

Media in society

[Entertainment](#), [Journalism](#)



In Debating Democracy's "The Media: Vast Wasteland or New Frontier?" Jarol Manheim and Douglas Rushkoff present opposing views of the media. Both authors raise the questions of what the media represents and what messages the media tries to send to the public. Is the media's coverage of events just for entertainment value or do the reports have political content and value? Are the viewers capable of distinguishing between the media's glitz and the real facts? Do different sources of the media system actually portray different views and stories? A key question is how typical objective reporting is. If the knowledge can easily be obtained elsewhere, it is possible to conclude with pluralists that citizens have the tools to govern themselves more or less democratically. If, on the other hand, there are serious shortcomings, one might agree with the power elite camp that the people, because they have insufficient meaningful information, wield less power than they could and should. Manheim claims that the media is not as diverse as it claims to be. He states, Though for competitive purposes they might have us believe otherwise, most American news organizations have a great deal in common with one another . . . they define news itself in essentially the same terms. (Manheim, 1991) He argues that the media entertains the viewers rather than giving them information that is relevant and socially important. Manheim's view about what the mass media system actually does to the news is similar to what W. Lance Bennett lists as the four main media biases: fragmentation, normalization, personalization and dramatization (Bennett, 1996). These biases are described by Manheim as the media system "[rendering] the content of the news less burdensome by packaging it more attractively" (Manheim, 1991). Contrary to Manheim's views, Rushkoff looks

at how the viewers are able to use and understand the media's messages. Rather than viewing the media as a mass system composed of the elite who view the public as a commodity, Rushkoff believes that the people strive to shape and understand the world through the messages the media portrays. Furthermore, he claims that the media is merely a reflection of the society that the viewers themselves have created. The viewers have the ability to choose which medium of media they will use (Internet, network, newspaper, etc.). Rushkoff says that the news has now become "interactive" and the people (particularly those under forty) have come to understand the media's symbols better (Rushkoff, 1994). Moreover, the "GenX-ers" that Rushkoff refers to, has absorbed the media into their own cultural evolution, reiterating and reanalyzing all the points the media system has raised them on. I found evidence that supports Manheim's, Rushkoff's and Bennett's views in my observation of Internet news. Nearly all of my findings are directly related to Manheim's views of the media, however I did find support for Rushkoff's idea that the media's creation is actually a reactionary creation by society. The Internet's portrayal of the news did show all four of Bennett's biases. Dramatization, normalization and fragmentation heavily dominated stories with a few references to personalization. In much of the political coverage regarding non-controversial topics the elite was given preference however, the public view was often brought in when the subject matter became more contestable. Such was the case with the coverage of the presidential nominees' campaign funds versus the coverage of Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura's controversial interview with Playboy magazine. Coverage of the campaign finances seemed to contain more of an elite slant

and did not take into account the public's views about the candidates' actual platforms. Conversely, the public's views and reactions heavily dominated coverage of the Ventura interview. This evidence relates to Manheim and Bennett's views of the media's portrayal of the news. The campaign finance stories contain a lot of dramatization, in the fact that finances are made out to be the most important aspects of the campaign, and in fragmentation, because the other aspects of the campaigns simply are not mentioned. Manheim states that "[T]hough many Americans . . . might need to feel informed . . . they preferred to be entertained more than they preferred to be informed" (Manheim, 1991). When I shared my surface findings with friends, they were interested and felt as if they should know more, but when I did go further in my findings (explaining different political platforms) they merely yawned and walked away. These personal findings refute Rushkoff's idea that GenXers understand the media's portrayal and are not easily swayed by the entertainment value. In a closer examination of the media, I found that while stories will grab one's attention, they lack much of the underlying political and institutional factors that contributed to the existence of the story. In an article regarding the treaty that would approve a global ban on nuclear testing, reasons why the treaty might fail were only lightly touched upon. More focus was placed on how much the treaty would hurt President Clinton's popularity polls right now. The articles presented by the Internet showed evidence of Manheim's idea that the "natural language of the news is a language of cynicism" (1991). If one were to base opinions solely regarding the news that the Internet showed, it would only be logical to believe that the world was about to come to a grinding halt due to the "

