Just delivering the news or something more? How the mass media influence public opinion and public perception

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The media, which include radio, television and newspapers, have become a crucial part of society as it provides the public with a variety of information on a daily basis. As a result, the media can potentially influence public opinion and public perception. This review examines the current research on how the media are influential and, in the process, the degree to which the media are responsible for creating public opinion. Also explained is the third-person effect, defined as the belief that a person considers himself to be less influenced by the media than others. Furthermore, the review focuses on the media's coverage of politics. The review will also discuss the implications of Internet and on-line news on the media.

Current events play an integral role in people's life. News can impact everything from a daily commute to vacation plans to who we elect as President of the United States. Because of the need to stay up-to-date with the news, people generally have a specific way they learn about the day's events. Whether by reading the morning newspaper, watching the 5 o'clock news, or browsing the Internet in between breaks, people have many ways to access the latest information. But what people often fail to understand is that the ways in which the media deliver the news greatly influences the public's opinion.

The wealth of research on the third-person effect alone provides strong evidence of the media's influence. Current research also shows that a person can be influenced by the use of dramatic music during a newscast or even the specific wording in a headline on the front page of a newspaper. So whether a person reads about the number of troops killed in Iraq or a string of hometown robberies, that single article has the potential to influence the person's general opinions about current events.

At first glance, this research suggests that the public is mindless and easily manipulated. However, much of the current research finds that the media are a positive influence as it increases memory for information and encourages political involvement.

Past literature reviews have focused either on the media's influence in political campaigns or the need for a revival of journalistic integrity in network news and newspapers. Iyengar and Simon (2000) argued that news coverage of political campaign has the potential to sway the public more than advertisements. The researchers state that the main benefit of campaign coverage is voters have an increased understanding of where each candidate stands on the issues. But, at the same time, they conclude
that a reporter’s behavior and campaign coverage can influence the public and, consequently, their opinion (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). Farhi’s (2005) literature review provides comment on a change in the style of newspapers and network news stating that the decline in newspaper readers over the last thirty years is due to the reporting style of major national newspapers. He also credits the decline in newspaper readers to a decrease in the number of young newspaper readers, a lack of funding in newsrooms, and the intense competition among the major media outlets for the slump in circulation numbers. Furthermore, the credibility of newspapers has been questioned, especially after the controversy surrounding Jayson Blair and Jack Kelley’s fictional reporting in major newspapers (Farhi, 2005).

Outside of newspapers, cable television news has lost respect, as Farhi explains, because the focus of coverage is not hard news, but rather getting as many viewers and ratings as possible. Although Farhi’s review presents methods for solving the newspaper crisis, it is unable to answer what the fate of newspapers, and the mass media as a whole, will be. Finally, Claussen (2004) presents recent research that examines the relationship between newspaper readers and television news viewers. Through his examination of the 1982 Newspaper Readership Project, he concluded that the public relies the most on television news when they want to know about current events. However, the study also stated that newspaper readers are more intellectual as they are more educated than television viewers. Claussen also explains that even if newspapers have changed their coverage style and focus over the years, television news has likely changed more, with the creation of multiple networks geared to provide viewers with constant news. Claussen’s key conclusion is that media illiteracy has become more prevalent because many viewers do not understand that television news stories often cite the wire and newspapers and use their stories during the broadcasts. This means that television news viewers often learn about stories covered in newspapers, even if they do not necessarily read newspapers (Claussen, 2004).

Because the term media is ambiguous and can include multiple types of news sources, it is necessary to set limitations on what media mean. For this literature review, the terms media and mass media refer to the main news sources: television, radio, newspapers and major newsmagazines, such as Time and Newsweek. Although some researchers included the Internet in their studies, websites were generally limited to such television and newspaper sources, including CNN, the Los Angeles Times and The New York Times. Thus, this literature review does not include research that focused on Internet only news sources or blogs.

This literature review will consist of four major sections. The first section concerns current research on various techniques that different media sources use during reporting, how use of these techniques can create fear and mistrust in viewers, and how the media creates public opinion. The second major part concerns the media’s role in politics and, in particular, political campaigns during elections. Similar to the previous section, research about the media’s influence on public opinion, but in terms of politics, will be discussed. The third section will present current findings on the third-person effect. Two sub sections will provide an understanding of the media’s role in creating the third-person effect and how the effect can influence people’s judgments and perceptions of the news. The final section will be dedicated to discussing the current research on the Internet’s role and on-line media as a news source and how it can affect the traditional news sources of television and newspapers.

