

LECTURE / DISCUSSION / DEBATE
PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MASS MEDIA

Terms and concepts to know:

Public opinion	Sampling
Questionnaire construction	Political orientations
Democratic values	Ideology
Political trust	Political efficacy
Political involvement / civic duty	Postmaterialism
Economics and political opinion	Conventional/unconventional activities
“Pack journalism”	Agenda setting
Priming effect	Chomsky / <i>Manufacturing Consent</i>
Propaganda model	The “5-Filters” on the news

Study and discussion questions:

1. Heineman notes that questionnaire construction provides “extraordinary good examples of biased wording.” He therefore suggests that “...one must ensure that all questions are not slanted and that the wording will be understandable to all.” Is this possible to do in your opinion? Think of some examples.
2. Heineman suggests that “Americans have typically been characterized as not possessing a great amount of political information.” Do you feel this is true? In your opinion, what can be counted as important “political information”?
3. Tocqueville said “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion in America.” Why might such observations be made, and to what extent are they true?
4. Discuss Herman and Chomsky’s “5-Filters” on the news. How important do you think each one of these filters is in distorting the mainstream news?
5. Croteau and Hoynes believe that the corporate media fall woefully short on the three functions that any true “watchdog” journalism in a true democratic society should aim for. What are those three functions and do you agree with any or all of their critique?
6. Identify and explain the four information biases that Bennett explores. How do these biases affect what we see and hear as news? Can you think of ways any recent news stories have been influenced by these four biases?
7. One of the assumptions underlying a democratic society is that the mass media are supposed to serve a vital role as a forum for diverse ideas, exposing the people to the wide range of information they need to make informed decisions, and providing one way for people to monitor what leaders do. Given the results of the study Ina Howard presents, how well do you think the media fulfill this key assumption of a democracy? In what ways might the news be different if a broader range of parties were given coverage, and if women, minorities, and non-traditional “experts” had a greater voice?

Readings:

Heineman. *American Government*, Chapter 4.
WEB – Readings from the “Public Opinion and Mass Media” links.

Video: *Project Censored: The Movie*.