bad" judgement calls made by politicians regarding both our society and their personal lives. Moreover, it is not far fetched to believe that if viewers believe everything they read that the elite will take care of everything. This idea of normalization as proposed by Bennett is evident in articles concerning natural disasters and " crisis" situations (note, many of these crises have also been created by the media). In this respect, Rushkoff's idea that the media is a creation by society is very valid. One can argue that society wants conflict resolved and the media thus presents the public with the opportunity for resolution gratification. (Rushkoff, 1994) Additionally, many long-term trends and historical patterns are often missing in the news coverage. In order to get the full story, draw knowledgeable conclusions, and deduce logical possibilities for solutions, one must uncover the truth behind the stories presented (Manheim, 1991). Even in looking at additional links to information on the Internet, the media sets up a system that keeps the reader in a cycle of regurgitated information presented in a different format. In an article regarding the Social Security trust fund, viewers are only told that Congress and the White House are arguing over who is planning on taking money from the fund. The actual figure that is in the trust fund, as well as the figures of money borrowed by both the House and Congress, are not mentioned in detail, nor are reasons why the trust fund has been repeatedly plundered. Furthermore, the viewers are not told what the effects of such borrowing are. In conclusion, the media has caused the public to believe that the political system, as well as other institutions systems, work when in actuality, it is the mass media system that is working. The media system works well in giving a distorted view of events to the public without

giving background or underlying institutional causes thus making the public ill equipped in making accurate political judgements. The media partakes in false objectivity. News coverage, whether by television, radio, the Internet, or newspapers, must inevitably be selective, selective not simply in which stories it reports but in how it presents them as well. The media is incapable of providing a rundown of everything that has transpired in a day. Therefore, editors, reporters, etc. decide what will go into the reports. Equally important, reporters are still human beings who, in spite of their good intentions, occasionally succumb to anger, jealousy, anxiety, impatience, ambition, and other emotions that cloud their objectivity. They belong to large, complex organizations that have their own diverse, often conflicting, goals and needs. Presenting the news to the public is not merely a matter of "telling it like it is." It is very much a human activity. Reporters do not willfully distort their stories, but the way they describe issues and events nevertheless affects the public's understanding of them. This is harmful to the idea of popular democracy in the fact that the public does not receive a complete picture of events, thus preventing them from making informed decisions and leaving the elite in a position of power. To quote Cass R. Sunstein, A democracy is badly served when newspapers and television focus so intensely on the personal joys and tragedies of famous people. This kind of "news" crowds out more serious issues, and there is an important difference-as the Constitution's framer well knew, and as many people today appear to have forgotten-between the public interest and what interests the public. (1997) Americans have never been truly fond of their press. Through the last decade, however, their disdain for the media establishment has

reached new levels. Americans believe that the media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded, and destructive. Public hostility shows up in opinion polls, through comments on talk shows, in waning support for news organizations in their showdowns with government officials, and in many other ways. The most important sign of public unhappiness may be a quiet consumers' boycott of the press. Year by year, a smaller proportion of Americans goes to the trouble of reading newspapers or watching news broadcasts on TV. This is a loss not only for the news media but also for the public as a whole. Ignoring the news leaves people with no way to prepare for trends they don't happen to observe themselves, no sense of what is happening in other countries or even other parts of their own town, no tools with which to make decisions about public leaders or policies. Evidently many people feel that these losses represent a smaller sacrifice than being exposed to what the news offers. The big American institutions that have failed in the recent past often wasted years blaming others for their problems. The U. S. military was near collapse in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam war. Many members of the military felt stabbed in the back and blamed their problems on weak political leaders and ungrateful fellow citizens. The Big Three auto makers of Detroit, with their dinosaur-like vehicles, were unprepared in the 1970s for the sudden rise in world oil prices or for competition from Japan. They complained about the unfairness of oil producers in the Middle East, regulators in Washington, and car makers in Japan. There was some truth in such complaints. But the larger truth is that these institutions reversed their decline only when they recognized and corrected defects in their own internal values. In the early 1970s, control of

