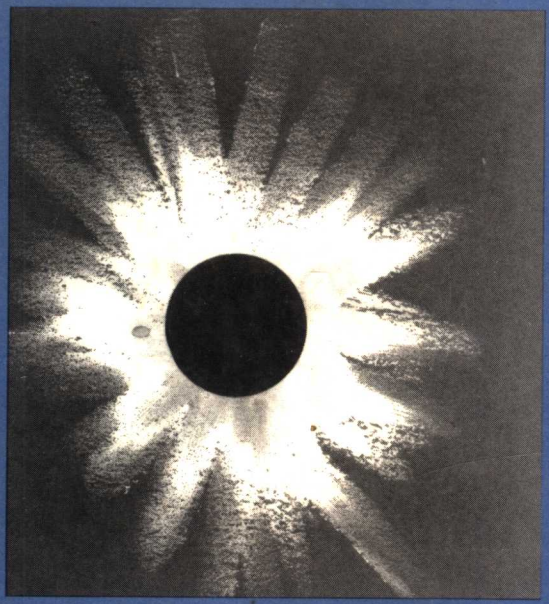
Reshaping the Media

Mass Communication in an Information Age



Everette E. Dennis

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Preface

Anyone who administers an institute for advanced study is eventually asked to be a sense-maker, to provide a holistic picture that integrates fragments of singular instance into a coherent whole. As the head of the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, I am frequently asked to explain what our inquiries into the media, their operations and audiences add up to. I do so in books, articles, speeches, and lectures as well as media interviews in an effort to keep track of the great issues, the central forces that bind media and people together. These efforts at sense-making have ranged from 20-40 second sound bites on network television to much longer presentations where I try to provide context and background for breaking stories about the media and public life.

Since 1984, requests for comment, in both short and long form, have taken me to other continents, scores of great universities and professional meetings and other forums. I have spoken at the Smithsonian Institution, presidential libraries, national conferences, press clubs, and civic groups. It has always been my goal to connect two kinds of knowledge—that gained by acquaintance with the media industries and that which has emerged from the work of media scholars—with media issues and problems of consequence to the public. Sometimes I get to choose my own topic; other times, I respond to requests from my hosts. I am guided by a conversation I had long ago with Dr. Karl Menninger, the eminent psychiatrist, who explained that he spoke only on topics he felt comfortable with, where he had enough knowledge to make sensible connections.

I have the good fortune to work in an environment where I am continuously learning. The Gannett Center attracts as fellows scholars and professionals who are among the world's experts in their respective fields. It is an international crossroads for visitors from scores of countries who come

to get and impart information. And most importantly, we have an energetic and enthusiastic staff guiding and nurturing any and all work that emerges from our various programs.

Although I have spoken and written for many audiences from those communicated by satellite internationally to those that reached only a few people, most of these presentations have not reached the vast majority of people who are interested in communication media and issues. Author and press critic Alfred Balk has warned that media think tanks and study programs can become monastic cells unless they make a great effort to communicate their work to others. At the Gannett Center we do that daily in responding to calls from the media, through a lively publication program, mailings, correspondence; and by occasionally inviting the cable service C-SPAN to our conferences, meetings, and seminars. Still there is much good material that reaches a limited audience.

With that in mind, I have prepared this book based mostly on speeches, lectures, and columns, but substantially reworked and edited. There has been much help from Craig Fisher-LaMay, the Gannett Center's editorial manager, whose knowledge of communication and skill as an editor I value greatly.

My thanks go also to Eugene Dorsey, president of the Gannett Foundation; Gerald M. Sass, my immediate boss and the Foundation's vice president for education. I have benefited greatly from conversations with the 53 persons who have held fellowships at the Gannett Center, with many faculty members and administrative colleagues at Columbia University and from contact with scores of people in the news media as well as ordinary citizens who have come to my lectures and speeches. To all these people and others I am grateful. All but one of the essays are my own and appeared originally under my byline. The one exception is an essay in Chapter 2, "Walter Lippman and the American Century Revisited," which was co-authored with William A. Henry III of *Time* and Huntington Williams III of the *Gannett Center Journal.* At the Gannett Center, my former and current executive assistants, Mikki Morrissette Neff and Jackie Fleischer, deserve much credit for helping me navigate these essays betwixt and between other obligations and work.

