

## Portrait of the USA

### CONTENTS

1. (People):  
[One From Many](#)
2. (Geography):  
[From Sea to Shining Sea](#)
3. (History):  
[Toward the City on a Hill](#)
4. (Government):  
[A Responsive Government](#)
5. (Business):  
[The Business of America](#)
6. (Education):  
[A Diverse Educational System](#)
7. (Science & Medicine):  
[A Republic of Science](#)
8. (Religion):  
[Separating Church and State](#)
9. (Social Services):  
[The Social Safety Net](#)
10. (The Arts):  
[Distinctively American Arts](#)
11. (Sports & Entertainment):  
[Exporting Popular Culture](#)
12. (The Media):  
[The Media and Their Messages](#)

## Chapter Twelve

### THE MEDIA AND THEIR MESSAGES

#### Freedom of the press, newspapers, radio, and television

The average American, according to a recent study, spends about eight hours a day with the print and electronic media -- at home, at work, and traveling by car. This total includes four hours watching television, three hours listening to radio, a half hour listening to recorded music, and another half hour reading the newspaper.

The central role of information in American society harks back to a fundamental belief held by the framers of the U.S. Constitution: that a well-informed people is the strongest guardian of its own liberties. The framers embodied that assumption in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which provides in part that "Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press." A corollary to this clause is that the press functions as a watchdog over government actions and calls attention to official misdeeds and violations of individual rights.

The First Amendment and the political philosophy behind it have allowed the American media extraordinary freedom in reporting the news and expressing opinions. In the 1970s, American reporters uncovered the Watergate scandal, which ended with the resignation of President Richard Nixon, and American newspapers printed the "Pentagon papers," classified documents related to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Press reports of official corruption that in some countries would bring arrests and the shutdown of newspapers are made freely in the United States, where the media cannot be shut down, where government itself cannot be libeled, and where public officials must prove that a statement is not only false but was made with actual malice before they can recover damages.

We examine four topics in this chapter: newspapers, magazines, the broadcast media, and current issues related to the media.

#### NEWSPAPERS: PIONEERING PRESS FREEDOM

In 1990 the press celebrated its 300th anniversary as an American institution. The first newspaper in the colonies, *Publick Occurrences: Both Foreign and Domestick*, lasted only one day in 1690 before British officials suppressed it. But other papers sprang up, and by the 1730s the colonial press was strong enough to criticize British governors. In 1734 the governor of New York charged John Peter Zenger, publisher of the *New York Weekly Journal*, with seditious libel. Zenger's lawyer, Alexander Hamilton, argued that "the truth of the facts" was reason enough to print a story. In a decision bolstering freedom of the press, the jury acquitted Zenger.

By the 1820s about 25 daily newspapers and more than 400 weeklies were being published in the United States. Horace Greeley founded the *New York Tribune* in 1841, and it quickly became the nation's most influential newspaper. Two media giants, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, began building their newspaper empires after the American Civil War (1861-65). Fiercely competitive, they resorted to "yellow journalism" -- sensational and often inaccurate

reporting aimed at attracting readers. Early in the 20th century, newspaper editors realized that the best way to attract readers was to give them all sides of a story, without bias. This standard of objective reporting is today one of American journalism's most important traditions. Another dominant feature of early 20th-century journalism was the creation of chains of newspapers operating under the same ownership, led by a group owned by Hearst. This trend accelerated after World War II, and today about 75 percent of all U.S. daily papers are owned by newspaper chains.

With the advent of television in the 1940s and 1950s, the new electronic medium made inroads on newspaper circulation: Readers tended to overlook the afternoon paper because they could watch the day's news on TV. In 1971, 66 cities had two or more dailies, usually one published in the morning and one in the afternoon. In 1995, only 36 cities had two or more dailies.

Overall, the number of dailies dropped from 1,772 in 1950 to 1,480 in 2000, and the number of Sunday papers rose from 549 in 1950 to 917 in 2000. The combined figure is the highest number of newspapers with the highest total circulation -- 115 million -- in the world. Nonetheless, the largest U.S. newspapers have been losing circulation in recent years, a trend that can be attributed to the increasing availability of news from television and other sources.

