

Legacy Media/Old Media

Eighteenth-century British parliamentarian Edmund Burke is cited as the first to acknowledge the power of the press when he deemed the news media as a Fourth Estate with stature equivalent in the social order to the three Estates of the Realm -- clergy, nobility and common people.

The Founding Fathers believed that the power of the press so essential a guarantee in fostering a democratic society and helping citizens to curtail abuses from the powerful that they added the right to free and open press in the Bill of Rights in First Amendment of the United States Constitution in 1791. Thomas Jefferson said "Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues of truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is freedom of the press. It is therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions."

Today the media is considered informally as a fourth branch of society – president, congress and courts – whose history has been intertwined with politics since the founding of the United States. In the 19th century, pamphlets and newspapers were often raw, partisan political tools supported by the wealthy, literate elite who took out subscriptions and made donations to support like-minded publishers. Historians cite Thomas Jefferson’s successful presidential run in 1800 as the first modern political campaign. He personally underwrote several newspapers during his race against John Adams. The news reports were as rough and tumble as any modern campaign with issues of race, religion and sexual indiscretion along with political issues of the day.

The 19th-century inventions of the high-speed press, typewriter, linotype, photography, photoengraving and telegraph helped improve the presentation and delivery of newspapers and propelled them into a modern mass medium. An outgrowth this innovation was the penny press – cheap newspapers -- filled with raw, populist and sensational fare that drew a large working-class audience. Advances in printing presses and improvements in photoengraving and photography allowed newspapers to easily incorporate visuals, which also helped spur the evolution of the advertising industry and the craft of photojournalism. The invention of the telegraph led to a cooperative of newspaper to share reporting resources and the development of the Associated Press.

Rise of Mass Media

Legacy or old media is defined as newspapers, radio, television, magazines and books. Some would also include movie and music studios as well as advertising industry. The daily newspaper began to face competition when radio became popular in the 1920s and later television in the 1950s. The spread of radio coincided with the political fortune of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1930s, who used it as his bully pulpit to rally a nation battered by the Great Depression. The four-term president used the new technology to conduct nearly 1,000 “fireside chats.” Roosevelt’s relationship with the press was so close that even though many news editors were aware of his physical limitations and health problems, they never reported on his infirmities.

By 1950s, television was becoming the most popular medium for news and information. The increasing popularity of television also increased competition for advertising business. Because newspaper publishing and distribution was expensive, and paid subscriptions did little to cover all the costs of publishing, not only were newspapers competing against television for audience, they also competed for advertising when some advertisers realized television was more

effective in delivering their messages. At the same time, television became the primary medium for political ads. By 1960, nearly 90 percent of U.S. households had televisions, which allowed then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy to use television to politically devastating effect against his rival Richard Nixon in series of widely watched televised debates. Kennedy was also helped by a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign that tailored his ads for a television audience.

The rise in television presaged the newspaper circulation declines in the 1970s. In the 1972, the laissez-faire relationship between presidents and the press came to a dramatic end when the Washington Post covered a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate Hotel, which led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

By the late 1980s all media began undergoing changes as a result of the rise of the Internet. Some newspapers began to experiment with innovative interactive communications technology such as videotext and the use of modems to transmit information. The rise of America Online (AOL) in 1989 heralded the influence of the Internet and the pressures that would disrupt traditional media. As one of the first Internet service providers (ISP), AOL grew from 200,000 to 6 million subscribers from 1992 to 1996. At its height, the service had 30 million subscribers. In 2000, the acquired old-media titan Time Warner in a disastrous merger that precipitated the decline of the Fourth Estate.

Amid this climate, the traditional role of the journalist became marginalized by the proliferation of “pseudo-journalism,” according to John S. Carroll, a former editor of The Los Angeles Times. Carroll, called the spread of faux journalism a troubling development because people who resemble journalists were manipulating rather than informing the audience. Politicians have taken advantage of this new era to bypass what former President George W. Bush once called “the filter.” Further blurring the role of journalists, the Bush Administration distributed propaganda in the form of taped segments with a phony journalist reporting on the presidential policies. In addition, financial and other pressures at some news organizations resulted in ethical and professional lapses – plagiarism and falsehoods in reporting -- that heaped scorn on the profession, sapping its credibility and creating a more cynical readership.

Subsequently, people have become more skeptical about what is being reported in the news. In fact, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press said that only about one-third of people say they believe what is reported by the 14 largest news organizations. The perception does not bode well for traditional media, as more people are willing to go elsewhere for news deemed more reliable, even it means that they must create it themselves through blogs and social media.

Blogging, first introduced in the late 1990s, was a tool for personal journaling. Now, the availability of easy-to-use blogging software has meant that bloggers are covering their communities and “fact-checking” professional journalists.

The Internet began to play a bigger role in political campaigns. For example, Democratic Sen. Diane Feinstein of California was credited with launching the first campaign website in 1994. John McCain was among the first to use the Internet to raise money in online donations. By the 21st century, technology has made publishers of anyone with a computer. By 2002, more voters turned to the Internet to get political information. In 2004, social networking sites began launching and political campaigns began to recognize the growing clout of bloggers. For the first time many were issued credentials to cover the Democratic and Republican conventions.

But 2004 presidential bid of former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's set the stage for the strategies adopted by Sen. Barack Obama in his presidential run in 2008. Dean encouraged bloggers to generate voter interest as well as to recruit and to motivate volunteers. Despite a lack of sufficient funding, Dean's strategy of Internet-based fundraising and grassroots organizing revolutionized the political campaign.

By 2008, the number of people getting their news and information from social media more than doubled, according to the Pew study. More politicians began incorporating the use of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels and blogs to connect with their constituents and to challenge opponents. Financial pressures began to weaken not just print news organizations but the broadcast-centered model of political communication. Following Dean's example, Barack Obama, a former community organizer, bypassed traditional press to develop a database with millions of names, email addresses and phone numbers of people who could be reached and engaged instantaneously. At the time, Obama had nearly 2.4 million supporters in Facebook. His rival Sen. John McCain had 620,000. On Twitter, Obama had about 112,000 followers to McCain's 4,600. On YouTube, there were more than 18 million channel views for Obama, compared to 2 million channel views for McCain, according Pew. In 2012, Obama's database and a strong get-out-the-vote campaign led many in the press to underestimate the strength of his support against Republican challenger Mitt Romney.

But some scholars say the retreat of legacy media has had a detrimental impact on the democratic process. In the recent past, newspapers would reprint the entire text of important political speeches. Today the New York Times is one of the last newspapers to do so. And declining news coverage has resulted in 25 states having no full-time reporter who covers Capitol Hill. Despite the perceived decline of the legacy media, a 2011 USC Annenberg/Los Angeles Times Poll on Politics and the Press found that most voters still turn to traditional sources – television news and newspapers for information. And the traditional media remains more trusted than blogs, late-night comedy shows and social media networks.

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See also: Social Media Optimization

Further Readings:

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