—Everette E. Dennis
New York City

1

Sea Changes for the Media

A Coming of Age

The call which came from a woman who had been interviewed by the CBS News program *West 57th* was one of scores I have received in recent years from people eager to respond to or converse with the news media. This caller, a surrogate mother who felt she had been misrepresented, wondered how she could most effectively give her side to a story that had caused her emotional distress along with embarrassment among her friends and neighbors, not to mention millions of citizens elsewhere who heretofore had not been aware of her.

This and other conversations reinforce what studies of public attitudes toward the news media reveal: that public knowledge about the news media is modest indeed and that people are increasingly frustrated by their inability to interact with an institution they believe casts a large shadow across our national life. Scholars say the mass media influence our thinking and decisionmaking as individuals as well as great national or global institutions. Ordinary citizens often attribute more "power" to the mass media than do scholars who make their judgments not on limited personal observations, but on systematic study. Connections between scholars who study the media, people who actually lead and operate the media and the general public who consume the media product are rarely made. And a

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This essay was first delivered as a speech before the Council for Advancement and Support of Education at its annual meeting, San Antonio, Texas, July, 1986.

more precise look at "the public," persons with no apparent vested interest in knowing about or understanding media per se, reveals many knowledgeable opinion leaders in institutions ranging from the arts and business to the law and education who care very deeply about media issues and whose minds hunger for more information. In the midst of mixed views about the media—whether they are generally a positive or negative force in society—there is almost universal agreement that the media are more important than we have heretofore thought.

For many years knowledge about the mass media in all of their forms (newspapers, television, book publishing, etc.) and in all of their functions (information, opinion, entertainment, advertising) has been generated by various media professionals, critics, scholars and other commentators. This information, until recently, got little attention in the popular press or in media channels most available to the general public. And while industry leaders and professionals discussed and debated their problems it was usually behind closed doors at conventions. The scholarly community was of several minds on what is currently called media studies. In the 1930s and 1940s researchers from several fields probed and explored the media. By the 1950s for a variety of reasons that interest flagged and the torch was held mostly by communication scholars and journalism professors. The relative status and "importance" of the media, vis–à–vis other social forces, was not highly regarded. Now, that seems to have changed. There is a lively field of media studies in American universities, although its reach is still fairly limited; the media themselves are more introspective and more given to self-assessment. This has led to an active field of media criticism easily accessible to the public in newspapers, magazines and on television. Citizen leaders in various fields who have a strong interest in the media are also part of an awakening audience that is asking questions, making critical comments, and sometimes calling for action, usually legal or governmental intervention.

The woman who called me to talk about the treatment she got from CBS News wanted to know how the mass news media work, how much influence they have, how she could make personal contact and be heard, and whether she ought to file a law suit. She was a very active and attentive media consumer. In our conversation without knowing whether her grievance was justified or not, I found myself making a map as I explained how media organizations work, the relationship between a national network and local stations, the link between ownership and daily decisions, and the limited nature of public feedback.

That conversation, and others over recent years, convinced me of the importance of the need for a public dialogue between the media and the people, one that underscores the role of freedom of expression in a democratic society, but also one that realistically confronts the "manufacturing process" that brings information, entertainment, and advertising to the public.

Although we have been communicating even before early peoples made drawing on the walls of caves, the intensity of media influence in our lives has altered largely in response to changing conditions in society, whether fueled by economic upheavals, political transitions, or technological innovation. Whether we are talking about the impact of the telegraph, telephone, or television on our lives, individually or in some national collective sense, we are locating the "media variable" amid various currents and forces which the media may or may not influence and help shape. And that is the situation in the 1990s as individuals in a computer age try to cope with and confront their media.

