

# Making Coverage Count

**T**ake a drive across the country, and you'll see varied landscapes, stumble across unique landmarks, taste new flavors and hear different accents. But people just about anywhere agree on one thing: their local news must be the worst in the country.

But it's not the worst. It's just the same. If it bleeds, it leads: that means plenty of crimes, fires and accidents. Then there are the healthcare stories, likely framed with frightening graphics and ominous music, celebrity gossip and network tie-ins.

## Why We Need the News

TV, radio, movies, books, newspapers and the Internet are our prime sources of news and information, and they shape our values, beliefs and perspectives. When it comes to the news, we need credible, accurate reporters keeping a watchful eye on those in power, attending the meetings and examining the issues we don't have time to follow, translating complex topics and keeping us informed about what's happening in our communities.

A viable self-government is impossible without quality journalism. Democracy requires journalism; but journalism also requires democracy—an engaged citizenry demanding the serious work that holds our leaders accountable.

Often, the media covers the spin instead of cutting through it to get to

• Craig Aaron  
• Free Press



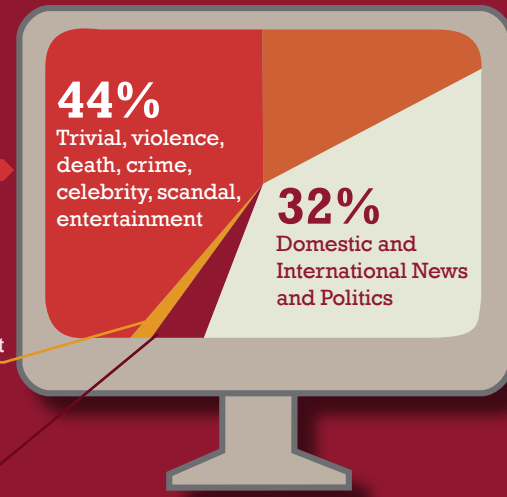
## Covering More of What Matters

A Pew poll shows that Americans are hungry for news, spending 70 minutes a day accessing it.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-seven percent of Americans said that there's too much celebrity coverage in the news.<sup>2</sup> They feel environmental coverage should be an average of 18 percent of coverage instead of just 2 percent.

Unfortunately too many news programs ignore important issues and devote too much coverage to sensational and trivial stories. A month-long news headline comparison of a leading and respected corporate news source, CNN.com and a nonprofit news aggregator, Commondreams.org revealed some vast disparities in news coverage. Clearly, less coverage of trivial and celebrity stories will free up more time for covering news that informs and empowers an engaged citizenry.

### CNN.com Headline Analysis

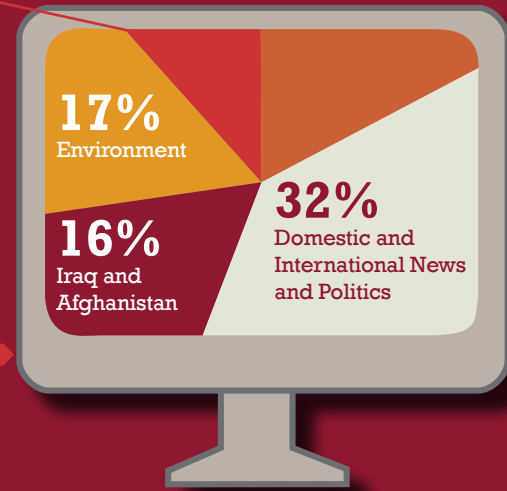
1% Environment  
3% Iraq and Afghanistan



(Tracked in September 2010 by SEE Innovation staff)

### Common Dreams Headline Analysis

12% Trivial, violence, death, crime, celebrity, scandal, entertainment



## from the editor

the facts. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism studied the media's coverage of the 2008 presidential election and found that most outlets covered the election like a sporting event. Pew found "horse race reporting, once again, made up the majority of coverage" and that rather than focus on the issues facing Americans, "53 percent of the coverage focused on political matters, particularly tactics, strategy and polling."<sup>1</sup>

Studies also show a link between access to news and levels of political corruption at the national and state level. One 2008 MIT study found that members of Con-

gress who were covered less by the local press did less work for their local constituents, showed up to fewer hearings and brought less money back to their home districts.<sup>2</sup> Yet according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, half the states no longer have a newspaper with a reporter covering the US Congress.<sup>3</sup>

### What's Missing From the News?

More than 70 percent of Americans get their news from cable and network television,<sup>4</sup> and how these outlets cover the big stories strongly influences who we

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Photo courtesy Ira Glass: This American Life

Ira Glass is the host of National Public Media's *This American Life* which explores a range of meaningful issues and stories of real people.

what news and information is covered, whether important issues are covered accurately, who is hired to report and produce the news, what music and artists get airplay and how women and minorities are portrayed in the media.

