

Making Coverage Count

Take a drive across the country, and you'll see varied landscapes, stumble across unique landmarks, taste new flavors, and hear different accents. But people just about anywhere agree on one thing: their local news must be the worst in the country.

But it's not the worst. It's just the same. If it bleeds, it leads: that means plenty of crimes, fires and accidents. Then there are the health-care stories, likely framed with frightening graphics and ominous music, celebrity gossip, and network tie-ins.

Why We Need the News

TV, radio, movies, books, newspapers and the Internet are our prime sources of news and information and they shape our values, beliefs and perspectives.

We need credible, accurate reporters, keeping a watchful eye on those in power, attending the meetings and examining the issues we don't have time to follow, translating complex topics, and keeping us informed about what's happening in our communities.

A viable self-government is impossible without quality journalism. Democracy requires journalism; but journalism also requires democracy — an engaged citizenry demanding the serious work that holds our leaders accountable.

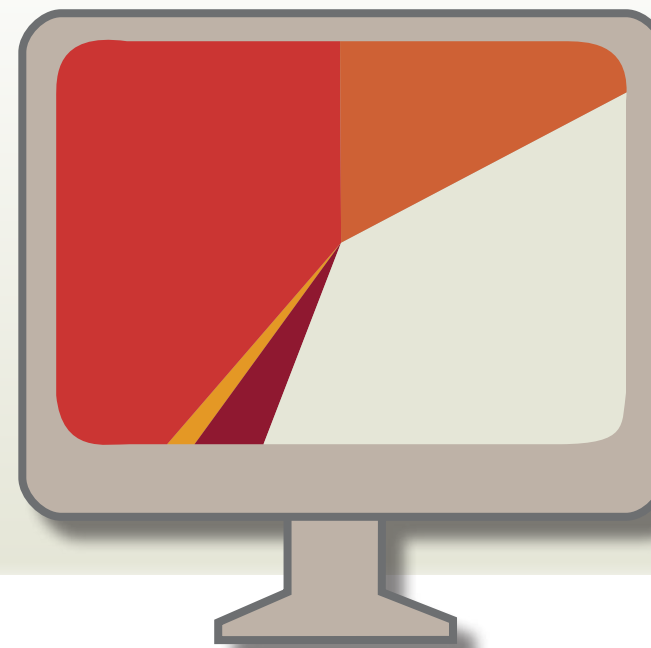
The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism studied the media's coverage of the 2008 election and found that most outlets covered the election like a sporting event. "Horse race reporting, once again,

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CNN.com Headline Analysis

(Tracked in
October
2009 by
SEE
Innovation
staff)



42%
Crime, violence, death,
trivial news, entertainment,
sports & celebrity activity

16%
Government, politics,
& the economy

3%
Iraq-Afghan wars

1%
Environment

made up the majority of coverage," the report states. They found that rather than focus on the issues facing Americans, "53 percent of the coverage focused on political matters, particularly tactics, strategy and polling." Often, the media covers the spin instead of cutting through it to get to the facts.

Studies also show a link between access to news and levels of political corruption at the national and state level. One 2008 MIT study found that members of Congress who were covered less by the local press do less work for their local constituents, show up to fewer hearings, and bring less money back to their home districts. Yet according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, half the states no longer have a newspaper with a reporter covering the U.S. Congress.

What's Missing From the News?

Sixty five percent of Americans get their news from cable and network television and how these outlets

cover the big stories strongly influences who we elect for public office, how we debate the most pressing issues of the day and when we go to war.

Increasingly, however, many mainstream media outlets often ignore important issues and devote too much coverage to sensational and trivial stories.

This is evidenced in the findings of a month-long headline analysis in 2009 of CNN.com news headlines showed that 42 percent of the month's stories covered crime, violence, death, trivial news, the entertainment industry, sports, and celebrity activity while only one percent covered the environment and 3 percent addressed the Iraq-Afghan wars. The combined coverage of government, politics and the economy made up 16 percent of online headlines during the month. Clearly, less coverage of trivial and celebrity stories will free up more time for covering the kinds of issues that people need to better understand in order to be active citizens.

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Jim Lehrer on the set of *The News Hour* on PBS. Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased nationally known institution.

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Amy Goodman’s article in this chapter highlights several shining examples of media outlets that are covering current events, but that also dig deeper and cover stories connected to social and economic equity, education, health, cutting edge science, and environmental stewardship—providing the information to empower individuals to take an active role in bettering their world.

Media Ownership Matters

The biggest problem in journalism isn’t poorly trained or unethical journalists. The real problem facing our media system is a structural one. Larger and larger corporations – in fewer and fewer numbers – have taken control of more and more of our news organizations. They’ve merged, consolidated and concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, swallowing up local outlets. Before 1996, for instance, the biggest radio chain owned just a few dozen stations. Now Clear Channel owns nearly 1,000 and only a fifth of newspapers are independently owned.