**Media Techniques**

**The Role of Dramatic Music, Images and Newscasters**

Research is being conducted to understand how much influence the music played during a newscast has on a person’s attention. Ravaja and Kallinen (2004) found the startling music during
newscasts causes people to be more interested in the story. This finding supports the idea that people will pay more attention when there is a breaking news story. For example, when dramatic music plays and the newscaster informs the viewer of a breaking story, a viewer immediately pays more attention to the newscast. Although the viewer might lose interest as the newscast continues, his or her initial increase of attention shows that the dramatic music has influential abilities. Ravaja and Kallinen also found support for the idea that if people have more interest in the story’s content, in addition to the dramatic music, they will pay more attention to it.

Another area of research examines the relationship between a newscaster’s movements during a news program and a viewer’s attention. Ravaja (2004) found that a moving face causes more arousal and pleasure in people. As a result, people who watch active news reporters are more likely to pay attention to the story and remember it later on. For example, when a reporter is on scene for breaking news, a person watching the reporter interview a fire captain about a brushfire is more likely to pay attention to the story as the reporter actively interviews the captain while shots of the fire and people evacuating their homes appear in the background.

Additionally, research examined how a newscaster’s speech style will affect people’s attention. Kallinen and Ravaja (2003) found that people will pay more attention to the newscasts when the audio characteristics are more similar to their own. As a result, a newscaster’s speech style could be a factor when viewers choose between watching the ABC Nightly News over CNN Headline News.

The research on media techniques also extends into the print media through newspapers’ use of headlines, which are specifically worded to attract readers to the story. When Gibbons, Lukowski, and Walker (2005) asked participants to judge various headlines, they found that unbelievable headlines became more believable over time. These unbelievable headlines also grabbed the participants’ attention more, which Gibbons et al. believe would make them more likely to read the accompanying story.

This idea of unbelievable headlines is one reason why magazines, such as People, Weekly World News and The National Enquirer have high readership. By printing large headlines with the words, “Brad and Jen Call it Quits” or “Girl Gives Birth to Alien” on the front page, people might initially read the headline with disbelief, but over time, it will seem more believable and they will be more likely to pick up the story.

Audio-Visual Effects

A growing field of research concerns whether the use of redundant and dissonant audio and visual images can influence a person’s level of attention. Redundancy refers to the repetition of audio and visual images during a newscast (Zhou, 2005). In contrast, dissonant audio and visual images are visual images that contrast with the audio played during a newscast (Zhou, 2005). For example, a story about obese children accompanied by stock footage of Americans walking on the street would be considered dissonant because the footage does not specifically show obese children. Zhou (2005) found that people are more likely to focus on stories presented in a redundant format, and consequently these stories elicit greater emotion and reaction to the stories. This can be important when news directors choose their top stories for the evening news as they can emphasize one story over another through the use of specific audio and visual images.

Building on Zhou’s (2005) research, Fox’s (2004) findings, though not statistically significant, point to the possibility that people who watch redundant newscasts can recall the stories better. More research on redundant versus dissonant audio and visual images via the signal detection analysis method are needed (Fox, 2004). Nevertheless, these initial results show that the media is able to manipulate minor details, such as the type of images presented on screen during a newscast, to increase a viewer’s
attention levels and to possibly improve a viewer’s memory of the news stories.

**Does The Media Create Fear and Mistrust In Viewers?**

*Fear.* One of the main criticisms of the media is that news stories report too much on negative topics like crime, political scandals and violence. Many also believe that news organizations embellish stories and make ordinary stories more dramatic than they really are. Consequently, the argument has emerged that the media’s constant presentation of crime related stories has made viewers more fearful.

Young (2003) believed that fear is predominant in the news because of agenda setting. In other words, stories about crime and violence have higher readership sells more newspapers, and earn higher ratings for network news. This idea is consistent with the general saying, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Young found that participants ranked the fear-mongering stories with higher importance than the other stories. Thus, the crime and violence stories would be on the front page of the newspaper. However, a drawback to the research is that Young used college students rather than editors of newspapers and network news directors as his participants, so it is unsure how generalizable his results are.

