

CHAPTER 9



The Media

“When I was growing up,” said Clarisse, a biology researcher from Paris now living outside of Boston, “my friends and I loved watching American movies and listening to American music. We especially enjoyed going to see old movies like *Casablanca* and *Gone with the Wind*, and we dreamed of visiting Hollywood some day. Now that I’m older, though, I see things a little differently. When I go home to visit my family in France, it bothers me that my nieces and nephews and their friends only seem to talk about American movie stars and American music. Why can’t they be more interested in French culture?”

In some ways it seems pointless to talk here about the American media. American television programs, motion pictures, DVDs, and CDs, along with downloads of many if not all of these media, are available in all but the most remote parts of the world. American actors, actresses, and singers are familiar figures almost everywhere. The American public’s appetite for glamorous and exciting movies and TV shows seems to be widely shared, even though the pervasive influence of American culture in other countries is often viewed with alarm.

But there are some points about the American media (referring mainly to mainstream television and film industries, the press, and some Internet

sites) that might help international visitors have a more accurate understanding of them. Three general topics are discussed here: the question of what makes the American media “American,” Americans’ own views of their media, and misconceptions about America that the media promote in other countries.

WHAT IS AMERICAN ABOUT THE AMERICAN MEDIA?

Different people will have different opinions about what makes the American media distinctively American. A few brief opinions and observations are offered here.

The Content of the Media

The U.S. American media mirror the values and assumptions of most Americans. Among them:

- Admiration for the individual who disregards other people’s opinions and does what he or she wants to do
- Admiration for the individual who somehow outwits or bests the establishment or the authorities
- A faith that good will triumph over evil
- Glorification of people who are young and physically attractive
- Glorification of people who earn large amounts of money or who have acquired impressive quantities of material goods
- A fixation on the action-filled life, as opposed to the contemplative one
- A bias toward the concrete (for example, “reality TV”) over the abstract or analytical
- A need for what may seem like speed and efficiency, with fast-moving advertisements and dialogue, text “crawling” across the bottom of a screen, and several things happening on the screen at once

Characteristics of contemporary American life that many foreigners find frustrating or even objectionable are also conveyed—perhaps in an

exaggerated form—through most of the media: a lack of intellectual depth; a greater concern for appearance than for substance; a fixation on sex; a strong interest in violence; superficial and parochial news and commentary, with little in-depth analysis of developments in other countries; and a fascination with computer-generated special effects and with “gadgets” or new technological devices that enable people to do things with less effort.

Some media outlets and personalities have become openly partisan. At the time of this writing, those expressing rightist views (such as Fox News and the *Washington Post*) outnumber those expressing leftist views (such as some MSNBC programs).

The Structure of the Media

Like many Americans and American businesses in general, the American media are driven by competition for money. In that sense, the media epitomize the American economic system and the American view of success as largely material in nature. A diminishing number of ever-larger corporations have taken over all parts of the entertainment industry, from controlling individual performer’s contracts to producing movies, TV programs, and CDs to distributing and advertising those products worldwide. Corporate efforts to prevent free downloading of products that are intended for sale (songs, television programs, movies) continue.

Media executives are always looking for new ways to attract audiences and buyers. These same executives are frequently fired when their products fail to attract large enough audiences, even if they have had successes in the past and even if the movies, TV programs, music, or publications in question have received critical acclaim. The executives experiment, trying new ideas and dropping old ones. Trends and fads in television programs and motion pictures come and go with striking rapidity. Stars are in heavy demand one day and forgotten the next. Likewise, the press often covers some sensational news stories in great detail while overlooking other seemingly more noteworthy developments.

One manifestation of media competition has been a segmentation of the market. Cable and satellite television have made it possible to devise not just programs but entire networks aimed at specific subsets of the population. One survey found that the average American household received nearly 120

television channels. There are channels directed toward children, teenagers, women, families (meaning households with young children), African Americans, and Latinos. There are channels aimed at people with specific interests, such as cooking, history, literature, current affairs, romance, movies, and, of course, sports.

Radio stations normally target specific audiences as defined by age, race, language, and, in effect, level of education.

Music producers also target specific groups when they select and promote different artists. The availability of personal music-storage devices makes it possible for each individual to listen to his or her favorite kind of music in virtually any setting.

The print media also play to a segmented market. In addition to many well-known national magazines and national or regional newspapers, the print media include a thriving alternative press comprising magazines (some published on the Web, where they may be called “webzines”) aimed at people in specific categories—butterfly collectors, square dancers, nudists, followers of Eastern spiritual disciplines, and on and on.

