propaganda."

Government-media collaborations are routine and uncontroversial, however, in another part of the media industry—the movies. Again, corporations watching the bottom line turn to a government interested in promoting certain ideas to the public. In this case, the collaboration usually involves the military. In filming war scenes and military movies, the media industry looks to the government for access and equipment that make the film much more realistic—and keep costs down. The price, however, is a close review of the script by government representatives. The government cooperates only when the film portrays the military in a positive light. In doing so, as one observer put it, "The Pentagon gets a promotional bonanza that reaches millions of taxpayers and potential recruits, all of whom see the military in its glory, with heroic soldiers and awesome weapons on display."[218]

The military has been involved in promoting itself through movies for years, with its influence peaking during World War II. Beginning with the 1986 hit *Top Gun,* the military's influence in films started growing again. Today's Hollywood operations officers in the military do not wait for filmmakers to come knocking, however. Instead, they take the initiative, attending Hollywood trade shows and industry workshops, advertising in movie industry publications, and speaking to film

students in universities—all at taxpayer expense. They "knock on doors, propose the use of equipment, suggest characters or plotlines, and sometimes even push movie ideas . . . the military is less concerned with strict accuracy than it is with burnishing its image."[219] Well-known films such as *Armageddon, Air Force One, A Few Good Men,* and *Blackhawk Down* received extensive help from the military—after script changes were negotiated. Films that present a critical or unflattering portrayal of the military, however, are not given this assistance.[220]

Not to be outdone, other government agencies have worked with movie and television studios to ensure a positive image of their work. Like the Pentagon, the CIA provides support and access for films it believes paint a positive picture of the agency. In 2004, the Department of Homeland Security assisted in the television portrayal of its work in *D.H.S.: The Series.*[221]

❖   THE SPECIAL ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA

No discussion of the political impact of the media on society would be complete without mention of the special role of the news media. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Americans were reminded of the news media's public service role. Still, although the news media were widely applauded for their coverage of 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, public skepticism and mistrust of the media returned only shortly thereafter. The media's failure to scrutinize the Bush administration's erroneous claims regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the implied connections between Baghdad and terrorism, along with the Pentagon's ability to coopt journalists through its "embed" program, were widely regarded as major errors on the media's part.

A series of events in early 2005 raised new questions about declining public trust in the news media. Three journalists acknowledged that they had received money from the Bush Administration for their support of various administration initiatives, but they did not disclose these financial connections to either their editors or the public until reporters revealed their ties with the Administration.[222] The most high-profile case involved news commentator Armstrong Williams, to whom the U.S. Education Department paid $241,000 to support the Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind" act in his newspaper column and radio program.[223] In addition, the Government Accountability Office released a report in January 2005 scolding the Office of

National Drug Control Policy for distributing antidrug messages in the form of prepackaged news stories, along with suggested anchor remarks, to local television stations for broadcast on the evening news. The Government Accountability Office's report concluded that "ONDCP's prepackaged news stories constitute covert propaganda in violation of the fiscal year 2002, 2003, and 2004 publicity or propaganda prohibitions"—and the report also noted that these prepackaged stories were broadcast on almost 300 television stations and reached more than 22 million households.[224]

Nevertheless, one of the most revered elements of American democracy continues to be its ideal of a free press, as enshrined in the First Amendment. Because its public service responsibility is so intertwined with the health of democracy itself, the press is the only business explicitly protected by the Constitution. Despite the fact that, as we have seen, much media content has become trivial and sensational, most citizens still believe the news media should serve the crucial role of informing the public. Even now, when market concerns dominate the media, the profession of journalism still contains a commitment to uphold public interest values. As we saw in chapter 1, every contemporary professional code of ethics for journalists speaks of the primary importance of serving the public.

American citizens face an interesting dilemma. This society, inundated with mass media of all sorts, also has extremely low voter turnout, limited knowledge of public affairs, and general disengagement from civic activity. Although certainly not the only cause, the media's inattention to its public interest role has contributed to generalized cynicism and alienation.[225] In particular, several of the media's characteristics are often cited for their corrosive effect on the public sphere.

Drama. The news media tend to focus on dramatic stories, such as scandals, to attract readers and viewers. We know the business rationale for such a focus: A certain amount of sensationalism has proven to be profitable for media companies. When it comes to news, however, this approach is also a recipe for civic disaster. When news is equated with scandal, citizens become tired of the sordid details and tune out political news altogether when it appears to be an endless series of stories about corruption and depravity. News coverage of the 1998 Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the subsequent impeachment of the president is a prime example of this phenomenon. MSNBC's round-the-clock coverage of the scandal helped to establish an identity for the fledgling

24-hour cable news channel. MSNBC adopted an "All Monica, All the Time" approach to its programming and generated the channel's highest ratings to date and a constant stream of publicity. Still, there are consequences to such scandal-driven news coverage. Journalists relied heavily on anonymous sources, rushed to get the newest revelations on the air, and featured lots of heated arguments about the scandal.[226] Although audiences tuned in for the titillating revelations, it is no wonder that citizens became increasingly cynical about both the news media and the political system.

One of the reasons the media was praised for its post-9/11 coverage was that, in contrast to its usual fare, it generally took a serious and sober look at the event and its aftermath. However, claims that nothing was the same after the attack proved to be vastly overstated, as the media returned to its usual dose of scandal and sensationalism just months later. Indeed, some critics argue that the subsequent "war on terror" itself became just another sensationalized media story.

