

The Evolution of News Media

It sometimes feels like we're constantly bombarded by the news. But how did we get here?

It's said that three main factors influence news coverage. First, the events that occur and the people who influence those events. Second, the journalists who decide what to cover. And third: us, the consumers of news.

This has been the case for hundreds of years, beginning with the oldest form of news media, print: newspapers and magazines.

The first continuous press in the US was created in 1704 in colonial Boston, where the population was highly literate and eager for self-governance. Before long, daily papers emerged in several large cities. At first, papers printed information about local events and activities. But when Britain imposed the Stamp Tax of 1765, raising costs for publishers and forcing some to shut down, editors and writers began to more openly question colonization. Newspaper stories became increasingly critical of British rule and even encouraged attempts to revolt.

Like the colonies themselves, newspapers were largely united in a common cause before and during the Revolution—but afterwards, divisions sprang up as people disagreed on how to run the new nation. Editorial content was dominated by political partisanship, propaganda, and criticism of those in government. But despite being on the receiving end of this criticism, George Washington and other founders still thought freedom of the press was essential to liberty and immortalized this principle in the Bill of Rights.

In the mid-19th century, advances in printing technology made it faster and cheaper to produce newspapers, while improved transportation offered more people access. Readers looked to the news for information but also for entertainment. Yellow journalism, which prioritized sensational, often scandalous stories, became the style of the time, with newspapers competing for readership with increasingly crude, not-always-factual, news.

By the Progressive Era, a period of intense social and political reform, yellow journalism evolved into muckraking, or what we'd now call investigative journalism. Newspapers and magazines still published sensational stories, but they now focused on exposing corruption in institutions like politics, manufacturing, and medicine.

Radio emerged as a news and entertainment source in the 1920s, and by 1940, about 80% of US households tuned in regularly. For politicians, radio was a way to reach millions of people in a personal way. FDR became famous for his intimate “fireside chats,” speaking directly to citizens about the New Deal and World War II.

World War II also marked the beginning of the decline of print as Americans' main source of news. Newspapers were printed once or twice a day, but radio provided live, up-to-the-minute reporting.

But it was television that changed news media forever. By 1955, half of US households had a TV, and ABC, CBS, and NBC all had nightly newscasts. For the first time, people could see and hear politicians and decide for themselves how trustworthy or likable they were. In the first-ever televised presidential debate in 1960, Richard Nixon refused to wear makeup, and the sight of his stubbly, sweaty face may have put him behind JFK in the polls—and in the general election.

TV also changed public perception in the '60s in regards to two major events: the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Video of Bloody Sunday, showing police beating and teargassing activists in Selma, Alabama, aired that same evening, horrifying audiences and mobilizing Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act later that year. Similarly, footage from Vietnam made clear the brutality of war unlike ever before, causing support to decline.

Television still reaches more Americans than any other form of media, and it's still an important source of political information.

In recent years, the internet changed the news landscape yet again. Online newspapers and individuals can break news almost instantly—but this high speed sometimes pushes organizations to publish click-worthy hot takes instead of deep reporting. The rise of social media, too, has democratized the news: anyone can post or repost a story, whether or not they're a trained journalist. Without social media, Americans may

never have known about George Floyd's murder or many other events that were captured by citizens on their phones.

As people continue to search for truth, news media will continue to evolve over time. What do you think might come next?