

大学生英语阅读系列丛书

# 媒体文粹

主编 张卫平

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# 第一篇 美国的新闻媒体

## 1. The American Press

### 美国新闻业

*An introduction to the current situation of the American communications industry viewed as a business, a public trust, which is largely unregulated and generally nonideological.*

The communications industry is the largest private sector<sup>1</sup> employer in the United States, and the news media make up the largest part of that industry. Generating information, not just delivering it, is a growth business in the United States.

The American news business used to be a largely domestic enterprise, but no longer. Satellite delivery of 24-hour Cable News Network<sup>2</sup> broadcasts and same-day publication of the Wall Street Journal in Asia and Europe are *symptomatic* of the U. S. media's new global reach.

Change has occurred in other aspects of the industry besides

mere growth, however. American journalism itself has undergone a fundamental transformation in recent years, partly as a result of new technology and partly as a result of the changes in the society it has chosen to mirror. This is not surprising, since change itself is a *hallmark* of American culture. Whether it chooses to call itself an observer or not, the American news industry is a *full-fledged* participant in that culture, as well as in its country's democratic political system and its free-market economy.

Protected by government interference by a brief, 200-year-old clause in the American constitution, the press has emerged as the self-appointed monitor of official life, recorder of public events, and even unofficial *arbiter* of public behavior. The U. S. news industry is also a very big business. Daily newspapers alone generate some \$ 32 billion in advertising revenue a year. Magazines — and there are more than 11000 of them — circulate more copies than there are Americans to read them. Every household has at least three radios, and more than 95 percent own televisions.

Needless to say, the press was not always such a mass medium. The American press started in the 18th century as a small instrument of the *literate* elite and an unapologetic participant in *partisan* politics. It was a pamphleteering press<sup>3</sup>, operated by colonial postmasters and *opinionated* printers. It was not for at least another century that the American press had transformed itself into a fairly nonideological communications instrument, in step with the desires, dynamism, and diversity of the country itself<sup>4</sup>.

But in spite of change, the American press has maintained two fundamental constants over the past two centuries: (1) its independence from government, and (2) its reliance on public acceptance —

if not approval — for its financial survival.

Today, the press is better known as the media — the plural for “medium” and a reflection of its many components in the electronic age. For it is no longer the written word but sight and sound that dominate the communications industry.

Some recent studies claim that 65 percent of Americans depend on television for their daily diet of news<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, that statistic can be misleading because it assumes that television fully satisfies the public’s appetite for news. Within that same 65 percent there are many who read newspapers and magazines, listen to the radio, and receive a vast *array* of *newsletters* and *brochures* (much of it unsolicited advertising in their mailboxes). Now they must deal with the newest member of the communications family: the fax. Add the VCR<sup>6</sup>, computerized mail, and something called *interactive* video<sup>7</sup>, and it is no wonder Americans complain about “no time in the day” to do all the things they want or need to do.

One of the consequences of all these choices is increased competition in the information and advertising marketplace for a person’s attention, and this competition has helped *blur* the once-clear line between information, entertainment, and commerce. Journalism is no longer quite so easy to define as it was just a decade ago. The American news business is currently facing what the *psychiatric* profession calls an “identity crisis”<sup>8</sup>. This is particularly true in the newspaper industry, which is watching its role (and its revenue) shrink in the electronic age. Connected with this is the concern, as well as some evidence, that America’s reading habit is *diminishing*, largely as a result of television and home video.

But it is highly premature to sound a funeral song for the print



media. Nearly every American town of any size (10000 population or more) still has its own newspaper and access to a *metropolitan* daily as well.

The story of the American press is a complex one, reflecting the *pluralism* of the country itself. A favored description is diversity. Nevertheless, there are some common threads that bind the media in the United States. Here are some of the most important of its common *traits*:

- ◆ The American news industry is a **business**.
- ◆ The industry views itself as a **public trust**.
- ◆ The news industry is largely **unregulated**.
- ◆ There is no uniform **definition of news**.
- ◆ The mainstream press is generally **nonideological**.
- ◆ America's press tradition is community based.

**A Business:** The American press and broadcast industries are mostly profit-seeking enterprises and must be financially healthy in order to survive. Only a small percentage are *subsidized* (less than 20 percent of the broadcast industry, less than 1 percent of the print media). Most depend upon commercial advertising for the *bulk* of their income — about 75 percent. In 1991, the media overall earned \$ 130 billion in advertising revenue.

A newspaper owner/publisher is often more a business person than a journalist, while the editor is usually the keeper of the paper's news mission. The publisher, who has the ultimate say in what the product looks like, may not want to carry news that will hurt his business, while the editor in the American system is usually ruled by

the *dictum*: “If it’s news, publish it.” In the best of the business, the publisher gives the editor ultimate authority over the news.

One of the ways in which the information side of the industry guards itself against the profit motive conflict is by clearly separating the business department from the news department, insulating each from the influence of the other<sup>9</sup>. Recently, however, this traditional insulation has broken down to some degree as newspapers, news magazines, and broadcast news programs have stepped up the fight to gain more “market share”.