Young’s (2003) findings can provide justification for why the word *fear* has been printed more often in newspapers in the last 10 years (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). A longitudinal study by Altheide and Michalowski found that the word *fear* has become more common in many newspapers, but particularly in the *Arizona Republic* and *Los Angeles Times*. The findings showed that the use of fear almost doubled, as the word was seen in *Arizona Republic* headlines 123 times in 1987 and 232 times in 1996 (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). Furthermore, *fear* was found in articles from the *Arizona Republic* close to 1,379 times in 1987 and 2,209 times in 1996. The researchers also found that the use of the word *fear* has spread into other sections of the newspaper, such as the features, sports, and business sections, unlike before where the word was only associated with hard news (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999).

An increased concentration on the word *fear* may account for Romer, Jamieson, and Aday’s (2003) findings that participants believed crime was the biggest problem facing society today. This could also support the belief that people who pay more attention to the news may have higher levels of fear. Yet the most interesting part of Romer et al.’s findings is that the participants who believed that crime was the biggest problem also responded that they consume the most news on a daily basis. Moreover, they found that even when the levels of crime in a particular region remained constant, subjects perceived greater levels of crime because of the increase of crime coverage on local television news (Romer et al., 2003).

Another growing area of research concerns children’s reactions to television news. Smith and Wilson (2002) found that many children watch news on a daily basis, exposing them to crime related news stories, even if they do not fully understand them. Furthermore, the researchers learned that even though younger children were unable to comprehend general news, they were still fearful of natural disaster stories because of the accompanying graphic images (Smith & Wilson, 2002). So even if children do not understand the details of a tsunami disaster news report, the images of people running away as waves rushed ashore can scare them. However, the older children, who understood all news stories, reported that they were more frightened by the crime related news stories and felt it could happen to them or their families.

To understand the implications of these findings, Smith and Wilson (2002) asked the children to predict how many kidnappings and killings occurred in their hometown of Santa Barbara and Los Angeles. They found that children who consistently viewed news programs overestimated the number of kidnappings and killings in Los Angeles (Smith & Wilson, 2002). The researchers concluded
that exposure to television news is linked to greater estimations of violent crimes in cities outside of where the children live. However, Smith and Wilson’s research has many limitations because their data came from one specific area; this can skew the results because the sample does not represent the population.

The research on fear also includes an international perspective. Slone (2000) researched the effects of crime related stories on Israeli adults and found a significant difference in anxiety levels and anxiety level changes between the participants who watched news clips about terrorists and those who did not. She also found that the anxiety levels were greater for men than women and participants who considered themselves religious (Slone, 2000). Anxiety levels for men could be higher because the majority of terrorists seen in the media are male, which could have caused the participating males to relate to them more than the women did.

Mistrust. The media has consistently battled with critics who believe the media is too liberal, takes quotes out of context and does not present all the facts. This has led to people calling the Fox News network biased or “too Republican” and nicknaming the Los Angeles Times the “Left Angeles Times.”

In order to understand where the mistrust comes from, one must first determine who is the source of the criticism and in fact, the more conservative people are, the more likely they are to rate the media as liberal (Lee, 2005). Lee (2005) believed the liberal media concept exists more among Republicans and conservatives; so consequently, they are more skeptical of the media. His reasoning is that topics such as global warming, gay marriage and single motherhood, consistently covered in the media, are considered to be part of the liberal ideology (Lee, 2005). As a result, when these stories are covered, Republicans assume they represent the views of the reporters and newspaper as a whole (Lee, 2005). In other words, including these “liberal” issues in the media is perceived as reflecting the newspaper’s overall ideology and opinion. But it is important to note that Lee’s studies were conducted when the Lewinsky scandal erupted during the Clinton administration. The higher level of political cynicism and discontent with the Democratic Party could have made the results appear more skeptical than they normally would be (Lee, 2005).

The second part of understanding the liberal media theory involves examining whether there is a connection between a person’s level of skepticism and mainstream media consumption (Tsfati, 2003). As a whole, mainstream media are traditional news outlets, such as CNN or NBC and daily newspapers like The New York Times or The Washington Post (Tsfati, 2003). On the other side is the nonmainstream media, which refers to less traditional sources, such as political talk radio and news sources found only on the Internet (Tsfati, 2003). Tsfati found that the more skeptical people are about the news media, the less mainstream media they watch. Similarly, Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found evidence to support the notion that if someone believes the information presented in the mainstream media, they will watch more of it.