It’s not surprising that we have the same cookie-cutter content from coast to coast. Media owners influence what news and information is covered, whether important issues are covered accurately, who is hired to report and produce the news, what music and artists get airplay, and how women and minorities are portrayed in the media.

Media and tech companies have spent a billion dollars in the past decade to influence federal policy – even more than the oil and gas industry. Because of their tremendous influence in Washington, media policymaking has been a closed and secretive process, and citizens have been shut out of the debate. So even though we own the airwaves, they decide how media is created, financed and distributed.

Turning Crisis into Opportunity

We live in an exhilarating but unnerving moment. Media that has for so long existed on different platforms — print, radio, and TV — are now converging on the Internet. High speed Internet access is fast becoming the 21st Century’s essential infrastructure. It is the central nervous system of our economy, society and government. But in all of the tumult, we need to ask not just how the media are changing, but what we should be doing to change the media.

The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) is one successful model. National polls conducted in December 2009 and January 2010 found that Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased nationally known institution in the U.S. PBS, with its nearly 360 member stations, “offers all Americans — from every walk of life — the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television and online content.” More than 59 million people in 37 million households watch public television during an average week. Four fundamental principles shape the content service that PBS provides to its member stations: editorial integrity, quality, diversity, and local station autonomy.

If we want better media, we need better media policies. If we want better media policies, we need to raise public awareness about these issues and organize for real change.

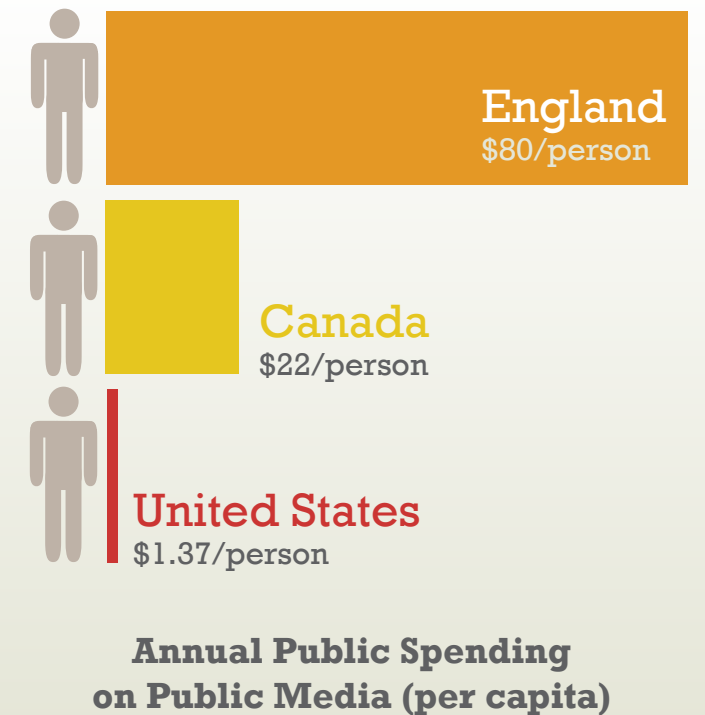
A privately supported, not-for-profit membership organization, National Public Radio (NPR) produces and distributes programming that reaches a combined audience of 26.4 million listeners weekly. NPR is an internationally acclaimed producer and distributor of noncommercial news, talk, and entertainment programming. Each NPR Member Station serves local listeners with a distinctive combination of national and local programming and with online content and audio streaming. NPR.org offers hourly newscasts, special features and ten years of archived audio and information.

Despite the quality of public journalism in this country, Americans now spend just a little more than \$400 million per year in public money on public media. That works out to just \$1.37 per person. By comparison, Canada spends \$22 per capita and England spends \$80.

Charting Our Future

Fair and accurate news and information is necessary to guide an informed citizenry and therefore the media is essential to our democracy. We depend upon media to know what’s happening in our communities, to play our part as citizens, and to serve as a vital check on government and corporate power.

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real change. We also need our country to provide more funding for public media. Now more than ever, people across the country need to be engaged in the debates about the future of our media. We need real people to have a seat at the table and a voice in those debates. By holding the media accountable for their content, supporting policies that encourage media diversity and participating in the media reform movement, real people can make coverage count.

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Craig Aaron leads all program, campaign and advocacy work at Free Press. He works in the Washington office and speaks regularly on media, Internet and journalism issues. His commentaries appear regularly in the Guardian and the Huffington Post, and he blogs at both SavetheInternet.com and StopBigMedia.com. He is a regular guest on talk radio shows across the country and is quoted often in the national and local press. Before joining Free Press, he was an investigative reporter for Public Citizen’s Congress Watch, where he helped create and launch WhiteHouseForSale.org.