Three great converging forces, all interrelated, are changing the shape of media in America. They are: (1) the technological revolution; (2) the economic upheaval and reconfiguration of media ownership; and (3) the resulting impact of both on the information environment and on journalistic styles and standards.

What was once in the realm of futurist forecasting is now with us. We have moved from the rhetoric of such cliches as "the age of information" and "the communication revolution" into a period when we are transmitting, processing, and receiving information with the help of microchips, satellites, and computers. We use VCRs, video discs, and on-line databases. We do our work on personal computers and subscribe to videotext services as we cope with various broadband communication systems, including cable, subscription television, and direct-broadcast satellites.

As we monitor the development of new technologies and services, their market penetration and, in some instances, their glacial growth, we also need to consider the impact that these new delivery systems are having on old media. For example, the competition for advertising dollars that these new media represent has given newspapers a much greater concern for their audiences. Indeed, as one critic said, newspapers have at last discovered the need to view their readers in a self-conscious way, something that broadcasters have done for a long time. Newspapers now engage in research and have pioneered a marketing approach to news. They are concerned more and more with market segmentation and the precise nature of their audiences.

Newspaper editors now speak not just of "the paper," but of "the product" and of "packaging," as well as the "upscale" audiences they hope to attract. Broadcasting has had more than a decade of experience with electronic news gathering (ENG), during which there has been a continued blurring of the distinction between news and entertainment. We are now experiencing a regionalization of television, in which power is no longer centralized in the networks and local stations are becoming less reliant on them. We have seen the virtual death of the documentary accompanied by the rise of mini-series and docudrama.

In the world of magazines, there is continued specialization. Indeed, more than any other medium the magazine anticipated the age of information and emphasized discrete audience segments that were identified and planned for on the basis of market research. Though they were ahead of the game, magazines now face stiff competition from other media and one another, in many instances struggling to survive. Still, magazines have always had somewhat cyclical histories; they are born, they grow up, and they sometimes die.

We need to spend more time assessing the impact of new technology (such as satellites) on old delivery systems and established media (such as newspapers) than assessing its impact on the emergence of genuinely new communication industries (relatively few to date). Remember that the time lag between the invention of a new technology and widespread use may be considerable. I think of this when I hear carping critics writing off cable television, remembering that it took 70 years for the telephone to become a truly national medium that reached 50 percent of the population. I know that technological change is rarely dramatic, but is instead subtle and incremental. As we know, the promise that cable seemed to offer in the 1960s and 1970s has not yet been fully realized. What was technologically feasible then met market and governmental resistance, and the result has been a much slower movement in that new and promising industry than we might have expected. Technological determinism is not the whole story.

The Economic Upheaval

This is a time for mergers and acquisitions, for concentration and reorganization of much of the corporate sector. This has affected the media industries profoundly. As one commentator said recently, there have been more dramatic changes in broadcasting in the last two years than in the previous 30 or 40, at least as far as ownership goes. The ABC-Capital Cities merger, General Electric's purchase of RCA (and thus NBC), and

CBS's attempt to thwart a hostile takeover bid are dramatic indicators of what is happening in the communication industry, what some have called "merger mania."

Of course, media companies make continued acquisitions: Knight-Ridder's purchase of the database Dialogue and subsequent sale of its TV stations; Rupert Murdoch's $3 billion deal with Triangle Publications in 1988; Gannett's "Triple Crown" (Des Moines, Detroit, and Louisville) in 1985 and 1986; as well as bullish moves by Times Mirror and others. Add to this the complexity of a global economy evident to media owners and entrepreneurs, and it is a turbulent and complex picture. These companies are growing, acquiring both print and broadcast properties, blurring the distinction between the print and electronic media. This is especially evident in the national editions of various newspapers, among them the *Wall Street Journal,* the *New York Times,* the *Christian Science Monitor* and, most visibly, *USA Today*. The old print and electronic distinctions are rapidly disappearing, as witnessed by the joint venture of Hearst-ABC and recent agreement between the direct-broadcast satellite service, Conus, and the Associated Press.