The findings from Lee (2005), Tsfati (2003), and Tsfati and Cappella (2003) allow researchers to understand who is critical of the news media and their viewing habits. These results show that the liberal media concept is based on perspective because people with conservative beliefs will feel more threatened by the news media (Lee, 2005). These conclusions can also be supported by the city a person lives in. For example, the Los Angeles Times might include more stories about the environment or human rights, which are considered to be liberal issues because the Los Angeles area is home to many liberals. But in Dallas, Texas, seen more as a Republican state, the city’s newspaper may not include as many liberal stories because its readers want to read more about Republican issues.

Third-Person Effect
In combination with the previously discussed research examining media influence, the research on the third-person effect also suggests that the media is influencing people, even though they might not realize it. For this review, the third-person effect is defined as the perception that media messages will be more influential on others than on ourselves (Jensen & Hurley, 2005; Reid & Hogg, 2005; Salwen, 1998). Douglas and Sutton (2004) qualify this definition and include the notion that “socially undesirable” media messages will influence others more than ourselves.

Using a variety of methods, current research provides an overwhelming support for the third-person effect further suggesting that it can be generalized to a wide range of socio-economic classes and races. In a series of studies, Reid and Hogg (2005) found that college students rated themselves as the least influenced by the media when compared to “trailer trash” and “Wall Street bankers.” For example, they believed that “trailer trash” would be more influenced by The Jerry Springer Show than a college student (Reid & Hogg, 2005). Reid and Hogg’s findings are consistent with a self-categorization interpretation, meaning, in essence, people always want to maintain a positive self-image.

In a different study, Jensen and Hurley (2005) found that participants who thought the media messages were socially desirable (e.g. a public service announcement) rather than socially undesirable (e.g. cigarette advertisements) were more likely to believe that the media message had a greater effect on themselves than on others. These results are crucial because they show that public service announcements do not necessarily fall on deaf ear. So, although people might believe that cigarette advertisements do not influence them as much as they influence others, at least they believe they are influenced more than others by public service announcements.

In contrast to previous researchers, Douglas and Sutton (2004) asked participants how influenced they would be before and after becoming informed about current events. An interesting aspect of the research was that Douglas and Sutton (2004) found that people underestimated the extent to which their own attitudes changed after being informed about an issue. Once again, this shows that people do not realize how easily influenced they can be.

Salwen (1998) researched the third-person effect in a new way by questioning whether the existence of the third-person effect will lead to a person being supportive of media restrictions during the 1996 presidential election. During the election period, many key advisors resigned in light of scandals made known to the public by investigative journalists part of major national newspapers. Salwen found significant support for the third-person effect and the public’s support for media restrictions on stories that could be hurtful or controversial. These findings could mean that the public would be in support of banning smear campaign commercials and advertisements, especially when the information about the candidate does not relate to his performance as a politician.

A year after Salwen’s study, Salwen and Dupagne (1999) conducted a study that once again supported the third-person effect, although they failed to support the idea that immoral effects of the media would cause the effect to be stronger. However, they found that people would support media restrictions for television violence, not just during election campaigns (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). The research provides the groundwork for understanding the third-person effect’s relationship with media restrictions, and consequently, how much news the public would like to see censored.

In an effort to study the third-person effect in a new way, Willnat, He, Takeshita, and Lopez-Escobar (2002) studied Asian and European perceptions about U.S. media. Contrary to their prediction, they found that Asians saw themselves as more influenced by the U.S. media than Europeans did. And as expected, there was research to support the third-person effect (Willnat et al., 2002). As a whole, Willnat et al. introduced a new aspect of research on the
third-person effect by applying prior research to entire racial groups. This means that not only can individuals experience the third-person effect, but also collective races can consider themselves to be more influenced by media messages than others.

