

How Does the Mass Media Influence People?

How mass media influences people is far different in the 21st century than it was for most of the 20th century. The term mass media itself may no longer apply in an era of personal social media that streams tips, reactions, rumors and observations that outrace news reporting of traditional media outlets. For businesses trying to spread the good news about themselves and counter the bad, the rules are constantly changing.

Social reporting

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism writes on its website, Journalism.org., that "news today is increasingly a shared, social experience." In the May 2010 article, PEJ reported that half of Americans say they turn to people around them for at least some of the news they know. A press release announcing a new product may end up in the business section of a newspaper, but it no longer has the impact it once had. Put that product announcement in a blog or on a Facebook page, and suddenly you start a conversation with people who will write to comment on the news, prompting other comments and reviews on other sites

Different Take on News

A report on a solid increase in third-quarter profits may be great news for a community's economy, and a news article may try to explain why. But unless the article includes an announcement of new jobs, the story's influence may be minimal. Social media follows a different lead. The PEJ study found stories covered by bloggers were ones that elicited emotion, concerned rights of individuals or groups, or raised vigorous debate. Bloggers push hot buttons of public reaction. Yet despite the difference in coverage, 99 percent of the stories' bloggers link to are from newspapers and broadcast networks. Business stories that appear in traditional mass media outlets may not have as much direct influence on people as in the past, but they do influence bloggers.

News Today, Gone Tomorrow

Traditional news media may stay on a major news story for weeks or months. Stories that grab attention on social media may do so within hours of their first appearance on the blogosphere, and be gone just as quickly. The PEJ study found that only 13 percent of top stories on blogs in one week were still grabbing attention the next week. That was only true of 5 percent of stories shared on Twitter. If a business is involved in a major story, good or bad, it will have to effectively communicate with traditional news media to have any influence on the story's outcome.

Flash point

If social media doesn't keep its news stories around for long, it does make news stories combustible. John Timpane wrote in the Philadelphia Inquirer that a story in Rolling Stone about inappropriate remarks by Gen. Stanley McChrystal erupted into a "media firestorm" in June 2010 due mainly to Twitter, Web reports and cable news that in two days abruptly ended the general's post as commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan—before the story ever appeared in Rolling Stone.

Chasing Social Media

When a news item reaches a sudden flash point, reporters are often chasing bloggers to catch up with stories that are suddenly widely known without credible sources. Columnist Mitch Albom of the Detroit Free Press wrote "there is no such thing as a single 'media' anymore. You cannot put credible newspapers or television stations in the same sentence as tweeters. You cannot lump legit Internet posts with a blog that begins in some guy's basement." Yet the public often does lump them together, degrading the influence of traditional news media.

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