Before we start looking at the media themselves, let's look at the role of the media, particularly the news media, in society. We already talked about how the media both influence and mirror society, but in what ways does it do this? Listed below are just some of the roles the media play.

When it comes to news media, most people think in terms of the historical role. That is, the media record history. Certainly, that is a major role the media play. But it is not the only function. The list below is not in any special order of importance, though the historical role is purposely buried in the middle.

**Political or Watchdog Role**

The media have long served as a watchdog for the public, watching for threatening actions from our elected officials and "growling" when necessary. How many of you have ever been to a school board meeting? Or a city council meeting? Our elected officials make decisions that can affect our quality of life, but most of us do not pay attention until it is too late, when new laws or rules have already been enacted. The media are at those meetings, or at least are checking up on what happens at them, and warn us --growl-- when something that will affect us negatively happens.

**Economic Role**

The media help the economy survive, both by bringing the businessman and the consumer together -- advertising -- and by keeping the public informed on the state of the economy. Advertising is just one way in which the media inform us about the economy, and as a result influence the economy. News about interest rates, the stock market, etc. are other ways.

**Sentry Role**

Like the sentry at the gate, the media watch the horizon and announce what or who is approaching before it gets there. The media do this as part of the watchdog role, too. But this is more subtle. Coming changes might be good changes or inconsequential changes that we might WANT to know about more than NEED to know about. Take new fashion trends, for example. We could probably get by without knowing about next year's fashion trends, but we like to know.

The media must realize that news is an evolving process and should be covered as it evolves. Too many people, especially sources of stories, think the media should wait until decisions have been made before covering a story. In reality, we probably have a greater need to know what decisions MIGHT be made.

**Historical/Record Keeping Role**

Considered by many to be the most important role -- to some it is the ONLY role -- is that of a record keeper. What happened? Where? When? Who was involved? Etc. As mentioned above,
this certainly is an important role. Today's media are recording history as it happens. And we enjoy that they do. We can watch a baseball game, perhaps in person, and still want to read about it in the paper the next day or see the highlights on the television news that night.

In reality, because of some gatekeeping decisions, some media do a lousy job of recording what happened. Many of these poor decisions on what to include or not include in the media are made because mass media is big business and today's corporate, bottom-line thinking means that some important stories just are too expensive to cover.

Entertainment Role

News is more than reporting bare facts. There are many media messages competing for the reader's/viewer's time, and those readers/viewers want to be entertained, as well as informed. So the media entertain us. Indeed, many news content decisions are made based on the entertainment value -- if more people are entertained, more will read/watch, and advertisers will pay to reach the larger audience.

Some media, such as television, are almost exclusively entertainment oriented. Many of the mergers between Internet and entertainment industries we read about these days are focusing on ways of entertaining us on our computers.

But even newspapers entertain us with comics, crossword puzzles, advice columns, horoscopes and more.

Social Role

People like reading/hearing about other people and the media have long complied. We especially are enthralled with celebrities. Entire media markets exist solely for this role -- look at People or Us magazines or "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

Newspapers have long included "vital statistics," such as who is getting married, who is getting divorced, who had children, etc.

Marketplace of Ideas/Leadership Role

The editorial pages, letters to the editor, opinion columns, reporter on the street interviews, critical reviews, etc., are all examples of how the media disseminate not only their own view, but the views of others.

This is really two related roles. First the media provide us with a variety of views, not just their own so that we have a "marketplace of ideas" on which to base our opinions. Second, the media themselves lead the way with editorials and other matter to help us form our opinions. Media that do neither, or emphasize one of these two roles over the other, do us a disservice. But as we'll see when we look at the history of media, especially print media, the concept of a diversity of opinions in one publication was unheard of. Early newspapers, for example, were highly partisan. If you wanted both sides of a story you had to read competing newspapers.
Exercise

Give one example each of how the media fulfill the roles outlined above. A single sentence for each will suffice. Try to include a variety of media examples in your answers.
Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

J100x – YourLastName – Roles

Send to rcameron@cerritos.edu