Similarly, Neuwirth and Frederick (2002) explored the relationship between racial cues in news stories and the third-person effect. They found that participants exposed to stories featuring minorities were more likely to believe that the article would affect African Americans more than white people (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002). They also found that the participants exposed to the article about a white prostitute would find the story to be beneficial to African Americans, whites, women, and the general public (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2002). Because their research is one of the first that combines racial cues with the third-person effect, there is a strong need for more research on participants from different backgrounds.

Media’s Influence in Politics

A major aspect of public opinion research concerns the persuasive press inference. Gunther (1998) defines the concept as the assumption that the media shapes the public's viewpoints about issues. When Gunther tested the theory, he found that the stories with a slant (a bias to favor a particular viewpoint) shaped how people view the current public opinion. This implies that first, people will take the information in the media seriously enough to believe it and, second, it shows how people can be easily manipulated. Furthermore, the findings show that people make conclusions about public opinion from their own reading of media coverage. However, one limitation of the studies that focus on the persuasive press inference is that the sampled group does not always represent the population (Gunther, 1998)). Because of this, it is imperative to study groups of people with different interest to understand the full implications of the persuasive press inference.

Similar to Gunther’s (1998) testing of the persuasive press inference, Domke, Shah, and Wackman (2000) researched how the presentation of certain types of political information could affect cognitions. As a whole, Domke et al., found that the perception of a candidate depended on the wording and focus on the articles about the candidates. Specifically, they found that the participants who read the articles that focused on the rights and morals of the topic were more likely to look at a candidate’s integrity (Domke et al., 2000). For example, former United States President Bill Clinton’s identity completely changed during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Many articles were written that attacked Clinton’s morals because of his affair. The once-respected president was turned into a womanizer whose action could not serve as an example to the youth of America.

Another media technique that has gained research attention is priming, defined as the way a person’s understanding of a concept is affected by the a priori personal values and political attitudes (Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998). Domke et al. argued that the media’s coverage of political issues could affect mental cognitions. In other words, how the media framed issues could affect public perception and public opinion. By studying evangelical Christians and university undergraduate students’ opinions about politicians, they found that the media presentation of various issues creates a priming effect on the way a candidate is perceived by the public (Domke et al., 1998).

Local and National Elections

During every presidential election, the media gives special attention to candidates and election issues. Numerous newspaper editorials are written and network news provides continuous commentary on televised debates to provide up to the minute details about the latest election news. As a result, the media have the ability to sculpt the candidates and create a certain persona. For example, during the 2004 presidential election, Democratic candidate John Kerry was labeled as a “flip-flopper” because he
changed his mind about certain issues. Thus, as each election passes and a new president is elected, researchers are better able to understand the level of influence the media have when voters go to the voting booth. Although the research is sparse, mainly because presidential elections happen every four years, a link between media consumption and political involvement is apparent.

But before understanding how much the media influence political opinion, it is necessary to study whether the media truly represent the main issues of the election. After tracking stories in *The New York Times* about the 2000 Presidential election, Kiousis (2004) found that the three main issues repeatedly covered were social issues like crime, violence, and education. These issues were also the main topics the candidates discussed during their campaign speeches, suggesting that *The New York Times* was accurate in its reporting of the major election issues. These results are crucial because *The New York Times* informs people across the nation about politics, not just those in the New York area. However, Kiousis’s results cannot be generalized to other newspapers because articles in each newspaper vary. To truly understand if the media are accurate in focusing on the right topics, an analysis of all major newspapers needs to be done.

Going a step further, Banwart, Bystrom, and Robertson (2003) studied how 2000 candidates for Governor and U.S. Senate were represented in newspapers. They found that female candidates received more media attention during the primary elections, but just as much media attention as the male candidates during the general election coverage. Their results also suggested that the media coverage was gender stereotypical because even though women received just as much neutral coverage by the news media as men, their gender, children, and martial status were discussed more than for the men (Banwart et al., 2003). Moreover, the researchers also found shifts in the representation of typical masculine and feminine issues. The female candidates’ discussion of healthcare, believed to be more of a feminine issue, received more coverage than the male candidates discussion of healthcare during both the primary and the general election (Banwart et al., 2003). Male candidates received more coverage regarding education and schools, which are also commonly seen as feminine issues. Although the implications of these potentially inconsistent findings require further examination, one may speculate that the media representations of female candidates as more motherly figures, rather than political figures, during election time, may explain why some voters are against the idea of a female president.

