

OpenLearn mini-documentary

How does the media impact politics?

Dr Donna Smith:

Understanding the media is of the utmost democratic importance. The media, whether newspapers, television, film, or social media, impacts our lives: our understanding of politics past and present, our democratic engagement, and our opinions.

'The media' is a collective term for the communication outlets used to deliver information to the public. The term covers a wide variety of outlets, from broadcast media (film, television, radio), print media, such as newspapers and magazines, to social media.

'News media' refers to the outlets used to deliver news to the public – television, newspapers, social media.

I referred to 'delivering' information then, but it's a two-way street: interaction between the media and the audience is increasingly common, with the audience able to make news and content, either directly (social media, for instance) or by interacting with the content that is being delivered by a mainstream outlet.

In fact, as much as the media impacts politics and society, society – people, you – also impact the media and politics.

If we think of politics as the exercise of power, the importance of the media becomes clear: it is a place in which politics takes place. It also becomes clear that you don't need to be a politician to 'do politics'; the media can be used to impart a political viewpoint, including party political ones. In turn, politics and politicians also impact the media through regulation and law.

The relationship between the media, politics and society is therefore an important one. The media has an impact on politics and society, translating to outcomes in society; so, the things you read, listen to, watch, and engage with, can have an impact on the way you live your life. In relation to politics, the media can impact our understanding of politics past and present, our democratic engagement, and our opinions.

It is not a one-way linear process though. Audiences are not necessarily passive ones, absorbing what they are told; they can resist meanings, challenge them, and create their own.

We can explore all of this by thinking about 'moral panic'. You have probably heard the term moral panic before, a feeling of fear that is shared by lots of people, usually generated by media coverage. For instance, there may be a spate of a particular kind of crime, and intense media coverage makes people not just aware of the issue, but hyper-aware of it and more fearful than statistically they probably need to be. So, 'panic' is created.

We can see though moral panics that the media is both a participant in politics (it can make issues political) and a provider of an environment in which politics is enacted (the media can be used for political ends). However, it's also important to remember that not everyone will necessarily agree with a moral panic as presented by the media – audiences are not passive and can reject or challenge what they are being told.

Moral panics reveal that the media can structure or be used to structure social expectations about citizens' rights/responsibilities – for instance, what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour from a group of people. It can also impact law.

A great example of moral panic is video nasties, a slang term for a group of low budget unregulated (and therefore uncensored) horror films released on VHS tape in the 1970s and 1980s. There were concerns that children and young people would have easy access and be affected by the content. As a result, the law was changed and all future videos needed to be reviewed and classified by the BBFC. The press contributed to this process, in fact leading the moral panic.

In this example the media set the agenda and selected who was 'deviant', using appropriate rhetoric to transmit the moral panic. The media was also used by others (some politicians and policy makers) to make a political point, with the resulting moral panic politically useful.

The media is both a participant in politics (it can make issues political) as well as a provider of an environment in which politics is enacted, so it can be used for political ends.

You can learn more by registering in *Media, politics and society*. Produced collaboratively with the British Film Institute, this Open University online short course explores the relationship between media, politics, and society. You'll explore key themes of propaganda, moral panic, media and memory, and fake news, topped and tailed by an introduction to media theory, and media and its impact on democratic politics. By the end of the course, you'll be able to better understand the key cultural and political dynamics that impact your everyday life.