Negativity. The nature of news results in an emphasis on stories that have a "negative" tone. More broadly, the news seems to focus on shocking, disturbing, and sometimes depressing events, such as conflict, crises, and disasters—and rarely gives citizens a sense that there are practical solutions. Although such events are certainly newsworthy, their overemphasis can also lead citizens to despair and pessimism about the possibility of effective change. Susan Moeller argues that the nature of the news media's coverage of international events—focusing on images of pestilence, famine, death, and war—have helped to produce "compassion fatigue" among American citizens. The source of compassion fatigue, according to Moeller, is the news media's formulaic, sensationalistic, and image-driven coverage, which "helps us to feel overstimulated and bored all at once."[227] The result is a growing sense that there is nothing we can do about these faraway crises, which seem to disappear from the news media's radar screen as quickly as they appear. More generally, the news media's tendency to highlight dramatic problems with little context can discourage participation in public life and engagement with current affairs.

Events Instead of Issues. The format of the contemporary news media— especially broadcast media—lends itself to coverage of spectacular *events,* not enduring *issues.* Brevity and drama often seem to be the watchwords of media coverage. What readers and, especially, viewers

experience is a parade of isolated incidents full of dramatic images. Rarely are people engaged as citizens with a role to play in the unfolding drama. Instead, they are invited merely to watch the spectacle.

Personalities Instead of Policies. The media often focus on personalities, not policies. It is easier to deliver drama through the personal lives of public figures or the personal tragedies of victims. This human interest approach has a place in journalism, but it has displaced more substantive analysis and examination of public policy and social issues. Coverage of political life often focuses disproportionately on issues of style, and enduring issues, such as crime, are treated as an endless series of tearful interviews with family members. The key issues of election campaigns or the underlying conditions contributing to crime, for example, require more substantive treatment than most media outlets give them. The potential impact of this type of coverage is to leave citizens poorly equipped for civic participation. Again, 9/11 serves as an interesting example of a story full of drama and stunning visual images, which many news outlets handled well. However, most media largely failed with the more substantive questions regarding the causes of terrorism and the U.S. policies that have led some to target America.

Fragmentation and Superficiality. The news media's coverage of events tends to be fragmented and episodic, with little depth or context. Again, because of the type of media formulas often used, news can be little more than a series of isolated events. The news spotlight wanders across the landscape, briefly illuminating certain events before moving on to the next ones. The average readers and viewers of such media coverage rarely see substantive, continuing coverage. It becomes almost impossible to understand what any of the fleeting coverage means, because news stories contain little or no context explaining why the events occurred. This is especially true of foreign news. Citizens may have little background information with which to fill in the picture. As a result, citizens are likely to feel unqualified to take part in discussions of public affairs.

Lack of Relevance. The news media often do not address the concerns of average citizens, focusing instead on "insider" politics and economic information for the investor class. Most people who pay no attention to the news media probably do so because what is routinely presented seems to have little relevance to them. Although it may be admirable to

educate oneself about current affairs simply to become well-rounded, most people pay the greatest attention to the news when they believe it is relevant to their lives. Because, as we have seen, news media are often interested in reaching only the particular desirable demographic groups that advertisers covet, many news media outlets do little to engage broader groups of citizens or educate them about the significance of civic affairs. The result is likely to be further alienation and disengagement from public life.

Strategy Over Substance. A great deal of political news focuses on the "game" of politics, highlighting the strategic actions of various public figures. This emphasis on political strategy, calculation, and tactics generally diverts attention from the substance of political actions and policies. The emphasis on the *why* deflects attention from the *what*, and, as a consequence, coverage of substantive issues is often neglected. Citizens get the message that politics is a strategic game and that news is the "program" by which to assess the moves of the key players. However, the strategic game of politics usually appears removed from the experience of most Americans, because it focuses on the efficacy of political tactics and not on the consequences of public policies for citizens. In addition, political news generally employs a "two-sided" approach, covering the regular debates between the Democrats and Republicans. When media regularly focus on such "insider" politics— and rarely present voices from outside the Washington beltway— citizens may well conclude that these fights are only about "politics" in its most derogatory sense. The routine nature of these ongoing battles between the same two sides may also suggest intractability in the political world and promote a sense of paralysis among citizens about which of the predetermined two sides is preferable. This may well encourage cynicism and apathy, rather than engagement.

In sum, the news media generally address people as consumers and spectators, not active citizens. Except for the anemic get-out-the-vote messages around election time and occasional calls for charitable involvement, the news media do little to foster a commitment to civic participation. News does little to help teach citizens about how government works or why they should care. It rarely spotlights the impact of ordinary citizens in effecting change. It usually does not show concrete opportunities for civic involvement. All of these would be more prominent in a news media that paid closer attention to its public interest role.

The news media cannot be solely—or even primarily—blamed for the discouraging state of civic engagement today, but news has too often been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Furthermore, the changing business of media has exacerbated these deleterious aspects of the news media's influence on political life.

❖ CONCLUSION

Changes in the business of media have had broad effects on society as a whole. The ubiquity of media and advertising has transformed social experiences in daily life. The growing importance of media has given the industry significant political influence, and the news media, especially, has helped influence political culture in our society.

Many of the changes described in this and other chapters paint a picture of a neglected or even endangered public sphere. This situation is not inevitable, but what can be done to revive the public interest role of media? We turn to this important question in the final chapter.