With an understanding of the actual representation of the election issues and candidates, research has also examined how this representation affects public opinion and poll standings. Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2005) found that voters who paid more attention to the issues discussed in the media formed specific opinions about campaign issues and had a better understanding of where each candidate stood on each issue (Kim et al., 2005).

Farnsworth and Lichter (2003) concluded that network news coverage during the 2000 New Hampshire Democratic Primary affected the poll standings of Al Gore and Bill Bradley. These latter findings can have huge implications for approval ratings. For example, if a president is under constant criticism and speculation in the media, it would be expected that the president’s approval ratings would suffer. This causal relationship shows that not only are members of the public influenced by the media, but also political figures’ ratings. A recent example of these relations may be stream of investigative articles in *The New York Times* about the war in Iraq and President Bush’s honesty with the American public. With the continued speculation from the media, the public has become increasingly concerned with Bush’s reliability about the war.

On a state or regional level, research is continuing to explore whether local media attention affects political knowledge and political involvement. Although the research is
limited, findings indicate that involvement in local politics can predict knowledge about national elections. Moy, McCluskey, McCoy, and Spratt's (2004) found that voters who paid greater attention to local news on television were more knowledgeable about local issues, elections, and the general politics of the city. Furthermore, Moy et al. found that participants who paid more attention to a newspaper's coverage of local events were more likely to become politically involved. However, no support was found for a relationship between participants' attention to local television news and political involvement, but Moy et al. see the findings as imperative to community integration. If members of a community are more informed on the issues, they are more likely to become involved and motivate change in the city, but only if they receive their news via the newspaper.

In complete contrast to Moy et al.'s (2004) research about media consumption and political involvement, Coulson and Lacy (2003) studied the actual coverage of city hall. Unlike other studies, their participants were television reporters who were asked about how television news and newspaper competition affects city hall coverage (Coulson & Lacy, 2003). The results indicate that reporters are divided about whether the competition between television and newspapers has increased the number of city hall stories, made it harder to find time to cover in depth stories about city hall, and caused them to cover stories that they most likely would not have covered if there was not strong competition (Coulson & Lacy, 2003). One interesting point Coulson and Lacy found was that the reporters said they have been adding new angles to their stories as a result of the competition. Although this area of research is still in its infancy, it shows that reporters still value the news about city hall enough to add new angles and attempt to cover as many city hall stories as possible. But a major limitation of the study is that news directors and editors were not surveyed because they have the final say about the types of stories that are covered in the newspapers and television news (Coulson & Lacy, 2003).

**On-Line Media**

This paper discussed much of the current research on the media’s influence on public opinion, but there is one main aspect of the media’s influence that was not covered: the Internet. This paper focused only on newspapers, television news and radio because they are the traditional news sources. But the Internet is becoming a vital source of current events information for people by offering a wide range of news options, such as Google News and Yahoo Headlines. Instead of buying a newspaper or having to wait until the evening news, people are able to go online and read up-to-date breaking news stories. A main feature of Internet news is that there are more options as websites are tailored to the specific news of people. For example, the Internet news website Google allows users to focus on specific genres of news that can appear on the web page each time they sign in. The site boasts that it searches for news from over 4,500 sites and is continuously updated, something traditional news sources cannot do. Technology has gone so far as to allow people to read the latest breaking news stories on their cell phones. No matter the time of day, a person is able to use the Internet and access developing stories. Even though newspapers have gone online by posting articles on websites, the question still remains if it will be enough to prevent newspapers from losing profits each year and, ultimately, making them obsolete.

In an attempt to study people’s reliance on traditional news media outlets and the likelihood of certain types of people switching to Internet news, Chan (2003) focused on how a person’s lifestyle plays a dominant role in which types of media he utilizes. His findings show that single males are more likely to read online news, especially with audio and visual graphics. Also, the heavy newspaper reader is more likely to access online news because it is more convenient.
and the online news format is more attractive (Chan, 2003). Finally, he found the people that listened to the radio more would be more likely to read online news (Chan, 2003).

Chan’s (2003) research presents a new perspective as he concluded that there is a connection between a person’s lifestyle and his traditional and online news habits. However, more research needs to be done to further support his findings because it is too early to truly determine how online news will affect the future of traditional media.

