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How Much Does the Media Affect Public Opinion?

Popular singer John Mayer was stated, “When you own all of the information, you can bend it however you want (Mayer, John).” Having said this, it can be safely assumed those media outlets across all platforms: newspaper, internet, television and radio, all bend the truth when reporting their information. Throughout major various political events such as around election times, the media constantly reports misleading information about a particular candidate or political organization by bending the truth and omitting key information. When this occurs, public opinion then becomes skewed by whichever perspective that media outlet has established during their reporting. Many would suggest that the manipulative ways in which the media reports information is a tool of propaganda.

It is important to note that in the United States, the media plays a huge role on public opinion and for many citizens it is their only source for information. Therefore, when opinions by the press are formed they become adopted by society. It can be assumed that all news media is bias to some extent. Each news media outlet has agenda setters who decided which news stories are worthy of being reported. There are also gate keepers who allow certain messages to be broadcast while, prohibiting the distribution of other information. People easily become influenced by the media because the media offers information that is essential to the survival of its audience. For example, the media provides information about government decisions. This creates a huge opportunity for miseducation. If the media does not properly provide information on a diverse set of viewpoints, then the public will not be properly informed. Problems are more likely to occur with sensitive information such as governmental decisions because it is information that may directly affect the people. In many cases the news is the citizen’s only source of knowledge regarding a particular issue. Without the media, it would take citizens much longer to find out pertinent information.

The media is multifaceted and has many outlets and platforms in which its information can become accessed by its audience. The internet has the ability to circulate information in a matter of seconds. Television news stations can provide around the clock coverage of a news story throughout the day. The radio can influence thousands and in some cases millions of listeners through its broadcast. Now that technology has rapidly expanded, the newspaper is no longer the go to source for information as it once was. However, the newspaper is still read, by who have the opportunity to access that information daily.

Agenda setting plays a huge role in the perception that the media has on public opinion. Since there are a variety of topics that media can report on, gate keepers have the option to cipher out which information they feel their audience needs to be informed of. This also allows them to manage which avenues they choose to publicize the information and what information their audience knows. Thus, when media decides to report on one topic versus reporting on another issue, the audience then weighs the reported news on a higher standard of importance versus information that has yet to be covered. The media has the opportunity to create an urgency, which in turn increases the response that the audience has to a particular issue. The intelligence of the audience is skewed by the perception that the media plays on their opinions.

In regards to presidential elections, the media affects public opinion in several ways. The most common way is on a presidential candidate’s personality. The media will go to great lengths to find scandalous information, regardless of how old the information is or whether or not the information has any relevancy to the election at hand. The information then is presented before the public. This information is usually fabricated. The media will embellish story topics in order to make them seem more appealing and entertaining. Thus, the media chooses to create more entertaining news rather than informative news because entertainment news sells. The news chosen to be reported is filtered based on which stories the media feels will earn the most revenue for their company. In the past, Presidents who were relatively shy or not as vocal publically as other candidates possibly would not be elected if running for presidential office today. For example, Abraham Lincoln was an intellectual and not very outspoken or charismatic. In today’s society most voters look for a president that they can relate to. “Recent studies have reported that public affairs opinion leaders do not show markedly higher rates of mass media exposure than those not defined as leaders, particularly with regard to television news. One qualitative aspect of the audience experience with television news which may be of particular significance in the public opinion process concerns the uses and gratifications associated with television news exposure” (Levy.) If President Lincoln were running for an election in this decade, the media might consider him to be incapable since he would not be as entertaining as another candidate. Lincoln’s stance on certain policies would not matter if he did not have the ability to speak well in front of large groups or speak persuasively during presidential debates.

Furthermore, the media can take a presidential candidate’s flaws and exploit them by creating a negative view of the candidate in front of the public. This negative news coverage can create a decline in voter turnout. During the nineteenth century for example, voter turnout dropped by ten percent from seventy five percent to eighty five percent (United States Elections Project.) Hence, the news does contribute either positively or negatively to voter opinion and voter turnout.

Moreover, another contributor to low voter turnout during elections is the fact that the media often tries to forecast the results of a certain election before an election even takes place. “Today, people have ample opportunity to engage in selective exposure, the selection of information matching their beliefs. Whether this is occurring, however, is a matter of debate. While some worry that people increasingly are seeking out likeminded views, others propose that newer media provide an increased opportunity for exposure to diverse views” (Stroud). People have the opportunity to discover more ample information regarding almost any issue. However, many people have one track minds and only consider the news from sources that appeal to their own ideals. Unfortunately, when conservatives only receive their source of news information from Fox News and liberals only receive theirs from MSNBC, then we become entangled in the web that media constantly has us spinning in. People usually don’t watch or listen to views opposing their own. When this occurs, it prohibits the viewer from analyzing different views that they do not identify with. Since all news media is biased, it important for citizens to research specific areas of interest, rather than getting all of their information from one source.

Summarily, the more an individual receives information from just one source, the more they believe the information that they are receiving to be true. Unfortunately, many people tend to believe whatever they see on television or hear on the radio to be factual solely off the basis that it is coming from a source that they believe to be credible. If viewers were to discover a variety of new information regarding political events from, but not limited to: newspapers, magazines, television, radio and internet; then those viewers can decide on which information they believe to be accurate rather than not thinking critically and independently by viewing just one news source. More people might be inclined to vote if news media were more neutral and less bias in their approaches to disseminate its information. Until then, it is important for each voting individual to take iniative of their own, to provide themselves with the knowledge necessary to make educated decisions while voting or engaging in situations related to the political world.

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