



## Mass Media: First Amendment Rights of Press and Speech

### Examples of Mass Media

**Print:** newspapers, magazines, newsletters, books

**Electronic :** radio, television, Internet

The Supreme Court has ruled that the key to the First Amendment right of freedom of speech and the press is ***freedom from prior restraint***, or government censorship of material *before* it is published. Generally, the government cannot tell the media what or what not to publish. In this way, free speech is exercised through mass media. But, there is a catch! Freedom of the press is not completely unlimited. No one is free to publish false information that will harm someone's reputation. This is called **libel** and is against the law. As we have seen however, candidates walk a very fine line during their campaigns, especially when the elections are very close and campaigning becomes negative. Unfortunately, libel cases are difficult to win for government officials. They must prove actual **malice**- meaning that they must prove that the publisher of the misinformation either knew that the information was false or showed "reckless disregard" for the truth. Although these things may seem very obvious, they are difficult to prove in court! One way that speech can be regulated however, is by the **Federal Communications Commission**. The FCC is a regulatory commission of the federal government that can penalize a television station that violates the rules.

### The Role of Mass Media in Influencing Elections:

- **Mass media emphasizes select issues.**  
Mass media can create interest in a topic where non existed by running articles in newspapers and magazines or airing stories on T.V. An example of this is the capital punishment issue which was first addressed through the mass media and is now a campaign issue on both the state and national level.
- **Mass media identifies candidates for an election**  
Mass media introduces candidates to the public by airing debates and campaign commercials. The news media follows elections closely, keeping the public informed about important issues.

- **Mass media broadcasts different points of view**

Mass media publishes editorials and political cartoons that may be critical or in support of a particular candidate. TV broadcasts debates between candidates during an election campaign. Campaign commercials provide candidates with an opportunity to communicate his or her point of view on a number of key election issues to the voters.

- **Mass media is used by candidates to communicate with the electorate**

Candidates use propaganda techniques in order to gain votes. Those that we have studied include “Glittering Generalities”, “Plain folks”, “Transfer”, “Card Stacking”, “Mudslinging”, and “Bandwagon”. The information in these ads are biased, meaning that they may leave out important information necessary to make a truly informed decision .

### **Evaluating Information**

It is important as active citizens to be able to evaluate all the information we get during an election campaign in order to make reasoned choices among candidates. We have to keep in mind that much of the information is propaganda, designed not to provide us with accurate information, but to get us to vote a particular way. Remember, some of what is stated in campaign ads may not be accurate but it is too difficult for government officials to prove this fact.

- Separate fact from fiction- We must educate ourselves about the issues during a campaign.
- Detect a bias- We need to be able to tell the difference between campaign propaganda and accurate information.
- Evaluate the sources providing the information- We need to know what agency is providing the information and for what purpose.
- Identify the propaganda technique and ask yourself what message the candidate is communicating.

**Match the description to the role of mass media in elections:**

- A. Emphasizes select issues
- B. Identifies Candidates
- C. Broadcasts Different Views
- D. Allows Candidates to Communicate with electorate

\_\_\_\_\_ Candidates use propaganda techniques to gain voters

\_\_\_\_\_ Published editorials and political cartoons that may either support or criticize a candidate

\_\_\_\_\_ Candidates are introduced through debates and campaign commercials

\_\_\_\_\_ Topics are be introduced to create interest

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**Match each way of evaluating information with the correct description:**

Separate fact from fiction

Know what agency is providing information

Detect a bias

Know what message the candidate is communicating

Evaluate the source

Educate ourselves about the issues

Identify propaganda

Tell the difference between propaganda and accurate information