With so many media outlets and new opportunities for advertisers to reach consumers in other ways, media competition for the advertising dollar is fierce. Critics say this heavily contributes to a policy of *pandering* to an audience’s desires and *prurient* tastes, rather than to the audience’s needs. Supporters of the system say, on the other hand, that attention to one’s marketplace is the most effective way of serving the public, and that the role of the press is not to dictate or lecture to its audience.

At the heart of this new devotion to “customer service” is the coming of group ownership and the decline of innercommunity newspaper competition. The result is a more *homogenous* industry. Most “family-owned” newspapers and local broadcast stations have been purchased by large media *conglomerates*, and this has unfavorably affected individuality — a trend in non-media industries as well.

The overwhelming standard for success in America’s group-owned media is profitability. This, coupled with the fear that Americans are spending less time reading the news, has radically changed the look of the American paper. Following a format started by the Gannett-owned USA Today<sup>10</sup>, most newspapers have intro-

duced more color, eye-catching graphics, shorter stories, and more entertainment news to appeal to the television generation.

This is not to suggest that group ownership and a growing *pre-occupation* with profitability are *intrinsically* harmful to journalism. As ironic as it may seem, some of the most profitable news organizations are also the best ones because they have used their expanding income to finance better quality coverage. As with other wide-open press systems, the *recurrent* accusation that the mass media engage in sensationalism in order “to sell newspapers” is a difficult charge to *refute*. But it is important to note that the American working journalist is not concerned about the employer’s profits; getting on the front page, yes, but selling newspapers, no. And what appears in the news columns of today’s papers is still largely the *purview* of working journalists, not business people.

**A Public Trust:** Treating itself as both a business and a public trust can cause conflict, if not confusion, within the news industry, not to mention in the eyes of the public.

Nevertheless, the “public’s right to know” remains at the core of America’s free-press philosophy and guides the way it conducts itself, particularly in relations with government. Some call this relationship “adversarial”<sup>11</sup>. Others prefer to think of it more favorably as simply a monitoring role, without the influence of opposition.

It is a relationship in which officials try to tell their version of events or avoid publicity altogether, while the press looks for mistakes and fights attempts to *suppress* information<sup>12</sup>. Largely in response to pressure from the media, a number of state legislatures<sup>13</sup> have passed “sunshine” laws that require government meetings to be held in public. There is also a federal Freedom of Information Act

(FOIA)<sup>14</sup>, which gives requesting citizens — usually journalists — access to government records and documents not classified for security reasons.

In short, the American press enjoys its role as the “watchdog of government”. The power that comes from this largely self-appointed role has earned the press the honorific title “the fourth estate”, after the three official branches of government (*legislative*, judicial, and executive).<sup>15</sup> It is also this role that prompted Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of American democracy, to say some 200 years ago that if he had to choose between government without newspapers or newspapers without government, he “should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter”.

It was this vision of how a democracy should work that prompted the framers of the U. S. Constitution to make free expression the first *amendment* of this *charter's* “Bill of Rights”. In reality, the amendment simply said that Congress cannot enact a law *infringing* free speech or a free press. That brief clause has been the beacon and the shield for the American press for over two centuries, but it is not carved in stone for *eternity*. It is tested almost daily in the courts, on the streets, and in the corridors of power. So far, this First Amendment protection has withstood these tests.

As part of this protection, the American news media enjoy a certain *immunity* from official *reprisal*. It is extremely difficult, for example, for a public official to win a *libel* suit against the media, because the courts have *ruled* that government servants must be open to special *scrutiny* and *accountability* in a democratic system. American journalists have also won a number of battles to protect the *anonymity* of news sources from government inquiry,

but that war periodically breaks out.

One area of continuing uncertainty is that of national security and government secrecy. Historically, American journalists have enjoyed more *latitude* in this *arena* than, for example, the British press. Periodically, the federal government warns journalists they can be *prosecuted* under existing law for compromising American intelligence-gathering efforts. But this has not been seriously enforced or pursued in recent years.

The American media is far more vulnerable to legal action from private citizens, whose right to privacy can be in direct confrontation with what the press calls the public's "right to know". Libel is a civil rather than a criminal offense in the United States, but the enormous size of monetary awards and punishments *levied* by the courts in recent years has had a "chilling" effect on journalistic enterprise, according to many in the news industry.

The increase in libel suits is just one example of what the American press perceives as diminishing support from the public. A 1991 survey by the American Society of News Editors indicated that more than a quarter of the public polled would not support any protection for the press if the Constitution were voted on today, and less than half of those polled would give it some protection. This is a reflection of negative views of the media as arrogant, biased, inaccurate, and *intrusive*.

Credibility surveys vary on the question of who the American people trust more — their press or their government. The answer varies with time and circumstance. Following the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, the press enjoyed a high degree of public confidence. But following scandal coverage that led to a senator's with-

drawal from the 1988 presidential race, the press came under sharp criticism on charges of exceeding the bounds of good taste and privacy.

