Civics Chapter 12 Lesson 2

The Influence of the Media

If you are like most Americans, you get your news from one or more forms of mass media: radio, podcasts, newspaper, news shows, evening news, or the Internet. In the US the mass media plays a key role in informing people about the issues. They also influence government. Finally, the media link the people to elected officials.

Two types of media sources:

1. Print media (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and books)
2. Electronic media (Internet, radio, and TV)

Most American media outlets are private businesses. They are run to make a profit. Media managers often decide what to publish based on what will attract the most viewers, listeners, or readers. The larger the audience, the more the media can charge advertisers. This fact shapes what the media cover.

Influencing the Public Agenda

The government deals with many problems and issues. The public agenda is made up of the issues that receive the most time, money, and effort from the government. The media can influence which problems officials regard as important.

Covering Candidates and Officials

The mass media can also influence who runs for office. Usually candidates are experienced politicians. Some candidates, though, are people who are famous in another field.

Reporters and politicians have a complex relationship. They need each other. Reporters need to write articles and political leaders need media coverage to get their message out. At the same time, the two groups often clash.

Officials try to use the media to their advantage. They may leak, or secretly pass on, information to reporters. They may do this to test the public’s response to a proposal before they openly acknowledge that they are considering it. If the public reacts well, officials might act on the idea. If the public reacts negatively they may drop it. Politicians also use leaks to shape public opinion on an issue, or to gain favor with a reporter.

At the same time, reporters can present news in ways that show an official in a bad light. They can ask tough questions and the positions they take. Politicians sometimes try to avoid this difficulty by refusing to answer questions.

Watchdog Role

The mass media also play a crucial “watchdog” role. That means keeping a close eye on government activities. Journalists write stories exposing government waste and corruption. These stories attract a large audience.

Media and National Security

Americans need to stay informed. The government must keep some secrets for national security reasons. They can classify, or label, some information as secret. This information becomes off limits to reporters.

The government can use other methods to try and shape the news. They may accompany troops into battle for example.

Protecting the Press

The Framers protected the press by passing the first amendment. Congress may not pass any law that would limit the freedom of the press. This covers all forms of media.

The media is free from prior restraint, the censorship of material before it is published. Reporters and editors are free to decide what they will say, even if it is unpopular.

Freedom Within Limits

Freedom of the press is not unlimited. The government can keep some information secret. Also, no one is free to publish false information that will harm another person’s reputation. This is called libel. Anyone who believes a written story has harmed him or her may sue the publisher for libel. Government officials rarely win libel lawsuits. In New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964), the Supreme Court ruled in a libel case. It said that public officials must prove actual malice, or evil intent, to win a libel suit. The official must that the publisher either knew the material was false or showed a reckless disregard for the truth.

The media also have some other protections. Gathering news may depend on getting facts from people who do not want to have their names made public. The press and government have fought many battles over reporters’ right to keep sources secret. Most states have shield laws that protect reporters from having to reveal their sources.

Regulating the Media

The federal government does have ways to regulate the broadcast media. The government decides who can use the limited airwaves for radio and TV broadcasting. In order to receive a license that allows them to broadcast, companies must meet certain standards. For example, a portion of their programming must be devoted to covering public affairs, usually through news programs. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversees broadcasters. The FCC is a regulatory, or managing, agency. It cannot censor broadcasts, but it can punish stations that break its rules. Fines for breaking rules can run to several thousand dollars, so stations are careful about what people say and do on the air. For example, stations edit out words that break FCC rules.