The top five daily newspapers by circulation in 2000 were the *Wall Street Journal* (1,762,751), *USA Today* (1,692,666), the *New York Times* (1,097,180), the *Los Angeles Times* (1,033,399), and the *Washington Post* (762,009). The youngest of the top five, *USA Today*, was launched as a national newspaper in 1982, after exhaustive research by the Gannett chain. It relies on bold graphic design, color photos, and brief articles to capture an audience of urban readers interested in news "bites" rather than traditional, longer stories.

New technology has made *USA Today* possible and is enabling other newspapers to enlarge their national and international audiences. *USA Today* is edited and composed in McLean, Virginia, then transmitted via satellite to 32 printing plants around the country and two printing plants serving Europe and Asia. The *International Herald Tribune*, owned jointly by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, is a global newspaper, printed via satellite in 11 cities around the world and distributed in 164 countries.

In 1992, the *Chicago Sun-Times* began to offer articles through America Online, one of the first companies that connected personal computers with the Internet. In 1993, the *San Jose Mercury-News* began distributing most of its daily text, minus photos and illustrations, to subscribers to America Online; in 1995, eight media companies announced formation of a company to create a network of on-line newspapers. Now, most American newspapers are available on the Internet, and anyone with a personal computer and a link to the Internet can scan papers from across the country in his or her own home or office.

---

## MAGAZINES' NICHE

The first American magazines appeared a half century after the first newspapers and took longer to attain a wide audience. In 1893, the first mass-circulation magazines were introduced, and in 1923, Henry Luce launched *Time*, the first weekly news magazine. The arrival of television cut into the advertising revenues enjoyed by mass-circulation magazines, and some weekly magazines eventually folded: *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1969, *Look* in 1971, and *Life* in 1972. (*The Saturday Evening Post* and *Life* later reappeared as monthlies.)

Magazine publishers responded by trying to appeal more to carefully defined audiences than to the public at large. Magazines on virtually any topic imaginable have appeared, including *Tennis*, *Trailer Life*, and *Model Railroading*. Other magazines have targeted segments within their audience for special attention. *TV Guide*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, for example, publish regional editions. Several magazines are attempting to personalize the contents of each issue according to an individual reader's interests.

This specialization has brought an upswing in the number of magazines published in the United States, from 6,960 in 1970 to 13,878 in 2001. Ninety magazines had a circulation of over one million in 2001. The top two in circulation were both aimed at retired persons: *NRTS/AARP Bulletin* (21,465,126) and *Modern Maturity* (18,363,840). Rounding out the top five were

*Reader's Digest* (12,558,435), *TV Guide* (9,259,455), and *National Geographic* (7,738,611).

In 1993, *Time* became the first magazine to offer an on-line edition that subscribers can call up on their computers before it hits the newsstands. In 1996, software magnate Bill Gates started *Slate*, a magazine covering politics and culture that was intended to be available exclusively on-line (Slate's publisher soon decided to add a print version).

Meanwhile, a new hybrid of newspaper and magazine became popular starting in the 1970s: the newsletter. Printed on inexpensive paper and often as short as four to six pages, the typical newsletter appears weekly or biweekly. Newsletters gather and analyze information on specialized topics. *Southern Political Report*, for example, covers election races in the southern U.S. states, and *FTC Watch* covers the actions of the Federal Trade Commission. Newsletters can be the product of small staffs, sometimes only a single reporter who produces the issue by computer.

The newsletter has been joined by the "zine," highly personalized magazines of relatively small circulation, sometimes with contents that are meant to shock. *Afraid*, for instance, is a monthly zine devoted to horror stories.

---

## THE ROLE OF RADIO

The beginning of commercial radio broadcasts in 1920 brought a new source of information and entertainment directly into American homes. President Franklin Roosevelt understood the usefulness of radio as a medium of communication: His "fireside chats" kept the nation abreast of economic developments during the Depression and of military maneuvers during World War II.

The widespread availability of television after World War II caused radio executives to rethink their programming. Radio could hardly compete with television's visual presentation of drama, comedy, and variety acts; many radio stations switched to a format of recorded music mixed with news and features. Starting in the 1950s, radios became standard accessories in American automobiles. The medium enjoyed a renaissance as American commuters tuned in their car radios on the way to work.

The expansion of FM radio, which has better sound quality but a more limited signal range than AM, led to a split in radio programming in the 1970s and 1980s. FM came to dominate the music side of programming, while AM has shifted mainly to all-news and talk formats.