The Web also thrives on Americans’ devotion to individuality. People establish their own—often very idiosyncratic—home pages. They visit chat rooms where they can express their views anonymously. They join “social networks” where they can be in electronic contact with “friends” all over the world. They seek out information on arcane topics and shop for virtually anything without having to interact with anyone.

As the Web has grown in scale and scope, it has partially replaced traditional print media as Americans’ main source of news and opinion. Indeed, the future of these traditional media remains quite uncertain. The traditional media have lost audiences and thus have lost the advertising revenue that once supported them. Traditional news sources—network radio and television stations, newspapers, and magazines—have dramatically reduced their staffs, particularly their staffs for covering overseas news. Some long-established newspapers and magazines have gone out of business.

Some commentators have suggested that the government subsidize selected news outlets, on the theory that good citizenship requires access to current and sophisticated information about current events and issues. But in the context of Americans’ general distrust of government, these sug-

gestions are considered quite radical and receive little if any consideration from people who might be in a position to enact them.

AMERICANS' VIEWS OF THEIR MEDIA

In America, as in other countries, consumers vote with their dollars. If a motion-picture producer makes a science-fiction movie featuring creatures that visit the earth from outer space and the movie attracts large audiences, then there will be more movies with a similar theme. If a newspaper sells larger numbers of copies when it begins carrying more articles about politicians' sex lives and fewer articles about separatist tendencies in Indonesia (or even the American state of Texas), the newspaper will carry more of the former and less of the latter.

American consumers also vote by responding to surveys. Media outlets regularly poll audiences to find out what people are watching, reading, or listening to so they can determine what potential audiences want. As stated previously, a program with a low audience rating, no matter how critically acclaimed, soon disappears.

Thus, American audiences can be said to get what they want from their media. That American movies, television programs, and performers are so popular elsewhere suggests that what the American public wants does not differ dramatically from what audiences elsewhere want. In fact, some media analysts believe that one of the reasons American film studios make so many sexually explicit and violent, action-oriented movies is because these movies appeal to the widest possible audience (or the "lowest common denominator," as some critics put it), both in the United States and abroad.

This is not to say that all Americans are satisfied with the quality of their television, radio, and newspapers. They are not. Some Americans criticize their media, especially television, for being racist and classist (by showing only middle- and upper-middle-class European American people as responsible, important individuals), sexist (by portraying women as sex objects rather than as whole human beings), and violent.

Members of the American public have organized to protest what they consider to be objectionable aspects of the media, including the amount of

violence and sex portrayed on television during the evening hours, the practice of directing advertising toward children (a topic discussed in chapter 6), and the allegedly racist, misogynist, and anarchic lyrics of some rock and rap musicians.

Some Americans (including some media executives) praise radio and television for providing huge amounts of free or inexpensive entertainment for the American people and for giving Americans common experiences that create bonds of understanding among them. This argument has lost virtually all its force in the face of the audience segmentation mentioned earlier. Before cable and satellite television became available, and before the Web's explosive growth, generations of Americans listened to the same songs, watched the same television programs, and went to the same movies. They did indeed have common experiences to respond to and discuss. Now, though, the media may do as much to divide as to unite the population.

Professional critics in the quality media argue that there is a larger audience for quality programming than the media decision makers, especially those in television and newspapers, recognize or admit. Such critics believe that television and many newspapers pander to uninformed opinion and unsophisticated tastes and should try to elevate the intellectual level of their products. They criticize the media for providing only superficial treatment of complex topics and events and for distracting Americans from important issues. For example, during times of national crisis, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the decline in value of the U.S. dollar, some Americans feel the need to turn to the independent or foreign press for more thoughtful coverage of international developments.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that many high-quality programs do in fact appear on television, even if they are difficult to find amidst the more trivial broadcasts. They applaud noncommercial public radio and television networks (NPR and PBS, respectively), which are supported primarily by corporate sponsorships and individual donations rather than by advertising revenue (or the government), for at least attempting to provide "serious" entertainment programs and in-depth analysis of current issues.

They also recognize that some news sources (for example, the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*) provide substantive coverage and

commentary on current and international affairs. So do some magazines. The so-called “serious magazines” often have their own political stances, from conservative (*National Review*, *The New Republic*) to liberal (*The Nation*, *Mother Jones*).

These and other magazines, like the country’s major newspapers, have websites that have increasingly become important sources of news and commentary, as have several websites that are independent of any print publication. Examples of the latter are the *Huffington Post* (liberal) and the *Drudge Report* (conservative).

