American Government

Mass Media
What Gets Covered in the News?

• Reflects the fact that news media is profit-driven
  – Goal: maximize sales, minimize costs
  – Trend from local and independent to national/international conglomerates
Media Consolidation

• 1983 – 50 corporations dominate
• 1990 – 23 corporations dominate
• 2000 – 6 corporations dominate

• 1946: 75% of daily newspapers are family owned
• 2000: 2% of daily newspapers are family owned
Causes of Conglomeration

• Economic Incentives
  – Synergy

• Changes in Regulation
  – Cross ownership rules
Four News Biases

• Personalization

• Dramatization

• Fragmentation

• Authority-Disorder Bias
Personalization

• The news deemphasizes big social and economic problems in favor of human trials, tragedies and triumphs
  – Causes an egocentric view of political problems
  – Encourages a passive spectator attitude
Dramatization

- The news tells stories as a dramatic narrative; often lacking analysis
  - Trivializes news content
  - Draws focus to only extreme examples
  - Ignores problems until they are big
Fragmentation

- The news isolates stories from each other and from their natural contexts
  - Makes it difficult to attribute cause and effect
  - Isolates individual actors from context
Authority-Disorder Bias

• The news highlights authoritative voices of public officials to create both fear and reassurance
  
  – Emphasizes “pseudo-events” with “return to normal” or “to be continued” endings
How the Media Covers Politics

• Focus on the president

Proportion of time spent covering the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court on the network TV news (during the early 1990s):

President 60%
Congress 37%
Supreme Court 3%

- President single person, cheap
- Congress and executive branch agencies large
- Courts expensive, not public
News Coverage of Elections

• Little coverage of issue positions
  – Belief that people tune out
  – Proposals not timely or novel
• Focus on candidates’ personal qualities
• Focus on the “horse race” and strategy
  – Candidates criticize each other (dramatic)
  – “Horse race” both timely and novel
Some Headlines from 2004 Election

- Bush Using Convention to Woo Undecideds
- Kerry Gets Little Bounce from Veep Choice
- Two New Bush Ads Assail Kerry on Health Care
- Bush, Kerry Spar Over Bin Laden Video
- Bush, Kerry Hope to Win Voters in Debates
- New Poll Shows Kerry Nearly Even with Bush
Has the News Media Perceived its Audience Correctly?

• Evidence suggesting yes:
  – Low ratings of News Hour with Jim Lehrer
  – Cable news ratings increase with dramatic events
  – Stories Americans pay attention to (see next slide)
# Stories Americans Tuned in 1986-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explosion of the space shuttle Challenger</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco earthquake</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles riots</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbine shootings</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosion during Atlanta Olympics</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death of Princess Diana</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 New Hampshire Republican primary</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressional debate about NAFTA</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage of the communications deregulation bill</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate on expanding NATO into Eastern Europe</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Has the News Media Perceived its Audience Correctly?

- Evidence suggesting no:

  - Questions citizens ask of candidates (ex: YouTube Debates!)

  - What Americans say they want from election coverage (see next slide)
## What Americans Say They Want from Election Coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Very interested</th>
<th>Media devotes too much attention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidates’ stands on issues</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How election affects people like you</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party and independent candidates</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign strategies and tactics</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which candidates are ahead</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal lives of candidates</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Covering Politics, Does the News Media Tilt in a Liberal or Conservative Direction?

• Rate the following news organizations as liberal, conservative, or neutral:
  – Seattle Times
  – New York Times
  – Wall Street Journal
  – Fox News
  – National Public Radio
  – NBC Evening News
Evidence of Liberal Bias

- Among people who work for news organizations, Democrats outnumber Republicans.

Self-Identified Political Affiliations of the Press, 2001

- Independent: 55%
- Republican: 4%
- Democrat: 27%
- Other/DK: 14%
Evidence of Liberal Bias

• Compared to the public, the press is much less conservative
Evidence of Liberal Bias

• The public perceives the media to be biased

Are The News Media Biased? Americans Answer the Question

- Yes: 78%
- No: 17%
- Don’t Know: 5%
Evidence of Conservative Bias

• News media is a profit-seeking business
  – Owners of media conglomerates are largely conservative
  – Bias in favor of corporate interests
  – Leads to media self-censorship
    • Killing stories that undermine corporate interests

• How could we determine if such bias exists?
Implications

• If we accept that most people who work for news organizations are moderate to liberal, is that problematic?

• Does that mean they will be biased in their coverage?

• Or can they separate their own beliefs from their reporting duties?