the auto companies had passed from "car men," who had been trained to design and build automobiles, to "money men," who knew all about quarterly profits and stock options but very little about making cars. In the face of Japanese competition, the Big Three floundered until they put "car men" back in charge. The American military of the same era was damaged by an ethic of careerism directly at odds with its older tradition of service. Officers bucked for promotion by being yes-men to their superiors and helping get defense contracts approved. In the field in Vietnam, enlisted men tried mainly to survive their 365 days "in country" and officers tried mainly to get a combat-command ticket punched. Then, during the decade after Vietnam, the military examined its ethics more deeply and honestly than any other American institution, and it corrected much of what was wrong. The media establishment is still in the denial stage. Many of today's journalists are all too aware of the pressures pushing their profession in a direction they don't want to go. But they have not been able to deal with outside complaints honestly enough to begin the process of reform. In response to suggestions that the press has failed to meet its public responsibilities, the first instinct of many journalists is to cry "First Amendment!", which is like the military's reflexive use of "national security" to rebut any criticism of how it does its work. Criticize reporters or editors for their negativity, and you will be told that they are merely reflecting the world as it is. Objecting to news coverage, they say, is merely "blaming the messenger"; the press claims no responsibility for the world that it displays. Accuse a publication of left-wing bias, and its editors will reply that they are often accused of being right-wing, too--or of being pro-black, or anti-black, or pro-business, or nuttily

pro-environment, or of being biased in every other conceivable way. If people are complaining from all sides, the editors reason, it must mean that they've got the balance just about right. Say that coverage is shallow or sensationalistic, and reporters will reply that they are already serving up more extensive, thoughtful news analysis than a lazy public will bother to read. If they don't feature crime and gore on the local TV news or run celebrity profiles in the paper, they'll lose their audience to competitors that do. Complain that reporters are insulated and elitist, being more committed to the values of the powerful politicians they cover than to the interests of the audience they supposedly serve, and journalists will say that even if the charge were accurate it would be irrelevant. They are "insulated," they feel, only in the sense that research scientists are, devoting all their effort to understanding an exotic subject. They can better serve the public by getting a close-up view of power than by artificially keeping their sources at arm's length. There is some truth in journalism's complaints and excuses. But the larger truth is that the most influential parts of the media establishment have lost sight of or have been pushed away from their central values. This book is an attempt to explain why the values of journalists have changed, how their current practices undermine the credibility of the press, and how they affect the future prospects of every American by distorting the processes by which we choose our leaders and resolve our public problems. Many journalists have noted the crisis in their profession, and a number of them have begun reform efforts. This book describes the efforts they have made. Everyone knows that big-time journalists have become powerful and prominent. We see them shouting at presidents during White House press

conferences. We hear them offering instant thumbs-up/thumbs-down verdicts a few seconds after a politician completes a speech. We know that they swarm from one hot news event to the next--from a press conference by Gennifer Flowers, to a riot site in Los Angeles, to Congressional hearings on a Supreme Court nominee, to the arraignment of Tonya Harding. Yet from outside the business it may be hard to understand the mixture of financial, social, and professional incentives that have produced this self-aggrandizing behavior. Some of the changes have been underway for decades, and others have taken effect in the last three or four years. Together they have turned the internal values of elite journalism upside-down. Any organization works best when the behavior that helps an individual get ahead is also the behavior that benefits the organization as a whole. Any organization suffers when what is good for the individual is bad for the group. As journalism has become more star-oriented, individual journalists have gained the potential to command power, riches, and prestige that few of their predecessors could have hoped for. Yet this new personal success involves a terrible bargain. The more prominent today's star journalists become, the more they are forced to give up the essence of real journalism, which is the search for new information of use to the public. The effects of this trade-off are greatest at the top of the occupational pyramid, which is why they are so destructive. The best-known and best-paid people in journalism now set an example that erodes the quality of the news we receive and threatens journalism's claim on public respect. The harm actually goes much farther than that, to threaten the long-term health of our political system. Step by step, mainstream journalism has fallen into the habit of portraying public life in

