

Just about everyone watches TV, browses the Internet, and makes judgements based off what they hear, read or see. People often may think: “This anchor has good hair, I like this channel”, or “This site is so cluttered with ads, nevermind what it says”. However, how much of what we take in that is actually pure from the literal information is questionable. When I watch national news, I may notice that a lot of the content wasn't even really news at all, but more like national gossip of events and people (Consider the Kardashians, English Royalty). Or even if it was, the focus wasn't entirely on the information but more on the medium. Many news channels use a wall of flat screen TVs to display information, even holograms in some cases, and a plethora of CGI transitions. I knew it made a lot of people want to watch it, but it really didn't seem right for a "news" channel. With this slow-cooked curiosity over the years I took the opportunity of the Capstone to write on the subject of media and its hold over viewers.

I always knew that media had a big impact on the public, and who wouldn't? I knew that Vietnam disapproval came from press footage of the war, and wars had always been fueled by propaganda messages as well. However, I only knew a few examples as such off the top of my head, leaving me with my main question: In what ways specifically has or does media affect people? I know, it's an incredibly broad question that would need an incredibly broad answer. To get my footing in this subject I decided to read *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman after some google searching pointed me toward this book. I hoped I would be able to answer this question after, but instead I found myself still scratching my head a bit. Postman essentially argued that television has transformed news into entertainment, cause people to form opinions rather than actions, and that how information is delivered will inherently create a viewer bias. After reading, I'd say it has only given me the broad answer I was expecting. Postman seems to

point that mass media has only filled society with frivolous information in forms of entertainment, and in a sense made society as a collective mind, dumber/amused to death. But I refuse to make such a quick judgement after a single summer reading book, and believe that in a world where we can access the internet from our pockets that we have become less intelligent. Postman's argument did make me wonder why we as a society couldn't have actually become smarter since we have more and greater access to information than people of the 1900s that he compared to. That left me only to wonder if people have simply become more permeable/mendable to the vast amounts of data.

That being said, it would be nice to know exactly how Postman was comparing modern society to 19th century's. During the 20th century, the inventions of television, internet, and other mediums and their effect on society's views and opinions were relatively new and more hypothesized than observed compared to today's world. Interestingly, there were people who considered and predicted how society was changing from their present to ours, one of these being Postman. Postman wrote several books on the matter of humans becoming too dependent on information and media that was fed to them. He argued that television had taken the meaning of many messages (political largely) and made people focus more on the superficial aspects (for example: suggesting President Taft could not have been elected if everyone saw how heavy he was). Postman compared society to that of George Orwell's 1984, except suggesting that it was actually the opposite. Postman believed that society would be filled with an overwhelming amount of irrelevant information, to the point where no one would know what was truth.

Postman is not the only person that would benefit my research, as the next person I'd like to bring back from the grave would be Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). McLuhan was a pioneer

of media studies. Along with predicting the internet 30 years prior to its conception, he coined the phrase "The medium is the message"<sup>1</sup>. What he meant by this was that in an example of news on TV, the message of the news is not the news stories themselves, but the change in the public's opinion toward events and crime. Or in the case of a political debate, it's not what the candidates say so much, but people tend to focus more on how they dress and look when on TV. I think I would like to ask him what is predictions of the future will be regarding the next medium of information, and if it will continue the trend of misleading society.

Lastly, Harold Innis (1894-1952) is the final person I'd like to resurrect as he brought forth some of the earliest realizations of how even basic forms of media carried through societies. He created the categories of time and space communication, which isn't as cool as it sounds, but is still neat within the topic of communication. Time communication is essentially things like tablets and scriptures that carry a message over thousands (or at least a very long time) of years and are accessed by many people over time. Space communication is the opposite, with an example being a TV broadcast that a very large amount of people access at once, but then don't see so much afterwards. He applied this idea to civilizations, with empires such as Egypt ruling with hierarchy because they used "time" communications, and the Romans using "space" communications with papers and ruled in a more centralized manner. Unfortunately, all these people as you may with vast knowledge on the subject, as you may have noticed, are very dead. But, that does not mean there are no more valid experts on society's dependence on media.

Among the present professionals is Douglas Rushkoff, a modern media theorist. He promotes a counter to what Neil Postman feared which was a society that can't see past what the

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<sup>1</sup> Postman, Neil. "The Medium Is the Metaphor." *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Viking, 1985. Print.

media says. Many of his works tell readers to rather think and analyze what is told to them instead of simply taking it in as fact. In addition, Rushkoff has looked at how even money has transformed society into a corporate culture over time. He focuses on company's advertisements that try to instill impulsive reactions among people to buy and spend. If I could meet Rushkoff, I would like to ask him if he believes that people are inherently malleable to ideas of consumerism and if he thinks that society will only get easier to coerce as communication continues to expand.

The next modern expert would naturally be someone who is/was part of the medium to the population. Jon Stewart, former host of The Daily Show, would be a prime example. I believe that he among all people, would understand the relationship between people and media coverage. Jon Stewart was in a unique position which was that he often communicated the message of self thought or challenging what was told on other media outlets, while relying on his own medium of media in order to do so. It would also be great to ask him if he thinks that society's mindlessness to media will be reversible, whether it be through his former show or others like John Oliver. In addition, I'd like to ask him if he believes that his viewers are any different than those of Fox (aside from their beliefs of course), in the sense that they simply watched his show for the entertainment and not to actually think for themselves but to devour what he says and jokes about. Lastly, it would be very interesting to speak to Barack Obama, or any living president of The United States. This is because I'm curious as to how much goes into the color of their tie or suit and the specific words they chose to use in speeches and debates all in the concern of public broadcast. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, it discusses the differences of presidential debates from the "age of reason" (1900s) and today as back then most people didn't even know what the president looked like, and relying only on what they actually said. Today,

so much more is factored in when people look at candidates. In fact, a lot of it is just looks, and not purely what is said anymore. If I ever did meet a president, I would ask if they believed that a modern politician would ever survive during the age of reasoning.

At this point in my brainstorming my focus became obvious to me. While it would be excruciatingly challenging and likely impossible for me to discuss media and its effect on society as a whole, I can emphasize how politics and media have grown together in the last century. Radio, Television, and Social Media have developed over the course of the 20th and 21st century, and it would be my primary interest to see how it has affected past presidential elections, and how it will in the future for 2016.