MISCONCEPTIONS THE MEDIA PROMOTE

A foreign graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh was unhappy about his housing arrangements. He had come to Pittsburgh with the hope that he would be able to live in an apartment like the one he had seen portrayed in a popular American movie. In that movie the main male actor had taken a job as the manager of a small apartment complex. The apartments were modest, clean, and attractive. There was a swimming pool on the grounds. Most of the tenants were beautiful, single women, who frequently sat around the pool after work in skimpy bathing suits and who were free with their sexual favors.

The student did not find such a place to live in Pittsburgh. Nor would he have likely found one anywhere else in the States. The movie had encouraged some false expectations about people and their lifestyles in this country. Modest, clean, and attractive apartments are indeed available (although not usually near universities), and many have swimming pools. But the addition of the many beautiful, available women (who spend most of their free time socializing with the apartment manager!) took the story into the land of fantasy.

The movie was not intended to mislead foreigners, of course. Its purpose was to earn money, which means it had to attract audiences in America and possibly in other countries as well. American audiences are drawn to novelty, glamour (as they themselves define it), and action. They view their movies and television programs in the context of their own real-life

experiences, so they have information on the basis of which to interpret them more or less accurately. Most Americans will know, for example, that apartment complexes like the one the graduate student sought exist “only in the movies.”

People abroad who see American films and television programs and who read American publications do not have the same context for understanding what they see and read. They inevitably relate American media products to their own experiences in their own countries, and the result is often misunderstanding and misconception.

One of the main misconceptions TV and movies unintentionally convey abroad is that many American women are readily available for sexual activity. Others:

- The United States comprises New York City, Los Angeles (or Hollywood), San Francisco, Chicago, Las Vegas, Disneyland, and Texas.
- Most American women are beautiful (according to contemporary Western standards), and most American men are handsome (according to the same standards). Those who are not beautiful or handsome are criminals, deceitful people, or members of the lower class.
- Average Americans are rich and usually do not have to work (or do not have to work very hard) to earn money.
- Average Americans live in large, modern houses or apartments.
- Most things in America are large, modern, and shiny.
- There is a stratum of American society in which most people are non-white, physically unattractive, uneducated, and dedicated to violence.
- Violent crime is an ever-present threat in all parts of the country.
- Most Americans have guns.
- High-speed automobile chases frequently occur on American streets.
- Non-European American people are inferior to European American people.

International visitors who come to the United States with open minds will see for themselves that these images are inaccurate. Such visitors are well advised to take stock of the ideas they have about America from TV shows and movies they have seen, and then to consider carefully how well those ideas fit with what they actually see and hear in this country.

International visitors sometimes comment on the American media's treatment of international news. One visitor from India was particularly dismayed by what he perceived as a lack of coverage about his country on American television networks. "How will Americans ever learn about the world outside the United States when all they ever see on television are stories about Americans?" This criticism is often echoed by international observers and was borne out following the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when it became clear how little most Americans knew about their country's behavior in other countries, about the Islamic faith, about the Arab world, and about conditions in Central Asia. It also became clear how little Americans knew about others' perceptions of them.

In recent years, the widespread availability of the Internet and cable television has afforded access to a wide variety of media. Foreign visitors frequently use these sources to learn about developments in their own countries.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

Foreigners visiting the United States for any length of time are encouraged to explore the many types of music, movies, television programs, and periodicals available in the communities where they live. Finding out which songs, movies, TV programs, websites, newspapers, and magazines are popular in a particular city or region can provide valuable insights into the prevailing social or political viewpoints. Many cities have annual film festivals featuring small, independent films and documentaries that offer different views of American life from those presented in Hollywood movies. Local and regional music festivals are also common.

International visitors with a more general interest in the American entertainment industry can find ratings and commentary on many Internet sites. They can talk with Americans they meet about their viewpoints and preferences. They will find that most Americans enjoy discussing their favorite music, movies, television shows, and performers.

AMERICAN WAYS

Sophisticated analysis and commentary about the media's performance are available from several sources, including:

- *Columbia Journalism Review* (www.columbiajournalismreview.com)
- Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (www.journalism.org)
- Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (www.fair.org/index.php?page=4), which, in addition to its website, publishes a magazine called *Extra!*

International visitors wanting assistance in identifying television programs that might interest them can refer to the television review pages of major newspapers (especially the Sunday editions) and to the magazine called *TV Guide*.