Tewksbury (2003) observed that the average Internet user visits few, but the same, websites on a daily basis by tracking the online habits of the average reader. But these websites are part of a large media brand. In other words, people use online news, such as CNN, but the online news is available on television as well (Tewksbury, 2003).

The results show that online newsreaders are more likely to read a newspaper, watch CNN, and listen to the radio news, but were less likely to watch network and local television news (Tewksbury, 2003). This suggests that online newsreaders are more likely to be consumers of long-format programming.

The overall finding from the study is that online news readers do not choose to read news about public affairs more than other news content, such as sports and entertainment. Tewksbury (2003) explains that this finding is notable because the survey was taken during March, which was during the 2000 presidential campaign primary election. He explains that these findings stem from the fact that people do different activities online and offline. Another explanation is that online newsreaders might not be as interested in public affairs, so they opt to view other types of news.

Another important aspect of Internet news is the use of hyperlinks, which allow browsers to connect to similar articles. Zillman, Chen, Knobloch, and Callison (2004) provided research by surveying participants and tracking their online behavior and found that the framing of certain stories affected readership. For the experiment, framing referred to the angle of a story, such as if it was economic, crime or health related (Zillman et al., 2004). They also found that when hyperlinks were provided, participants were likely to explore other types of news stories.

Maybury, Greiff, Boykin, Ponte, McHenry, and Ferro (2004) have begun research to understand the importance of tailored newscasting. They have designed a program that allows people to choose what kinds of stories appear on their computer. By entering a keyword, participants were able to find specific stories about what they were looking for. However, because Maybury et al. are the first to design such a program, more research needs to be conducted to understand its implications for the traditional news sources.

**Conclusions**

This literature review found overwhelming support for the theory that the media has influential abilities. As seen in the first section, the media uses various techniques to gain attention from its viewers. It is interesting to see that something as simple as the placement of music during the background of a newscast can influence how much a person remembers from the story. But when applied to the public, it is the reason that people rely on a certain station more than others. These media techniques, especially the modulation of a newscaster’s voice may be one reason why NBC anchor and former host of the Today show Katie Couric is extremely popular with viewers.

However, as discussed, criticism has emerged that the media’s focus on crime related stories has led to an increase in fear among viewers. There are two sides to the discussion because as Young (1999) explained, viewers rate crime related stories as more important. At the same time, these findings provide support for Altheide and Michalowski’s (1999) findings that the use of the word *fear* itself has drastically increased in the past years and spread into other sections of the newspaper other than news. The other side
to the argument that the media create fear in its viewers is with the increase in coverage of crime-related stories, people believe more crime is occurring, when in fact, the crime rates have remained constant (Romer et al., 2003).

Many critics also believe that the media are generally too liberal and misrepresent the facts. However, research indicates that these perceptions arise primarily from conservatives and Republicans, who do not support certain topics, such as gay marriage and abortion, covered by the media (Lee, 2005). Consequently, there is evidence that if someone is skeptical regarding the media, they are more likely to depend on nontraditional media sources (Tsfati, 2003; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

An immediate effect of the media techniques is the third-person effect. Although people do not believe they are as easily influenced as others are, research provides tremendous support to refute this myth. People may say that they are not influenced by what is on television or in the newspapers, but through the use of dramatic music in the background of a newscast, people will often switch their attention and buy into what the media have to offer. The interesting part is not that people are quick to pay attention to the media, but how they believe that they are not affected by what is presented. The only evidence to even slightly contest the third-person effect is the use of socially desirable messages, such as public service announcements (Douglas & Sutton, 2004). Because the messages are positive, people are more likely to admit being influenced by them.

In a different area is the media’s involvement with politics. The research indicated that the media are accurate in identifying the major issues of campaigns. Furthermore, during local and national elections, it is apparent that paying more attention to the media will result in a person being more knowledgeable about the candidates and their platforms (Moy et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2005). Finally, there is strong support for the idea that when the media change the angle of a story, it will result in a person having a different perception of the story’s focus (Domke et al., 1998).

As a whole, the present review has given insight into the media’s ability to influence public opinion and public perception. This review is only a sample of the current research from the last ten years because media research is a developing field. In addition, there is also budding research on the use of the Internet as a news source and its possible effects on the traditional news sources, newspapers, television, and radio.

References