America as a race to the bottom, in which one group of conniving, insincere politicians ceaselessly tries to outmaneuver another. The great problem for American democracy in the 1990s is that people barely trust elected leaders or the entire legislative system to accomplish anything of value. The politicians seem untrustworthy while they're running, and they disappoint even their supporters soon after they take office. By the time they leave office they're making excuses for what they couldn't do. Deep forces in America's political and economic structure account for most of the frustration of today's politics, but the media's attitudes have played a surprisingly important and destructive role. Issues that affect the collective interests of Americans--crime, health care, education, economic growth--are presented mainly as arenas in which politicians can fight. The press is often referred to as the "Fourth Branch of Government," which means that it should provide the information we need so as to make sense of public problems. But far from making it easier to cope with public challenges, the press often makes it harder. By choosing to present public life as a contest among scheming political leaders, all of whom the public should view with suspicion, the press helps bring about that very result. While creating new obstacles for American politics, the today's media has also put itself in an impossible position. It increasingly presents public life mainly as a depressing spectacle, rather than as a vital activity in which citizens can and should be engaged. The implied message of this approach is that people will pay attention to public affairs only if politics can be made as interesting as the other entertainment options available to them, from celebrity scandals to the human melodramas featured on daytime talk programs. In attempting to

compete head-to-head with pure entertainment programs, the "serious" news media locks itself into a competition it cannot win. Worse, it increases the chances of its own eventual extinction. In the long run, people will pay attention to journalism only if they think it tells them something they must know. The less that Americans care about public life, the less they will be interested in journalism of any form. This book mainly describes the media from the outside, assessing the way journalists' behavior affects our public life. But since I have spent more than 20 years as a reporter, it naturally also reflects my own concerns about the institution of which I am a part. I got into journalism by accident and stayed because I liked it. I liked many of the incidental aspects of the business--the craftsmanship required to tell a story in limited space with limited time, the thousands of decisions and feats of teamwork necessary to make a newspaper appear each morning or a broadcast begin on time. I enjoyed the chance to learn about a variety of subjects without having to tie myself permanently to any one of them. I also believed that journalism mattered. Journalists have rarely been loved, but their work has often been valued. Through what they find out, they give other people tools for understanding the world beyond their immediate experience. Few Americans know first-hand about China or Bosnia, about the conditions in Mexico that affect immigration or those in Japan that affect trade policy. Few know about life on aircraft carriers or life inside the White House or even life on the far side of their own town. Yet Americans are asked to have opinions on these subjects, or at least to choose among potential officeholders with opinions. As much or as little as we know about these subjects most often depends on what journalists tell us. Tremendous

potential power comes with being a reporter. You have the negative power to say things about other people, in public, to which they can never really respond in kind. You have the positive power to expand other people's understanding of reality by bringing new parts of the world to their notice. Taking this power seriously means taking your calling seriously, which in turn means recognizing the impact of the tool or weapon in your hands. Like teachers, soldiers, nurses, or parents, journalists perform a job whose full value cannot be recognized by their pay. When they do their jobs well, many people benefit. When they do their jobs poorly, when they are irresponsible about their power, the damage spreads farther than they can see. The institution of journalism is not doing its job well now. It is irresponsible with its power. The damage has spread to the public life Americans all share. The damage can be corrected, but not until journalism comes to terms with what it has. But the most important factor influencing news coverage is the audience. Since mass media depends upon advertising revenues for their profits the perspective of most advertisers (especially those whose products are relatively expensive) tend to want younger, upscale consumers for their ads and commercials. Therefore it is in the upper and middle class segments of the audience whose interest and taste especially influence the media's news, public affairs, and political coverage. This is evident from the topics covered, style of coverage, and from the types of reporters and newscasters who appear on the screen. Take for example the political and social topics in news coverage. These topics mainly appeal to the interests of well-educated professionals, executives, and intellectuals. In recent years the topics have ranged from the nuclear arms race to the cost of real estate. A better

example would be the New York Times. According to the article "What makes Mainstream Media Mainstream" by Noam Chomsky the Times are considered a corporation that sells a product. The product being the audience or rather "privileged people." (The privileged people are just like people who are writing the newspapers; top-level decision-making people in society.) Therefore the product of the media, what appears, what doesn't appear, and the way it is slanted will reflect the interest of the buyers and sellers, the institutions, and the power systems that are around them. Freedom gives the media enormous power. They can make or break reputations, help to begin or end political careers, and build support for or bring together opposition against programs and institutions. Through the freedom of reporters, the influence of groups and politicians, and the audience, it makes it impossible for the news coverage to unbiased and objective.