What is behind the economic rumbling? I believe that among other things it is a new and more sophisticated concept of marketing in the midst of great competition. Thanks to the computer, it is a discovery of audience, a recognition that there might not be a great undifferentiated national audience, or not much of one. Instead there are distinct demographic and special-interest audiences that need to be coddled and courted. This is leading to what some critics call "the death of mass communication." They argue that there is not mass communication but only segmented communication serving discrete parts of the total population. This means that there is a difference between the local "community" a newspaper or broadcast station serves, and its "actual audience;" those people who plight their troth with a given medium by subscribing, viewing, or buying advertising.

We have moved from media governed by a law of large numbers, in which the gathering together of large heterogeneous audiences served the interests of the mass media, to a law of right numbers, in which media seek smaller and more targeted audiences. What this may mean for the decline of democratization and the rise of elitism and class consciousness is a matter of much speculation. I believe there is nothing to fear, because the changes that occur in media audiences only reflect the changing nature of society and its natural segmentation into what legal scholar Anne Wells Branscomb calls "teletribes and telecommunities," new publics made possible by modern

telecommunication. Beyond the traditional mass media, there are heretofore unknown audiences conversing with each other through "citizen-band" services on interactive databases.

Newspapers, still a vital force in the media community, have responded to the changing environment and economy with vigor. Faced with declining circulations and a diminishing market penetration, partly due to electronic media competition, they have commissioned market research to better understand who their audiences are. They have repackaged themselves in special sections, restructured their operations, and even encouraged new writing styles and reporting strategies. Traditional journalists decried all this, but it is very much a reality today, and not, I think, in the least harmful to freedom of expression. We have little social memory for similar upheavals in the past, including the one that brought us the mass press in the 1880s and 1890s. Then the press became more egalitarian and less elitist as it attempted to lure a new mass audience, and journalists and other critics decried that as the debasing of information. Today just the opposite is occurring, and critics are making similar charges.

The New Information Environment and Journalism

The economic pressures affecting the distribution and marketing of information have also given rise to new styles and standards of journalism. These are driven by a new definition of news that is audience-oriented and characterized by pertinence to the individual. This has led to the so-called "use paper" and to service journalism in print and broadcasting. The emphasis is on useful information in a no-nonsense age. This new definition of news has been called soft-and-sexy, humanistic, process rather than event-oriented, and many other things. It is marked by spare, lean prose that delivers useful information.

Beyond a new definition of news, there is also more descriptive, analytic reporting. Today, reporters place more emphasis on the consequences of a story than on its bare facts alone. Well beyond simple description, news today is most often in the realm of analysis and forward-looking, speculative stories. A story about a new tax bill, for example, will focus more on the effects the legislation will have on individuals than on the details of how Congress passed the bill.

Amid these substantive changes in news there seems to be a decline in investigative reporting. Perhaps this is because investigative reporting tends to run in cycles. Nevertheless there is less of it than there once was, due, many people think, to libel suits and press credibility issues. While there are still a good many investigative reports, such as journalistic accounts of Mrs.

Marcos' fortune, there is less attention given to penny ante local political corruption, diminished attention to matters involving sex and violence, except in the tabloids.

As old-fashioned, blood-and-guts investigative reporting is on the downswing, service journalism, aimed at solving people's problems and looking at the quality of life, is on the rise.

People want all kinds of information, from specialized reports on health and recreation to hard data about the economy. And, no fable, they are willing to pay for it. A magazine like the *National Journal* charges more than $600 per year for thorough, substantive reports about government. Many newsletters are pricing their subscriptions in the hundreds—some in the thousands—of dollars, while data base services charge a pretty penny for their useful wares.

We are an information society. People care about the ownership of information because more than ever before information is valuable. As keepers of some of the most credible and most reliable information in our society, we can contribute mightily to public understanding by wisely managing this great renewable resource: information that the public needs and wants.

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Figure 2.1
SOURCE: Art Young, from "The Freedom of the Press," published in *The Masses*, December 4, 1912.