

Leo Bogart, Commercial Culture,
New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995.

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What are “The Media?”

“Media.” The very notion is of recent origin. The word now accurately describes a phenomenon rather than an abstract category covering a number of unrelated institutions. It combines dissimilar forms of communication under a common heading. How did the term creep into everyday language? What do media encompass, what do they do, what accounts for their hold over us? This chapter begins by considering the idea of the media and their roots in advertising and journalism. These are the principal points I shall make:

- Media are a reality, not just an abstraction.
- They deal both in information and entertainment, but often disguise information as entertainment.
- Media attract audiences because they fill time predictably; the character of those audiences is shaped by differences in the way people use time.
- As free time expands, so do audiences, changing the relationship between them and those who address them.
- Media facilitate the passage of time by organizing their output into standardized formats.

The Notion of “Media”

The term, “the media” is now applied collectively to the newsgathering organizations, but the media encompass all the other forms of mass communications apart from those that package the news—including entertainment television and magazines.

Books and periodicals, television, radio, film and recordings—lumping together all these diverse forms of communication as “the media” is a relatively recent practice. It appears, appropriately, to have originated with advertising. “It is hardly

credible what wonderful advertising mediums children are," said an expert in Victorian England, ecstatic about the use of cheap labor to carry sandwich boards or hand out leaflets.¹

The 1909 edition of Webster's *Dictionary* included among its definitions of the word "medium," "instrumentality, as in advertising medium." At about this time, the closely linked term "marketing" also came into use. In the context of the advertising business, media simply represented different methods by which advertisements could be delivered and products "marketed." Advertising agencies, beginning at the time of the first World War, set up media departments, to marshal facts and compare the channels—newspaper, magazine, billboard and car card space—through which their clients' messages could be disseminated.

The task of the agency's media specialists was to weigh alternative cost efficiencies, reader characteristics, and editorial environments, and to match them to the advertiser's objectives. Radio, and later television, complicated this task and encouraged specialization. But the use of the term "media" to describe all the forms of advertising caught on. People in every aspect of mass communication began to think of themselves as participants in "the media business."

The term "media" was not commonly used, or known, probably, by the general public, even though Marshall McLuhan's best-selling book, *Understanding Media*, gave it brief currency when it appeared in 1964.²

"The press," as a generic description of newspapers and working journalists, has been in use since the nineteenth century, and has been applied to news people in broadcasting since radio days. The idea of "media" as a common category rather than as a form of classification really seems to have acquired familiarity as a result of the spectacular growth of television news at the time of the Vietnam War, when journalists, seeking a comprehensive term to describe the enterprises for which they reported, found the words, "the press," imprecise and, perhaps, misleading.

In the Vietnam War years, the term "media" gained usage only after television news increased its air time and became a major journalistic force. The word "press" did not comfortably cover camera crews and others with no conceivable connection to periodical publishing or the printing arts. "The media" may also have become the preferred appellation applied to broadcast journalists by newspaper people, who thought of their television counterparts as part of show business and wanted to set themselves apart from them. For a time the phrases "print press" and "broadcast press" were used by way of establishing a distinction, but these awkward terms gave way to "the media," which often ended up as a synonym for television news.