

## Chapter One: Why focus on the media?

*“The media do not merely represent; they also recreate themselves and their vision of the world as desirable, salable. What they reproduce is chosen, not random, not neutral, not without consequence.”<sup>4</sup>*

Media are in the business of providing information. Women and men read watch and listen to this information daily which is in the shape of what we know as **news**.

The media’s focus on the current issues and events of the day and the collection and editing of this information for presentation through the news media – newspapers, television and radio – is the practice of **journalism**.

Journalism, however, is not a flawless exercise. In his 1978 speech to collect a Pulitzer Prize, David Broder of the Washington Post, said:

“I would like to see us say over and over until the point has been made...that the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete, inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of some of the things we heard about in the past 24 hours...distorted despite our best efforts to eliminate gross bias by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you...to read it in about an hour. If we labeled the paper accurately then we would immediately add: But it’s the best we could do under the circumstances, and we will be back tomorrow with a corrected updated version...”<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, the events and issues that become news each and every day, also go through a process of selection which is not without its own imperfections. News is a choice, an extraction process, saying that one event is more meaningful than another event. The very act of saying that means making judgments that are based on values and based on frames (*mental structures that shape the way we see the world*).<sup>6</sup>

In simple terms, the media, when asked, define their role as:

- To inform
- To educate
- To entertain

The radio, TV and newspapers give us information through news, current affairs programs, and talk shows. They also entertain through TV soaps, films, game shows, music and sitcoms. It is through advertisements on radio, TV and in the newspapers, that we know about goods and services for sale.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Patricia J. Williams, *The Rooster’s Egg, On the Persistence of Prejudice*, Harvard University Press, 1995

<sup>5</sup>Alan Rusbridger, *The Truth About the Truth*, in *Newsweek International*, 2005 <sup>6</sup>David Murray, Joel Schwartz, S. Robert Lichter, *It Ain’t Necessarily SO, How the Media Remake Our Picture of Reality*, Penguin Books, 2002

<sup>7</sup>*Whose Perspective? A Guide to Gender-Sensitive Analysis of the Media*, Women’s Media Watch Jamaica, 1998

The media do this by providing information that is collected and edited based on the media guiding principles of **accuracy**, **fairness** and **balanced** representation.

The media also see their key role in any society as a 'watchdog' of the government and all entities to ensure accountability in a society in the public's interest.

The media's ability to carry out this role depends greatly on whether the media operate within political and legal environments which enable free speech, reasonably unfettered access to information, free media, and economic and political environments which encourage and promote the development of a diversity of media.

Because the process of collecting, editing and choosing what is news is not purely objective, media and communications researchers and analysts have identified several other key roles the media play in any society:

- Shape public opinion and attitudes
- Determine the public discourse and thereby shape our political, cultural and economic priorities
  - Influence public policy through the news agenda
  - Reinforce or challenge gender, racial and other stereotypes and norms
  - Serve as the channel through which the public communicates to policy makers and through which policy makers communicate to the public
- Media can act as catalysts for social change through coverage of injustices and the marginalization of populations in society which often have little access to expression in the public sphere. In other words, the media can give a voice to those who often find their voices marginalized

### **Box One: Types of media**

The form of media that reaches large audiences daily is what is known as **mainstream** or **mass media**. Newspapers, magazines and the broadcast mediums of television and radio fall into this category. Mass media is often general in its content in order to cater for a diverse audience. There also are trade and specialist magazines – fashion and beauty, home design and interior, sports, computer, science, foreign affairs and policy analysis, among others – that are produced for mass consumption, but which may be more targeted at specific audiences within the larger population. Mass media view audiences as both consumers of information and of goods and services. Advertising is essential to the sustainability of the mass media. Mass media can be owned and operated by the state (often in developing countries worldwide), public or private interests.

**Community media**, on the other hand, are limited to certain geographical areas and targeted at smaller groups of people. This media caters for people in towns, rural areas, close-knit communities which seek to keep themselves informed on issues of interest. Unlike in the mainstream media where the control of information and messages is vested in the hands of the media practitioners, there is more room for people within a local community to participate in the governance and editorial operations of this form of media.

**New media** is the term used to refer to the New Information and Communications Technologies (NICTs) which include web sites, web portals, e-mail, e-mail news alerts, listservs, and blogs. The new technology is used by those involved in mainstream media in that many of these media have web-based editions of their information and news products. But the information technology revolution also has opened the space for civil society, special interest groups, as well as individuals to create their own sites for disseminating information and viewpoints. Outside of the mainstream media sites, one of the major concerns surrounding the use of new media is the accuracy and credibility of the information provided.

### Box Two: In the Public's Interest

The dominant form of broadcasting worldwide is **public broadcasting** (same as **public service broadcasting**). This form of broadcasting is defined as 'public' when radio, television and other electronic media outlets receive funding from the public – either through individual donations, fees, or indirectly as state subsidies that originated in taxes or other national funding sources.

Some public broadcasters supplement this with contributions from corporations which may be granted a limited amount of advertising time in return.

There is no standard definition of what public broadcasting is, but there are defining characteristics:

Public service broadcasters generally transmit programming that aims to improve society by informing viewers

Public stations' broadcasts are available nationwide and generally aim to cater for all interests and tastes including minorities

Public broadcasters have a concern for national identity and community which leads to the commissioning of programs from within the country, rather than from abroad

- They tend to be more detached from vested interests and government-impartial programming that does not cater to the desires of advertisers or government
- Quality of programming rather than number ratings is the basis for competition

Public broadcasting is often regulated by guidelines that do not restrict program makers - these guidelines can be backed by hefty penalties

Source: Wikipedia Encyclopedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_broadcasting](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_broadcasting)

**Understanding the media's various roles, its power and sphere of influence and the role it can play in bringing about change are essential for any type of advocacy that aims to change the media.**

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**Activity – Discussion points!**

1. Make a list of the major media in your country. Divide them into print and broadcast media, mainstream and community (where appropriate). Find out from each media's marketing and circulation department, the numbers of readers, listeners and viewers so that you have an idea of the media's reach and influence in your community.
2. Find out who owns the various media?
3. Find out if there is a public broadcaster and how it is funded?
4. Find out how many community media exist? Who owns these media and how do they operate?

It is important to understand that the media do not just provide information and reports on news events and current issues. Through the selection of types of news stories, choice of words and language used, choice of people interviewed to give their views and perspectives, selection of images to illustrate stories and decisions about where stories should be placed (on what pages or which item in the news line-up heard on radio or television), the media also **communicates** and sends a **message**.

**Activity – Discussion Points!**

1. What are some of the key messages transmitted through your media about women's roles in society? What are some of your media's messages on men's roles in society?
2. What are your media's messages on the struggle for gender equality?
3. Look for specific examples of newspaper articles, radio or television talk shows or programs to illustrate the messages you have identified.