Barely in existence 25 years ago, talk radio usually features a host, a celebrity or an expert on some subject, and the opportunity for listeners to call in and ask questions or express opinions on the air. The call-in format is now heard on nearly 1,000 of the 10,000 commercial radio stations in the United States.

Despite the importance of TV, the reach of radio is still impressive. In 2000, 99 percent of American households had at least one radio, with an average of five per household. Besides the 10,000 commercial radio stations, the United States has approximately 700 public radio stations. Most of these are run by universities and other public institutions for educational purposes and are financed by public funds and private donations. Today, more than 20 million Americans listen each week to public radio stations affiliated with the major public radio networks, National Public Radio and Public Radio International.

---

## TELEVISION: BEYOND THE BIG THREE

Since World War II television has developed into the most popular medium in the United States, with enormous influence on the country's elections and way of life. In 2000, 100 million American homes (98.2 percent) had at least one TV set, and the average number of sets per home was 2.4.

Three privately owned networks that offered free programming financed by commercials -- NBC, CBS, and ABC -- controlled 90 percent of the TV market from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the 1980s the rapid spread of pay cable TV transmitted by satellite undermined that privileged

position. By 2000, almost 70 percent of American households had subscribed to cable TV, and non-network programming was drawing more than 30 percent of viewers. Among the new cable channels were several that show movies 24 hours a day; Cable News Network, the creation of Ted Turner, which broadcasts news around the clock; and MTV, which shows music videos.

In the meantime, a fourth major commercial network, Fox, has come into being and challenged the big three networks; several local TV stations have switched their affiliation from one of the big three to the newcomer. Two more national networks -- WB and UPN -- have also come along, and the number of cable television channels continues to expand.

There are 349 public television stations across the United States, each of which is independent and serves its community's interests. But the stations are united by such national entities as the Public Broadcasting Service, which supplies programming. American taxpayers provide partial funding for public television, which is watched by nearly 100 million viewers per week. Among the most popular programs is "Sesame Street," a children's show that teaches beginning reading and math through the use of puppets, cartoons, songs, and comedy skits.

Beginning in the late 1970s, U.S. cable companies have offered services to selected segments of the population. Programs broadcast by the Silent Network come with sign language and captions for the network's audience of people with hearing problems. In 1988, Christopher Whittle founded Channel One cable network, which provides educational programming -- along with commercials -- to about 40 percent of American high school students. In addition, the convergence of the computer, TV, and fiber optics has raised the possibility of interactive TV, which would allow viewers to select specific programs they wish to see at times of their choosing.

---

## **CURRENT ISSUES**

Many Americans are disturbed by the amount of violence their children see on television. In response to citizens' complaints and pressure from the Congress, the four major TV networks -- ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox -- agreed in 1993 to inform parents of violent content at the beginning of a program, and cable networks have agreed to give similar warnings. In 1996, the commercial and cable networks went a step further and established a rating system, based on the amount of violence, sexual content, and/or profane language that a program contains. A symbol indicating the show's rating appears on the television screen at the beginning of, and intermittently during, the broadcast.

Such voluntary measures seem preferable to government regulation of programming content, which would probably violate the First Amendment. Another possible solution to the problem is technological. Beginning in 1998 new television sets sold in the United States will be equipped with a "V-chip," a device that will enable parents to block out programs they would rather their children not see.

One of the most debated media-related issues facing Americans today has little to do with technology and much more to do with the age-old concept of personal privacy: whether any area of a person's life should remain off-limits once he or she becomes a public figure. In 1988, a leading presidential candidate, Senator Gary Hart, withdrew from the race after the press revealed his affair with a young woman. Politicians from both parties complain that the press is "out to get" them, and some conservative members of Congress assert that the media are biased in favor of liberals. Many critics believe that increased prying by the media will deter capable people, regardless of their beliefs, from going into politics.

On the other hand, in the old days reporters virtually conspired with politicians to keep the public from knowing about personal weaknesses. President Franklin Roosevelt's crippled body was not talked about or photographed, and his poor physical health was kept from the electorate when he ran for a fourth term in 1944. A majority of voters might have chosen Roosevelt anyway, but shielding them from the facts seems dishonest to most Americans today, who believe that in a democracy it is better to share information than to suppress it.

InfoUSA is maintained by the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), U.S. Department of State