In general, the American press believes that too many citizens confuse media self-interest with the public interest. While journalists worry about these perceptions, they tend to see them more as a public relations challenge than a *mandate* for significant change.

**Unregulated:** A serious publication like the New York Times and a fictional *tabloid* sold in supermarkets both call themselves newspapers. There is no law, no government agency, and no person to say otherwise, because there is no licensing requirement for newspapers to operate and no enforceable definition of what constitutes a legal news publication.

In addition, the American news industry and journalistic profession do not regulate themselves in the same sense as the legal and medical professions do, for example. The press does not require minimum standards for membership, does not issue or *revoke* licenses, and does not regulate professional standards. Rather, each news organization and journalist association *adheres* to its own codes and standards.

The decision as to whether one is eligible and qualified to be a journalist in America is also solely up to the employer. However, more and more American journalists are graduates of journalism schools, a trend that helps standardize minimum qualifications throughout the country.

Despite the individualism and diversity, there is a remarkable similarity of values and practices in the mainstream news industry. These values stress the importance of public service, *impartial* re-

porting, and balance of opinion. Most American newspapers also take pains to separate information from opinion by clearly differentiating the news columns from the *editorial* section.

Although there is no official regulation of the press, there are unofficial "checks" and "balances" against journalistic excess, both outside and inside the industry. The external checks include libel laws and self-appointed press monitors. Competition also tends to help keep news organizations "honest". The internal checks include the appointment by some newspapers of an "*ombudsman*" to investigate public complaints, publish self-criticism, and enforce internal standards.

Different from the print media, the broadcast media in the United States require a government (federal) license to operate, because the space-limited airwaves are regarded as public property. There are, however, safeguards against political *discrimination* in the licensing process, and there have been remarkably few examples of ideological or political bias in issuing or revoking licenses. Government decisions on broadcast licensing are primarily aimed at ensuring competition and diversity.

**News:** There is no universally accepted definition or set of definitions for "news" in the American media. This is because there is no single role designated for the press. Among the roles the American press has chosen for itself are to inform, to educate, to reform, to entertain, to stimulate, or all of the above.

Within a broad range of definitions, however, there is general agreement as to what is newsworthy and what is not. The most prevalent characteristics include: the activity of officials and celebrities; government action of any kind; events that are new or bizarre

(such as crime and disaster); revelations that are *titillating* or shocking (involving sex and scandal); and new social trends.

Emphasis on the unusual is a *mainstay* of modern American journalism, explained by the saying: "If dog bites man, it is not news; if man bites dog, that's news." The public tends to have a love-hate relationship with this definition. On one hand, the audience is entertained or provoked by the news; on the other hand, it is resentful that "normal life" tends to be ignored.

There was a time in America when few would argue with the *cantankerous* editor who declared: "News is what I say it is." With renewed attention to the desires of the buying public, such editors are hard to find today.

In an effort to be more useful and relevant to the buyer, one of the most successful innovations in recent years has been to *enlist* the press in the cause of consumer service — investigating buyer complaints, exposing business fraud, and offering marketplace advice.

Perhaps the greatest source of pride in American journalism is the tradition of investigative reporting, largely aimed at exposing abuses of power. The Pulitzer Prize, the most popular award in American journalism, is given annually for superior investigation and public service. In recent years, the business community has come under the kind of press scrutiny that was traditionally reserved for government, even though access to business information is usually harder to obtain.

**Nonideological:** During this century, the mainstream media in the United States have remained largely non-ideological. Very few mass-circulation papers, magazines, and broadcast stations are *affiliated* with political organizations, parties, or movements. It was



not always so, but purposeful nonaffiliation has been a hallmark of the American press for more than a century. This characteristic — both a source of professional pride and a result of economic self-sufficiency — is one of the main features that distinguishes the American press from many others around the world.

Although most papers, and some stations, voice a political preference in their editorials, news reporting is generally nonpartisan. Editorial opinion is often based on the merits of an issue, and it is not unusual for these opinions to *stray* outside a particular ideological framework.

Not everyone believes the American press is free of ideology. Conservative critics say the American news media — particularly those based in New York and Washington — reflect a “liberal bias”. By that they generally mean that the press is too quick to criticize authority and does not support America’s interests.

Left-of-center critics, on the other hand, accuse the press of government *cronyism* and uncritical reporting about Washington’s policies and practices. American journalists tend to feel most comfortable when attacked by both sides of the ideological *spectrum*. They believe it confirms their impartiality.

In fact, there is a pattern of political preference within the news industry, though undeclared. Studies have shown that American reporters tend to be more liberal than editors and program directors, who, in turn, tend to be more liberal than publishers and station owners. These leanings may rarely be visible to the public, but instead are part of the dynamic tension that *permeates* the American newsroom.

Traditionally, the U. S. government has stayed out of the news