Larger and larger corporations—in fewer and fewer numbers—have taken control of more and more of our news organizations. They've merged, consolidated and concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, swallowing up local outlets. Before 1996, for instance, the biggest radio chain owned just a few dozen stations. Now Clear Channel owns nearly 1,000 and only a fifth of newspapers are independently owned. That runaway consolidation has left us with the same cookie-cutter content from coast to coast.

Media and tech companies have spent a billion dollars in the past decade to influence federal policy—even more than the oil and gas industry. Because

of their tremendous influence in Washington, media policymaking has been a closed and secretive process, and citizens have been shut out of the debate. So even though we own the airwaves, they decide how media is created, financed and distributed.

### Public Policy for Public Media

What could things look like if policies were made to serve the public? Consider the current state of public broadcasting. National polls conducted in December 2009 and January 2010 found that Americans named PBS the most trusted, least biased, nationally known institution in the US.<sup>6</sup> Yet compared to the rest of the world, we spend peanuts on public media. Americans now spend just a little more than \$400 million per year in public money on public media. That works out to just \$1.37 per person. By comparison, Canada spends \$22 per capita and England spends \$80.<sup>7</sup>

If the United States spent the same per capita on public media and journalism subsidies as Norway, which

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elect for public office, how we debate the most pressing issues of the day and when we go to war. Local television is still the number one source for news, but we don't often ask what we get in return for giving broadcasters those free but exclusive licenses to use the public airwaves.

Increasingly, we see the news ignore important issues and devote too much coverage to sensational and trivial stories. A recent study of Los Angeles television news by the University of Southern California found that in a typical half-hour newscast, half of the time was spent on ads and teasers. The remaining 15 minutes were dominated by crime stories, soft features, entertainment news, sports and weather. Just 22 seconds of the typical 30-minute news show was about local government.<sup>5</sup>

### Media Ownership Matters

The biggest problem in journalism isn't poorly trained or unethical journalists. The real problem facing our media system is a structural one. Media owners influence

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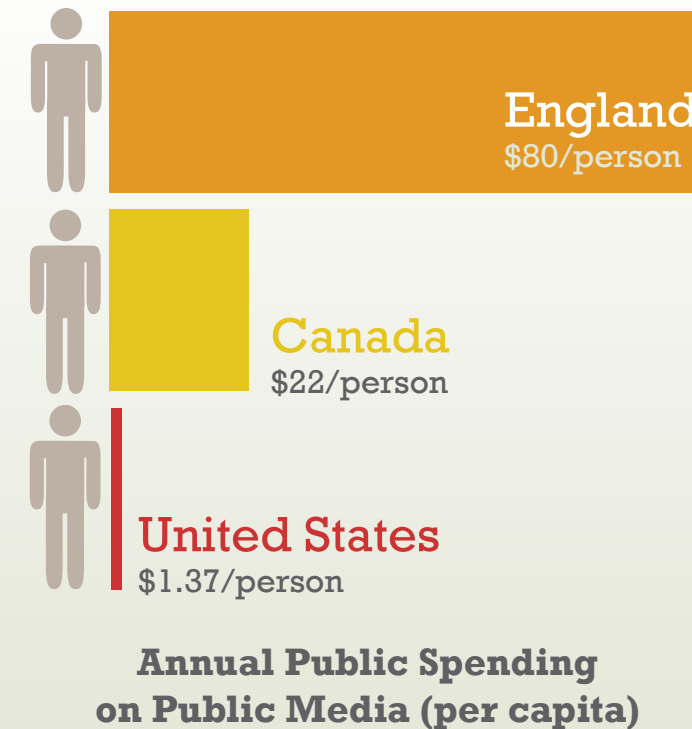
ranks number one, we would be spending as much as \$30 billion a year on public media—which would go a long way toward putting thousands of journalists back to work. Not coincidentally, countries that rank near the top in public media spending are also at the top of *The Economist* magazine's annual Democracy Index, which evaluates nations on the basis of the functioning of government, civic participation and civil liberties. In that same survey, the United States ranks 17th.<sup>8</sup>

At a moment when journalism is in crisis, we could re-imagine our current public broadcasting system and rebuild it as new public media with an overarching commitment to newsgathering and community service. We could put reporters back on their beats and remove commercial pressures from the newsroom. But getting better coverage of our communities starts with new policies and political change.

### Charting Our Future

Fair and accurate news and information is necessary to guide an informed citizenry, and therefore the media is essential to our democracy. We depend upon media to know what's happening in our communities, to play our part as citizens and to serve as a vital check on government and corporate power.

If we want better media, we need better media policies. If we want better media policies, we need to raise public awareness about these issues and organize for real



change. Now more than ever, people across the country need to be engaged in the debates about the future of our media. We need real people to have a seat at the table and a voice in those debates. By holding the media accountable for their content, supporting policies that encourage media diversity and participating in the media reform movement, real people can make coverage count.

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*Craig Aaron is the president and CEO of Free Press (www.freepress.net), the national media reform group. He is the editor of two books, Appeal to Reason: 25 Years In These Times and Changing Media: Public Interest Policies for the Digital Age.*

